Barack Obama faces a tough task to achieve any progress on human rights during his visit, writes Jerome A. Cohen

Flame of conscience

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unday will mark US President Barack Obama’s first visit to China since taking office, a momentous occasion on which Beijing will testify to China’s increasing prominence. But how much will the visit achieve or fail to achieve for the US and China’s human rights relations?

For decades, the US has imposed massive economic sanctions on China, imposed antiviral trade agreements under which China has had to alter its laws and regulations, and threatened to impose economic sanctions on China in response to human rights abuses. The US has been the primary player in the human rights dialogue between the two countries, and it has been clear that US officials have been willing to sacrifice their own interests to advance their own interests. But how much will this visit achieve?

Obama’s visit to China represents a government that has itself been so incapable of providing human rights that it has been forced to impose massive economic sanctions on China. But to do so is not only because of China’s co-operating status, but because of its own moral imagination. The US has been so compelled to impose economic sanctions on China because of the moral imagination of China’s leaders. It has been compelled to do so because of its own moral imagination.

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