

## The Divergent International Response to China's Xinjiang Policy

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## Introduction

In response to ethnic and religious unrest in China's northwestern province of Xinjiang, the Chinese Communist Party has engaged in a colossal crackdown on the local Uyghur Muslim population. In recent years, an estimated one million Uyghurs have been detained in re-education centers, which have been likened to concentration camps, while religious and cultural freedom has been forcibly suppressed<sup>1</sup>. This has generated a slew of strong yet divergent international reactions, ranging from outright support to passive silence to scathing condemnation. On July 8, 2019, a group of 22 predominantly Western countries issued a letter to the United Nations Human Rights Council condemning China for their oppression of the Uyghurs. Days later, 37 developing countries, many of which are Muslim-majority, came together and wrote a different letter to the UNHRC, "commend[ing] China's remarkable achievements in the field of human rights,"<sup>2</sup> in reference to their policies in Xinjiang. While it is initially shocking to see so many (especially Muslim) countries coming to China's defense, it cannot be divorced from China's burgeoning global influence. This paper analyzes the international response to China's oppression of the Uyghurs, in order to understand the shifting face of the emerging Sino-centric world order. I argue that the emerging Sino-centric world order is becoming increasingly characterized by the dissolution of traditional transnational religious and cultural bonds and the emboldening of regimes that emphasize sovereignty over human rights.

I begin this paper with a historical overview of the region of Xinjiang and its Uyghur inhabitants. I then discuss the geopolitical significance of Xinjiang and the Belt and Road Initiative to provide the context needed to understand the motives behind Beijing's policies and

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<sup>1</sup> Maya Wang, "Eradicating Ideological Viruses: China's Campaign of Repression Against Xinjiang's Muslims," *Human Rights Watch*, 2018. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2018/09/09/eradicating-ideological-viruses/chinas-campaign-repression-against-xinjiangs>

<sup>2</sup> Hussam Edin Aala et al. to the United Nations Human Rights Council, July 12, 2019.

the international response. Next, I explain why many Islamic countries have expressed support for China's policies and the implications for the future of international alliances. Finally, I examine how China has attracted the support of authoritarian regimes with their own histories of human rights abuse and what this could mean for the future of human rights.

## Background

The Uyghurs are a Muslim minority group in the region of Xinjiang, China's northwestern province. They claim indigeneity to the Xinjiang region, although the Chinese government disputes this claim. The Uyghurs are of Turkic stock and are culturally, religiously, and linguistically similar to their Central Asian neighbours. Kashgar, which is one of Xinjiang's oldest and most traditional cities, is situated in the Westernmost part of the country in the Tarim Basin, making it closer to Baghdad than it is to Beijing. As such, the Uyghurs, like many other groups in Central Asia, view Turkey and the Middle East as their cultural and spiritual home, rather than China<sup>3</sup>. Xinjiang has a long and rich history as a key stopping point on the Ancient Silk Road, and became dominated by Islam in the twelfth century with the proselytisation of Sufi missionaries.<sup>4</sup>

Xinjiang is officially known today as the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region, and is China's largest province. China claims historical sovereignty of the region, although this hold has been rather tenuous throughout various periods and dynasties<sup>5</sup>. These historical claims to the region stem from the Han Dynasty, which held suzerainty over much of Central Asia. Until

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<sup>3</sup> Lillian Craig Harris, "Xinjiang, Central Asia and the Implications for China's Policy in the Islamic World," *The China Quarterly* 133, no. 133 (1993). doi:10.1017/S030574100001821X.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Dillon, *Xinjiang in the Twenty-First Century: Islam, Ethnicity and Resistance*. (Florence: Routledge, 2019).

<sup>5</sup> Harris, "Xinjiang, Central Asia."

modern times, the Tang Dynasty constituted the period of greatest Chinese control over the region, although some scholars claim it was limited to a fictional tributary relationship rather than actual hard control<sup>6</sup>. In 1209, the Uyghurs voluntarily submitted to Chinggis Khan and were subsequently controlled by the Mongols in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. They were later incorporated into the Qing Dynasty in the late nineteenth century following the defeat of the Dzungars. In the turbulent periods after the fall of the Qing in 1912, the region was often at the mercy of Han and Muslim warlords, experienced a brief period of republican control, and was incorporated into the People's Republic of China in 1949<sup>7</sup>.

