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December Roundtable: Introduction

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December Roundtable: Introduction

Abstract

An annotation of:

Obama's speech to the United Nations General Assembly (September, 2009).

and

Does Obama believe in human rights? By Bret Stephens. The Wall Street Journal. October 19, 2009.

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[Obama's speech to the United Nations General Assembly \(September, 2009\).](#)

[Does Obama believe in human rights?](#) By Bret Stephens. *The Wall Street Journal*. October 19, 2009.

An Annotation

Next month will be the first anniversary of President Barack Obama in the White House. The United States President was elected largely for his promise of change. His message inspired many people around the world, who believed that Obama's leadership would bring the kind of change that they were hoping for. There was an international expectation for a new logic of international engagement in which human rights would play an important role. In his recent acceptance speech of the Nobel Prize in Oslo, Norway, President Obama emphasized once again his commitment for a more humane world: "We are not mere prisoners of fate. Our actions matter, and can bend history in the direction of justice."

This Roundtable evaluates President Obama's human rights policy and asks whether his actions in this field are moving toward the direction of justice or not. In other words, is there any change in human rights policy that "**we can believe in**"? This month centerpieces—Obama's first speech at the United Nations and Bret Stephens critique on current human rights policies—serve as a general background for the panelists to initiate a discussion on the progress and challenges ahead for the Obama administration.

In his speech to the United Nations General Assembly, President Barack Obama underscored the necessity to start a new era of global cooperation based on a multilateral approach, respect for international law, and renewed commitment to join human rights regimes through the UN Human Rights Council. He mentioned some of the actions taken by his administration to reestablish a human rights policy. "**[o]n my first day in office, I prohibited -- without exception or equivocation -- the use of torture by the United States of America. I ordered the prison at Guantanamo Bay closed, and we are doing the hard work of forging a framework to combat extremism within the rule of law. Every nation must know: America will live its values, and we will lead by example.**"

Obama's speech at the UN has moved a long way from his predecessor, George W. Bush, helping the United States to recover its legitimacy at the international level. However, as our panelists have pointed out, if the United States wants to lead by example on human rights issues, it is not enough to be better than the former president. Rather, the United States needs to build on concrete actions to effectively serve the "**common interests of human beings.**" However, as the recent visit of Barack Obama to China illustrates, the delicate balance between human rights interests and other foreign policy goals is not an easy task; they more often than not tend to be in conflict with each other.

How can President Obama meet human rights challenges? Our contributors provide a number of recommendations to the current American administration; we would like to highlight two:

First, credibility. A government can not promote democracy abroad if it is not respecting democracy at home. Respecting civil and political rights on counterterrorism activities is seen as a priority on this area. The United States will not be able to urge other governments to observe human rights without leading with the example.

Second, match rhetoric with reality. Claiming an international commitment to human rights without deeds undermines Obama's leadership at the international level. **“But without such action, Obama's words will just leave us feeling empty since faith without works is dead.”** Actions matters as President Obama himself acknowledge in his Nobel Prize speech.

These issues and others are considered in this month's Roundtable.