

Human Rights and Belt and Road (BRI): China's Strategic Xinjiang Economic Corridor

West Is Showing Double Standards in Its Concerns over China's Human Rights Abuses

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Region: [Asia](#), [Middle East & North Africa](#),
[USA](#)

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Over recent weeks, the mass media has highlighted large-scale human rights violations carried out by China's government in the country's far north-west. The press attention on this occasion focused on seemingly plausible details, which relate mostly to Uyghur communities in Xinjiang, the largest region in China.

It would surely be unwise to suggest that Beijing has not been guilty of human rights abuses here, at the expense of impoverished and isolated minority groups. Tellingly, autocrats like Saudi Arabia's Mohammed bin Salman earlier this year supported Beijing's crackdown, when [he said that](#), "China has a right to carry out anti-terrorism and de-extremisation work for its national security". When a country receives public backing from Saudi Arabian leaders on issues relating to "anti-terrorism", it is not a good sign.

Beijing's actions in Xinjiang have been defended by other despotic oil rich states like Kuwait, the UAE and Qatar – all of which are Western allies, it may also be added, with tens of thousands of American soldiers today stationed in the above Middle East countries.

It can be recognised too that the territory of Xinjiang is of high strategic importance to Beijing. Xi Jinping's government has legitimate concerns here within the nation's own frontiers.

Xinjiang is a focal point for China's vast financial and industrial programs, like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The BRI was implemented from 2013, and has a planned completion date for 2049, exactly a century after the revolution which deposed United States-backed forces. Prior to 1949, the Chinese nation was exploited for decades by imperial powers like Britain and America. This encroachment into east Asia was a central factor in stoking tensions with China's close neighbour, Japan, who was finding its access to natural resources increasingly cut off.

Xinjiang is a critical area pertaining to oil and gas pipelines, through which raw materials pour into China from Central Asian states like Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan.

It may also be apt to place the West's criticism of China in a broader context. For instance Saudi Arabia, through the decades, has committed much more serious human rights breaches than can be levelled at China, including summary executions, torture, long prison sentences for minor misdemeanours, and so on. Women in Saudi Arabia were not granted the right to vote until 2015, and they continue experiencing fewer freedoms and

opportunities than Saudi men.

It is rare that Western establishment rebukes the Saudis in anything like a similar manner to that of China. The reason being that Saudi Arabia remains a great friend while China is a designated enemy, and herein lies the old double standards. Saudi Arabia has [been an ally](#) of America and Britain dating to World War II, mainly because this large Middle East country contains one of the biggest oil reserves on earth.

The Saudi Arabian dictatorship has long been benevolent to American and British business interests, while the country is a major purchaser of Western arms. Riyadh has spent billions on modern weaponry [sent from](#) America, Britain, France, etc., and which has allowed them to conduct a brutal war in neighbouring Yemen for almost the past five years.

An international outcry against the Saudis fully emerged only after the premeditated assassination of author Jamal Khashoggi, in October 2018. This was partly due to the fact that the Saudi-born Khashoggi had ties to the West, and was a columnist for the Washington Post. That the killing of one man provoked a bigger uproar, in comparison to thousands of deaths and great suffering in Yemen, reflected poorly indeed on moral standards.

Israel, another key US ally in the Middle East, has also experienced paltry criticism in comparison to China. Israeli policies, which are enjoying even stronger support by the Trump administration, have among other things turned the Gaza Strip into an open-air prison. The Gaza Strip consists of a piece of territory less than 400 kilometres squared in size, and almost two million Palestinians are crammed into it, living in abject conditions.

Meanwhile, in Xinjiang province in north-west China, Beijing has been interning Uyghur natives and members of other minority groups such as ethnic Kazakhs. The Uyghur people originated from central and eastern Asia, and there are about 12 million of them in existence today. Of these, around 11 million Uyghurs call Xinjiang home, and they are for the large part believers in the Sunni branch of Islam.

It has been reported in liberal media that more than one million people, primarily Uyghurs, are held in what Beijing describes as “re-education camps”. Due to the often secretive nature of Chinese internal affairs, it is difficult to ascertain for complete certainty that the number of those detained comprises over a million people. This proportion of Uyghurs, if accurate, consists of about 10% of their population in China.

There has been a recent history of terrorism which can be traced to ethnic Uyghurs in Xinjiang. China’s hosting of the 2008 summer Olympic Games was overshadowed by a terrorist attack on 4 August 2008, in the city of Kashgar, Xinjiang, which killed 16 Chinese policemen and injured another 16. This atrocity occurred just four days before the Olympics commenced and was executed by two men, aged in their late 20s and early 30s, who were members of Xinjiang’s Uyghur community. They had [called for a](#) “holy war against China”.