Xinjiang's modern history has been rife with revolt and the East Turkestan independence movement, so in 1989, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) imposed regulations that severely limited contact between Uyghurs and the broader Islamic world<sup>8</sup>. The CCP also began moving Han people into Xinjiang to dilute the Uyghur population, culture, and political power. In 1955, there were 3.6 million Han in Xinjiang, but by 2010 there were 21.8 million<sup>9</sup>. There have been recent escalations in the twenty-first century, including the 2009 Urumqi riots resulting in around 200 deaths and the 2014 terrorist knife attack at the Kunming Railway Station, in which 31 were killed<sup>10</sup>. In light of these incidents and the global War on Terror, threat perceptions of Islamic radicalism and allegations of ties to terrorist organizations like Al-Qaeda grew, and the oppression of the Uyghurs has correspondingly increased.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Dillon, *Xinjiang in the*.

<sup>8</sup> Harris, "Xinjiang, Central Asia."

<sup>9</sup> Zainab Raza, "China's 'Political Re-Education' Camps of Xinjiang's Uyghur Muslims," *Asian Affairs* 50, no. 4 (2019). doi: 10.1080/03068374.2019.1672433.

<sup>10</sup> Katie Hunt, "4 found guilty of railway station knife attack in China," *CNN*, September 12, 2014, <https://www.cnn.com/2014/09/12/world/asia/china-kunming-attack-trial/index.html>.

<sup>11</sup> Raza, "China's 'Political Re-Education.'"

In 2014, China launched the “Strike Hard Campaign Against Violent Terrorism”, and in 2016 appointed Chen Quanguo as the Communist Party Secretary of Xinjiang, switching him from his post in Tibet<sup>12</sup>. This was when the widespread and systematic surveillance, repression, and incarceration of Uyghurs in detention facilities really ramped up. These policies drew condemnation from much of the Western world and there was increasing pressure against China from organizations like Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International. The aforementioned July 8th letter to the UN signed by 22 mostly Western countries stated:

“We call on China to uphold its national laws and international obligations and to respect human rights and fundamental freedoms, including freedom of religion or belief, in Xinjiang and across China. We call also on China to refrain from the arbitrary detention and restrictions on freedom of movement of Uighurs, and other Muslim and minority communities in Xinjiang.”<sup>13</sup>

While the internal unrest and external condemnation has posed a headache for China, the CCP has fought hard to contain it as a domestic issue, while asserting their sovereign claims over Xinjiang. However, the region has major international implications and holds strong geopolitical strategic importance to China and its vastly growing trading ventures across Eurasia. Therefore, for the CCP, suppressing separatist and resistance movements is critical for maintaining their political and economic interests.

### **Geopolitics and the Belt and Road Initiative**

In order to grasp the international implications of China’s oppression of the Uyghurs, it is crucial to first examine the geopolitical significance of the region and discuss the Belt and Road

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<sup>12</sup> Wang, “Eradicating Ideological Viruses.”

<sup>13</sup> Harald Aspelund et al. to the United Nations Human Rights Council, July 8, 2019.

Initiative. Xinjiang is China's largest province, accounting for one-sixth of the country's total landmass. It is rich in natural resources, containing important and largely unexploited petroleum reserves in the Tarim Basin area. It also has a large supply of minerals and vast deposits of gas, iron, and fuel. These resources have been crucial to China's recent massive industrialization and modernization programs, and allow China to limit its dependency on petroleum from the Middle East<sup>14</sup>. In addition, there is an oil pipeline through Xinjiang to Kazakhstan, which fuels Shanghai's industrial and commercial development<sup>15</sup>.

