

Nobel Peace Prize: Another exercise in political cynicism

John Chan
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Last Friday's announcement awarding the Nobel Peace Prize to jailed Chinese dissident Liu Xiaobo was a highly political decision designed to stoke up the issue of "human rights" in China on behalf of the US and European powers.

US President Obama immediately seized on the prize to call for Liu's release, declaring that it "reminds us that political reform has not kept pace [with economic expansion], and that the basic human rights of every man, woman and child must be respected."

This year's award to Liu is of a piece with last year's Nobel Peace Prize for Obama—even as the US president was escalating the neo-colonial war in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Neither has anything to do with "peace" or "democracy".

Just as the 2009 prize was a sign that European elites were mending relations with Washington after tensions under President Bush, so the 2010 award signals European support for Obama's pressure on Beijing over a range of issues—from currency revaluation to US "freedom of navigation" for its warships in waters near the Chinese mainland.

Predictably the Chinese regime reacted angrily, denouncing the Norwegian Nobel Peace Prize committee's choice as an "obscenity" for honouring "a criminal who has been sentenced by Chinese judicial authorities for violating Chinese law". Chinese authorities hauled in the Norwegian ambassador for a dressing down and warned that Sino-Norwegian relations could be affected.

Liu was arrested last year for initiating the "Charter

08" rights campaign and jailed in January for 11 years for "inciting subversion". He speaks on behalf of a layer of the Chinese ruling elite that advocates limited democratic rights as a means of forestalling a social explosion. His Charter 08 warned that protests and strikes were "becoming more militant and raising the possibility of a violent conflict of disastrous proportions." Liu's jailing was not so much directed against him personally, but at keeping the floodgates closed to far broader political opposition by the working class.

All of this underscores the fact that China remains a police state that tramples on the basic democratic rights not only of middle class dissidents, but of hundreds of millions of working people. However, the decision to pluck Liu Xiaobo from relative obscurity is not aimed at fostering democracy in China, but rather is to further the interests of the European powers and the US against a rising economic rival.

One only has to recall the reaction of the Western powers to the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989. Liu was a leading figure among liberal intellectuals who initiated the student protests that were crushed by soldiers and tanks after workers began to join and voice their own class demands. Hundreds, if not thousands, were killed and many more students and workers were arrested in Beijing and other cities throughout China.

The US and European powers shed crocodile tears for the dead and imposed a token arms embargo on China. Later that year the Nobel Peace Prize Committee handed the 1989 award to the Dalai Lama in a further diplomatic slap in the face to Beijing over "human rights".

However, the actual conclusion drawn by Western governments and corporations was expressed in the hundreds of billions of dollars in foreign investment that flooded into China. Far from being concerned about the abuse of democratic rights, investors took the massacre as a guarantee that the Chinese regime would use all means to suppress any threat by the rapidly expanding working class to their property and profits.

By becoming the cheap labour “workshop of the world”, China has undergone a vast economic expansion over the past two decades—propelling the country from the tenth largest economy in the world in 1989 to the second largest this year. The global financial crisis that erupted in 2007-08 highlighted the relative decline of the United States and intensified the debate in Washington over how to respond to the Chinese challenge.

The awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to Liu gives a boost to the ideological component of the Obama administration’s aggressive campaign to demand economic concessions from Beijing, particularly on the revaluation of the yuan, and to undercut growing Chinese influence in Asia and internationally. The lack of “human rights” in China is exploited to highlight Chinese support for repressive regimes on the world stage such as Burma and Sudan—while keeping a diplomatic silence, for instance, on the oppressive US-led military occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan.

The Nobel Peace Prize announcement came amid the rising danger of a “currency war” over the undervalued Chinese yuan. The US House of Representatives recently passed a bill enabling Washington to impose tariffs on China for allegedly manipulating its currency. At the International Monetary Fund meeting last weekend, US Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner again called “on countries whose currencies are significantly undervalued”—that is, China—to do more to boost domestic consumption and rebalance global growth.

Over the past year, the Obama administration has aggressively reasserted US strategic interests in Asia. Obama pointedly met with the Dalai Lama earlier this year, despite protests from Beijing, and sold

sophisticated weapons to Taiwan, resulting in China putting an end to high-level military talks between Beijing and Washington. At an Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) summit in July, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton supported ASEAN members in their territorial disputes with China in the South China Sea. Most recently, the US tacitly backed Japan in its diplomatic row with China that erupted over disputed islets in the East China Sea.

While the Obama administration did not publicly link Liu’s Nobel Prize to these broader economic and strategic issues, the American media has not been so reticent. In an editorial last Friday declaring that China should be “ashamed” over Liu’s detention, the *New York Times* issued the following call to arms: “Beijing is used to throwing its weight around these days on currency, trade, the South China Sea and many other issues. Too many governments, and companies, are afraid to push back. Maybe someone in China’s leadership will now figure out that bullying is not a strategy for an aspiring world power.”

“Chinese bullying” is becoming the rallying point around which the US is seeking to marshal support to throw its own weight around in Asia and internationally. By enlisting in this ideological campaign, the Nobel committee is not advancing “peace”, but is helping to fuel the drive to currency and trade wars that ultimately will produce war itself.

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