

Mini Simulation

Uighur Repression in Xinjiang

Last Updated:
October 13, 2020

Overview

At the start of a new presidential term in 2021, the United States reassesses its policy toward China in light of the ongoing repression of Uighurs in Xinjiang.

Students will understand the difficulty of standing up to human rights violations when a country wields great economic power.

The Situation

Xinjiang, a region in Northwest China, is home to about eleven million Uighurs, a mostly Muslim ethnic group. The region is resource-rich and strategically important to China's Belt and Road Initiative. The Xinjiang region boasts close proximity to China's Central Asian neighbors. In recent years, Chinese authorities have cracked down on Uighur communities. The Chinese government asserts that Uighurs hold extremist and separatist views. More than one million Uighurs and other Muslims in Xinjiang have been arbitrarily detained in camps. In these camps, Uighurs are subjected to religious restrictions, sexual abuse, torture, family separation, and forced labor. Since 2017, the Chinese government has forced tens of thousands of Uighurs to work in factories supporting the [supply chains](#) of more than eighty prominent global brands. Outside the camps, China enforces cultural and religious restrictions on Uighurs. Beijing also conducts intense [surveillance](#) in Xinjiang that makes it difficult for Uighurs to exercise their basic human rights. Moreover, the Chinese government has overseen a campaign to forcibly sterilize hundreds of thousands of Uighur women in 2019 and 2020. As a result, the Uighur birth rate has plummeted. These conditions have sparked criticism from foreign governments. Human rights organization have suggested that China's actions constitute [genocide](#).

However, meaningful international pressure against China has been limited. Beijing wields growing global influence as a giant in global trade and a cornerstone of global supply chains. For instance, all iPhones, for instance, are assembled in China. China is the United States' largest trading partner and holds more than \$1 trillion of U.S. debt. China is also a powerful member of [multilateral](#) institutions such as the United Nations and has invested in many countries' development. This influence has led several governments to remain silent on Xinjiang. The United States has condemned Chinese repression of the Uighurs, sanctioned Chinese officials, and blacklisted dozens of Chinese companies connected to the abuses of Uighurs. However, these efforts have not yet altered China's behavior. As the severity of state repression in Xinjiang grows more apparent, Washington has an opportunity to stand up as a leader for human rights. The United States would hold significant leverage over China if it can convince other countries to see Beijing's treatment of Uighurs as a stain on its international reputation.

The United States has long sought to support human rights and has taken a leading role in confronting violators in the past. This stance is evidenced by the implementation of [sanctions](#) and multilateral arms embargoes in South Sudan. The U.S. also took a leadership role to protect human rights through military intervention in Libya in 2011. However, upholding human rights in this case could carry a considerable cost. Given China's economic power and global influence, the U.S.-China relationship is crucial to the United States. Amid already rising tensions between Washington and Beijing, robust action in support of the Uighurs is a major policy risk. Such actions from the United States might inspire not only retaliatory action from China but also collateral damage to the U.S. economy. Policymakers will therefore need to carefully consider what trade-offs they are willing to incur to confront Chinese

repression in Xinjiang.

Decision Point

Set in January 2021

A new presidential term has started, and the president has called a meeting of the National Security Council (NSC). The goal of this meeting is to reassess U.S. policy toward China in light of its ongoing repression of Uighurs in Xinjiang. Recent reports indicate that China is increasing its efforts by building or expanding over sixty new detention facilities in the past year. Amid increasing claims that China is committing [genocide](#), policymakers need to consider whether the United States should take a firmer stand against repression in Xinjiang. The NSC must consider how to uphold human rights values while taking into account U.S. economic interests. Given China's expanding global influence, policymakers also need to consider which actions could realistically alter Chinese behavior.

NSC members should consider the following policy options:

- *Continue current, limited actions*, including targeted [sanctions](#) on officials and businesses connected with Xinjiang. This option has the lowest risk of escalating tensions with China and causing economic fallout. However, it would represent a largely symbolic response. Limited actions would do little to curb Chinese repression in Xinjiang. As a result, the United States could be left open to criticism for turning a blind eye to genocide.
- *Strengthen existing measures* by broadening current sanctions to target a wider range of relevant actors. These broader measures would target higher-level officials in the Chinese government and block imports of goods tied to forced labor in Xinjiang. Most notably, this policy decision would sanction Chinese businesses and multinational corporations who exploit forced Uighur labor. This option would constitute a more forceful rebuke of China and could put pressure on businesses using forced Uighur labor. However, it increases the risk of economic fallout or retaliatory sanctions from Beijing.
- *Pursue aggressive diplomatic measures*, including by vocally condemning China's actions as genocide. This policy decision would include coordinated international calls for China to allow an independent investigation in Xinjiang. Moreover, the NSC would advocate for coordinated international sanctions, or call for the matter to be referred to the International Criminal Court. Many of these measures would be difficult to pursue given China's influence and [veto](#) power on the UN Security Council. Aggressive [multilateral](#) measures could likely spark Chinese retribution. However, such policy decisions could considerably increase international attention and pressure on the Chinese government.

Photo: An ethnic Uighur demonstrator wears a mask while protesting China in front of the Chinese Consulate in Istanbul, Turkey on October 1, 2019.

Source: Huseyin Aldemir/Reuters

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