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Counterpoint: An Ignoble Nobel

By KISHORE MAHBUBANI

In an [article on these pages](#) on Oct. 23 (“Why China is wrong about Liu Xiaobo”), Thorbjorn Jagland, the chairman of the Norwegian Nobel Committee, argued against the notion that supporting a Chinese dissident could worsen conditions for the opposition, asserting that silence undercuts the most basic tenets of human rights. Mr. Mahbubani continues the debate.

SINGAPORE — Max Weber once wisely stated, “It is not true that good can only follow from good and evil only from evil, but that often the opposite is true. Anyone who says this is, indeed, a political infant.” His remarks apply equally well to good intentions. And one such Western good intention may actually end up doing more harm than good.

In the Western mind, the recent award of the Nobel Peace Prize to the Chinese dissident, Liu Xiaobo, was an unmitigated good. Several Western commentaries said the prize should be given to “individuals struggling against the overwhelming force of an oppressive state or an unjust social order.” In these pages, the chairman of the Norwegian Nobel Committee, Thorbjorn Jagland, compared Liu to Andrei Sakharov, another Nobel Peace Prize winner, who struggled against “human rights abuses in the Soviet Union.”

Many Chinese, however, believe that the award of the Peace Prize to Liu could well do more harm than good. Few Chinese intellectuals, inside or outside China, have celebrated the award, publicly or privately. They do not believe that a candle has been lit for freedom. Instead, this award may set back the steady progress toward more personal freedom in China. This inability of the West to understand that there may be an alternative point of view could well create a major problem for the world.

Over the past 30 years, the Chinese government has done far more good than harm both for China and the world. The largest poverty-reduction exercise in human history was achieved by the Chinese government. When Deng Xiaoping launched his famous reforms in 1978, over 800 million people lived in absolute poverty. Today, fewer than 200 million do. Over 600 million were lifted out of absolute poverty.

For this achievement alone, Deng should have earned the Nobel Peace Prize. But he did far more.

He took great political risks in opening up China. He allowed foreign investment and opened up China to Western influence. He sent hundreds of thousands of young Chinese to study in Western universities. He did all this aware that they could come back with ideas that could undermine the Chinese system. It is hard to think of any other recent leader who has been as courageous as Deng. Before him, the Chinese had no freedom to leave their villages, let alone leave China. Today, over 40 million Chinese leave China freely each year. And they return to China freely each year. China today is at least one thousand times less oppressive than it used to be.

So why was Deng not considered for the Nobel Prize? One word: Tiananmen. Tiananmen was a mistake. But the West has double-standards when it comes to judging human-rights violations. It does not condemn American society because it violated every canon of human rights by being the first modern Western society to reintroduce torture. Instead, it sees Guantánamo as a blemish that should not take away from all the good that American society has done. The same judgment should apply to Deng: Tiananmen was a blemish that should not take away from all the good that Deng had done.

Equally importantly, the West needs to understand that for Deng to achieve all the good he did for China, he had to maintain social and political order even as Chinese society opened up dramatically to the world. In the Western political imagination, the march to progress is made by steadily weakening the state and enlarging individual freedom. In the Chinese political experience, the weakening of the Chinese state has inevitably led to chaos and enormous personal suffering. There can be no doubt that the past 30 years since Deng's reforms began have been the best 30 years that the Chinese have experienced since the Opium War of 1842.

One reason for this is that the Chinese government managed to find the right balance between opening up society and maintaining order — and that in a country of 1.3 billion people.

The Nobel award to Liu could upset the delicate political balance in China by stirring up a “color revolution,” reintroducing chaos to China and setting it back 150 years. That, in turn, could lead to an overreaction by the Chinese government and a clampdown on the many personal freedoms the Chinese people have gained in recent decades. In short, the Liu award could generate less, not more, personal freedom.

Over time, China will become a democracy, especially when it develops the world's largest middle class. However, it is likely to get there faster if the present balance of rapid economic transformation and gradual political transformation is maintained. Few Chinese believe that the West is trying to do China any good by trying to accelerate the political transformation. Indeed, most Chinese believe that the Western agenda is to unleash the same chaos in China as it did with instant democracy in Russia. When Jagland compared Liu to Sakharov, he confirmed the Chinese conviction that the goal of this prize is to destabilize China. If the West persists in its refusal to

understand China's fundamental concerns, it will do more harm than good with its good intentions.

Kishore Mahbubani is dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore.