

**China's Human Rights and Good Governance: Implications for  
Foreign Policy  
Academisch China Overleg, 28 november 2008**

*Introduction*

Human rights are a cornerstone of Dutch foreign policy. The strategy document 'Human Dignity for all' describes how the government wants to contribute to improving human rights worldwide. Human rights are also a key element of our relations with China. Today, I want to outline how we can be most effective in our human rights policy on China, given the parameters in both our countries.

*Universal values, cultural identity and national interests*

All 192 members of the United Nations have adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. But there is an increasingly large and vocal movement that maintains that human rights are a Western invention. They say the Asian culture, including the Chinese culture, is different. It has an emphasis on the collective, rather than the individual. Kishore Mahbubani has dismissed the emphasis on human rights as 'ideological triumphalism'. I completely disagree. It is a moral obligation to people whose governments prevent them from living their lives in dignity. Mahbubani says we need to move on from a discussion of values to a discussion of interests. I think values and interests can go hand in hand.

*Dutch perceptions, Chinese realities*

When you read a Dutch newspaper or watch a Dutch TV-programme, the picture is clear. There are many areas of concern in China, such as freedom of speech, freedom of religion, the death penalty and the position of human rights defenders. The Chinese perspective is completely different. They would probably say: "It's the economy, stupid!" And the economy has grown for 30 years, at staggering rates. It has lifted hundreds of millions of Chinese from poverty. And the downward risks of economic and political instability are great. We have to take that into consideration when setting out and implementing our policy.

### *Chinese perceptions, Dutch realities*

The Chinese perception of the Dutch policy may be that we focus on human rights. And we do: human rights are an essential element of our foreign policy on China. But our policy on China is much broader than human rights. In line with our policy memorandum, we want a stable, responsible, prosperous and sustainable China. Therefore, Prime Minister Balkenende's visit to China showed in words and in deeds the importance we attach to economic cooperation, rule of law, sustainable energy and the environment. The Chinese might complain that half of the official consultations between Prime Minister Balkenende and Prime Minister Wen was spent on human rights. But the Dutch reality is simple: 90% of discussions in parliament on China are on human rights. And our parliamentarians are driven by popular vote. In contrast to China, they need popular support to be elected. And Dutch people are genuinely concerned about civil and political rights in China.

### *Different systems, different goals*

The different political systems of our two countries result in different goals. The Chinese authorities' goal is clear: the Communist Party should stay in control of government. Political unrest should be avoided; stability is key. Hence the focus on the economy and improvement of economic rights. The Dutch trias politica leads to a clear focus on civil and political rights in China. This is the area where we think most progress should be made. But progress can only be made if we understand the local context, work together with the local authorities and build on the needs of the local people.

### *Knowing each other, learning from each other*

We therefore have to know each other better. There seems to be a considerable lack of actual and sometimes factual knowledge. I am therefore pleased that recently bilateral visits seem to have increased. In the foreign policy area, we have had a visit of the National People's Congress Foreign Affairs Committee in October. The Dutch Foreign Affairs Committee will visit China next year. On human rights, the State Administration for Religious Affairs came to the Netherlands last month. These visits are essential for a clearer picture and a better understanding.

### *Opening up and the role of the media*

When you read the Dutch media on human rights in China, the picture on human rights in China is very bleak; we'll discuss that in the next session. When you read the Chinese media, there doesn't seem to be any problem at all. Interest groups try to influence and act on this picture. This puts both our governments in a difficult position, since their starting points from a media perspective are different: the Dutch government has to act, the Chinese can't give in. Opening up society and extensive, independent media reporting will contribute to a clearer picture, a better understanding and a more fruitful cooperation.

### *Improvement of human rights and good governance*

The Chinese focus on economic rights shouldn't move us away from our focus on civil and political rights. It does mean that we have to focus on areas where there are win-win situations, such as rule of law. The Chinese have a clear interest in improving their laws and the implementation thereof. This matches our interests: to create a stable and trustworthy environment, for example for the business community. Results can only be achieved through dialogue. Since a dialogue is 'two way traffic', we should stay away from lecturing China. We need a balanced approach: not just words, but also deeds, with concrete cooperation programmes. Not only focus on where things need to improve, but also acknowledge where improvements have been made. And not only look at civil and political rights, but also at economic and social rights. Only then do we have the moral ground to express our concerns about the treatment of human rights defenders. Or about a lack of respect for freedom of religion. Or persist when asking for improvement of freedom of the press. Or complain about the lack of a level playing field for our private sector.

### *Influence from the outside, change from the inside*

There are clear limits to the Dutch impact on the human rights situation in China. Even if we count the EU impact as our own. China will change at its own speed, when and where it chooses. And real change has to come from the inside, not from the outside. That is what even Chinese human rights defenders are telling us. The Chinese government has to listen to its people and act on their needs. We have

to accept that changes take time. But it does not mean that we shouldn't stimulate the Chinese government to act quickly.

### *Cooperation and disagreement*

As I pointed out before, the relation between China and the Netherland is broader than human rights. Because of the extensive relations, we are able to have a constructive dialogue on human rights. We also have partnership programmes, for example on improvement of the Rule of Law. Through these programmes like these we are able to show our critical, constructive engagement. This engagement, and the depth of the Sino-Dutch relations, enable us to deliver a clear message on issues where we disagree.

### *Government, society and private sector*

Government, society and private sector should each play their role in contributing to the human rights in China. I already explained the Dutch government's side. Society shouldn't stop being active at the Dutch borders. They should go out and reach out for cooperation with China. Through our Rule of Law programme, or our programme on Tibet. Or through other programmes. The private sector should work on corporate social responsibility. Respect for the rights of labourers, transparency, no corruption, environmental protection: all issues where the private sector should take the lead. But corporate social responsibility goes beyond economic rights. The private sector also needs to draw a clear red line on civil rights, for instance on the freedom of internet. Their responsibility does not stop at the cashier's desk.

### *Conclusion*

In conclusion: as you have noted, I have not outlined new goals nor put forward a new strategy. For three reasons. One: we need to be consistent in our policy. Whereas circumstances may change and thus individual priorities, the strategy should remain the same. Two: we are working on the basis of trust and mutual respect. The Chinese don't like surprises in the field of human rights. If anything changes, we should tell them first. And three: I believe the current policy is the right one: *cooperate when possible, disagree when necessary, in a*

*constructive way.* For the good of the Chinese people and of the Dutch.

Thank you.