

THE FUTURE OF HUMAN RIGHTS UNDER AN EVOLVING INTERNATIONAL ORDER

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Preface

Global human rights governance is facing at a moment of choice.

The international landscape is undergoing the most profound historic transformation since the end of the Second World War. Multipolarization is advancing with difficulty amid twists and turns; the international human rights system continues to develop and mature; and the importance and urgency of global human rights governance are consistently increasing. Yet localized conflicts and turbulence persist unabated, unilateralism and power politics recklessly trample upon the space for equal development among nations continue to deepen global divisions. As old and new contradictions intertwine and erupt, global human rights governance now faces a difficult choice: progress or regression, cooperation or division, win-win outcomes or confrontation? This not only profoundly concerns the survival and development of individuals, but will also determine the future of the global human rights cause.

To resolve this predicament, we need both the historical wisdom to reshape a sound order and the political maturity to pursue common development. Both China and Europe boast profound historical and cultural heritage, opening up broad prospects for the two sides to advance institutionalized human rights dialogue.

China and Europe are both indispensable forces in a multipolar world. Amid profound changes in the international landscape, the China-Europe Seminar on Human Rights has gone through an exceptional journey. In 2015, at the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg, France, China and Europe initiated their dialogue on this subject. Today, at a time of profound transformation in the international order, we gather once again in France, continuing our reflections and advancing together through concerted efforts. This commitment stems from a shared conviction: no matter how turbulent the international landscape may become, human dignity is inviolable, and the cause of human rights must press forward against all obstacles. This is our common belief; it is also a universal consensus.

Over the past decade, the China-Europe Seminar on Human Rights has addressed diverse and evolving themes, keeping pace with the times. As we embark upon a new journey after ten years of dialogue, there is an urgent need to reexamine the diverse civilizational roots of human rights concepts, to reflect collectively on the human rights challenges confronting humanity, and to promote peace and development through the ideals of fraternity and solidarity, in the joint efforts to build a community with a shared future for mankind.

I. In What Era Do We Live?

Clearly understanding where we stand in history bears directly upon what decisions we make and what actions we take in the future regarding human rights.

Global human rights governance is facing severe challenges. Certain countries manipulate geopolitical rivalries and openly trample upon international human rights consensus and the fundamental principles of international law, while long evading the responsibilities they ought to bear. Such actions undermine the authority of international law and exacerbate the global deficit of trust. Data from relevant international organizations show that, more than sixty armed conflicts continue across the globe; 117 million people have been forcibly displaced; 300 million workers remain trapped in extreme poverty; and 2.2 billion people, in the digital age, are excluded from development opportunities. Disorder in security, imbalance in development, and failures in governance have become deeply intertwined, intensifying what may be described as the “non-simultaneity within the same era” in the survival and development of peoples across nations: beneath the same sky, some people fully enjoy the fruits of modern civilization, while others struggle in the abyss of lost dignity.

The global landscape of human rights governance is on the eve of historical transformation. Although the United Nations multilateral system has repeatedly been impacted by the attitude of certain major powers, it remains the world’s most universal and authoritative intergovernmental organization. As conduct characterized by “using it when it suits one’s interests and discarding it when it does not” repeatedly breaks through the bottom line of human understanding, countries are no longer willing to be judged according to a single standard imposed upon them. Instead, they are courageously exploring paths of human rights development rooted in their own national conditions, thereby injecting new hope into the global human rights cause. The course of history has repeatedly demonstrated that attempts to permanently manipulate the international human rights order amount to nothing more

than arrogance nearing its end. As an ancient Chinese saying goes, “Virtue is never solitary; it always has neighbors.” This maxim reveals the dialectic of good and evil in global human rights governance: those forces that practice hegemony in the name of human rights will ultimately become isolated, whereas those that uphold fairness and justice and genuinely advance human rights will inevitably win recognition and companionship.

