

Our Collective Failure: Why the International Community Has Not Intervened to Protect China's Uighur Muslims

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Abstract

Today, as many as two million Uighurs (WEE-guhrs)—a predominately Muslim, Turkish ethnic minority group—in China's northwest Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR) have been arbitrarily detained in highly-secretive, government-run mass detention centers. After years of conducting intensive surveillance—which included the collecting of biometric data and the seizing of passports—the Chinese government began imprisoning hundreds of thousands under the guise of expelling religious extremism. These detention centers have been likened to the concentration camps of Nazi Germany; and satellite imagery, leaked government documents, and testimony from released Uighur detainees have revealed numerous accounts of torture, starvation, brainwashing, organ harvesting, sexual harassment, and even execution occurring inside the camps. However, while the international community has covered the crisis, it has not been covered in sufficient depth to result in any form of large-scale, cohesive international action to protect the Uighurs.

Through an analysis of over 400 news articles obtained from the ProQuest News and Newspapers database, this thesis investigates the potential reasons for why this massive-scale human rights violation has failed to garner substantial international action to put a stop to the Chinese government's systematic repression of the Uighurs. Three theories are presented for this apparent global apathy: (1) Our international human rights organizations are ineffective and lack an enforcement component, (2) China's strict censorship laws, propaganda, and misinformation campaigns have been relatively successful in keeping the issue out of international spotlight, and (3) China is a global economic superpower upon which the rest of the world relies, and we are afraid to question its legitimacy in terms of human rights.

Keywords: Uighur, arbitrary detention, ethnic minority, Belt and Road Initiative, human rights

After visiting China while studying abroad in the spring of 2019, I gained insight into one of the world's largest ongoing human rights atrocities, and how contemporary China's totalitarian government, culture of secrecy facilitated by technological excellence, and role as a rising economic world superpower have all allowed this issue to carry on largely unacknowledged—and certainly un-intervened in—by the international community. When I began researching China's Uighur detentions, the issue seemed clear-cut, and I thought I mostly knew what I would find. However, what I ended up uncovering was far more nuanced,

multifaced, and interesting: the overwhelming influence of a multitrillion-dollar Chinese economic initiative, complicit multinational corporations, threats, intimidation, lies, and deceit on behalf of the Chinese government, massive propaganda efforts and coverup schemes, incriminating leaked documents and satellite imagery, and that is just the beginning.

Although China's systematic detentions of the Uighurs seems to have arisen suddenly, these extreme measures on behalf of the Chinese government are essentially the culmination of over 70 years of Uighur repression. The Uighurs once resided in their own autonomous region formerly known as the East Turkistan Republic, but in 1949 this region was invaded and annexed by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) ("Why is," 2014). Since this ancient Muslim-majority group had virtually nothing in common with the ethnic Han Chinese, the CCP began persecuting and oppressing the Uighurs almost immediately due to their ethnicity, language, religious beliefs, and their presence in the extremely resource-rich Xinjiang region.

In response to decades of harsh treatment by the Chinese government, in the 1990s, the Uighurs began staging protests which prompted China to intensify its crackdown in the region. This crackdown was even further heightened leading up to the 2008 Olympics in Beijing. In 2009, tensions escalated when rioting broke out in Xinjiang's capital, Urumqi, where approximately 200 people were killed, including many Han Chinese ("Why is," 2014). In the years following, Chinese government repression worsened, thus prompting additional violent incidents on behalf of the Uighurs which the Chinese government labeled as Islamic extremist terrorism. Experts estimate that the mass detentions of the Uighurs started in 2014, and began escalating drastically in 2017 (Maizlan, 2019). Since then, the Chinese government has been waging a violent and unjust campaign of internment and ethnic cleansing—what many have even labeled as genocide.

While a large percentage of Chinese citizens remain completely unaware of this issue due to China's stringent internet censorship and persuasive propaganda, the international community has slowly become aware of the magnitude of these human rights violations, especially within the past year. Due to the recent and ongoing nature of this crisis, and the fact that it has been kept highly secretive, there are relatively few academic studies and publications regarding the detention of the Uighur Muslims. Because of this, my research will attempt to fill the gap in literature by examining why this issue has amassed comparatively little attention and has so far prompted a woefully inadequate response.

Upon beginning the initial stages of my research, I quickly noticed that the amount of information on China's detention of the Uighurs seemed to pale in comparison to the amount of information regarding other significant, contemporary human rights violations. To confirm my observations, I examined a similar human rights crisis of about the same scale and time period for comparison: Myanmar's Rohingya genocide. Both China's Uighurs and Myanmar's Rohingya are Muslim groups that are being actively targeted for their religion, and both have faced ongoing state-sponsored persecution within the last couple of years. Tens of thousands of Rohingya have been killed, and over 700,000 have been forced to flee, (Mahtani, 2020), while Uighur detentions are currently numbered at approximately 2 million (Chudnovsky, 2019). I then

compared search results using the ProQuest News and Newspaper database. Entering the key words 'China' and 'Uighur,' and leaving all other search criteria on default, yielded a total of 9,335 results. I then conducted the same search, but this time using the key words 'Myanmar' and 'Rohingya.' This search generated 30,597 results. I initially assumed this lack of results on China's Uighurs reflected the fact that the world knew what was going on but simply did not care. How else could a search for Myanmar's Rohingya have yielded more than three times the number of results as a search for China's Uighurs?