Xinjiang shares a border with eight countries: Mongolia, Russia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, and is very close to Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Most of these neighbouring and nearby countries are Muslim-majority, so China sees Xinjiang as a key geopolitical buffer zone shielding the Han Chinese heartland from the Islamic and turbulent countries of the Middle East and Central Asia. The region has historically served this purpose, shielding China proper from Central Asian steppe nomads for centuries<sup>16</sup>. Moreover, the Chinese government has been increasingly wary of political instability and religious extremism radiating from the Middle East in recent decades, compounding the importance of this buffer zone. Once called the "pivot of Asia"<sup>17</sup>, Xinjiang is today the only part of Islamic Central Asia that is controlled by China, securing China's land bridge through Eurasia. Xinjiang has 29 ports of entry connecting with Central Asia, 30 international flight routes, and 104 transport roads between Xinjiang and its neighbouring countries<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> Harris, "Xinjiang, Central Asia."

<sup>15</sup> Dillon, *Xinjiang in the*.

<sup>16</sup> Harris, "Xinjiang, Central Asia."

<sup>17</sup> Dillon, *Xinjiang in the*.

<sup>18</sup> Mingjiang Li, "From Look-West to Act-West: Xinjiang's Role in China-Central Asian Relations," *Journal of Contemporary China* 100, no 25 (2016). doi: 10.1080/10670564.2015.1132753

Xinjiang's strategic importance has been elevated by the emergence of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which was announced in 2013 as China's expansive and ambitious plan to dominate global trade by investing roughly \$1 trillion USD in infrastructure development in around 70 countries across Eurasia and Africa<sup>19</sup>. Part of this project is the revitalization of the Ancient Silk Road, which ran through the heart of Xinjiang, as China shifts its money and interests westward. In response to the separatist movement, Beijing has adopted a two-pronged strategy, with heavy repression of religious, political and cultural activities on one hand, and an ambitious programme of economic reform on the other hand<sup>20</sup>. In 2017, China invested \$66 billion USD in developing this crucial infrastructure in Xinjiang, including highways and high-speed railways<sup>21</sup>. Ultimately, China sees the economic development of Xinjiang as crucial for maintaining its stability, while this stability in the region is also crucial for the smooth implementation of much of China's BRI plans.

### **The Myth of Muslim Solidarity**

The international response to China's oppression of the Uyghurs reveals an unprecedented dissolution of Muslim solidarity in replacement of support for China. Of the 37 countries that expressed support for China's Uyghur policies, fourteen are Muslim-majority,

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<sup>19</sup> Yoram Evron, "The Challenge of Implementing the Belt and Road Initiative in the Middle East: Connectivity Projects Under Conditions of Limited Political Engagement," *The China Quarterly* 237. Doi: 10.1017/S0305741018001273

<sup>20</sup> Dillon, *Xinjiang in the*.

<sup>21</sup> Wei Shan, "Xinjiang casts uncertainty over the Belt and Road Initiative," *East Asia Forum*, November 29, 2019, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2019/11/29/xinjiang-casts-uncertainty-over-the-belt-and-road-initiative/>

including Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Pakistan, Qatar, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and the United Arab Emirates<sup>22</sup>. This is highly inconsistent with the trend of global Islamic solidarity that has been observed throughout history, and reflects the thirst for Chinese economic support.

Since 1969, the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) has existed as the embodiment of pan-Islamism. It was founded on the principle of *ummah*, a central tenet in Islam that refers to a global community of Muslims bounded together by their shared religion<sup>23</sup>. The OIC is comprised of 57 states and has amassed strong global influence. As such, it is “uniquely placed to act as an advocate for human rights in the Muslim world”<sup>24</sup>, and its creation was largely dedicated to furthering the Palestinian cause. Since its creation, it has also worked to advocate for Muslims living in non-member states, and to protect the religious identity and culture of Muslim minority communities, as enshrined in the OIC Charter. Throughout the years, the OIC has worked to protect Muslims in Jammu and Kashmir, Cyprus, the Philippines, Bulgaria, Bosnia, the United States, Thailand, and Myanmar<sup>25</sup>.

