



China's Uighur abuse augurs poorly for world

January 17, 2019 **Lawrence J. Haas** *The Hill*

Related Categories: Democracy and Governance; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; China

"There is danger for every one [of us] in Pakistan now," a leader of that nation's Muslim Uighur community told Al Jazeera this week.

Apparently not satisfied with persecuting the Muslim Uighur community in its own Xinjiang province by, among other things, throwing an estimated million or more of them in torturous "re-education camps," Beijing is targeting Uighurs who live outside China. In fact, The Atlantic reported late last year that many Uighurs in the United States say Chinese authorities are contacting and threatening them.

As gripping details of China's crackdown on Uighurs leak out, the Wall Street Journal reports that Beijing is applying its growing diplomatic muscle to pressure governments around the world not to protest its policies. And, in a practice used by, among others, Hitler and Stalin, Beijing is stage-managing visits of foreign diplomats to assure them that it's not doing the very thing that, in fact, it is – abusing Uighurs.

Beijing's brutal crackdown on Uighurs both at home and abroad highlights what's at stake for not just the Chinese people but also the larger world as an increasingly aggressive regime exerts its growing military, diplomatic, and economic might. That's because with Western populations expressing rising doubts about the promise of democracy, Beijing is trumpeting its authoritarian model as an effective alternative.

That, at the same time, Washington is retreating from the world stage by questioning its alliances, eschewing multilateral trade deals, and refusing to promote freedom is creating a global vacuum that Beijing will be more than happy to fill. Unfortunately, a world of greater Chinese, and less U.S., influence will be one in which freedom and democracy are increasingly endangered.

As for the Uighurs, China is cracking down on this minority just as it's cracking down on all organized religion within its borders. Beijing sees the Uighurs as especially prone to radicalism, and has systematically denied them real autonomy for their region, Xinjiang.

Beijing dramatically expanded 28 of its internment camps in the second half of 2018, with their total floor space growing nearly five-fold – according to an Australian think tank that surveyed just 28 camps in a network that one German researcher believes numbers as many as 1,200 facilities. Last fall, America's UN Ambassador, Nikki Haley, described China's treatment of its Uighurs as "the largest internment of civilians in the world today" and "maybe the largest since World War II."

The Uighurs who have been detained in the camps – with their high walls, watchtowers, and razor wire – emerge with horrific tales. "I thought that I would rather die than go through this torture and begged then to kill me," a 29-year-old woman told reporters in late November. As CBS reported, she was "interrogated for four days in a row without sleep, had her hair shaved and was subjected to an intrusive medical examination following her second arrest in China in 2017. After she was arrested a third time, the treatment grew worse."

Specifically, she said, she spent three months in a cramped prison cell with 60 other women, was electrocuted until she almost lost consciousness, and was forced to use the toilet in front of security cameras, sing songs to praise the communist party, and take medications that made the women faint or bleed.

Beijing has offered a variety of justifications for the internment camps. At one point, the government said they help fight terrorism, thus contributing to global anti-terrorism efforts, and in this way protect China's majority population. At another point, it said the camps were vocational schools. Another still another point, it described them as "training centers" for local development.

The Uighurs are just one part of the larger story of Beijing's growing crackdown on organized religion. For instance, as a statement from nearly 300 scholars from around the world put it, "more than 10 million Turkic Muslim minorities in the region are subjected to a dense network of surveillance systems, checkpoints, and interpersonal monitoring which severely limit all forms of personal freedom."

Like other authoritarian regimes of yesterday and today, Beijing hopes to curtail belief systems that can compete with its governing ideology and, in turn, weaken its rule.

Though we might be tempted to dismiss the Uighurs as an internal Chinese matter, we should recognize – as the Uighurs of Pakistan and the United States surely do – that Beijing's internal behavior has implications beyond its borders. That's because, as Soviet dissident Andrei Sakharov wisely cautioned, "A country that does not respect the rights of its own people will not respect the rights of its neighbors."

Lawrence J. Haas, a senior fellow at the nonprofit American Foreign Policy Council in Washington, D.C., is the author of, most recently, Harry and Arthur: Truman, Vandenberg, and the Partnership That Created the Free World.

