



Opinion

Editorial Board

Jimmy Lai is not forgotten as Trump goes to China

Why is Beijing so scared of letting an ailing 78-year-old former newspaper publisher go free?

Yesterday at 3:57 p.m. EDT

President Donald Trump has much to discuss this week with Chinese President Xi Jinping in Beijing. In addition to tariffs and Iran, wrongfully imprisoned Hong Kong democracy activist Jimmy Lai deserves a place on the agenda.

It might be tempting to put human rights on the back burner as Trump seeks to stabilize trade with the world's second-largest economy and solicits Beijing's help in reopening the Strait of Hormuz. But it's worth pressing Xi for Lai's release, partly because it's a concession the president just might be able to secure.

The former publisher of the shuttered Apple Daily newspaper, for years one of Hong Kong's most widely read publications, was sentenced in February to 20 years in prison for bogus charges of sedition and colluding with foreign forces, meaning the United States.

The 78-year-old is in poor health, so two decades in prison, with no likelihood of parole under China's draconian national security law, is tantamount to a death sentence. Lai holds a British passport and could live out his days there.

Hong Kong is now as cowed as any mainland Chinese city under Communist rule. Independent media has been silenced. Opposition parties have disbanded. Civil society, once vibrant, has been stifled. Many people have voted with their feet and left.

Trump told radio host Hugh Hewitt last week that he intends to raise Lai when he talks with Xi. During the 2024 campaign, he promised to free him. On Thursday, a bipartisan group of more than 100 members of Congress signed a GOP-led letter urging Lai's release. Two-thirds of senators signed it, including more than 40 Republicans.

Xi releasing Lai would be a welcome humanitarian gesture and remove an impediment to more normalized U.S.-China relations. Refusing to do so, which unfortunately seems the likeliest outcome, would reflect the rot inside the Chinese system. It's telling that Xi is so scared to let a 78-year-old ailing newspaperman go free.