While the OIC defines itself as the collective voice of the Muslim world, it has not only failed to condemn China, but has offered explicit praise and support. A November 2019 OIC resolution reads that the OIC “commends the efforts of the People’s Republic of China in providing care to its Muslim citizens; and looks forward to further cooperation between the OIC and the People’s Republic of China.”<sup>26</sup>. While this is initially shocking, it cannot be divorced

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<sup>22</sup> Human Rights Watch, “China: Muslim-Majority States Whitewash Abuses,” July 17, 2019. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/07/17/china-muslim-majority-states-whitewash-abuses>

<sup>23</sup> Turan Kayaoglu, *The Organization of Islamic Cooperation: Politics, Problems, and Potential* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Organization of Islamic Cooperation resolution, *Muslim Communities and Muslim Minorities in the Non-OIC Member States*, OIC/CFM-46/2019/MM/RES/FINAL, March 1-2, 2019.

from the fact that in recent years, China has pumped the equivalent of billions of US dollars into the economies of many Muslim-majority countries around the world, especially in the Middle East, which is one of the focal regions of the BRI. Since the mid-1990s, China has fixed its eyes on the Middle East in order to secure access to the region's energy sources. Between 2004 and 2014, trade between China and the Middle East grew from \$40 billion USD to over \$300 billion USD<sup>27</sup>. By 2016, China was the biggest investor in the region, pledging \$29.5 billion worth of loans and contracts to Arab countries, which was four times more than what the US pledged<sup>28</sup>. Condemning China is simply too expensive for many Muslim-majority states who rely on China for trade and investment.

It is also important to examine the individual cases of Muslim-majority countries who supported China to better understand this phenomenon. Despite an ongoing border dispute, China and Pakistan have had historically close ties. Pakistan, which often positions itself as a champion of global Muslim struggles, has received significant funding from China, and its economic future rests increasingly in the strategic \$62 billion USD China-Pakistan Economic Corridor<sup>29</sup>. Criticizing China has become taboo in Pakistan, and in a March 2019 interview, Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan claimed he “didn’t know much” about the persecution of the Uyghurs when pressed by a journalist<sup>30</sup>, while simultaneously referring to the treatment of Muslims in India’s Jammu and Kashmir as an “impending genocide”<sup>31</sup>.

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<sup>27</sup> Evron, “The Challenge of.”

<sup>28</sup> Matt Schiavenza, “Why Aren’t More Countries Confronting China over Xinjiang?” *China File*, January 14, 2020, <https://www.chinafile.com/reporting-opinion/viewpoint/why-arent-more-countries-confronting-china-over-xinjiang>.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ben Westcott, “Pakistan’s Khan dodges questions on mass Chinese detention of Muslims,” *CNN*, March 28, 2019. <https://www.cnn.com/2019/03/28/asia/imran-khan-china-uyghur-intl/index.html>

<sup>31</sup> “Imran Khan on ‘genocide’ in Kashmir and possible war with India,” *AlJazeera*, September 14, 2019.

The UAE was recently incorporated into the BRI and has over \$43 billion USD in trade with China<sup>32</sup>, focused around the Port of Jebel Ali. China has also cut similar deals with Bahrain, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia. In addition to these wealthy states, poorer Muslim-majority states like Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Sudan rely heavily on China for trade. Criticizing China would potentially cause them to lose billions of dollars, so their religious ties to the oppressed Uyghurs have taken the back burner.

In comparison, of the 22 countries that condemned China, 18 were European, and 15 were European Union members. According to Rian Thum, a historian of Islam and China, “these are countries that are pretty safe from Chinese retribution.”<sup>33</sup> The United States was not a signatory to the letter, as it withdrew from the UNHRC in 2018. There were several OIC countries that did not sign the letter that supported China, including Afghanistan, Albania, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Malaysia, Morocco, Tunisia, and Turkey, but of the 22 countries that called for the UN Human Rights Council to investigate abuses, none were Muslim-majority.

