

## Opinion Walz's decades of China experience are an asset, not a liability

The vice-presidential candidate has stood up for the Chinese people against Beijing's abuses.

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By [Josh Rogin](#)

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As the tanks rolled into Beijing's Tiananmen Square to crush the student protests on June 4, 1989, a 25-year-old American named Tim Walz was in Hong Kong, preparing to travel to mainland China for a teaching job. Many Hong Kongers were angry about the crackdown and urged him and the other foreign teachers not to go, he later recalled. But Walz went anyway.

"As the events were unfolding, several of us went in," [Walz said](#) at a 2014 congressional hearing commemorating the 25th anniversary of the [Tiananmen massacre](#), in which hundreds (perhaps thousands) of people were killed by Chinese military forces. "It was my belief at that time that the diplomacy was going to happen on many levels, certainly people to people, and the opportunity to be in a Chinese high school at that critical time seemed to me to be really important. It was a very interesting summer, to say the least."

Walz's teaching experience formed the beginning of his 35-year relationship with China and its people. If elected vice president, Walz would be the highest-level U.S. official to have lived in China since George H.W. Bush, who had served as de facto U.S. ambassador there. Over that time, Walz's views on the Chinese government evolved as the government itself came under the more totalitarian, aggressive and repressive regime of President Xi Jinping.

As Walz grew more skeptical of the Chinese leadership, he still worked to engage with the Chinese people. In Congress, he was heavily involved in issues relating to China, especially human rights. He staked out a nuanced position, often saying he is neither a "dragon slayer" nor a "panda hugger."

Since Walz's selection, his critics have rejected such nuance. On Tuesday, conservative commentators criticized Walz for teaching a ["CCP-approved course in China"](#) (he [taught English](#) at a high school in Guangdong province) and [for getting married](#) on the fifth anniversary of the Tiananmen Square massacre and [visiting China on his honeymoon](#). Walz marked the day as one to remember, not to praise the government but to commemorate the protesters, he explained at a [2009 hearing](#) marking the 20th anniversary of the massacre.

“To watch what happened at the end of the day on June 4 was something that many of us will never forget, we pledge to never forget, and bearing witness and accurate telling of history is absolutely crucial for any nation to move forward,” he said.

The MAGA War Room posted a video Tuesday of Walz saying he had been to China more than 30 times and that he doesn't agree China “necessarily needs to be an adversarial relationship.” The educational program he and his wife ran for U.S. students to visit China and his interactions with China as Minnesota governor are receiving new scrutiny. While it's true Walz was a proponent of the notion that engaging China economically would lead to political liberalization there, he has since acknowledged that belief was naive. And attempts to paint him as weak on China ignore his record of standing up to Beijing.

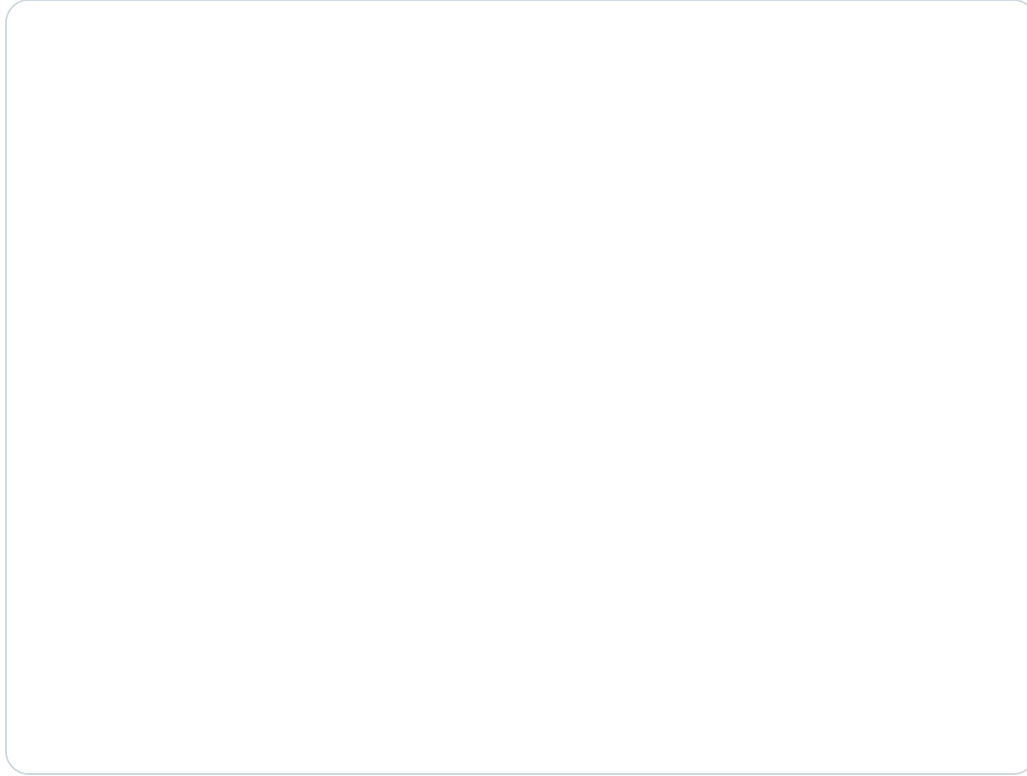
Walz joined the Congressional-Executive Commission on China, which is focused on human rights, in 2007. He has a graduate degree in genocide studies and in 2009 was early to criticize Beijing for what he called a “culturacide” (cultural genocide) in Tibet and Xinjiang, both places he had visited. In 2015, Walz accompanied then-House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) on a visit to Tibet, criticizing the oppression there upon their return. Walz has met with the Dalai Lama multiple times and has advocated for Tibetan political prisoners.

Tim Walz 

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[#tbt](#) to 2 years ago, a life-changing lunch with [@DalaiLama](#). We talked about humility, patience, and compassion. I try to embody these values every day in my work.



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124



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Walz was a strong supporter of the Hong Kong democracy movement and co-sponsored the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act in 2017. He formed close relationships with many student leaders, such as Joshua Wong, who is now in prison. “Walz is perhaps the most solid candidate when it comes to human rights and China on a major-party ticket in recent memory — if not ever,” Hong Kong activist Jeffrey Ngo wrote on X this week.

Sen. Jeff Merkley (D-Ore.), who served on the CECC with Walz, told me his selection as Democrats’ vice-presidential nominee “is an affirming signal that a Harris-Walz administration would continue to make human rights a key part of the United States’ relationship with China.”

That remains to be seen. But compare Walz's record with that of former president Donald Trump, who called the Hong Kong protests "riots" and told Xi that putting Uyghur Muslims in reeducation camps was the right thing to do. To be sure, there were many officials in the Trump administration who cared about human rights in China, but Trump did not seem to be one of them.

Walz's theory on the China challenge is that the United States can advocate for human rights in China while still engaging with the Chinese people and China's economy. This should not be a controversial stance. The real question is how Walz would adapt that thinking if he entered the White House, where national security concerns often take precedence.

"Now, he will have to think about China as the United States' global rival that is actively undermining U.S. interests and values Walz cares about," Peter Mattis, president of the Jamestown Foundation, told me.

The attacks on Walz over his ties to China are surely just beginning. But his experience, knowledge and commitment to the U.S.-China relationship should be seen an asset, not a liability, for both his campaign and the country.