



How to Hold China Accountable on Human Rights

October 29, 2020 *Newsweek*

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

As the U.S.-China relationship grows increasingly confrontational, few issues have captured Washington's attention more than the egregious ongoing violations of human rights in Xinjiang. Over the past four years, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has targeted Uighurs, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Hui and other minority ethnic groups in the province with systematic oppression, ranging from high-tech surveillance and arbitrary arrest to internment camps and forced labor. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has called these atrocities "the stain of the century," and a growing chorus of voices has called on President Trump to designate the oppression as genocide.

Meanwhile, the Trump administration has rolled out a number of sanctions targeting party elites and companies directly involved in Uighur persecution. Agencies have also blocked slave-labor imports from Xinjiang and advised U.S. companies to scrub their supply chains from the territory.

These steps, if enforced, could hamper as much as a fifth of Xinjiang's economy. But, in and of themselves, they won't save the Uighurs. To do that, policymakers need to look past their existing toolkit, understand the game the CCP is playing and consider new sanctions that would actually cripple China's campaign in Xinjiang.

Such an effort starts and ends with Xi Jinping's signature foreign policy project: the One Belt, One Road (OBOR) initiative.

OBOR envisions an integrated Eurasian economic market with Beijing as its capital. Economically, it is China's plan—formulated in response to its aging working population and rising labor costs—to preempt the impending realignment of global supply chains. Geopolitically, it provides China direct access to the Indian Ocean, the Bay of Bengal and the Persian Gulf, while circumventing the U.S.-patrolled Malacca Straits. Technologically, it exports China's digital authoritarianism to autocratic regimes throughout the continent. Politically, it represents the CCP's gambit to weaken American influence in Asia, the Middle East and Europe. Overall, the initiative previews the world that China hopes to build, and reveals its plan to deconstruct the one currently in place.

These aspirations hinge on Xinjiang. Of the six OBOR land routes currently under construction, three pass through China's westernmost territory. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), the flagship project that provides China with land access to deep-water ports in the Indian Ocean, originates in Kashgar and runs through Tashkurgan Tajik county, on China's border with Kashmir. The New Eurasian Land Bridge originates on China's east coast, then cuts across Xinjiang before passing through Kazakhstan and Central Asia on its way to Europe. Finally, the China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor originates in Xinjiang and cuts westward across the continent before terminating in the Balkans.

The economic impact of these routes on regional growth is difficult to overstate. In 2018, the Rand Corporation estimated that the initiative could, under certain circumstances, boost trade volumes throughout Asia by \$329 billion (a 7.3 percent increase), while increasing trade for the European Union by \$133 billion (a 2.6 percent increase). Indeed, Saudi Arabia's "Vision 2030" development plan has brought tens of billions of dollars of Chinese investment into the kingdom over the past three years.

Newsweek subscription offers >

Beijing is leveraging this economic potential to buy silence, and even support, from OBOR partner countries for its Xinjiang policies. Pakistani prime minister Imran Khan has been particularly explicit about his government's allegiance to China: "They came to help us when we were at rock bottom, and so we are really grateful to the Chinese government." These financial incentives lubricate China's Belt and Road, which runs over the backs of oppressed minorities.

The transportation infrastructure, financial incentives and political partnerships of OBOR are the most important—and most overlooked—factors in explaining why the CCP is cracking down in Xinjiang. If Washington is serious about changing the risk-reward calculus for the CCP and compelling party leaders to end their oppression of Uighurs, or at least significantly raising the costs to Beijing of its reeducation campaign in Xinjiang, policymakers must account for this reality.

Instead of issuing one-off sanctions, Washington should sanction all commerce passing through Xinjiang. These sanctions would mirror existing anti-money laundering provisions by restricting U.S. banks from providing financial services to any entity facilitating or benefiting from commercial activity within a region of gross human rights violations. This tool, if implemented and enforced throughout Xinjiang, could effectively cut off half of OBOR's land routes from the international dollar-denominated banking system.

Importantly, the underlying principle is not to punish legitimate commercial activity, but to target trade that exploits persecuted and brutalized groups. Much like laws prohibiting the importation of "blood diamonds," this authority would stymie commerce that depends on such atrocities as forced sterilizations, population control and systematic repression.

Regardless of whether the United States labels China's persecution of the Uighurs as genocide, policymakers need to think beyond existing tools in order to hold the CCP accountable. This necessity is indicative of America's broader China challenge: moving from reactive confrontation to proactive competition. OBOR's link to the Uighurs is an enormous vulnerability for the CCP—one that U.S. policymakers can and should exploit.

Michael Sobolik is Fellow in Indo-Pacific Studies at the American Foreign Policy Council in Washington, DC.