

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/385936311>

China's Stranglehold on Tibet Extends Far Beyond Human Rights

Article · November 2024

CITATIONS
0

READS
36

1 author:



[Mark S. Cogan](#)

Kansai Gaidai University

37 PUBLICATIONS 44 CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE

China's Stranglehold on Tibet Extends Far Beyond Human Rights

Mark S. Cogan

The phrase “Free Tibet” is so ubiquitous to so many, that it has almost lost its meaning. Why does Tibet need to be freed, and from whom? Tibet has been occupied by Communist China since 1950, after the controversial Seventeen Point Agreement created a semi-independent state, although signed without the authorization of the 14th Dalai Lama. So worried were the Tibetans, that in 1959, a rebellion began where the Dalai Lama escaped and remained in exile. The consequence of that rebellion was an undoing of the tenets of the Agreement and the beginning of decades of social, cultural, and political repression.

Perhaps the most famous Tibetan case was that of Tashi Tsering, the late and well-known educator who in August of 1999 attempted to raise the Tibetan flag in a public square, before being severely beaten by security forces and sentenced to 15 years in prison.¹ The case became a focal point for human rights abuses in Tibet, where, at the time, hundreds of political prisoners languished behind bars, many for their religious beliefs. More than 20 years later, the depth and breadth of Chinese human rights abuses across much of its territory that contains national minorities has increased, as has international pressure

on Beijing to adhere to international norms. Human rights in Tibet has since then become both a *cause célèbre* in continental Asia as well as a matter of international urgency, but Chinese repression of Tibetans remains largely unchanged² according to the U.S. State Department in 2023, yet issues of enforced disappearance, torture, or cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment or punishment by the government, arbitrary arrest or detention, a highly politicized judiciary, and a rise in transnational repression against Tibetans now residing in another country have become normalized through regime propaganda, security policies, and persistent interference at the international level.

Recently, the trend of academic and political discussion has seen the issue of transnational repression become a growing concern for China's many minority groups, including the Uyghur Muslims of Xinjiang region of Western China,³ Hong Kongers who fled the once cosmopolitan city after the Umbrella Revolution of 2014 and the implementation of the draconian “Law of the People's Republic of China on Safeguarding National Security in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region” in June 2020⁴, and now as many as

150,000 Tibetans that live outside the Tibetan Autonomous Region, including those who have fled to the United States, India, France, Australia, and Canada.⁵ According to a 2024 report by the Tibetan Centre for Human Rights and Democracy (TCHRD), the Chinese Communist Party in Beijing puts significant pressure on variety of communities to which it labels “the five poisons.”⁶ Tactics include the weaponization of relatives in Tibet by means of threats, harm or various forms of manipulation, as well as instances of surveillance conducted on foreign soil by Chinese nationals, particularly of diaspora groups. As is the case in Hong Kong, intimidation also includes attempts to undermine the livelihoods of Tibetan exiles, including the prohibition of foreign remittances or money transfers from relatives.⁷

Tibet, like Xinjiang and Hong Kong, is of major significance to Beijing, even though individual and group identities are not characteristically Chinese. In the years after Hong Kong’s reunification with China after 99 years of British control, Hong Kongers developed an identity of their own, rather than categorizing themselves as Chinese. Uyghur Muslims from Xinjiang, a sparsely populated, far-flung region which borders the Central Asian countries of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Pakistan, and Afghanistan are of Turkic heritage, and often refer to the region as East Turkistan.⁸ Likewise, Tibetans do not consider themselves Chinese and also inhabit a vast, largely unpopulated region. The commonality of the three—which are all distinct—is that each poses both an internal and external security risk to Communist China and each contains assets of irreplaceable value to Beijing and the world.

The Challenges for Beijing

The security challenges for Beijing are extraordinarily complicated with regard to Tibet, as China has long accused its rival neighbor, India, of interfering in its internal affairs and supporting what it deems “Tibetan separatists.”⁹ As its border dispute with New Delhi has flared up, with Tibetans actively serving in India’s Special Frontier Force (SFF),¹⁰ Beijing has spent additional resources and attention on the region. Plus, like in Xinjiang and Hong Kong, China has feared that the pursuit of autonomy in Tibet would both weaken its position and internal legitimacy, and ostensibly, start a chain reaction of separatism that would destabilize mainland China.

