



## **Transnational Repression Committed by the People’s Republic of China – Evidence from Freedom House**

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Thank you, Chairman Smith, Co-chairman Merkley, and distinguished members of the commission, for the opportunity to share information about the scope and scale of the global transnational repression campaign carried out by the People’s Republic of China (PRC). I will use my time to first describe the ways in which the PRC intimidates, harasses, harms, and otherwise tries to silence critics, diaspora members, and exiles living beyond its borders and second, to explain how this campaign has evolved to threaten people in new ways. I’ll conclude with suggestions for policies that can be adopted by democratic governments, including by the United States, to better protect people targeted by the PRC.

The People’s Republic of China is one the least free countries in the world. Freedoms there have deteriorated rapidly over the last decade, and especially since 2017, under the leadership of Xi Jinping. The country now ranks near the very bottom among the 195 countries assessed every year in *Freedom in the World*, our global survey of political rights and civil liberties.<sup>1</sup> Like other authoritarian governments, the PRC also exports oppression abroad as a way of maintaining its regime at home.

Even though Chinese officials routinely reference the government’s policy of noninterference, Beijing seeks to dictate, sometimes through use of physical force, the terms of free speech, association, movement, assembly, and even religious expression of individuals thousands of miles away. Today, China is carrying out the world’s most sophisticated and comprehensive campaign of transnational repression, using a wide array of physical, digital, and psychological tactics to attempt to silence those it views as threats to the regime.

Freedom House has compiled a database of direct, physical incidents of transnational repression—including assassinations, abductions, assaults, detentions, and unlawful deportations that spans 2014

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<sup>1</sup> Freedom House, “Freedom in the World 2023: China,” <https://freedomhouse.org/country/china/freedom-world/2023>.

to 2022 inclusive.<sup>2</sup> After our last update, the database now includes 854 cases. This is a conservative estimate based only on public, verified cases of direct attacks which excludes incidents that are harder to confirm, such as the intimidation of family, digital surveillance, and online harassment. Even so, a clear picture of the PRC's role in this global phenomenon has emerged. China is responsible for 30 percent of the coded cases —nearly twice as many as Turkey, the second most prolific perpetrator in the database.

This statistic tells only one part of the story. The PRC has targeted people in at least 36 countries, including those living in democracies. Among the victims are pro-democracy activists, journalists, students, human rights defenders, artists, former insiders, civil society organizations, as well as whole ethnic and religious groups like the Uyghurs, Tibetans, and Falun Gong practitioners, and others who simply criticize the Chinese Communist Party.

Beijing's transnational repression toolkit is diverse. It continues to rely on well-practiced tactics of intimidation such as forcing family members to call their relatives abroad in order to urge them to stop engaging in activities, like protest or human rights activism, objectionable to the PRC.<sup>3</sup> Members of the diaspora are sometimes recruited or coerced into informing on each other.<sup>4</sup>

It also continues to abuse established mechanisms of international cooperation, like Interpol's notifications system and extradition agreements, which allow it to coopt agencies of foreign states in order to repress. Idris Hasan, a Uyghur activist, was detained on a Red Notice requested by China after he landed at the airport in Casablanca in March 2021.<sup>5</sup> He has been in prison for more than two years. Despite the fact that the Red Notice was cancelled shortly after his arrest, Idris is in danger every day of being deported because Morocco and China have an extradition agreement.

The PRC menaces people living in democracies. In addition to the problem of overseas police stations that my colleague from Safeguard Defenders has described, China has sent police officers into foreign countries to surveil and intimidate targeted individuals, sometimes in cooperation with the government<sup>6</sup> and sometimes clandestinely.<sup>7</sup> Signaling a dangerous evolution of this tactic,

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<sup>2</sup> Yana Gorokhovskaia, Nate Schenkkan, and Grady Vaughan, *Still Not Safe: Transnational Repression in 2022*, Freedom House, April 2022, [https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2023-04/FH\\_TransnationalRepression2023\\_0.pdf](https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2023-04/FH_TransnationalRepression2023_0.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Sam Judah, "China Using Families as 'Hostages' to Quash Uyghur Dissent Abroad," BBC, July 31, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-66337328>.