The two perpetrators were mentioned as belonging to Uyghur separatist groups, like the Turkistan Islamic Party, which was founded in Xinjiang over 30 years ago. The Turkistan Islamic Party is deemed a terrorist organisation not only by China and neighbouring Pakistan, but also by the United States, Russia and the European Union. In late July 2011, separate terrorist attacks took place once more in Kashgar which killed a number of civilians, and was committed by Uyghur extremists.

There have been other terrorist assaults in China linked again to Uyghur separatists, such as the March 2014 Kunming attack which occurred in south-west China; when over 30 people were killed at a railway station by knife-wielding assailants.

Thousands of Uyghur men have, in preceding years, joined terrorist organisations like Al Qaeda, ISIS and the Taliban. These groups have received ideological backing and funding recently from Western allies like Saudi Arabia. CIA activities have also been linked to these issues, without a great deal emerging in the way of hard evidence.

Since the notorious Guantanamo Bay prison was opened under the George W. Bush administration in 2002, Washington incarcerated 22 ethnic Uyghurs there. The Uyghurs at Guantanamo, some of whom were imprisoned for 12 years, were held [despite being](#) “not convicted of any crime”. Much of this is forgotten.

In addition, terrorist organisations like ISIS and Al Qaeda were, in effect, spawned as a result of Washington’s foreign policies of the past four decades directed against the Middle East, and the Soviet Union.

The Pentagon has wielded its hammer most notably against Iraq on repeated occasions – from the 1991 Gulf War to the invasion of Iraq early this century – and also upon Afghanistan, where almost 15,000 American soldiers are today embroiled in an 18-year long war. Military actions, such as these, have inevitably resulted in serious direct and indirect consequences.

In May 2017 Syria’s ambassador to China, Imad Moustapha, said that thousands of Uyghurs were fighting in northern Syria, some belonging to groups like ISIS; but also others “under their own banner” to promote their independent ethnic cause.

There are most likely separate underlying reasons for the rise in terrorism originating from Xinjiang. There has, as stated, been suppression committed against the Uyghur people by Beijing. Repression leads to discontentment and can result indirectly in extremism. This has damaged the Chinese government’s reputation, regardless of slanted mainstream reporting.

On the other side of China, in the south-east, social unrest continues apace in Hong Kong, which is an important commercial centre with trade and cultural links to the West. Hong Kong has over seven million inhabitants, and it is one of the most affluent areas of China. The average person in Hong Kong earns just under \$60,000 per year, which is almost four times what a typical citizen in mainland China can expect to take home annually.

For well over a century until 1997 Hong Kong was part of the British Empire. Western culture and capitalist influence abounds in Hong Kong, and many of the marchers are aligned closer ideologically to the West than Beijing. Some have been seen of late waving American flags along the streets, and also in front of the US consulate in Hong Kong.

The National Endowment for Democracy (NED), an Orwellian-titled organisation which is funded mainly by the US Congress, has since 2014 been [financially backing](#) the Hong Kong protests with many millions of dollars. This represents a clear interference in China’s domestic policy from a foreign power, considerably more serious than the accusations laid at Russia’s door regarding Donald Trump’s election victory three years ago. The NED, which was founded under the Reagan administration, has an unseemly history of infringing upon the sovereignty of independent countries, from Venezuela and the Ukraine to Cuba.

Joshua Wong, one of the most prominent of Hong Kong's dissidents, has recently visited Washington and New York to seek [political support](#) from the White House, US Congress, and other elite American circles. The 23-year-old Wong in the past was sentenced to imprisonment for "unlawful assembly". However, he has willingly become a tool in Washington's power game with China, a country which is America's principal rival in the global arena.

Wong's decision to pursue US sponsorship is both naive and ill-judged, as it wipes away any shred of legitimacy he previously had on the Chinese mainland. Wong's appearance in America, moreover, undermines the protesters' cause to be viewed as an independence movement acting on its own initiative. It adds substance to Beijing's position, and its argument, that the Hong Kong rallies are propped up by external forces.

Three months ago, Wong met with high profile American politicians like Speaker of the House, Nancy Pelosi, along with Florida's Republican Senator Marco Rubio; Wong can be seen shaking hands, smiling and talking with them in photographs. These occurrences did not escape the attention of an irate Beijing, with foreign ministry spokesman Geng Shuang urging Washington "to respect China's sovereignty".

In mid-September 2019, Wong spoke to the US Congress at the Capitol Building in Washington, and he asked them to pass legislation known as the Human Rights and Democracy Act, which overtly interferes in Chinese affairs. This new law "requires Washington to monitor Beijing's actions in Hong Kong". The US government would, no doubt, look unkindly on Beijing reviewing their policies, say, in Miami.

The Human Rights and Democracy Act was signed into law by president Donald Trump in late November, which prompted China's foreign ministry to react angrily once more. Beijing has [threatened to enact](#) "firm counter-measures" against the US, while they summoned America's ambassador to China, Terry Branstad, to demand that Washington cease intervening in Chinese internal policy.

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