The other concern for China is the preservation of Tibet’s vast natural resources, of which the water supply in the Tibetan Plateau has been described as the “Water Tower of Asia,”¹¹ where despite some political scientific controversy to that affixed label, it provides freshwater to approximately 2 billion people and supports ecosystem services for many of the major rivers in China, including the Yellow River and the Yangtze River. However, climate change has begun to threaten the natural resources that the Tibetan Plateau has for mainland China. Beijing’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has connected it to many of the fastest growing Asian economies (Kyrgyzstan and Bangladesh) and its slowest (Pakistan), but these same economies—including China’s rivals—rely on the freshwater runoff that is now under considerable stress.¹² As the meltwater that protects Asia from severe drought declines due to climate change,¹³ China has added impetus to defend what it has repeatedly claimed as

its own since the Mao Zedong era.¹⁴ While China's reputation in other parts of Asia has soured over its damming of the Mekong River, Tibet plays an important role in ensuring national food security, particularly through robust agricultural production. However, the two challenges for Beijing—national security and food security—collide in Tibet, given its proximity to rival India and the prolonged dispute over Ladakh and a nearly 1,600 kilometer Line of Actual Control (LAC) that marks the contested boundary between two. Any movement by New Delhi that would interfere with either threat to mainland China will have serious implications for Tibet.

China's Anti-Human Rights Strategy

At the international level, China maintains control over Tibet through a thorough understanding of the many weaknesses of human rights enforcement mechanisms, particularly by the United Nations. Quite simply, the UN is still based on the notion of sovereign equality and China leans heavily on a strict interpretation of Article 2(7) of the UN Charter, where other member-states are not authorized to “intervene in matters which are essentially within the domestic jurisdiction of any state.” While not directly connected, China repeatedly uses similar language when subject to criticism by other member-states. For example, when the Biden administration passed legislation urging resolution to the Tibet-China dispute, Beijing insisted that the United States “cease using Tibet-related issues to interfere in China's internal affairs and to avoid actions that could harm Tibet's development and stability,” also referencing the possibility of sparking a pro-independence

movement and an increased threat of “anti-China separatist activities.”¹⁵

That same strategy is also employed when China faces challenges to its human rights records, through the Universal Periodic Review (UPR), which takes place every five years, or through various UN Treaty Bodies, which accompany any treaty to which China is a party to.¹⁶ Knowing the mechanism well since its first UPR in 2009, China has managed to avoid the brunt of major criticism of its poor track record in Tibet, with just 23 states making critical recommendations at its latest UPR in 2024.¹⁷ And while the uptick in the number of states appears promising, it is the equivalent of fool's gold in reality.

It is commonplace for China to augment the progress made from previous UPR cycles, but also issue periodic National Reports that provide little to no substantive measurement. In the 2024 UPR held in January, China did not mention Tibet specifically, but in response to recommendations made by other member-states, China noted that it upholds “the equality of all ethnicities, [and] respect[s] the religious beliefs of the people and protect the lawful rights and interests of all ethnic groups. We are cracking down on all types of illegal and criminal behavior in order to maintain the long-term stability of society”, the latter sentence a reference to the ongoing security challenges mentioned earlier.¹⁸ Instead, China directs attention to a larger aim, which the CCP under Chinese President Xi Jinping, has deemed a “great rejuvenation” where all Chinese territories “follow a Chinese path of human rights development, actively participate

in global human rights governance and promote all-around advancement of human rights.”¹⁹ Finally, in response to the recommendations made in 2024 by mostly Western states, China grouped Tibet into the same category as other ethnic and political minorities, and reiterated that Beijing’s positions on minority issues were about “safeguarding the national sovereignty, security and unity of China” and accused other UN member-states of “weaponizing human rights issues.”²⁰