This question became the foundation for my original first theory, which was that powerful Western nations simply do not care about the crisis because China's Uighurs are so different them in terms of national and religious values, government and economic systems, and even geography. I predicted that the then-current U.S. Presidential administration's generation of xenophobic, Islamophobic, and isolationist rhetoric was fostering a widespread indifference to the plight of the Uighurs. I suspected that anti-Muslim sentiment generated after 9/11 and other Islamic extremist attacks on the Western world, in culmination with decades of fierce anti-communist discourse, had been the perfect storm for an apathetic response to the persecution of a group of Muslims from communist China.

As I began delving deeper into my research, however, I came to see that the topic was far more complex than a simple matter of people not caring, and that there are numerous reasons for the lack of a unified international response. But still, the most crucial issue is that we have not intervened to end the crisis.

Group Rights are Human Rights

One of the most considerable points of contention in the international human rights debate is the difference between individual rights and group rights. In his article, Peter Jones neatly sums up this controversy by raising some thought-provoking questions aimed at generating critical examinations of key wording in legislation within the human rights arena:

Can a right borne by a group be a human right? For some analysts, the answer is obviously, "No." They argue that human rights are the rights of human beings and, self-evidently, each human being is an individual being. Groups may have rights of some sort, but whatever those rights might be, they cannot be human rights. Human rights must be rights borne by human individuals (Jones, 1999, p. 80).

One of the problems with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UNHDR) is that nearly every article begins with the word "everyone" or "no one," thus making each article aimed directly at individuals instead of at groups of peoples ("Universal Declaration," 1979). While this may seem like a minute difference, the application and enforcement of these human rights laws can vary drastically depending on whether they are applied to individuals or to collective groups.

When examining human rights for groups of peoples, it is important to look at how these rights differ from individual rights, and how the existence of individual rights may even undermine and challenge the legitimacy of group rights. Sanders posits that because society is accustomed to individuals asserting rights, collective and group rights have not received the same amount of acceptance as individual rights. In essence, Sanders argues that few people would attempt to question the validity or necessity of individual rights, even while they are building a case against the recognition of collective rights (Sanders, 1991). While Sanders suggests that group rights are impeded by the prioritization of individual rights, on the contrary, David Phillips argues that group rights are most effectively promoted through the strengthening of individual rights (Phillips, 2005). Using Iraq and its history of ethnoreligious conflict as a case study, Phillips discusses the Iraqi ethnic and sectarian groups that are seeking out unique constitutional provisions which protect them from discrimination and help to preserve their identities. Phillips proposes that the Iraqi constitution must first improve in terms of promoting more liberal individual rights before these minority groups can assert their collective rights (Phillips, 2005).

Richard Thomson adds another layer of complexity to the debate of the coexisting nature of group and individual rights—or lack thereof. In direct contrast to Phillips who believes that individual rights must first be strengthened, Thomson argues that, in certain societies, group rights have the potential to justify culturally-specific practices such as infanticide and female circumcision, which are inherently harmful to individual rights (Thompson, 1997). One area where Thompson and Phillips would likely agree, however, is on the topic of the benefit of decentralization in fostering group rights. When discussing what policies could potentially benefit Iraqi's minority groups, Phillips contends that group rights can be promoted through decentralization:

Consistent with the principle of decentralization, federal Iraqi state, governorate, county, district, and municipal governments should be able to adopt laws conforming to local customs just so long as such laws do not contradict the constitution or laws enacted by the national parliament within the scope of its powers. (Phillips, 2005, p. 26)

In line with Phillips' position on decentralization, Thomson also agrees that delegating power to minority groups is beneficial in helping them to protect themselves against policy and action by dominant groups that could potentially be harmful. (Thompson, 1997). While Phillips and Thomson would concur that decentralization provides regions that are home to minority groups with the opportunity to protect their language and culture, some scholars argue that this same decentralization could intensify political and economic tensions between central and ethnic minority regions. For example, David Lublin conducted a study which analyzed the share of votes won by ethno-regional parties in 71 different democracies throughout the world, and he found that ethno-regional parties do not benefit from the outcomes of decentralization in non-ethnically decentralized countries (Lublin, 2012). In sum, depending on the type of

decentralization and how it is brought about, it has the potential to either deepen the divide between ethnic and majority groups or to unify the two and foster more equity and cohesiveness between group rights and individual rights within a given country. However, as we continue to examine how individual and group rights interrelate, we begin to observe that these tensions over defining and implementing human rights only become more and more complex.

