

Hillary Clinton: Chinese System Is Doomed, Leaders on a 'Fool's Errand'

By Jeffrey Goldberg

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In an exclusive interview, the secretary of state says Beijing's human rights record is "deplorable" and it is "trying to stop history" by opposing the advance of democracy



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In my [latest Atlantic cover story, which is out now](#), I interview Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton about America's response to the Arab Spring. When we met last month, in her State Department office, she was, as usual, fluent, comprehensive, and in total control of the details. She was also insistent that the Administration's approach to the Middle East betrayed no inconsistencies or hypocrisies (there is much on this subject below, in a transcript of the interview). We didn't spend a great deal of time on the Middle East peace process (though my

belief, [expressed repeatedly](#), is that she is the best-qualified person in America to bring the Israelis and Arabs to a negotiated settlement); instead, we discussed the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood, and what it might mean for women, and we also spent some time on the debate between foreign policy realism and idealism.

It was during this part of the conversation, when the subject of China, and its frightened reaction to the Arab Spring, came up, that she took an almost-Reaganesque turn, calling into question not just Beijing's dismal human rights record, but the future of the Chinese regime itself. The Obama Administration has been ratcheting-up the rhetoric on China's human rights record lately, especially since the arrest of the dissident Ai Weiwei, but Secretary Clinton, in our interview, went much further, questioning the long-term viability of the one-party system. After she referred to China's human rights record as "deplorable" (itself a ratcheting-up of the rhetoric), I noted that the Chinese government seemed scared of the Arab rising. To which she responded: "Well, they are. They're worried, and they are trying to stop history, which is a fool's errand. They cannot do it. But they're going to hold it off as long as possible."

Clinton's assertion that the repressive Chinese system will eventually collapse brought to mind nothing so much as Reagan's statement, made to Richard V. Allen in 1977, about America's goal in the Cold War: "My idea of American policy toward the Soviet Union is simple, and some would say simplistic," Reagan said. "It is this: We win and they lose." (See [this post](#) from Jim Fallows for more, and better, analysis of these comments.)

I traveled with Clinton on her most recent trip to Egypt and Tunisia, in March, and she stated on many occasions during that trip that she was moved by the peaceful rising of pro-democracy protesters. Her comments on China to me suggested strongly that she sees the Arab Spring as the harbinger of a worldwide move toward democracy.

What follows is a transcript of our conversation. It has been slightly condensed, and edited for clarity:

JEFFREY GOLDBERG: I stayed on in Tunisia after you left, and the next day, I was downtown, and there was a demonstration forming. And I thought, "Great, young people yelling about something." I couldn't figure out what it was immediately. They're in front of the Interior Ministry, and I mix in with the crowd and I find out that they're demonstrating against an Interior Ministry decision to ban women from wearing the hijab in their photo IDs for their national identity cards, and this was a demonstration for the hijab. And I asked -- I said, "Is this something that you would compel?" And they said, "No, but in our vision of society, people would know the role of men and the role of women." And I thought to myself at this moment, "Man, I wish Hillary Clinton was here so I could ask her what she thinks of this." THESE revolutions are moving in some ways that are pleasing to the American mind and some ways that aren't pleasing.

SECRETARY OF STATE HILLARY CLINTON: I have spoken to this on other occasions, because what I want to see is the freedom to choose for women and men in responsible ways that are protected by the laws of their society so that -- my model, of course, would be our own country -- women are able to dress as they choose in accordance with their own personal desires.

And I would like to see that available to women everywhere so that there's no compulsion, there's no government coercion. It is a choice, and --

JG: So the red line is compulsion or anything --

HRC: Absolutely.

JG: -- on the continuum of compulsion.

HRC: Absolutely, anything on the continuum of compulsion. Now, I think there are security issues with, like, the burka, but if you're talking about the hijab, which is the head scarf, for me, that is not a red line. Now, when people start to say, "Oh, but there are certain things women should not be permitted to do and the only way we can stop them from doing them is by passing laws against them," like you can't drive in Saudi Arabia or you can't vote. They just had a riot in Bangladesh because the government wants women to inherit equally. That's a red line, and that infringes on the rights of women, and therefore, I am against it and I think any society in the 21st century that is looking toward modernization, and certainly if they are claiming to be democratic, needs to protect the right to make those choices.

JG: Should we fear the Muslim Brotherhood?

HRC: Well, I think we don't know enough yet to understand exactly what they're morphing into. For me, the jury is out. There are some Islamist elements that are coming to the surface in Egypt that I think on just the face of it are --

JG: Coming out of jails, in fact.

HRC: Coming out of jails, coming out of the shadows, and they are inimical to a democracy, to the kind of freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, freedom of conscience that was the aspiration in Tahrir Square.

JG: Is there a situation in which a woman can find herself in a country where it's not necessarily the law that you have to wear the hijab, but that a culture is created by the government that would cause you to raise a flag?

I've never understood the division between so-called realists and so-called idealists

HRC: Of course, but that's true in any society. You can go into neighborhoods in the United States where people dress a certain way because they don't want to be out of touch, where boys wear pants down to their knees, which nobody has compelled them to do but they pick up the cultural norms, or where girls are improperly dressed by my eyes, but that's what they see in the media.

So certainly, there are cultural norms and there are family expectations and there are even religious admonitions. But so long as there is not the coercion of the state, then I'm not going to be pointing fingers at people who make certain choices that I would not make, but within a democracy should be protected. But when it comes to political decision-making, then I think you

have to be very careful that the people who are in those positions are understanding of their obligation to protect decisions that they do not necessarily agree with.

It's almost impossible to imagine in today's world, but there might be a family in our country that doesn't want their children to learn to drive because they think it's against their religion. Well, that's very different than the family that says we don't want our children to get medical assistance. And our courts step in and say, "That's too far even for parental authority." And similarly, in societies, you do not want so-called political decision makers, political parties, or political leaders to be making decisions that are going to infringe on the range of opportunities that should be available to both women and men.

JG: Should the U.S. now be using the bully pulpit to go to countries and say, "You know what, we have a system, liberal democracy, that works really well, and since you're in this very fluid moment, you should look into this." In other words, engage in the battle of ideas --

HRC: Absolutely.

JG: -- with Islamist parties.

HRC: Well, with everybody. The Islamist parties are the ones that, obviously, we look at with most worry. But there are remnants of old regimes that are also trying to prevent progress and keep people economically denied opportunity and politically denied their rights.

So in this kind of transition, there are ideological foes of democracy, there are economic and commercial foes of democracy, there are political foes of democracy. So I think we need to be competing in the arena of ideas and information.

JG: Is that a little bit neoconish?

HRC: No. I don't think so. I think that's what we believe in. We believe that more speech is better than less speech. We deplored the guy in Florida who burned the Koran, which is so hard for other people to understand, around the world, because they say, "Well, if you thought it was terrible, you should have stopped it." And we say, "No, we overwhelmed it with speech deploring it and speech calling for tolerance and respect."

So I testified before Congress a few weeks ago. I said we are losing the war of ideas because we are not in the arena the way we were in the Cold War. I don't think that belongs to a political party or a political philosophy in our country. I want to see us out there pitching our ideas. Now, we need to do it in a way that's more likely to be understood and received than just asserting it in a conclusory way, but no, we need to be much more engaged. And frankly, just at the moment when there's this ferment for democracy breaking out -- 20 years-plus after the Berlin Wall fell, and we invested so much money and effort over so many decades to get behind the Iron Curtain, to talk about what democracy was, to keep the flag of freedom unfurled in people's hearts, to get our messages in through every means of shortwave radio and smuggling Bibles, and we did all kinds of things just to give people a sense that they weren't alone and that maybe their ideas about the human spirit were not subversive -- well, we have cut back on all of that. We don't

have those messages going out.

China is starting an English-speaking television network around the world, Russia is, Al Jazeera. And the BBC is cutting back on its many language services around the world. We're not competing. I just feel like we're missing an opportunity. And I'm well aware of our budget constraints and all of the difficulties we face, but now is the time -- not in an arrogant way, but in a matter-of-fact experiential way.

We have figured out (in America) how people from every part of the world, every kind of person you can imagine, can live together, can work together. It wasn't easy. It took a long time, but I think we know a little bit about how to do it, and we want to offer whatever assistance we can.

