

CASE STUDIES

# China



Demonstrators in Istanbul protest China’s mass internment of Uighurs and other Muslims held in “reeducation” camps. Image credit: Ozan Kose/AFP via Getty Images

China conducts the most sophisticated, global, and comprehensive campaign of transnational repression in the world. Efforts by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to pressure and control the overseas population of Chinese and members of minority communities are marked by three distinctive characteristics. First, the campaign targets many groups, including multiple ethnic and religious minorities, political dissidents, human rights activists, journalists, and former insiders accused of corruption. Second, it spans the full spectrum of tactics: from direct attacks like renditions, to co-opting other countries to detain and render exiles, to mobility controls, to threats from a distance like digital threats, spyware, and coercion by proxy. Third, the sheer breadth and global scale of the campaign is unparalleled. Freedom House’s conservative catalogue of direct, physical attacks since 2014

covers 214 cases originating from China, far more than any other country.

These egregious and high-profile cases are only the tip of the iceberg of a much broader system of surveillance, harassment, and intimidation that leaves many overseas Chinese and exile minorities feeling that the CCP is watching them and constraining their ability to exercise basic rights even when living in a foreign democracy. All told, these tactics affect millions of Chinese and minority populations from China in at least 36 host countries across every inhabited continent.<sup>57</sup>

The extensive scope of China’s transnational repression is a result of a broad and ever-expanding definition of who

should be subject to extraterritorial control by the Chinese Communist Party.

- First, the CCP targets entire ethnic and religious groups, including Uighurs, Tibetans, and Falun Gong practitioners, which together number in the hundreds of thousands globally. Over the past year alone, the list of targeted populations has expanded to also include Inner Mongolians and Hong Kongers residing outside the People's Republic of China (PRC).

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- Second, China's anticorruption drive has taken a broad, global view, targeting what may be thousands of its own former officials living abroad, now designated as alleged embezzlers.
- Third, China's overt transnational repression activities are embedded in a broader framework of influence that encompasses cultural associations, diaspora groups, and in some cases, organized crime networks, which places it in contact with a huge population of Chinese citizens, Chinese diaspora members, and minority populations from China who reside around the world.
- Fourth, China deploys its technological prowess as part of its transnational repression toolbox via sophisticated hacking and phishing attacks. One of China's newest avenues for deploying repressive tactics overseas has been via the WeChat platform, a messaging, social media, and financial services app that is ubiquitous among Chinese users around the world, and through which the party-state can monitor and control discussion among the diaspora.
- Fifth, China's geopolitical weight allows it to assert unparalleled influence over countries both near (Nepal, Thailand) and far (Egypt, Kenya). This produces leverage that the CCP does not hesitate to use against targets around the world.
- Finally, China asserts control over non-Chinese citizens overseas, including ethnic Chinese, Taiwanese, or other foreigners, who are critical of CCP influence and human

rights abuses. While not the focus of this report, China's attempts to intimidate and control foreigners in response to their peaceful advocacy activities is an ominous trend.

Due to China's growing power internationally, its technical capacity, and its aggressive claims regarding Chinese citizens and noncitizens overseas, its campaign has a significant effect on the rights and freedoms of overseas Chinese and minority communities in exile in dozens of countries. Additionally, the CCP's use of transnational repression poses a long-term threat to rule of law systems in other countries. This is because Beijing's influence is powerful enough to not only violate the rule of law in an individual case, but also to reshape legal systems and international norms to its interests.

### A multi-faceted transnational repression bureaucracy

The parts of the Chinese party-state apparatus involved in transnational repression are as diverse as the targets and tactics of the campaign. The importance of extending the party's grip on overseas Chinese and ethnic minority exiles originates with the highest echelons of the CCP. Besides CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping's own advancement of sweeping anticorruption campaigns, leaked speeches from other members of the Politburo high up in the security apparatus are explicit about the priority that should be given to the "overseas struggle" against perceived party enemies. These name specific tactics or goals, like co-opting allies in foreign countries to assist in the effort, using diplomatic channels and relevant laws in host countries, and preventing protests during overseas visits of top party officials.<sup>58</sup>