Human Rights for Ethnic and Religious Minorities

Human rights for ethnic and religious minorities may be uniquely distinct from human rights for other groups of people. Article 27 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights reads, "In those states in which ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities exist, persons belonging to such minorities shall not be denied the right, in community with the other members of their group, to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practice their own religion, or to use their own language" (Noorani, 1992, p. 1717). The United Nations General Assembly Resolution takes this idea a step further and lays out principles of enforcement: "States shall take measures where required to ensure that persons belonging to minorities may exercise fully and effectively all their human rights and fundamental freedoms without any discrimination and in full equality before the law" (United Nations, 1992). Despite their origin, many human rights laws regarding ethnic and religious minorities make sure to specifically include key verbiage such as 'equity,' 'equality,' and 'discrimination,' and to make it clear that each and every marginalized group deserves the same rights under the law as their majority counterparts. Although most states' constitutions and formal legal documents include similar phrases as included in the aforementioned quotations, it is in the problem of enforcement where most human rights are at risk of being violated.

When it comes to the treatment of ethnic and religious minorities worldwide, we begin to see a phenomenon which somewhat resembles that of the famous 'chicken and the egg' metaphor. Johnathan Fox suggests that "[cross-sectional analyses] tend to attempt to predict or explain the level of protest or rebellion in which ethnic minorities engage at the expense of determining the causes for the behavior of the government of the state in which these minorities live (Fox, 2000, p. 423). Fox's analysis raises the question: do religious and ethnic minorities tend to rebel because the state has not given them the rights and treatment that they deserve, or has this lack of rights granted by the state been in response to the rebellion of certain minority groups?

History has proven that the former is often the case. Religious and ethnic minorities most often rebel against and protest, sometimes violently, their oppression by the state. More often than not, this pushback results in even further oppression and violation of rights which spawns a vicious cycle of rebellion followed by oppression until the minority group has virtually no rights left at all. Fox posits that the political, economic, and cultural discrimination against ethnic minorities results in the group's formation of grievances which then causes them to mobilize and eventually to rebel (Fox, 2000).

Contrary to Fox's assumptions, Michael Clarke rests his argument on the opposing side of this 'chicken and egg' debate. Clarke discusses ethnic minority rights in China, suggesting that "the nature and scale of the challenge posed by any one ethnic minority to the PRC is largely a function of three major factors: the historical relationship between the ethnic group and the Chinese state; the geographic concentration of the ethnic minority; and the degree of acculturation to the dominant Han society" (Clarke, 2013, p. 109). Essentially, Clarke posits that the People's Republic of China's approach to ethnic minority rights—more specifically, which rights and to what degree these rights are to be granted—is contingent upon the extent to which a minority group assimilates to dominant cultural norms. This implies that, in the case of China, rights are not universally applied, but rather are dependent, first and foremost, upon a minority group's ability to homogenize themselves with the ethnic Han Chinese. In the eyes of the Chinese government, failure to assimilate automatically constitutes a form of rebellion, to which the response is to begin revoking rights.

With regard to the protection of human rights, specifically for ethnic and religious minorities, much of the issue lies in the ideologies of universalism versus particularism. Ethical universalism is the belief that all people's interests should be treated with equal and impartial consideration. Ethical particularism, on the other hand, refers to the idea that preferential consideration should be given to the interests of some people over others (Gewirth, 1988). Therein lies the question: ought rights be universally applied, or do certain minority groups warrant specifically tailored rights to place them at the same baseline as majority groups?

Hegel's political philosophy questions the extent to which human rights law should consider nuanced characteristics of the cultural make-up of various groups. However, Hegelian philosophy also holds that although human rights are inherently universalist in nature, they are more than capable of accommodating the particularity of distinct cultural groups. In all, he argues that neither approach is ideal, but rather that a middle ground in between these two philosophies will allow for a set of human rights laws that is universally applicable, but that also considers the needs of cultural groups (Mullender, 2003).

Ultimately, both components of universalism and particularism in human rights law are necessary for a set of laws that is both inclusive and that also accommodates the cultural nuances of ethnic and religious minority groups. However, the complexity of devising and enforcing a cohesive and fair set of rights that also applies to minority groups does not stop here. In the 21st century, globalization has added an entirely new level of complexity to this debate.

Globalization, Power, and Human Rights

Since the end of the Cold War, there has been a marked shift in the world's approach to human rights as a result of the new type of globalization that has emerged. Robert McCorquodale and Richard Fairbrother argue that, as a result of this new era of post-Cold War globalization, states are no longer the only actors involved in decision making regarding human rights; now inter-governmental institutions and transnational corporations are also playing an integral role

(McCorquodale & Fairbrother, 1999). These additional actors make human rights policy creation more complex and tumultuous as numerous other interests are at stake.

McCorquodale and Fairbrother go on to assert that globalization has led to the reconceptualizing of state sovereignty, and that in many cases, international human rights law reflects Western, European values instead of universal ones (McCorquodale & Fairbrother, 1999). Adamantia Pollis and Peter Schwab accept McCorquodale and Fairbrother's claim regarding the Westernization of international human rights law, and add that this Westernization has infringed on state sovereignty as a whole (Pollis & Schwab, 1980). McCorquodale and Fairbrother concede that current international human rights law is incapable of dealing with the globalization-induced changes to state sovereignty and that changes must be made to promote a more inclusive system (McCorquodale & Fairbrother, 1999). But, Pollis and Schwab contend that a more radical rethinking of international human rights and an establishment of universals is in order (Pollis & Schwab, 1980).