JG: The flip side of that question is: Has this moment taught us that foreign-policy realism, the realist school, is dead? I mean, you're sounding very idealistic --

HRC: No, no. I think I'm very hardheaded. I've never understood the division between so-called realists and so-called idealists. I don't know how you get up in the world every day, doing what I do, if you don't have some sense of idealism, because you have to believe that as hard as it is, you're going to prevent the dictator from oppressing his people, you're going to help to stop the war, you're going to figure out a way to get clean water to thirsty people and cure kids of disease. And at the same time, I don't know how you go through the day and expect to be successful without being very hardheaded and realistic. So for me, it's not an either/or.

When I came in here, I said, look, I think there are these three trends that we have to pay attention to that are separate and apart from dealing with nations, dealing with regions, dealing with ideologies. [First,] power is diffuse. It is no longer the province of just governments. There's too much going on in the world today. People know too much. So we have to start dealing with people on a more direct basis.

JG: The realist camp did hold for 50 years -- Scowcroft/Kissinger types -- that dictators, benevolent or otherwise, are the one address we should pay attention to: you should deal with the leader, and let them sort out the problems beneath them.

HRC: Right.

JG: I know you're arguing against the idea that there are discrete streams of foreign-policy thought, but --

HRC: I'm not arguing --

JG: -- but you are talking --

HRC: Look, I'm not arguing against it. I'm just saying that it's not either/or. So that today, that, to me, would be impossible, so the realist position today is you have to deal with. Realism evolves. I mean, we aren't living in Bismarckian Germany right now. And can you imagine any secretary of state like Henry Kissinger being able to go anywhere secretly today? I don't think so.

JG: You mean allegedly being sick in Pakistan for a week and dashing off to China? You would kind of like that, though.

HRC: Well, of course I would. But it's not possible. The second issue is the dispersal of power through information that was unimagined a decade ago, let alone 50 years ago. So even if you thought you could just deal with one guy in one country and you could check it off your list of concerns, that's impossible now. The way technology has exploded means that we are all living in a totally different environment. It has changed everything. And to pretend otherwise, that there's some kind of great doctrine out there that can be taken from the heavens and imposed upon the global national body, is just not realistic anymore.

JG: I'm not a fan of coherence. We have this bias toward coherence. Everything has to be tied up neatly --

HRC: Everybody wants that.

JG: Everybody wants coherence. Is there, however, some sort of coherent story line that you can identify that's happened since the poor vegetable seller self-immolated.

HRC: I mean, I'm now being blamed in some Arab capitals for having caused this with my speech in Doha. I mean, because what I saw happening was so clear to me that what was going on was just this movement below the surface, that despite the leaders' either refusal or blindness to see what was going on, it was moving. And we have just lost our breath over the last many years trying to get people that we worked with ahead of the curve. So I gave that speech in Doha, and it was fascinating, and I noticed it at the time. A lot of the government leaders were like, "No, didn't want to hear it." The business leaders, the NGOs, were on the edge of their seats. They were nodding at each other. They were poking each other in the arm. I could see it. I could literally see it where I was sitting as I was delivering it, and then during the question-and-answer period.

So the leaders might have chosen to be oblivious, but people in the society, not just the young people, but people of all walks of life, they knew that there was this beginning of change.

JG: One of the obvious contradictions here is that while on the one hand you are pushing for democratic reform in Egypt and Tunisia, places like that, you have also gone into the monarchy business. We have a lot of allies -- Jordan and Saudi Arabia, most notably -- who are going to feel some pressure on the democratic front, and our direct interest is in supporting and keeping these guys on their thrones. Does this contradiction bother you?

This administration has probably done more for Israeli security than any administration

HRC: I wouldn't accept the premise. I think that we believe in the same values and principles, full stop. We believe that countries should empower their people. We believe that people should have certain universal rights. We believe there are certain economic systems that work better for the vast majority of people than other subsystems. So I think we're very consistent. I think that's been a cornerstone of American foreign policy for at least the last century.

At the same time, we live in the real world. And there are lots of countries that we deal with because we have interests in common. We have certain security issues that we are both looking at. Obviously, in the Middle East, Iran is an overwhelming challenge to all of us. We do business with a lot of countries whose economic systems or political systems are not ones we would design or choose to live under. And we have encouraged consistently, both publicly and privately, reform and recognition and protection of human rights. But we don't walk away from dealing with China because we think they have a deplorable human rights record. We don't walk away from dealing with Saudi Arabia --

JG: And (the Chinese) are acting very scared right now, in fact.