The harshest forms of direct transnational repression from Chinese agents—espionage, cyberattacks, threats, and physical assaults—emerge primarily from the CCP's domestic security and military apparatus: agencies like the Ministry of State Security (MSS), the Ministry of Public Security (MPS), and the People's Liberation Army (PLA), although the precise division of labor among these entities is often unclear. Persecution of Uighurs, Tibetans, and political dissidents is typically managed by the MSS,<sup>59</sup> but MPS is often involved in threats against family members within China, or cases where regional authorities call exiles to threaten them from within China. Anti-Falun Gong activities are led by the 6-10 Office, an extralegal security agency tasked with suppressing banned religious groups,<sup>60</sup> and the MPS, but local officials from various regions are also involved in monitoring Falun Gong exiles from their provinces. Hackers from the People's Liberation Army (PLA) run spyware campaigns from within China.<sup>61</sup>

Other forms of transnational repression that involve working through the legal and political systems of foreign countries—including detentions and extraditions—or that involve diplomatic staff at embassies and consulates, run through agencies like the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. China has proven particularly adept at using its geopolitical and economic clout to provoke foreign governments in countries as diverse as India,<sup>62</sup> Thailand, Serbia,<sup>63</sup> Malaysia,<sup>64</sup> Egypt,<sup>65</sup> Kazakhstan,<sup>66</sup> the United Arab Emirates,<sup>67</sup> Turkey,<sup>68</sup> and Nepal<sup>69</sup> to use their own security forces to detain—and in some cases deport to China—CCP critics, members of targeted ethnic or religious minorities, and refugees. “Anticorruption” activities that target CCP members are coordinated by the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI).

Beyond the direct agencies of the party-state, a network of proxy entities—like “anti-cult” associations in the United States, Chinese student groups in Canada,<sup>70</sup> and pro-Beijing activists with organized crime links in Taiwan<sup>71</sup>—have been involved in harassment and even physical attacks against party critics and religious or ethnic minority members. The greater distance from official Chinese government agencies offers the regime plausible deniability on the one hand, while accomplishing the goal of sowing fear and encouraging self-censorship far from China’s shores, on the other.

These actors taken as a whole are best understood as part of the united front system, “a network of [Chinese Communist] party and state agencies responsible for influencing groups outside the party, particularly those claiming to represent civil society,” as the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) describes it.<sup>72</sup> United front work is an important part of how the party rules China, “cultivating, co-opting, and coercing nonparty elites” using economic carrots and sticks, according to China analyst Matt Schrader.<sup>73</sup> United front work *outside* of China—partly coordinated by the CCP United Front Work Department (UFWD)—includes regional diaspora associations, student groups, and scholarly bodies that officially represent specific regions of China abroad. This work has been growing in importance for the CCP, as shown in the restructuring of the UFWD, including its work on the Chinese diaspora, in the last three years.<sup>74</sup> While some of these activities may be legal public diplomacy, united front work binds them with espionage and transnational repression. When US authorities arrested a Tibetan New York Police Department officer for spying on the Tibetan community in September 2020, one of his handlers was identified as a Chinese consular employee working for the UFWD.<sup>75</sup>

## An escalating campaign

China’s use of transnational repression is not new. Uighurs, Tibetans, and Falun Gong practitioners, as well as political dissidents, have long faced systematic reprisals outside the country.<sup>76</sup> The campaign has escalated considerably since 2014, however, and new target groups have been added in an international extension of emergent repressive campaigns within the PRC. The concentration of power under CCP general secretary Xi Jinping and his emphasis on an assertive foreign policy has led to an ever-more aggressive stance in Chinese foreign policy, which includes transnational repression. A series of new PRC laws passed under Xi have codified the extraterritorial reach of CCP controls, such as the National Intelligence Law, the Hong Kong National Security Law, and the draft Data Security Law.<sup>77</sup>

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A significant step in this process was the CCP’s increasing effort to control **the Uighur community**, including by claiming broad jurisdiction over Uighurs abroad. In 2014, Xi Jinping ordered the CCP to escalate its efforts against alleged “terrorism, infiltration, and separatism” in the Uighur-plurality region of Xinjiang. In 2016, Chinese authorities began to round up Uighurs and other Muslims in the region for “re-education” camps. At the same time, the authorities also clamped down upon mobility, collecting the passports of Uighurs across the region and preventing their exit. In early 2017, Uighurs around the world with Chinese citizenship began to be told to return to China; those who did often joined the over a million Uighurs housed in the camps.<sup>78</sup> Those who did not return, or those who fled the escalating repression inside China, were detained and in many cases rendered or unlawfully deported to China. At least 109 Uighurs were deported unlawfully from Thailand in 2015, and 13 were rendered from Egypt without due process;<sup>79</sup> Egypt may have unlawfully deported another 86 during this time.<sup>80</sup> The global persecution of Uighurs continues to this day. As