While there is a general consensus within the scholarly community on the impacts of post-Cold War globalization on state sovereignty, there is greater contention with regard to whether said globalization has helped or hindered the international human rights effort. Micheline Ishay suggests that although globalization has been associated with a growing gap between rich and poor countries, it has also facilitated a communications revolution which has ultimately opened up new spaces for progress in the human rights arena (Ishay, 2008). Dreher, Gassebner, and Siemers would agree with Ishay in the sense that globalization has been beneficial for international human rights, but would likely disagree with her on the economic component. Dreher et al. argue, on the other hand, that economic, political, and social globalization have all led to a broad-spectrum improvement in international human rights. This improvement is due to the globally reformed economic system which has increased the quantity and quality of available goods and services, thus decreasing the scarcity of goods, which in turn decreases the potential for conflict and repression (Dreher et al., 2012). Contrary to this position, Nisar Mohammad bin Ahmad contends that because globalization is mainly driven by corporate elites and transnational companies, it is almost entirely motivated by for-profit interests, often at the expense of human rights (Mohammad bin Ahmad, 2011).

By adding in the dimension of power dynamics, yet another layer of complexity is seen in the issue of globalization's intersection with human rights. When discussing how human rights and power are inextricably linked, Paul Farmer attests that human rights violations are, "symptoms of deeper pathologies of power and are linked intimately to the social conditions that so often determine who will suffer abuse and who will be shielded from harm" (Farmer, 2003, p. 7). One example of these "deeper pathologies of power" that Farmer discusses is the often inherently repressive tendencies of the state. Julius Stone discusses the pervasive nature of the power imbalance between a state and its people, regardless of the type of government in power and true along a spectrum of other factors, stating, "be it communist or capitalist, freedom is a reality only within limits imposed by the state, and these limits cannot go much beyond the broad ideologies of those that govern" (Stone, 1986, p. 1). When placing Stone's argument in the

context of modern globalization, one might infer that this “reality” is not only beholden to the state, but also to the powerful conglomerate of international organizations and multinational corporations that infringe upon the state’s sovereignty. The question could then be raised: has this relatively rapid increase in the number of entities that now impact this reality of freedom aided or impeded it? The general consensus is that it depends. The more actors that are weighing in on topics of human rights, the more international attention it garners, but on the other hand, corporate greed, diplomatic interests, and trade agreements can cause states to turn a blind eye to human rights violations when it serves their interests. An irrefutable example of this failure to intervene at the stake of interest preservation is the international community’s response to China’s arbitrary detention of its Uighur Muslims.

Methodology

This research explores three competing reasons for why China’s arbitrary detention of its Uighur Muslims has failed to garner substantial international intervention. These three theories are: (1) Our international human rights organizations are ineffective and lack an enforcement component, (2) China’s strict censorship laws, propaganda, and misinformation campaigns have been relatively successful in keeping the issue out of international spotlight, and (3) China is a global economic superpower upon which the rest of the world relies, and we are afraid to question its legitimacy in terms of human rights.

A content analysis of newspaper articles was conducted using the ProQuest News and Newspapers database, and the two key words used were ‘China’ and ‘Uighur.’ However, since the term ‘Uighur’ has multiple spellings, the terms ‘Uyghur’ and ‘Weiwu’er’ were also entered to ensure that articles containing any of these three spellings were included in the search. The search included articles published between January of 2017 and April of 2020, and was limited to include the key words only in the document title. These key words were: China and (Uyghur or Uighur or Weiwu’er).

This search yielded a total of 1,225 results. ‘Newspapers’ was then selected in the left-hand column under ‘Source type,’ and this yielded 663 results. After deselecting all of the duplicates, there remained a total of 459 articles. The articles were then sorted through to see if they included information relevant to either of the three theories, regardless of whether the information supported or contradicted these theories. Articles that covered the same concepts were then grouped together in order to see if there was a general consensus amongst the articles covering that particular topic.

Analyzing all of the articles found using these search criteria created objectivity: articles were not selected only because they supported the theories. Examining hundreds of news sources allowed for a relatively untainted examination of the topic which was up-to-date and free from the influence of extensive analyses often seen in academic articles. Utilizing news sources published all around the world provided a diverse and comprehensive perspective from which to analyze each article. This wide array of news sources helped to present the issue from the

perspective of dozens of different countries, thus preventing analysis from an ethnocentric viewpoint.

Lack of Enforcement Capabilities or Cowardice? Effectiveness of HROs

International human rights organizations have done extremely valuable work in spreading awareness of, preventing instances of, and sometimes even ending violations of human rights all across the globe. These organizations, however, often lack a critical component in stopping rights violations: enforcement. Many prominent human rights organizations have successful track records in ending ethnic conflict and human rights infringements on a smaller scale. When it comes to large-scale, state-sponsored violations of rights, however, even organizations as large as the United Nations can appear powerless in intervening. As important as these organizations may be, no entity, no matter how powerful could ever fulfill the role of a global police force; and oftentimes these organizations are forced to accept major losses in the human rights arena at the sake of state sovereignty.