HRC: Well, they are. They're worried, and they are trying to stop history, which is a fool's errand. They cannot do it. But they're going to hold it off as long as possible.

JG: But what do you do to get these kings -- for instance, King Abdullah II of Jordan? He's under more pressure than he's ever been. He's a great ally to America, he's certainly not a murdering thug like Qaddafi. But he's a king, and he's got problems in managing the government. How do you specifically help a person like that stay ahead of the curve?

HRC: We offer as much support and advice as we possibly can.

JG: It didn't work with Mubarak.

HRC: No, it did not work with Mubarak, and it wasn't for want of trying. President after president, secretary after secretary -- everybody tried. In countries such as Jordan, we are trying to be of practical help. So for example, the king has not only some political challenges and economic challenges that he is working toward addressing, but Jordan is one of the most water-deprived countries in the world. So a few months ago, I announced a Millennium Challenge grant of something like \$250 million to help them deal with their water problems, because I believe that it's not only that we go and sit and say, "You should do this, and you should do that," which is easy to say, but that we're a real, friend, partner, and ally. And we say, "Look, here's some positive, tangible progress we can help you make." And that's true across the board where we deal with people who are in the throes of transition and we think have their hearts in the right place, but face some difficult issues.

JG: One thing I didn't understand was this Bashar al-Assad moment, when you called him a reformer, or said he was being seen by others as a reformer. There is always going to be plasticity or strategic hypocrisy in the way you have to deal with the world. But shouldn't we be blowing some of these winds of change in the direction of Damascus and Tehran as well?

HRC: We don't have to blow. The winds are blowing. There's no stopping them. And what we have tried to do with him is to give him an alternative vision of himself and Syria's future. So when a number of the members of Congress who have gone over to Syria come back and say both publicly and privately, "We think he really wants to reform, but he's trying to put together the political pieces to be able to do that," I think it's worth reminding him of that. And since I'm

not going to be on a phone conversation with him, and I'm not going to fly to Damascus, I think that's one way of communicating with him. He's got to make the decisions, and thus far, it doesn't look like it's heading in the right direction. But there was certainly a lot of hope that he would begin to introduce the kinds of reforms that would help Syria get ahead of the curve.

JG: Would you be sad if his regime disappeared?

HRC: It depends upon what replaces it.

JG: Talk about Tehran a little bit, because they are this looming shadow over the entire Middle East. Every aspect of every problem that you're dealing with has an Iran component. They're scared, and they're also seeing some opportunities, obviously. It's not a bad thing for them to see the rise of Islamic parties. But how do you box them in, move them toward actual reform, encourage the people to rise up as they did in 2009?

HRC: Well, I regret deeply the way that the regime in Iran is treating their own people, the level of hypocrisy that they have demonstrated in responding to the uprisings across the region. They have demonstrated quite a talent for totalitarianism, and they have imposed a relentless mind-control mechanism that has begun to go even into what is in their textbooks, what you can learn, what you can talk about. That is so contrary to the kind of mentality of the modern Iranian from everything we know, but it is a scary place now to live in.

JG: What can we do?

HRC: Well, I think we're doing it. At first, in 2009, there were a lot of very knowledgeable Iranians inside and outside of the country who said, "Don't overstate it, don't oversell it, this has to be homegrown, don't turn it into something that America is doing, we need to be able to stand on our own feet." Sort of the same way Tahrir Square was: "This is our revolution; everybody else get out of our way." And the force with which the regime just slammed that down and has continued to morph into a kind of military dictatorship, with the Revolutionary Guard basically in charge, has made it even more imperative that we do everything we can to support those who are standing up for human rights and real democracy in Iran.

JG: I guess the way to ask it is: Can we capitalize on the Arab Spring?

HRC: I think so, and I think we are. I think we are very clearly saying that the Iranians are trying to take credit for something they had not only nothing to do with, but they are exactly in opposition to and should be given no credence whatsoever.

JG: Stipulated that you get it coming and going on these questions, do you -- and I just want to come to two final things on the Middle East peace process -- but stipulated that somebody in Egypt is going to think of you as the best friend of Mubarak and somebody in the Gulf is going to think of you as sort of a wild-eyed Wolfowitz or something --

HRC: You can say I'm wild-eyed but don't compare me to that. (Laughter.)