Kathmandu, Nepal - March 30: A pro-Tibetan demonstrator screams ‘Free Tibet’ while being forcibly detained by Nepali police during a pro-Tibetan protest outside of the Chinese consulate March 30, 2008 in Kathmandu, Nepal. Image Credit: Brian Sokol/Getty Images.

of November 2020, Saudi Arabia was detaining two Chinese Uighurs and considering their forced return to China.<sup>81</sup>

Uighurs who avoided coerced return were still subject to abuses. For instance, Chinese political pressure has weakened Turkish protections for the large Uighur diaspora in that country.<sup>82</sup> Residence permits remain difficult for Uighurs to acquire or to keep in Turkey. The US outlet National Public Radio (NPR) reported in March 2020 that between 200 and 400 Uighurs had been detained in Turkey in 2019 alone. Deportations from Turkey to China also occur despite the Uighur community’s efforts. In August 2019, a Uighur woman and her two children were deported from Turkey to Tajikistan, and then promptly transferred to Chinese custody.<sup>83</sup> News outlets reported that five or six other Uighurs were on the flight with her.

Wherever they are, Uighurs face intense digital threats combined with family intimidation, in which their relatives in Xinjiang are used as proxies to threaten or coerce them.<sup>84</sup> In multiple cases, Chinese police are reported to have forced family members to call their relatives abroad on WeChat in order to warn them against engaging in human rights advocacy.<sup>85</sup> China has used some of its most powerful spyware tools against Uighurs, developing malware to infect iPhones via WhatsApp messages.<sup>86</sup> China has even hacked into telecommunications networks in Asia in order to track Uighurs.<sup>87</sup>

These threats create an atmosphere of fear for Uighurs abroad. In November 2020, a Uighur in Turkey, who had previously come forward as having been pressured to spy on the community, was shot in Istanbul.<sup>88</sup> He survived, and has accused the Chinese state of targeting him.

**Tibetans** overseas are also subject to sustained, systematic pressure from the CCP party-state that spans from neighboring Nepal to Europe and the United States. Only around 14,000 Tibetans reside in Nepal. But the “gentleman’s agreement” that allows Tibetans who reach Nepal to travel on to the exile Central Tibetan Administration’s headquarters in India made it the main conduit for Tibetans fleeing China. In recent years, this agreement has eroded under Chinese pressure. First, stricter mobility controls by China reduced the ability of Tibetans to flee the country, winnowing the number of those reaching Nepal from several thousand per year down to only 23 in 2019.<sup>89</sup> At the same time, Tibetans who reached Nepal have been more vulnerable to return, as happened with six individuals who crossed the border in September 2019 but were immediately handed to Chinese authorities.<sup>90</sup> The number of Tibetans able to flee may shrink even further. In October 2019, the Nepalese government and China signed a new agreement including a “Boundary Management System” and Mutual Legal Assistance Treaty (MLAT) that would expedite Nepalese handovers of Tibetans to China, either at the border or after they are inside Nepal.<sup>91</sup>

Like Uighurs, Tibetans around the world are subject to intimidation and espionage by Chinese agents. In September 2020, US federal authorities announced the arrest of an active New York Police Department officer of Tibetan descent who had worked with Chinese officials in the US to spy on the Tibetan community in and around New York City.<sup>92</sup> The case resembles recent incidents of surveillance and intimidation of Tibetans in Sweden, Switzerland, and Canada.<sup>93</sup> The same top-shelf spyware used against Uighurs has also been used in campaigns against Tibetans.<sup>94</sup>

As Chinese government efforts to suppress the culture and language of **Mongolians** in Inner Mongolia accelerated in 2020, provoking widespread protests, threats also spread to members of the ethnic group living outside China. In September 2020, a man from Inner Mongolia living in Australia on a temporary visa reported that that he had received a call from local authorities in China warning him that if he spoke out about events in the region, including on social media, then he would “be withdrawn from Australia.”<sup>95</sup>