This lack of enforcement capabilities, however, is not the only factor at play when it comes to how international human rights organizations are dealing with China's detention of Uighur Muslims. In fact, the manner in which many of these organizations are responding to China is completely unprecedented. When the issue first started to come to light, many organizations gave appropriate, predictable responses. But as China's detentions continued to increase in scale and severity, other organizations had entirely unexpected responses. Of the total 459 articles analyzed, 108 referenced the attempts on behalf of a human rights organization to either speak or act out against China's Uighur detentions. And 12 of the articles referenced human rights organizations that did the exact opposite: either ignoring or supporting China's actions. Although they represent only a small proportion of the whole, these 12 articles are significant because they specifically reference instances where human rights organizations acted completely contradictorily to their entire purpose for existing.

Many of the predicted responses began surfacing in 2018, still several years after the Chinese government began profiling Uighurs and building its surveillance state in Xinjiang. In May of 2018, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) publicly denounced China's increasing crackdown on Uighur Muslims ("USCIRF deeply," 2018). In August of that same year, the United Nations anti-discrimination committee cited reliable sources that there were more than one million Uighurs in detention in "counter extremism centers." The Chinese delegation comprised of 50 officials refused to comment. Numerous other organizations also began to speak out, including the Network of Chinese Human Rights Defenders ("UN Panel," 2018). A month later, the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination called on China to release all Uighur detainees. The committee's report cited that the Chinese legislation included only vague references to extremism and an unclear

definition of separatism, which the UN cautioned could lead to criminal profiling of ethno-religious minorities (Cumming-Bruce, 2018); ("UN Committee," 2018).

Following behind these organizations, in 2019, the Muslim Association of Britain issued a release imploring the British government to take a hardline stance against China. As justification for the staunch position, the news release specifically read, "Uighur Muslim children as young as 2 years old, are being abducted and subject to brainwashing and organ harvesting by the Chinese Communist Party's social engineering 'strike hard' campaign" ("Muslim Association," 2019). The Executive Director of the International Coalition to End Transplant Abuse in China (ETAC) announced in a joint letter with other human rights organizations that they were calling for a UN Commission of Inquiry into China's forced organ harvesting ("China accused," 2019). Additionally, a human rights organization by the name of Emgage—which mobilizes and encourages American Muslims to speak out on pertinent issues—has called for a boycott of Beijing's 2022 Olympics ("China's inexcusable," 2019).

Other strategies from human rights organizations have included targeting other countries instead of condemning China directly. The director of the international NGO, Society for Threatened Peoples, implored that the EU take punitive actions against China such as imposing travel sanctions and reevaluating its supply chains in Xinjiang ("Uighur Persecution," 2020). Additionally, the USCIRF has heavily criticized Egypt for its deportation of Uighur Muslims to China. The USCIRF has not yet classified Egypt as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC), but implied that Egypt's indifference to the Uighur community could lead to the reevaluation of this classification ("USCIRF condemns," 2017). China, on the other hand, has been classified as a CPC since 1999 ("USCIRF deeply," 2018). Having been already designated as a Country of Particular Concern for nearly two decades by the time that organizations began speaking out, China could reasonably have already been expected by both the USCIRF or the United Nations to act in such ways. The USCIRF is unique in the sense that it has proactively flagged and ranked countries to monitor, whereas many other organizations tend to respond to rights violations only after they have already begun. This track record raises the question: should China have been kept under even closer scrutiny, or would it have been impossible to foresee or prevent these mass-scale arbitrary detentions from occurring? Based on the responses of individual nations and of rights organizations, a more appropriate question may be: did the world see this coming and choose to look the other way?

After China had been under suspicion of detaining Uighur Muslims for three years, in July of 2019, the ambassadors from over thirty Muslim-majority countries signed a letter to the United Nations at Geneva praising China's policies. This letter stated, in part, "We commend China's remarkable achievements in the field of human rights by adhering to the people-centered development philosophy and protecting and promoting human rights through development" ("Arab, Muslim-majority," 2019). The ambassadors who signed this letter represented Russia, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Cuba, Algeria, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Nigeria, Angola, Togo, Tajikistan, Philippines, and Belarus among others. What is even more puzzling is that a vast majority of the signatory nations have taken immense pride in safeguarding Islam

throughout their history ("China warns," 2019b). Could China's rapidly growing global influence really be buying the silence of historically devout Muslim countries? And more crucially, the silence of their UN ambassadors?

Also in 2019, the human rights commission of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation—comprised of 57 countries and describing itself as, "the collective voice of the Muslim world"—initially condemned China's treatment of Uighurs. Just a few months later, however, the organization backtracked and issued a report, "commending the efforts of the People's Republic of China in providing care to its Muslim citizens" (Anderlini, 2019).

In all, a majority of the world's human rights organizations fall into three categories: those that are making their best efforts but lack an enforcement component, those that are acting avoidant and failing to deal with China directly, and those that are either failing to condemn China's actions or are overtly supporting them. Those organizations that fall into the latter two categories are likely either afraid of China, incentivized by China, or both. While encouraging other nations to do their part in stopping China's human rights violations is a great step, failing to publicly condemn or directly deal with China starts these organizations down a path of faintheartedness and avoidance that many others may be inclined to follow. On the contrary, while other human rights organizations are taking all the right stances, they simply lack the autonomy to enforce many of their propositions. Whether it be imposing sanctions or boycotting the Olympics, the kinds of large-scale responses that work are often beyond the scope of action of these well-meaning organizations.