The other tactic employed by China has little to do with human rights on the surface, but Beijing’s emphasis on robust bilateral relations. China has long engaged in no-strings-attached development ties with African states over the course of decades, slowly shaping outcomes such as the diplomatic recognition of Taiwan.²¹ With the lone exception of a brief rejection of China’s attempt to erase Taiwan from recognition in the Pacific Island States (PIS), Beijing maintains an ironclad of alliances globally that mitigates the potential challenges to its record on the international stage.²² Central Asia is a case in point. Chinese foreign policy in recent years has been reassessed and rebranded with a greater role for what it has called global governance, a poor euphemism for a more sinister mechanism for empowering institutions that can undermine the post-war international order. For example, China created the Global Security Initiative (GSI) in 2022²³ and quickly reached out to Central Asian states like Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, the former of which experienced political unrest that unnerved the CCP. Using mechanisms and institutions like the GSI not only shore up anxieties over separatism and political

instability in Tibet and farther to its western frontier, but they provide aid and cover to states with similar internal security problems.

The Path Forward

By creating both interdependent and dependent relationships in different corners of the globe, China not only has built up a seemingly legitimate defense against Western human rights norms, but also creates a phenomenon known as norm diffusion, where the impermissible patterns of behavior are slowly disrupted over time, negating decades or even centuries of “ripened” international norms. The conventional wisdom is that the degree of diffusion of international human rights norms depends on domestic and transnational actors who set the conditions for change.²⁴ While ostensibly outdated now, the strength of the networks and international institutions are supposed to increase pressure on the norm-violating states through “moral consciousness-raising”, and challenge norm-violating governments by creating a transnational structure to pressure governments from “from above” and “from below.”²⁵ China has interrupted this process by targeting countries that are both above *or* below, or whether they are major trading partners or have minimal bilateral relations with Beijing. The difficulty in combating this kind of norm diffusion is that it requires a similar effort by Western governments to challenge the diffusion of international human rights norms by providing reasonable or equitable alternatives to governments who have already been recipients of Beijing’s development assistance or that now have had access to infrastructure loans. In Central Asia, the GSI offers states flexibility,

but also the risk of becoming dependent on China. In theory, as Southeast Asian states have found along the Mekong River countries, with the exception of Laos and Cambodia, it became more prudent for each to balance their options by also enhancing ties with the United States, Japan, Australia, and India.

With the scale of China's investments from the Indian Ocean and across the Pacific Ocean, it will be nearly impossible to compete with

Beijing's investments, but through smarter bilateral ties, particularly in creating reasonable alternatives and establishing the groundwork for a long-term, stable economic partnerships, the current international order will be able to preserve the integrity of the international human rights system, and present a formidable challenge to China's attacks on Tibetan and other ethnic minorities at the international level.