**Practitioners of Falun Gong**, a spiritual movement banned in China, also face regular reprisals from China and from Chinese agents. These include frequent harassment and occasional physical assaults by members of visiting Chinese delegations or pro-Beijing proxies at protests overseas, as in cases that have occurred since 2014 in the United States,<sup>96</sup>

the Czech Republic,<sup>97</sup> Taiwan,<sup>98</sup> Brazil,<sup>99</sup> and Argentina.<sup>100</sup> Media and cultural initiatives associated with Falun Gong have reported suspicious break-ins targeting sensitive information, vehicle tampering, and pressure from Chinese authorities for local businesses to cut off advertising or other contractual obligations with them.<sup>101</sup> Multiple Falun Gong practitioners in Thailand have also faced detention, including a Taiwanese man involved in uncensored radio broadcasts to China<sup>102</sup> and several cases of Chinese refugees formally recognized as such by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).<sup>103</sup> In October 2017, a Falun Gong practitioner who had survived a Chinese labor camp and become a high-profile informant on CCP abuses—sneaking a letter into a Halloween decoration when detained and later filming a documentary with undercover footage—died of sudden kidney failure in Indonesia. Some colleagues consider his death suspicious, but no autopsy was performed.<sup>104</sup>

#### **Human rights defenders, journalists, and others**

**who criticize the CCP** have come under target as well. Independent Chinese media in Australia have had advertisers and even local town councils withdraw from sponsorships under Chinese diplomatic pressure, while suffering more overt actions like the theft of newspapers.<sup>105</sup> Chinese journalists<sup>106</sup>, political cartoonists,<sup>107</sup> activists, and the teenage son of a detained rights lawyer who have fled China have been threatened or detained in neighboring countries like Thailand<sup>108</sup> and Myanmar,<sup>109</sup> and in some cases, forcibly returned to the mainland. In July 2020, a Chinese student in Australia who runs a Twitter account critical of Xi Jinping said she had received video calls in which a Chinese police officer, speaking next to her father, warned her “to remember that you are a citizen of China.”<sup>110</sup>

In recent years, **Hong Kong democracy advocates** have emerged as a relatively new target of transnational repression. In October 2016, prominent Hong Kong political activist Joshua Wong was detained on arrival and deported from Thailand.<sup>111</sup> After large-scale prodemocracy protests broke out in Hong Kong in 2019, advocates traveling to Taiwan were followed, harassed, and attacked with red paint by pro-CCP groups,<sup>112</sup> prompting police protection to be assigned to them.<sup>113</sup> A Singaporean activist was jailed for 10 days in August 2020 for “illegal assembly” because of a Skype call he convened with Joshua Wong in 2016 during a discussion event in Singapore.<sup>114</sup> With Beijing’s imposition of a National Security Law on Hong Kong in June 2020, the net around Hong Kongers globally tightened. The law includes a provision with vast extraterritorial reach, potentially criminalizing any speech critical of the

Chinese or Hong Kong government made anywhere in the world, including speech by foreign nationals.<sup>115</sup> Among those who received the first round of arrest warrants under the new law was Samuel Chu, an American citizen, who was charged for his work to gain US government support for the cause of freedom in Hong Kong.<sup>116</sup> Chu and others like him now must not only avoid traveling to Hong Kong, but also to any country with an extradition treaty with Hong Kong or China.

Reflecting the CCP's expansive idea of who belongs within its purview, in line with the state's "One China" policy, the PRC considers **citizens of Taiwan** as its own despite lacking any actual control over Taiwan's government affairs, law or law enforcement, or its military. In April 2016, eight Taiwanese citizens were extradited to China from Kenya after being acquitted of telecommunications fraud, despite stringent protests from the Taiwanese government.<sup>117</sup>

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China's aggressive extraterritorial policies extend even in some cases to people of Chinese origin with other nationalities. One of the most prominent recent cases was that of Gui Minhai, a Chinese-origin bookseller who was a Swedish—and not Chinese—citizen. After Gui angered Xi Jinping with sales of books in Hong Kong containing salacious rumors about the general secretary, he was forced to flee to Thailand. In October 2015, he was kidnapped and taken to China. There he appealed in what looked by all accounts to be a forced confession to be treated as a Chinese citizen, and for Swedish authorities not to be involved in his case. In 2019, Minhai's daughter Angela Gui was warned by two China-linked businessmen to stop publicly advocating on her father's case if she ever wanted to see him again. This threat was made during a meeting in Stockholm arranged by the Swedish ambassador to China, Anna Lindstedt, who lost her job as ambassador as a result of the meeting.<sup>118</sup> As Yuan Yang, the deputy bureau chief of the *Financial Times* wrote, Minhai's case “makes us wonder whether the state sees itself as the governor of ethnic Chinese people wherever they may be, rather than a state constrained by international law and diplomatic protocol!”<sup>119</sup>