Turkey, who has taken in many Uyghur refugees, initially criticized China in 2009, referring to its killing of Uyghurs as “a kind of genocide”<sup>34</sup>, and in 2015 offered to shelter Uyghur refugees, to which China responded by threatening to shatter their economic relations. Turkey then remained silent on the matter for four years, until February, 2019 when they doubled down, calling the crackdown on Uyghurs a “great shame for humanity.”<sup>35</sup> However, Turkey has strong trade relations with the EU, making them less financially dependent on China.

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<sup>32</sup> “China leading trade partner of UAE: Al Mansouri,” *Gulf News*, July 22, 2019. <https://gulfnews.com/uae/china-leading-trade-partner-of-uae-al-mansouri-1.65370898>

<sup>33</sup> Schiavenza, “Why aren’t more.”

<sup>34</sup> Alexandra Ma, “A wave of Islamic countries started to stand up to China over its persecution of its Muslim minority. But then they all got spooked,” *Business Insider*, April 6, 2019, <https://www.businessinsider.com/islamic-world-stopped-calling-out-chinas-muslim-persecution-2019-4?r=US&IR=T>.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

As China's economic and political power continues to permeate global markets and international relations, countries are growing increasingly willing to abandon long-standing religious and cultural bonds in order to receive billions of dollars in trade and investment. The case of these fourteen countries and the OIC issuing their support for China, despite China's evident violation of Uyghur human rights, sets a large precedent for the emerging Sino-centric world order, especially as the crackdown in Xinjiang does not appear to be waning anytime soon. This contradicts the theory of political scientist Samuel Huntington, whose predictions of the world's fault lines being drawn increasingly along cultural or "civilizational" lines<sup>36</sup> gained worldwide traction. Clearly, if countries prefer ingratiating themselves with business partners over commiserating with their cultural neighbors, international cultural bonds are not as strong as Huntington claimed they would be. Most importantly, said cultural bonds are not strong enough to define the structure of international relations. Instead, there appears to be a deepening divide between the countries that are restrained by China's financial power and those that have the financial stability to allow them to speak candidly on these issues.

### **Non-Interference and Human Rights**

The international response, as gleaned from the signatories of these two letters, reveals a divide between countries who place greater importance on non-interference than human rights and those who emphasize the protection of human rights over notions of sovereignty. According to the NGO Freedom House, the 22 countries that condemned China were liberal democracies, while the 37 countries that supported China have been characterized as "not free" or "partly

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<sup>36</sup> Samuel Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?" *Foreign Affairs* 72 no. 3 (1993). doi: 10.2307/20045621

free”.<sup>37</sup> Additionally, most of the 37 supporting countries have their own history of oppression and human rights abuses, so China’s objection to outside interference naturally appeals to them.

The Western-dominated international legal order tends to focus on individual liberty and has in recent decades undergone a shift to emphasize human rights imperatives. The rigid notions of Westphalian sovereignty and non-interference have come to be somewhat obsolete in the Western world, while China has undergone a shift in the opposite direction. China has recently moved to hold the principles of sovereignty and non-interference high, especially when it is seen as beneficial to furthering their own interests<sup>38</sup>. China has a handful of unsettled territorial disputes, including Xinjiang, Tibet, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the South China Sea, in which they frequently invoke sovereignty and non-interference rhetoric.

Furthermore, China has grown wary of Western concepts of human rights and interference, which they have historically experienced as being synonymous with Western imperial motives, reviving bitter memories of the century of humiliation. Most of the countries that have backed China have also suffered under Western imperialism and have grown skeptical of Western interference and political pressure. Moreover, many Western countries require that their trading partners have decent human rights track records<sup>39</sup>, so China’s “no strings attached” offers for trade and investment draw in authoritarian, illiberal regimes who cannot get funding elsewhere. Despite various conflicts and fragmentations in the Middle East, China has managed to adopt an “everyone’s friend approach” in doing business to maximize their economic benefits and ensure successful implementation of the BRI<sup>40</sup>. In 1954, China laid out the Five Principles of

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<sup>37</sup> Freedom House, Twitter Post, July 16, 2019, 1:43 PM.