Censorship, Propaganda, and Misinformation: China's Efforts to Control Global Discourse

The Chinese government's extensive misinformation campaigns, persuasive propaganda, and stringent censorship have all played a crucial role in stifling the realities of their Uighur detention camps in an attempt to keep the issue out of the international spotlight. China's responses to allegations have ranged from feigned ignorance through outright denial to elaborate cover stories and carefully-constructed facades. In the analysis of articles described above, China's denial and its misleading narratives were most frequently mentioned. China's denial of what is truly going on inside its Xinjiang borders was mentioned in 161 articles, while China's alternative descriptions of its Uighur detentions were mentioned in 254 articles. Many of these articles contained information about both China's denial and its misrepresentation, given that these two have often gone hand-in-hand. However, a vast majority of these articles referenced these two key factors as mere pretextual descriptions of the situation in Xinjiang, rather than China's efforts to control the global discourse being their central story.

Whether intentionally or not, the manner in which the Chinese government has surveilled and suppressed its Uighur Muslim population has also played a role in keeping the surveillance aspect of the issue relatively difficult to expose. China's exceptional innovation in the technology sector has been far from a secret to its global competitors. However, China has been working on far more than smartphones in recent years, with goals that are far more than

economic. A Human Rights Watch report revealed that China is installing QR codes on the homes of Uighur Muslims in order to gain instant access to information on those living inside (Embury-Dennis, 2018). The Chinese government has also imposed a large-scale electronic surveillance system which monitors commonly used mobile apps such as WhatsApp, Viber, and Telegram. The advanced system can even monitor virtual private networks (VPNs) ("Film depicts," 2019). Even tourists in the Xinjiang region are being surveilled in order to curb the risk of information regarding Uighur detention reaching the outside world: "Chinese border police are secretly installing surveillance apps on the phones of visitors and downloading personal information" ("Uighur Muslims'," 2019). To take measures a step further, the Chinese police with the help of startup tech companies have been developing a software that utilizes artificial intelligence to recognize "sensitive groups of people" by using skin color or eye shape in order to profile Uighur Muslims ("China's systematic," 2020);(Mozur, 2019).

Technological means of surveillance are not the only methods used by the Chinese government. It is also reported that between 2016 and 2017, the Chinese government was using "free medical check-ups" as a guise under which to collect DNA from thousands of Uighur Muslims. One Uighur man reported that during one of these alleged check-ups, officials "scanned his face, recorded his voice and took his fingerprints" ("China collected," 2019). To take measures of repression even further, the Chinese government introduced its "Pair Up and Become One" initiative, under which Chinese affiliates were sent to live as "relatives" in Uighur households. The affiliates' job was to report back to the state any behavior they observe that does not align with traditional, secular Chinese values ("China's latest," 2018);(Wong, 2018). These affiliates have been reported as targeting Uighur women whose husbands have been detained, and even forcing the women to share beds with them (Baynes, 2019).

As the issue began gaining traction in the international media, China correspondingly ramped up efforts to control the global discourse surrounding its illegal internment. One of the many tools China uses to propagate its narrative is its state-sponsored newspaper, *Global Times*, which has published numerous articles attempting to counter or deny any information it does not want reaching the public (Grove, 2020);("Uighur Persecution," 2020). During the early months that Uighur detentions began coming under media scrutiny, China outright denied the existence of any sort of detention camps. In November of 2018, a group of Canadian officials organized the signing of a document by 15 Western ambassadors to China requesting entry into Xinjiang in order to assess allegations of human rights abuses. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying responded to the request stating, "This is above and beyond the duties of a diplomat and exceeds their mandate under the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations. So we will by no means allow them to do so" ("China will," 2018).

However, after international intelligence agencies gathered evidence from satellite footage and leaked documents, the Chinese government changed their narrative, announcing that the camps were actually "vocational training centers" built to help Uighurs obtain important skills for the workplace and practice their Mandarin Chinese. In attempt to legitimize the camps, China retroactively changed the laws by making amendments to counterterrorism regulations:

The amended counterterrorism regulations, adopted Tuesday in the northwest Xinjiang region where most Uighurs live, say that authorities can use "vocational skills training centers" to "deradicalize" people suspected of extremism. The previous rules made no reference to vocational centers (Dou, 2018).

In an even further effort to control what they were forced to admit, the Chinese government strategically invited international journalists and diplomats to visit "model camps," and led them on highly controlled tours through the facilities (Emont, 2019);(O'Brien, 2019). These state-controlled visits even included detainees demonstrating their happiness by singing and clapping, while undercover Chinese police officers curbed journalists' efforts at independent reporting (Su & Wilkinson, 2019). Apart from these controlled visits, however, China strictly limits entry of foreign journalists in the Xinjiang region.

In 2019, with international tension over Uighur detentions continuing to mount, the Chinese government announced that it had released a majority of those in Xinjiang's camps. Xinjiang governor, Shohrat Zakir, put out a statement that more than 90% of Uighurs had left the camps and gone on to find jobs. However, it was not long before friends and relatives of those detained began to realize that their missing loved ones had not returned. Zakir's statement failed to include any numbers of those interned or released, and when asked by the public for proof of numbers, Beijing responded by saying that the numbers are fluid since people are constantly coming and going from the camps (Chun Han, 2019).

