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Sent: Thursday, February 16, 2012 6:48 AM
To: H
Subject: Fw: Washington Post

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From: Posner, Michael H
Sent: Thursday, February 16, 2012 06:41 AM
To: Mills, Cheryl D; Sullivan, Jacob J
Cc: Baer, Daniel B
Subject: Washington Post

Editorial: Talking to China about religious freedom

Editorial Board
 Wednesday, Feb 15, 2012

PRESIDENT OBAMA and Vice President Biden took care to mention human rights during their meetings on Tuesday with China's incoming leader, Xi Jinping. The president devoted one vaguely worded sentence to the subject during his greeting of Mr. Xi at the Oval Office; Mr. Biden stretched that to three during a toast at the State Department, in which he observed that "conditions in China have deteriorated." Mr. Xi, who has appeared to have adopted the script of his predecessor, Hu Jintao, during a tightly controlled tour, offered the standard reply that China had made great progress in human rights but that there was "always room for improvement."

That much was predictable. The more pressing question is whether Mr. Obama — who may be beginning a five-year official relationship with Mr. Xi — treated human rights as a central matter of concern in the bilateral relationship, or as a box to be checked in a dialogue centered on economic and geopolitical issues. We believe it is essential that U.S. policy toward China focus on the need for political reform, because without it, the country is less likely to remain stable, or peaceful toward its neighbors, during Mr. Xi's planned decade in power.

The White House told us that the issue is "a priority" and that "the president and vice president spoke very directly with Vice President Xi about our commitment to universal values including religious freedom." In his toast, Mr. Biden indicated that he had discussed "the plight of several very prominent individuals," telling Mr. Xi, "we appreciate your response." Yet neither Mr. Biden nor Mr. Obama chose to utter the name of Liu Xiaobo, the imprisoned winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, much less the four other peaceful dissidents recently given long prison terms. They publicly raised trade and currency issues ahead of human rights, and Mr. Xi himself observed that "the greater part of our discussion" was devoted to those subjects.

Then there's this: The words "religious freedom" appeared nowhere in the public remarks of Mr. Obama, Mr. Biden, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton or Defense Secretary Leon Panetta. That's striking because religious activists have been a target of recent Chinese repression, especially in Tibet, and because Beijing has been refusing official meetings or a visa to the State Department's ambassador for international religious freedom. The Post's William Wan and Michelle Boorstein reported that Suzan Johnson Cook was forced to cancel a trip to China planned to begin Feb. 8

and that she and her staff were told by superiors in the administration to avoid talking about the matter before Mr. Xi's visit.

Was Ms. Johnson gagged by an administration fearful of offending Mr. Xi? White House and State Department spokesmen say no. China did not formally deny the visa, State says, and Ms. Cook still hopes to visit. Perhaps she will; but it will help if the administration makes clear to Beijing and its incoming leader that matters such as religious freedom are as important in U.S.-China relations as currency rates and World Trade Organization cases. So far, it hasn't done so.