## “Anticorruption”: Fox Hunt and Skynet

The final area of focus for China in transnational repression is its global “anticorruption” campaign. The party's Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI) oversees this campaign, focusing on members of the CCP who are accused of corruption and may be fugitives within China, but also those who have fled abroad. The campaign has escalated since 2014, when the CCP announced a global anticorruption drive under the banner of “Fox Hunt.”<sup>120</sup> The campaign expanded further in 2015 with the announcement of “Operation Skynet.”<sup>121</sup> The scale of the anticorruption drive is difficult to evaluate through public sources, but in 2018, Chinese state media claimed that 3,000 people had “returned or been repatriated” from 90 countries.<sup>122</sup> In public remarks in August 2020, US FBI director Christopher Wray said that there were “hundreds” of targets of Fox Hunt in the United States.<sup>123</sup>

On the official level, the anticorruption campaign is a legal effort to hold accountable Chinese elites who have embezzled money, frequently from state enterprises, and fled abroad. The CCP makes a point of emphasizing the supposed legality and legitimacy of Fox Hunt. The campaign was announced alongside the dissemination of a list of 100 individuals China said were sought through Interpol “Red Notices.” Like other countries, China uses Interpol notices to imply international endorsement of its pursuit, even though Interpol notices are not subject to any judicial review. In January 2019, Beijing's state broadcaster, China Central Television (CCTV), aired a program titled “Red Arrest Notice” documenting 14 cases of individuals arrested and returned to China, and one found hiding in China. The show emphasized the legality of the process of repatriation from abroad, including through lengthy legal proceedings in other countries. In line with the CCP's communications, the overall message of the show was that China's anticorruption campaign is a fully legal effort accepted by other states as a matter of international cooperation.

The actual tactics underpinning the CCP's anticorruption campaign are much more unsavory. These include at a minimum surveillance, physical threats, and family intimidation in order to force exiles to return “voluntarily” to China. In October 2020, the US Department of Justice accused eight individuals of acting as illegal agents of China in a multiyear campaign of harassment and stalking in order to coerce an unnamed Chinese individual to return to face trial.<sup>124</sup> In 2018, US intelligence officials alleged off the

record to *Foreign Policy* that Chinese agents had beaten and drugged multiple individuals in Australia, returning them to China by boat.<sup>125</sup>

The anticorruption campaign is also a vehicle for the CCP to seek to change international norms to better suit its objectives and interests. Chinese officials and media present the anticorruption campaign as part of a global effort to shape anticorruption norms. This includes endorsing the 2014 “Beijing Declaration” on fighting corruption, a product of that year’s Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum (APEC), and the G20 Anti-Corruption Action Plan of 2017–18. In all of its efforts, officials highlight calls to join the UN Convention against Corruption. The CCP has also put significant diplomatic effort into building bilateral legal relationships that would enable authorities to more readily “reach” individuals who flee abroad. A 2019 analysis by the Center for Advanced China Research identified 37 countries with which China had extradition treaties, a list that notably includes European Union (EU) member states like Italy, France, and Portugal.<sup>126</sup> According to analysis in *The Diplomat*, from 2015–17, five EU member states extradited “economic fugitives” to China.<sup>127</sup> In at least one other European state—Switzerland—Chinese officials successfully entered into a secret agreement to give their security agents free reign in the territory to monitor and potentially intimidate a wide range of targets, including Fox Hunt fugitives.<sup>128</sup>

Despite its cultivation of an image of legality and careful references to international law, at its core the CCP’s

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anticorruption campaign reflects its domestic context, in which the preferences of the party-state stand above all other considerations. It is useful to recall the case of Meng Hongwei. A prominent CCP official from the domestic security apparatus, Meng served as president of Interpol from 2016 until October 2018, when he was abruptly arrested in China, expelled from the party, and sentenced to prison for corruption.<sup>129</sup> This sequence of events should act as a reminder of how the CCP’s global anticorruption drive is part and parcel of its overall strategy of shaping international norms to its advantage. As countries around the world grapple with how to manage relations with China, they should avoid assuming that “anticorruption” is neutral ground without implications for broader engagement with the Chinese Communist Party.