Be it through censorship, propaganda, misinformation, intimidation, or outright denial, China has succeeded in occluding the narrative surrounding its Uighur detentions. The relative lack of available information on the topic as a whole evinces China's ability to at least partially control the information flowing both into and out of its borders. Additionally, the manner in which China has been systematically oppressing the Uighurs (via extreme secrecy, draconian policing, and advanced technology) has also contributed to China's efforts in keeping the issue out of the public eye.

Global Fears of Questioning China: Threats, Intimidation, and the Belt and Road Initiative

All around the world, both Muslim and non-Muslim countries alike have shown reluctance to criticize China's human rights violations in fear of offending Beijing, suffering backlash from the rising power, and straining crucial economic ties. Although Xinjiang has historically been one of China's poorest regions, it is extremely rich in gas and oil, borders eight countries, and comprises a significant part of China's multitrillion-dollar Belt and Road initiative (O'Brien, 2019). This Chinese infrastructure initiative involves investment and development in over 70 countries and international organizations across Asia, Europe, and Africa. The Belt and Road project, "requires a compliant Uighur population, since all these road and energy pathways between coastal China and the Middle East must pass through Xinjiang" (Kaplan, 2018).

According to the articles analyzed above, the international community's economic reasons for not condemning China's actions are threefold. Out of the total of articles, 51

mentioned China's Belt and Road initiative, 23 mentioned the supply chains of major corporations running through Xinjiang, and 80 referenced other potential economic repercussions or the straining of trade ties as a reason for the overall hesitation to act.

Uighur activists are particularly outraged by the lack of criticism and action coming from Muslim nations around the globe. During his visit to China, Mohammad bin Salam—Saudi Arabia's crown prince—stated "China has the right to take antiterrorism and de-extremism measures to safeguard national security." This statement came just after he and Xi Jinping had solidified a 10-billion-dollar deal to refine a petrochemical complex in China (Osborne, 2019). The Philippines also has a sizeable Muslim population, but its President's position is clear: "I cannot fight China. It would be a war which I can never win." This response could also be in part because the Philippines is currently pursuing closer economic ties with China ("Beijing's global," 2019). Even neighboring Kazakhstan, which is heavily dependent on China for trade, has been accused of silencing human rights activists by arresting those who are opposed to China's policies in Xinjiang (Vanderklippe, 2019).

It is not just Muslim nations who have shown reluctance in speaking out against China's human rights violations. Germany is in a particularly interesting position, as it is actively working toward redeeming itself on the global stage after its own egregious human rights violations. Having been such a strong proponent for promoting the "never again" rhetoric generated after the Holocaust, Germany and its response loom large in the public eye. However, China is Germany's largest trading partner, and when asked whether it was right for German companies to continue investing in Xinjiang in light of the Uighur detentions, Chancellor Angela Merkel's spokesman stated, "In a situation where there are no sanctions or other legal regulations which would forbid that, then it's essentially a business decision...I am not here to give advice to German companies" ("Germany under," 2019).

Many of these countries later went on to retract their statements or issue new statements claiming to be either neutral or in support of the Uighurs. Qatar, for example, retracted its support for China's actions, and claimed that it now wishes to maintain a neutral position ("Qatar retracts," 2019). However, these official public statements are often mere surface-level efforts to appear empathetic about human rights atrocities, even while these nations have no intention of acting to put Xinjiang detentions to a halt. In fact, many nations who have publicly denounced China's treatment of Uighurs are continuing business as usual with China in terms of their economic relationships.

Furthermore, China's diplomatic influence, in collaboration with its economic dominance, has been extremely powerful, especially within the pretext of the Belt and Road Initiative. During a trip to China in April, New Zealand's prime minister refused to comment on the ongoing internments in Xinjiang. This visit came just two weeks after New Zealand's horrific mosque shootings in Christchurch, her compassionate response to which earned the Prime Minister praise from the Islamic world. New Zealand has recently developed deep economic ties with China, and the purpose of the Prime Minister's visit was to discuss its possible participation in China's Belt and Road Initiative ("Beijing's global," 2019). Numerous developing regions of

the world, especially many African countries, rely heavily upon the economic prospects that the Belt and Road Initiative promises. It is not surprising then that over 30 African nations all signed a letter to the UN Human Rights Council defending China's program in Xinjiang (Aggrey, 2019). These African nations likely acted not out of fear for Chinese reprisal, but out of collective yearning for China's economic support, which they hope will provide them a gateway into the global market.