The dream of full enjoyment of human rights for everyone is yet to be realized. A fragmented and displaced world is by no means the proper form of our shared human homeland. However, if human rights are to be universally and effectively respected and protected, we cannot stop at the level of theoretical imagination within rights discourse. We must continue to seek and consolidate consensus, shifting our focus from abstract claims of rights to concrete human rights obligations and responsibilities, to jointly embark upon constructive actions marked by coordinated efforts, mutual benefits, and win-win outcomes.

II. Is Cross-Civilizational Consensus on Human Rights Possible?

The ideal of universal human rights has been solemnly enshrined in international instruments as a moral vision, yet how it is interpreted and applied in practice often gives rise to controversy and even confrontation. Although the universality of human rights values has become a shared conviction of the international community, the foundation of global human rights consensus is becoming increasingly fragile amid a turbulent international order. A gap has emerged between ideal and reality. Against this backdrop, a fundamental question has become particularly urgent: among different civilizations, is it still possible to establish meaningful and substantive consensus around the concept of “human rights,” a concept that carries profound value commitments?

The crisis of global human rights consensus stems from the inherent and enduring tension between the universality and particularity of human rights. Since the birth of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, it has remained a persistent challenge to recognize the universal value of human rights while at the same time respecting the differing histories, cultures, and realities of various countries. Divergent understandings of human rights reflect different philosophical and socio-political visions.

In fact, although Chinese and European civilizations differ significantly in many respects,

they share, at a deeper level, fundamental values concerning human dignity and social justice. These shared values constitute a solid foundation upon which both sides may transcend differences and engage in dialogue and cooperation.

The first is a shared reverence for human dignity. This is the most fundamental point of convergence between Chinese and European conceptions of human rights. The European culture regards human dignity as the source of rights; likewise, concepts in traditional Chinese philosophy, such as “among all beings endowed by Heaven and Earth, human beings are the most precious,” embody an affirmation of human value and dignity. Whether in the Enlightenment principle that “all men are born free and equal,” or in the Confucian precept that “do not impose upon others what you yourself do not desire,” we find a shared respect for the intrinsic worth of the individual.

The second is an unremitting pursuit of equality and justice. The European Enlightenment held up high the banner of equality, while traditional Chinese culture also contains abundant intellectual resources championing equality. These span multiple traditions, including the Confucian ideas of “education without discrimination” and “rather than fearing scarcity, one should fear inequality,” the Legalist principle that “punishment for wrongdoing should not spare high ministers, nor should rewards for virtue omit commoners,” and the Buddhist doctrine of the “equality of all sentient beings.” In history, equality has manifested in various forms, yet the aspiration for a more just society free from oppression is shared.

The third is the ethical advocacy for fraternity and solidarity. The spirit of fraternity in European culture is closely linked to the Christian teaching to “love thy neighbor as thyself,” while Chinese culture emphasizes “benevolence,” “universal love,” and the community ethic that “within the four seas, all men are brothers.” This value orientation—transcending the individual, caring for others, and highlighting social connectedness—reflects the shared nature and ethical foundation of what it means to be human.

The fourth is a shared concern for social welfare and the abuse of public power. Although the paths differ, both China and Europe are committed to creating sound societies that safeguards the well-being of the people. Europe constrains power and protects individual liberty through the separation of powers—along with its attendant checks and balances—and the rule of law. China, by contrast, emphasizes that “the people are the foundation of the state,” and consolidates governing legitimacy through economic development and the improvement of people’s livelihoods, while also stressing the rule of law to confine power within an institutional

cage. It may thus be said that, on the fundamental issues of social welfare and public power, Chinese and European conceptions of human rights are oriented towards a common goal via distinctly different trajectories.

The historical evolution of human rights ideas—either in Europe or in China—has never been a completely self-contained process. In the course of modernization, traditional Chinese culture and European human rights theories have engaged in exchange and dialogue across time and space, complementing and elevating each other to enrich the tapestry of human rights civilization.

By tracing the historical trajectory and exploring the underpinning nature behind institutional appearances, we find that cross-cultural consensus on human rights ideals is not only possible, but also real.

