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Torture, Former Combatants, Political Prisoners, Terror Suspects, & Terrorists

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China's bids to host the Olympics and join the World Trade Organization led to single-prisoner releases, which in the twisted world of international politics were greeted by some as concessions by China. And then, as planned, the revolving door pushed more government critics into China's appalling prison system

Over the years the event most likely to trigger a prisoner release has been a high-level diplomatic visit between the United States and China. Such visits always put China's human rights record in the spotlight, though in recent years increased trade (and more recently the Bush administration's desire to placate China while it helps sort out the North Korea nuclear problem) have greatly reduced the priority placed on human rights by the United States in its relations with China

But when Prime Minister Wen Jiabao visits Washington next week, the U.S. government has the chance to show that human rights remain at the core of U.S.-China relations. It can also put a permanent end to the charade of allowing China to score points through its revolving door prisoner releases

In February 1999, during the run-up to the United Nations human rights meeting, Beijing released Gao Yu, a young journalist. Not long after, Gao Yu was seized again for a series of articles published in Hong Kong analyzing Chinese politics. In February 2000, two weeks before Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's plane touched down in China, Chinese officials released Gao Yu to a second round of applause

One week before President Jiang Zemin visited President George W. Bush at his Crawford ranch in 2002, Beijing released the Tibetan nun Ngawang Sangdrol, first arrested for taking part in a pro-independence demonstration in 1989 at the age of 13

This October, China did it again. Kang Yuchun, an advocate for a multiparty political system, was released from jail just days before a European Union delegation arrived in Beijing to discuss trade - and human rights. But while Kang's release is cause for celebration, in the past two months, Chinese authorities have also jailed nearly a dozen activists, lawyers and religious leaders around the country. The revolving door continues to spin

It is always a welcome development when a political prisoner is freed. But the release of one, two or even a few high-profile prisoners does nothing to address China's systemic rights crisis. And in too many cases, when the world stops paying attention, and the activists pick up their work again, Beijing re-arrests them. Others are exiled into the political wilderness

In recent years, hundreds of Chinese citizens have been arrested for political crimes. Clearly, getting China to release a single prisoner at a time is not making a dent in the prison population or discouraging future political arrests

The United States should greet Wen Jiabao with a demand that China release all prisoners sentenced for what are in reality political crimes. These include using the Internet to call for government reform, publicizing an AIDS scandal, petitioning for government reform, organizing workers and worshipping outside state-controlled venues

Vice President Dick Cheney, Wen Jiabao's host, should demand that China stop censoring the Internet and blocking access to sites featuring sensitive topics like human rights. Washington should call for Beijing to pass a law prohibiting discrimination against people with the AIDS virus. U.S. officials should aggressively promote workers' rights to form independent trade unions

The United States should also stress the need for the rule of law to guard against arbitrary arrest, to ensure fair trials and to guarantee Chinese officials do not place themselves above the law. (China should reply by demanding that the U.S. stop flouting international law by detaining hundreds at Guantamo Bay, at Bagram airbase in Afghanistan, and elsewhere, without the right to a hearing or access to a lawyer.)

China's one-release strategy is worthy of the sixth-century strategist Sun Tsu, who wrote, "Before doing battle, one calculates in the temple, and one will win because calculations were made." Beijing has made a calculation that wins every time: jail many, release one, and the world will praise its progress on human rights. It's up to the United States and other countries to change the rules of this sordid diplomatic game

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