Endnotes

- 1 Melvyn C. Goldstein, William R Siebensschuh, and Tashi Tsering, *The Struggle for Modern Tibet: The Autobiography of Tashi Tsering* (Routledge, 2015).
- 2 U.S. Department of State, “China (Includes Hong Kong, Macau, and Tibet): Tibet,” Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, 2023, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/china/tibet>.
- 3 Mark S. Cogan, “UN is failing the Uighurs in China,” *Bangkok Post*, May 7, 2021, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/opinion/opinion/2111643/un-is-failing-the-uighurs-in-china>.
- 4 Mark S. Cogan, “Adapting to Hong Kong’s grim reality,” *East Asia Forum*, September 26, 2020, <https://eastasiaforum.org/2020/09/26/adapting-to-hong-kongs-grim-reality/>.
- 5 Jessie Lau, “Beijing accused of using spying, threats and blackmail against Tibetan exiles,” *The Guardian*, February 10, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2024/feb/10/china-transnational-repression-beijing-targets-tibetan-exiles-spying-blackmail-threats-losar>.
- 6 “Chinese Transnational Repression of Tibetan Diaspora Communities,” Tibetan Centre for Human Rights and Democracy (TCHRD), February 2024, <https://tchrd.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Chinese-Transnational-Repression-of-Tibetan-Diaspora-Communities.pdf>.
- 7 Meghan Khoo, “Hong Kong exiles in UK and Canada lack access to billions of their savings,” *Radio Free Asia*, June 9, 2024, <https://www.rfa.org/english/commentaries/hongkong-savings-repression-06092024081728.html>.
- 8 Adrian Zenz, “Innovating Penal Labor: Reeducation, Forced Labor, and Coercive Social Integration in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region,” *The China Journal* 90 (2023): 27-53.
- 9 Shannon Tiezzi, “China Vows to ‘Intensify’ Fight Against Tibetan Separatists,” *The Diplomat*, September 12, 2015, <https://thediplomat.com/2015/09/china-vows-to-intensify-fight-against-tibetan-separatists/>.
- 10 “The Tibetans serving in ‘secretive’ Indian force,” *BBC News*, October 16, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-54464189>.
- 11 Fuqiang Tian, Yi Nan, Guangheng Ni, Long Yang, Qihong Tang and David Grey, “Is the Tibetan Plateau really a water tower?” *Hydrological Processes* 38, no. 3, <https://doi.org/10.1002/hyp.15103>.
- 12 Qiang Zhang, Zexi Shen, Yadu Pokhrel, Daniel Farinotti, Vijay P. Singh, Chong-Yu Xu, Wenhuan Wu and Gang Wang, “Oceanic climate changes threaten the sustainability of Asia’s water tower,” *Nature* 615 (2023): 87-93, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-022-05643-8>.
- 13 Hamish D. Pritchard, “Asia’s shrinking glaciers protect large populations from drought stress,” *Nature* 569 (2019): 649-654, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-019-1240-1>.
- 14 “Water security for India: the external dynamics,” IDSA Task Force Report, Institute of Defense and Analysis, 2010, 48.
- 15 Tenzin Pema, Tashi Wangchuk and Dorjee Damdul, “Congress passes bill urging China to resolve Tibet dispute,” *Radio Free Asia*, June 12, 2024, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/tibet/congress-bill-negotiatie-dalai-lama-06122024151757.html>.
- 16 Mark S. Cogan, “China set to dodge accountability at its UN human rights review,” *East Asia Forum*, January 23, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.59425/eabc.1705978800>.
- 17 Central Tibetan Administration, “The UN China Review Finds Unprecedented Support for Tibetan Rights by Member States, While Beijing Shuts Down Criticism,” January 24, 2024, <https://tibet.net/the-un-china-review-finds-unprecedented-support-for-tibetan-rights-by-member-states-while-beijing-shuts-down-criticism/>.
- 18 Human Rights Council, “National report submitted in accordance with Human Rights Council resolutions 5/1 and 16/21,” Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review, 45th Session, January 22-February 2, 2024, <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/g23/228/57/pdf/g2322857.pdf>, 2.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Human Rights Council, “Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review: China,” 56th Session, June 18-July 12, 2024, <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/g24/034/58/pdf/g2403458.pdf>, 4.
- 21 Kristina Kironka, “How Taiwan lost Africa,” Central European Institute of Asian Studies (CEIAS), December 21, 2022, <https://ceias.eu/how-taiwan-lost-africa/>.
- 22 Stephen Dziedzic, “China responds furiously as Pacific Islands leaders reject bid to cut Taiwan from bloc meetings,” *ABC News (Australia)*, August 30, 2024, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-08-30/china-responds-furiously-taiwan-pacific-islands-forum/104291322>.
- 23 Michael Schuman, Jonathan Fulton, and Tuvia Gering, “How Beijing’s newest global initiatives seek to remake the world order,” Atlantic Council, June 21, 2023, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/issue-brief/how-beijings-newest-global-initiatives-seek-to-remake-the-world-order/>.
- 24 Thomas Risse and Kathryn Sikkink, “The socialization of international human rights norms into domestic practices: Introduction,” in Thomas Risse (ed.), *Domestic Politics and Norm Diffusion in International Relations* (Routledge, 2017), 117-149.
- 25 Ibid., 120.