JG: But it's interesting because you hear, not only here but in the White House also, people are saying, "Oh, you guys are so slow on Yemen or so slow on this" --

HRC: I mean, my doctrine is the Goldilocks Doctrine -- not too hot, not too cold, just right.

JG: I get that. But let me come back to this: How do you deal with hypocrisy, meaning that you're going to deal with one country one way, and another in another way?

HRC: I don't. I honestly believe that each place is different. There are trends, but I think following the fall of the Berlin Wall, how Germany responded and Poland responded, you couldn't say that there was one template that fit all.

JG: That was an easier one, though.

HRC: I don't know that it was. I mean, we all are prisoners of our own experience. And you can look at transitions to democracy in Latin America and in Europe -- look at Spain and Portugal. There's no two that are exactly alike. There may be common trends, and you hope you get to the same point at the end of the journey, but Yemen is a very different country than Libya, in every way you can imagine.

JG: Come to the Middle East peace process for one second. The Israelis and a lot of their supporters in America will say, "See, the Arab revolt proves that the people were not upset about Palestinians; they're upset about a lack of accountability in our governments, etc., economic opportunity --"

HRC: They're upset about both.

JG: How related to the Arab Spring is the Middle East peace process? And how could it affect it in adverse or positive ways?

HRC: Well, I think a lot of it is sequencing, Jeff. Right now, people in Egypt, for example, are very focused on their own future. That doesn't mean that the Arab-Israeli conflict doesn't come up, because it came up when I was there, but it didn't come up as the only subject people wanted to talk to me about, which was sometimes the case in the past. It came up as, "Okay, for now we're going to honor the Camp David accords, but you know we're going to have to take a look at this when we get a new government and we get more stable, we figure out what our relationship really is. We're not going to be an automatic supporter of the peace process. But right now, we've got to get our economy going, we've got to get our political transition done."

So it's not like it's off the table. It's just stuck in a corner until other matters get tended to. But if you talk to King Abdullah of Jordan, it is still very much on the mind of Jordanians, because they live with it every single day.

JG: So lack of progress could have an adverse effect on --

HRC: This is nothing that I haven't said many times and told my Israeli friends, because I love Israel and I feel so strongly about the future. Right now, you have a secular leadership in the West Bank that has made economic progress and has made security progress. You have an uncertain environment that Israel is now having to cope with, and I do not in any way discount how difficult that is. That has happened in Egypt [for one], and you've seen Israeli commentators saying they're not so sure that change in Syria is in Israel's interest.

JG: I was wondering if that had some influence on the way this government here has been talking about [Syria] --

HRC: Well, it certainly didn't escape my notice. You have a situation in Lebanon that is uncertain. So Israel has real problems that it has to deal with in new ways now, with all of the changes going on. I still believe it is very much in Israel's interests and Israel's security to really turn their attention to the peace process and to hammer out an agreement under appropriate safeguards for Israel's security with the Palestinian Authority.

JG: One final question on that subject: About four years ago, we were talking in your Senate office about Israel, and how to get them to make the concessions necessary for peace. One of the things you said that struck me was that, in your understanding of the Israeli mind-set, the Israelis will move on these issues when they feel the warm embrace of the United States --

HRC: Right.

JG: -- when they know that somebody is behind them. And when they feel alienated from the United States, as they did for the first couple years of this administration, they're less apt to move. Does that still hold true, or has Prime Minister Netanyahu just shown no desire to move, with a warm embrace or without a warm embrace?

HRC: I think he has some very serious concerns that have to be addressed.

JG: National-security concerns or coalition concerns?

HRC: National security is the first and foremost of his concerns. But obviously, he's in politics. I've been in politics. You also have to worry about your political position. But this administration, the Obama administration, has probably done more for Israeli security in as short a period of time as any administration in the past. The kind of assistance and support that we have given to Israel in order to assuage some of the legitimate security concerns that Israel has, the work that we are doing to try to contain Iran, the sanctions that we, much to everyone's amazement, were able to negotiate, the pressure that we've brought to bear on Iran -- we have really been closely coordinating on key issues that are fundamental to Israel's security. So I think that that has to be the way we're judged, because we certainly have delivered on that.

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