III. What New Human Rights Challenges Do We Jointly Face?

As the international situation is marked by turbulence and complexity, all countries face a series of structural challenges in advancing the cause of human rights. At the same time, these challenges also create practical opportunities for reshaping the pathways of cooperation.

First, deficits in sustainable development and difficulties in development financing constrain the realization of human rights. The achievement of sustainable development constitutes the foundation for the realization of all rights. However, progress toward the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development has fallen seriously behind, while the adverse effects of poverty, inequality, and climate change continue to intensify, directly threatening the protection and development of human rights on a global scale. Against this background, the severe shortfall in development financing has become a key bottleneck. Owing to resource constraints, many developing countries are unable to make sufficient investments in healthcare, education, clean energy, and social security, thereby hindering the realization of basic rights and further entrenching global structures of inequality. Whether eliminating poverty in all its forms, ensuring food security, or addressing climate change and biodiversity loss, these sustainable development goals are themselves core human rights issues. In this process, ensuring a “just transition”² and preventing the rights of vulnerable groups from being undermined present challenges that all countries must navigate carefully.

Second, threats to international peace and security fundamentally erode the enjoyment

of human rights. Peace and security constitute the prerequisite and foundation for the protection of human rights. The evolution of the contemporary international security landscape is characterized by the persistence of traditional conflicts, the spread of terrorism and violent extremism, the networking of transnational organized crime, and the unknown risks arising from the militarized application of emerging technologies. These threats directly infringe upon the lives, dignity, freedom, and security of civilians in various regions, while their spillover effects also affect the stability and security of both Chinese and European societies. How to jointly safeguard international peace and how to protect human rights while respecting state sovereignty remain common agendas fraught with challenges. In addition, the militarized application of emerging technologies has generated profound ethical and legal challenges. For example, the development and deployment of lethal autonomous weapon systems have raised fundamental questions concerning human control, the attribution of responsibility, and compliance with international humanitarian law. Meanwhile, the application of cyber operations and artificial intelligence in the military sphere may blur the boundary between peace and conflict, increase the risk of miscalculation, and pose potential threats to rights such as privacy and freedom of expression.

Third, digital transformation and technology governance pose new human rights risks. Digital technologies are reshaping society while also creating new arenas of human rights risks, among which the foremost challenge is the deepening digital divide. Inequalities in access and digital skills are producing new forms of social exclusion, restricting the rights of marginalized groups to enjoy equal opportunities in education, employment, healthcare, and public participation. Regarding the protection of specific rights, data abuse, algorithmic discrimination, and digital surveillance pose direct threats to the rights to privacy, equality, and freedom from discrimination. At the same time, cyber violence, online gender-based violence, child sexual exploitation, and algorithm-driven hate speech seriously endanger the physical and mental health, safety, and other fundamental human rights of specific groups. In addition, the governance of artificial intelligence has become a focal issue. The application of AI systems in critical sectors may embed and amplify social biases, thereby affecting fair treatment to individuals in key areas.

Fourth, imbalances within the global governance system and the inertia of hegemonic practices structurally distort the human rights agenda. The deficiencies of the current global governance system in terms of representation, effectiveness, and fairness constitute profound

and structural obstacles to the universal realization of human rights. Among these, the inertia of hegemonic practices left from history and the unilateral actions continue to undermine human rights protection and cooperation grounded in international solidarity. The abuse of unilateral coercive measures is a prominent manifestation of such inertia. When excessively or improperly imposed, such measures often result in difficulties in accessing basic goods and public services for civilians in targeted countries, thereby seriously infringing upon their rights to subsistence, health, and development. Opposing the abuse of unilateral sanctions and mitigating its negative impacts on the human rights of civilians should constitute a shared concern between China and Europe in safeguarding the international rule of law.