Not all nations, however, have been as reluctant to defend the Uighurs openly and actively. Although its response has been far from perfect, the United States has done more than many nations in attempting to condemn China's actions. For example, former U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo publicly implored all nations to resist China's pressure to repatriate ethnic minorities, warning that these individuals will likely face persecution if sent to China (McNamara, 2019). Additionally, the U.S. Department of Commerce officially blacklisted 28 Chinese technology companies, most of which were in the business of creating facial recognition and video surveillance equipment (Withnall, 2019). In an even further effort to protect the Uighurs, the U.S. House of Representatives passed the Uighur Rights Act of 2019 which included the imposition of harsh sanctions on China ("US passes," 2019). However, as soon as the bill passed, the Chinese Foreign Ministry issued a warning: "For all wrong actions and words...the proper price must be paid" ("China warns," 2019a). In a further effort to prevent the U.S. from going through with implementing sanctions, Hua Chunying, the Chinese foreign ministry spokeswoman threatened, "If you undermine China's interests, you will be hit back" (Dou, 2019).

National governments are far from the only entities afraid to question China's legitimacy for fear of economic repercussions. Some multinational corporations are also bordering on complicity. The supply chains of numerous prominent Western corporations run through China's Xinjiang region, including: Adidas, Kraft, Heinz, Coca-Cola, H&M, and Gap ("China's Uighurs," 2020). Residents throughout the region are often forced into "training camps" to prepare them for forced labor in many of Xinjiang's factories. These "training camps" are essentially political indoctrination programs with the goal of forcing the Uighurs into assimilation. The training topics include the importance of national unity and how to avoid the appearance of extremism by not dressing too conservatively or praying too frequently. Those who refuse the training are often detained as suspected extremists, while those who complete the training are often sent into forced labor, many of them working for Huafu Fashion Co. which produces thread that is ultimately used to weave H&M t-shirts ("Top brands," 2020).

In early 2020, the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) accused China of forcing over 80,000 Uighurs out of internment camps and into factories that supply major international brands such as Nike, BMW, Volkswagen, and Apple. The ASPI released a statement claiming, "Under conditions that strongly suggest forced labor, Uighurs are working in factories that are in the supply chains of at least 83 well-known global brands in the technology, clothing and automotive sectors." China's Foreign Ministry rejected the report, arguing that it was only trying

“to smear China's anti-terrorism measures in Xinjiang” (Smith, 2020); (“Think-tank report,” 2020).

While many nations have been quick to publicly condemn China’s actions, these nations’ economic endeavors tell a different story. It is evident in these nations’ actions that no matter how grave an offense may be, a vast majority will prioritize their own supply chains, trade ties, and economic prospects over their national or religious values.

Conclusion

Each of the initial three theories is well substantiated by the entire collection of articles analyzed. The articles not only support these theories, but also present numerous additional factors that were not previously theorized. In all, the reasons for the collective failure of the international community can be attributed to the ineffectiveness of human rights organizations, China’s attempts to control global discourse, and the prioritization of countries’ economic interests over the plight of the Uighurs.

There was more evidence to support the third theory of economic prioritization than there was to support the first two. This theory is the most telling and is substantiated with the greatest number of contributing factors that play into the idea of the prioritization of China trade ties over action on behalf of the Uighurs. First, China views the geopolitical position of the extremely resource-rich Xinjiang region as its gateway to central and south Asia, both of which are instrumental for the Belt and Road Initiative. Additionally, powerful multinational corporations, often with more wealth than many countries, are refusing to relinquish their supply chains that run through Xinjiang. And lastly, due to a vast trade imbalance, most countries rely more heavily on China for trade than China relies on them. This has led countries to avoid condemning China’s Uighur rights violations for the sake of preserving day-to-day economic relations with what is, for many countries, their primary trading partner. Ultimately, the research suggests that this third theory contributes the most to the international community’s failure to respond.

The Chinese government’s misinformation campaigns, propaganda, and censorship controlling the global discourse comprise the theory with the second greatest amount of supporting evidence. When dealing with the public, China’s most common approaches are either outright denial or an entirely false narrative surrounding their Uighur detentions. However, whatever strategy it has used, China has been relatively successful in controlling the information flow in and out of its borders. The manner in which China has been systematically oppressing the Uighurs has also contributed to its efforts in keeping the issue out of the public eye. In part by attempting to keep the issue out of the international spotlight, China has so far managed to stave off a cohesive global response or any sort of backlash that might threaten the continuation of its activities in Xinjiang. Even though references to China’s denial and attempts to control discourse were mentioned more frequently in the articles than were aspects of the other two theories, a majority of these references were merely descriptions of the ongoing situation, used as a foundation for the rest of the article rather than being the subject of its investigation.

Lastly, the ineffectiveness of human rights organizations is another reason for the world's lack of a unified effort to protect the Uighurs. A majority of the world's human rights organizations are ineffective because they either lack an enforcement component, avoid dealing with China directly, or either fail to condemn or overtly support China's actions. Despite their effectiveness, most of these organizations have at least been helpful in lobbying their governments, calling for boycotts and sanctions, or spreading the word about Uighur detentions. However, when it comes to large-scale, state-sponsored violations of rights, these organizations are often powerless to intervene.

These deplorable human rights violations have not received nearly enough attention or action on behalf of the international community. The implications of ignoring the detention of China's Uighurs in the interest of economics sets a terrible precedent for neglecting future rights violations in China and around the globe. We must act now so that we do not have to look back on the events and recognize them for what they truly were: our collective failure.

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About the Research

This paper is an honors thesis submitted to the faculty of the Department of Politics and International Relations in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the bachelor's degree in International Relations.

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