<sup>4</sup> Gulchehra Hoja, "With Threats and Intimidation, China Coerces Uyghurs in Turkey to Spy on Each Other," RFA, February 5, 2023, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/uyghur-turkey-02052023210957.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Nicholas Muller, "The Continued Imprisonment of Idris Hasan," *The Diplomat*, July 1, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/06/the-continued-imprisonment-of-idris-hasan/>; <https://menarights.org/en/articles/2-years-detention-uyghur-activist-idris-hasan-must-be-released>.

<sup>6</sup> Michael E. Miller and Matthew Abbott, "China Hoped Fiji Would Be a Template for the Pacific. Its Plan Backfired," *The Washington Post*, August 21, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/interactive/2023/china-fiji-police-mou-pacific-islands/>.

<sup>7</sup> Sebastian Rotella and Kirsten Berg, "Operation Fox Hunt: How China Exports Repression Using a Network of Spies Hidden in Plain Sight," *ProPublica*, July 22, 2021, <https://www.propublica.org/article/operation-fox-hunt-how-china-exports-repression-using-a-network-of-spies-hidden-in-plain-sight>.

evidence has emerged over the last year that the PRC is coopting former members of domestic law enforcement agencies to harass, coerce, stalk, and surveil people living in the US and Canada.<sup>8</sup> The Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Department of Justice, as well as their Canadian counterparts, have begun to pursue these cases. There has been at least one successful criminal prosecution in New York state to date. However, it is worth underlining that the employment of former law enforcement officials by the PRC to act as proxies in the transnational repression campaign may amplify the fear that members of the diaspora feel, demonstrating that the PRC is able to coopt officials in democratic states to carry out its repressive schemes.

The PRC's toolkit of repression is growing, with each new tactic exploiting a previously undetected vulnerability and adapting to the responses of democratic countries. Wang Jingyu was a teenager when he fled China in 2019 after posting comments online critical of the CCP and supportive of pro-democracy protests. In 2021, he was detained in Dubai while on a layover on his way to the US. He was held in detention for weeks and the UAE authorities allowed Chinese embassy officials to interrogate the teen.<sup>9</sup> His release was secured as a result of media attention and international pressure. But Wang continues to be targeted. Beginning last year, bomb threats were made in his name, and in the names of other activists and journalists, against Chinese embassies in the Netherlands and Norway.<sup>10</sup> These threats predictably activated the security and public safety responses of European law enforcement, resulting in police investigations, questioning, and even the brief detention of some of the targeted individuals. Like the coopting of former law enforcement agents working in democracies, "swatting," or harassment carried out by alerting police or emergency services through false reporting, is meant to cause psychological stress and demonstrate the reach of the PRC.

The PRC is the world's worst abuser of internet freedom domestically;<sup>11</sup> it also employs tactics of digital authoritarianism in its transnational repression campaign. These tactics, which include mass trolling, smear campaigns,<sup>12</sup> threats and intimidation, spoofing accounts, and even doxing of

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<sup>8</sup> U.S. Department of Justice, "Federal Jury Convicts Three Defendants of Interstate Stalking of Chinese Nationals in the U.S. and Two of Those Defendants for Acting or Conspiring to Act on Behalf of the People's Republic of China," U.S. Attorney's Office, Eastern District of New York, June 20, 2023, <https://www.justice.gov/usao-edny/pr/federal-jury-convicts-three-defendants-interstate-stalking-chinese-nationals-us-and>; Robert Fife and Steven Chase, "Former Mountie Targeted B.C. Real Estate Tycoon for China, RCMP Allege," The Globe and Mail, August 21, 2023, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/politics/article-rcmp-officer-charged-bc-entrepreneur/>.