Worse still, the escalation of geopolitical competition is eroding the foundations of multilateral cooperation and diverting the attention and resources needed by the international community to address global challenges such as climate change, public health crises, and development deficits. Such competition may spill over into the fields of technology, trade, and even human rights, triggering a series of chain reactions. Upholding the principles of multilateralism and maintaining an open, stable, and non-discriminatory global environment amid a tense international climate are of vital importance for the realization of all human rights.

These global challenges are interconnected and mutually reinforcing, transcending the scope of traditional bilateral relations. In an era of transformation, jointly addressing these structural challenges carries universal significance for building a more just and sustainable future in which human rights are enjoyed by all, beyond regional and cultural boundaries.

IV. How Can We Jointly Build the Future of Human Rights?

The eleventh China-Europe Seminar on Human Rights will be held this year. The eleven-year course of dialogue demonstrates the firm commitment and pragmatic capacity of both sides to seek common ground and advance cooperation despite differences. At present, the international order is undergoing profound changes. Unilateralism and hegemonic practices continue to disrupt the global landscape, placing unprecedentedly higher demands on the fairness and effectiveness of global human rights governance. Chinese President Xi Jinping has put forward four Global Initiatives, advocating the promotion of the common values of humanity and the practice of genuine multilateralism. He advocates safeguarding human rights through security, developing human rights through development, and advancing human rights through cooperation, thereby injecting stability and certainty into a turbulent world. The

promotion and protection of human rights is a common cause of all humankind. As two major constructive forces in today's world, China and Europe have more reasons to improve global human rights governance through pragmatic actions and promote the sound development of the international human rights cause.

First, we must seek common ground while shelving differences and consolidate the foundation of shared values for human rights cooperation. Seeking common ground while shelving differences constitutes the core principle guiding China and Europe in handling bilateral differences and advancing human rights cooperation, and it is also the key to addressing the crisis of global consensus on human rights. History shows that there is no universally applicable path or model for human rights development and protection in the world. Differences in history, culture, social systems, and stages of development among lead to the diversity of human rights development paths, and such diversity is itself an important asset for the progress of the human rights cause.

Second, we must deepen pragmatic cooperation and address practical challenges in human rights development. In the face of new human rights challenges brought about by sustainable development, peace and security, and technological innovation, China and Europe should proceed from a sense of shared responsibility, focus on key areas, and promote the real transformation of human rights cooperation from concepts into practical achievements that benefit the peoples of all countries.

Third, we must strengthen institutional development and expand the channels and mechanisms for human rights exchanges and cooperation. Based on existing dialogues, China and Europe should further broaden platforms for people-to-people exchanges and think tank cooperation. Academic communities, social organizations, enterprises, and other diverse actors from China and Europe should be encouraged to actively participate in exchanges in the field of human rights, share their practical achievements and beneficial experiences in human rights protection, and promote the cross-civilizational dissemination of human rights concepts and the reaching of consensus.

Fourth, we must safeguard the multilateral system and jointly shape a new landscape for global human rights governance. China and Europe should play a leading role in firmly upholding multilateralism and jointly safeguarding the multilateral human rights governance system centered on the United Nations. They should oppose any attempts by any country to weaken the authority of the United Nations or hollow out international human rights

mechanisms, while promoting the improvement and development of international human rights mechanisms.

Conclusion: Creating a Better Future for Global Human Rights Governance through Solidarity and Responsibility

“The beauty of a good soup lies in the blending of different ingredients.” Standing at this historical juncture of profound transformation in the international order, China and Europe should forge a consensus through solidarity and guide action with a firm sense of responsibility, working hand in hand on the path of human rights development so as to inject enduring momentum into the transformation of global human rights governance.

The cause of human rights is long and arduous. It is precisely because it's fraught with difficulties that we need to stand by each other on this cause. So long as China and Europe adhere to the principle of seeking common ground while shelving differences and engage in dialogue on an equal footing, expand areas of exchange and cooperation in human rights, and jointly safeguard the multilateral human rights governance system, we will certainly be able to resolve differences, combine strengths, and continuously advance the cause of human rights, making greater contributions to building a community with a shared future for mankind.