<https://twitter.com/freedomhouse/status/1151230969229144065>

<sup>38</sup> Maria Adele Carrai, *Sovereignty in China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

<sup>39</sup> Ian Taylor, “Sino-African Relations and the Problem of Human Rights,” *African Affairs* 426, no. 107 (2007). [www.jstor.org/stable/27666999](http://www.jstor.org/stable/27666999).

<sup>40</sup> Evron, “The Challenge of.”

Mutual Coexistence, which include respect for each other's territorial integrity; non-aggression; non interference in each other's internal affairs; equality and mutual benefit; and peaceful coexistence<sup>41</sup>, and these principles continue to shape the nature of Chinese foreign relations today.

For example, following the 2018 assassination of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, Saudi Arabia faced widespread international condemnation and threats of sanctions by the US. China - Saudi Arabia's largest trading partner<sup>42</sup> - remained silent on the matter and rolled out the red carpet for Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's visit to Beijing the following February for his meeting with President Xi Jinping. During their meeting, bin Salman proclaimed his support for Beijing's right to "take counter-terrorism and de-extremism measures to safeguard national security."<sup>43</sup> Despite political, religious, and ideological differences, these two leaders, who are both facing international pressure over the statuses of human rights in their own countries, found allies in each other in the name of shared interests in non-interference and economic prosperity.

Other countries on the list include Myanmar, who has been systematically persecuting its Rohingya Muslim minority for years, and North Korea, who egregiously violates human rights while emphasizing their sovereignty and largely shutting out the outside world. Sudan, with its bleak history of human rights has received large investments from China and also signed the pro-China letter. Similarly, oil-rich Angola, who has been accused by the West of malgovernance, signed the letter, and has also received infrastructure funding from China as a part of BRI. The Angolan Ambassador boasted "Africa can [now] develop by its own effort with China's help...

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<sup>41</sup> Taylor, "Sino-African Relations."

<sup>42</sup> Tamara Qiblawi, "Muslim nations are defending China as it cracks down on Muslims, shattering any myths of Islamic solidarity," *CNN*, July 17, 2019. <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/07/17/asia/uyghurs-muslim-countries-china-intl/index.html>

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

without any political conditions.”<sup>44</sup> It is evident that China does not hesitate to deal with corrupt, brutal, or abusive leaders during the allocation of BRI-related funding, while citing their respect for sovereignty and the principle of non-interference. The only major caveat, it appears, is that these countries refrain from commenting on China’s own human rights abuses.

China has been widely criticized for funding and supporting illiberal regimes with histories of human rights violations. Human Rights Watch alleged that “China’s policies [in Africa] have not only propped up some of the continent’s worst human rights abusers, but also weakened the leverage of others trying to promote greater respect for human rights.”<sup>45</sup> By providing relatively unconditional funding to countries with corrupt leaders, China is emboldening their abuses and providing little incentive for these regimes to be held accountable. As China’s global influence continues to swell, there will also be a growing network of mutual economic and political support between authoritarian countries banded together by the BRI. Consequently, the divide between liberal democracies and authoritarian regimes will likely continue to deepen as much of the Western world will further defend human rights while China and its supporters dig into their heels.

### **Conclusion**

Ultimately, despite China’s wish to contain Xinjiang’s unrest as a domestic issue, it is evident that the region has vast international implications, from transnational trade corridors to carving newfangled global allegiances. While overviewing the divergent international responses to China’s Xinjiang policies, I have demonstrated that China’s rise has had significant impacts

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<sup>44</sup> Taylor, “Sino-African Relations.”

<sup>45</sup> Human Rights Watch, “China-Africa Summit: Focus on Human Rights, Not Just Trade,” November 2, 2006. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2006/11/02/china-africa-summit-focus-human-rights-not-just-trade>

on international alignments. Specifically, it has catalyzed a shift away from the importance of cultural and religious bonds, which are progressively becoming replaced by the emboldening of states that emphasize sovereignty over human rights. As China's economic and political influence continues to unfurl and proliferate via the BRI, it is likely that these trends will further accelerate. Finally, for the first time in modern history, the global hegemon will likely not hail from the West, and the accompanying shifting face of international relations will pose new and unprecedented conundrums for the global community to grapple with.

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