<sup>9</sup> Voice of America, "Teen, Fiancee Flee to Netherlands to Avoid Extradition Back to China," July 21, 2021, <https://www.voanews.com/a/east-asia-pacific-teen-fiancee-flee-netherlands-avoid-extradition-back-china/6208514.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Bethany Allen-Ebrahimian and Alison Snyder, "Fake Bomb Threats Used to Harass China Critics," Axios, April 2, 2023, <https://www.axios.com/2023/03/29/chinese-activists-false-bomb-threats>; Jemimah Steinfeld, "Critics of Beijing Face Increasing Impersonation Attacks," New Lines Magazine, August 21, 2023, <https://newlinesmag.com/reportage/critics-of-beijing-face-increasing-impersonation-attacks/>.

<sup>11</sup> Freedom House, "Freedom on the Net 2022: China," <https://freedomhouse.org/country/china/freedom-net/2022>.

<sup>12</sup> Wang Gang and Liam Scott, "Trolling of Female Asian Journalists on Rise as Beijing Seeks to Discredit Media," Voice of America, January 2, 2023, <https://www.voanews.com/a/trolling-of-female-asian-journalists-on-rise-as-beijing-seeks-to-discredit-media/6898789.html>.

personal information, are meant to intimidate critics and journalists, drown out reports of human rights abuses, and apply psychological pressure on the targets. These tactics are also often gendered; women face not only violent but sexualized digital threats in response to work that shines a critical light on the PRC.<sup>13</sup>

The CCP's campaign of transnational repression is a threat not only to the targeted individuals and groups but also to state sovereignty, democratic institutions, and the exercise of fundamental rights. Building resilience and imposing accountability are key to curbing the CCP's campaign of transnational repression. Steps to better protect against the CCP's campaign of transnational repression, both in the United States and abroad, include:

1. Codifying a definition of transnational repression, which will facilitate the tracking of incidents at home and abroad, distinguish attacks from ordinary crime, and coordinate inter-agency action, in addition to serving as a basis for any other laws that may be needed.
2. Training for government officials, including law enforcement, who may encounter transnational repression. Several agencies including the FBI, Department of State, and Department of Homeland Security have begun instituting trainings, but they vary in consistency and content. Coordinated, mandated requirements across agencies could help ensure officials are equipped with matching and sufficient information to help protect those at risk and not unwittingly become a player in an authoritarian regime's campaign of transnational repression. The Federal of Investigation has begun this effort.
3. Conducting strategic, consistent, and culturally sensitive outreach to communities that are at risk of experiencing transnational repression in order to equip them with the resources to report these activities.
4. Using voice and vote within international institutions to limit the ability of Interpol member states to target individuals through the misuse of Red Notices and other alerts.
5. Deploying targeted sanctions against Chinese officials for the use of transnational repression and screening Chinese diplomats for a history of harassing diaspora members in their postings.

More details about these recommendations, and additional recommendations, are available in our reports.<sup>14</sup>

I should note that several pieces of legislation to address transnational repression have been introduced or will be introduced in the near future. Thank you, Co-chairman Merkley and Chairman Smith for your introduction of the Transnational Repression Policy Act, which Freedom House supports. We look forward to working with you and your staff to see this passed into law.

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<sup>13</sup> Albert Zhang and Danielle Cave, "Smart Asian Women are the New Targets of CCP Global Online Repression," Australian Strategic Policy Institute, June 3, 2022, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/smart-asian-women-are-the-new-targets-of-ccp-global-online-repression/>.

<sup>14</sup> Freedom House, "Policy Recommendations: Transnational Repression," <https://freedomhouse.org/policy-recommendations/transnational-repression#US>.

Addressing transnational repression committed by the government of the People's Republic of China is a matter of urgency. It is imperative that Congress, in a bipartisan fashion, come together with the Executive Branch and like-minded partners to protect those at risk and defend democratic institutions and fundamental rights. We appreciate the leadership of the Commission on this issue, and I look forward to your questions.