



The Chinese Threat to Human Rights

by Dr. James M. Dorsey

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: China is leading a charge to undermine accepted concepts of human rights accountability and justice around the world. This effort, backed by autocrats, has turned human rights into an underrated yet crucial battleground in the shaping of a new world order.

Beijing is engaged in a concerted bid to undermine accepted standards of human rights around the world. Its maneuvers include an [unprecedented crackdown on Turkic Muslims](#) in the northwestern Chinese province of Xinjiang, an [accelerated rollout of restrictions elsewhere in the country](#), and the export of key elements of a Chinese model of a 21st century Orwellian surveillance state.

The Chinese effort, as highlighted in the just-published, 674-page [World Report 2019](#) from Human Rights Watch, is multipronged.

It involves proposals to alter the principles on which the UN Human Rights Council operates in ways that would enable repressive, autocratic regimes.

To achieve its goal, Beijing is flexing its financial muscle and using its infrastructure- and energy-driven Belt and Road Initiative to economically entice countries that are financially strapped, desperate for investment, and/or on the defensive because of human rights abuses.

China is also [seeking a dominant role in various countries' digital infrastructure and media](#). This would allow it to influence the flow of information and enable its allies to better control dissent.

China is waging its campaign at a crucial juncture of history. It benefits from the rise of ethno- and religious nationalism, populism, intolerance, and widespread anti-migrant sentiment across the world's democracies, as well as the emergence of presidents like Donald Trump in the US, the Philippines'

Rodrigo Duterte, Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Hungary's Victor Orbán, and Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro, all of whom have either deemphasized human rights or gone so far as to justify abuses in addition to seeking to limit, if not undermine, independent media that hold them accountable.

The timing of the Chinese effort is also significant because it comes at a moment when predictions of the death of popular protest, symbolized by the defeat of the initially successful 2011 popular Arab revolts, are being called into question.

[Mass anti-government demonstrations in Sudan](#) demand the resignation of President Omar Bashir. [Anti-Chinese groups are marching in Kyrgyzstan](#), while [protests in Zimbabwe](#) decry repression, poor public services, high unemployment, widespread corruption, and delays in salary payments to civil servants. Last year also saw widespread anti-government agitation in Morocco and Jordan.

The protests, and what Human Rights Watch executive director Kenneth Roth describes in his foreword to the group's [World Report 2019](#) as "a resistance that keeps winning battles," suggest that China's campaign may have won some skirmishes but has yet to win the war.

"Victory isn't assured but the successes of the past year suggest that the abuses of authoritarian rule are prompting a powerful human rights counterattack," Roth wrote.

Nonetheless, the China director of Human Rights Watch, Sophie Richardson, warned that "[people outside China don't yet seem to realize that their human rights are...increasingly under threat](#) as Beijing becomes more powerful... In recent years, Beijing has...sought to extend its influence into, and impose its standards and policies on, key international human rights institutions – weakening some of the only means of accountability and justice available to people around the world."

Richardson noted that last year, China successfully pushed a non-binding resolution at the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) that

gutted the ideas of accountability for actual human rights violations, suggesting "dialogue" instead. It failed to specify any course of action when rights violators refuse to cooperate with UN experts, retaliate against rights defenders, or actively reject human rights principles. It even failed to acknowledge any role for the HRC itself in addressing serious human rights violations when "dialogue" and "cooperation" don't produce results. If these ideas become not just prevailing norms but also actual operating principles for the HRC, victims of state-

sponsored abuses worldwide – including in Myanmar, South Sudan, Syria, and Yemen – will face almost impossible odds in holding abusive governments accountable.

China is of course not the only state that would like a globally accepted approach to be altered to the detriment of human rights. Muslim nations, with Saudi Arabia in the lead, have, for example, long sought to have blasphemy criminalized.

In a separate interview, Richardson described the resolution as “the start of a process to wither away the UN human rights ecosystem.” By her account, human rights groups are concerned “about what China will try to do next, whether it will more aggressively try to change the Council’s mandate or nibble away at language in treaties or roll back the role of civil society. China wants inter-governmental cooperation instead of accountability, government officials discussing among themselves with no discussion of accountability for abuses and no participation of independent groups.”

Beijing’s efforts are an attempt to both rewrite international norms and counter sharp Western criticism of its moves against Christians and Muslims, particularly the crackdown in Xinjiang.

Up to one million Turkic Muslims have reportedly been incarcerated in [reeducation camps that China claims are vocational training facilities](#). To maintain the crackdown, China is depending on a fragile silence in the Muslim world that is starting to fray at the edges.

In addition to attempting to change the operating principles of the UN Human Rights Commission, lobbying UN and foreign government officials to tone down criticism, and [inviting foreign diplomats and journalists on choreographed visits to Xinjiang](#), China has at times successfully employed its economic and financial clout to buy either support or silence.

Pakistan, which hosts the Belt and Road Initiative’s \$45 billion crown jewel, has [curbed its initial criticism of the crackdown in Xinjiang](#).

Similarly, China is pressuring Myanmar to revive the suspended \$3.6 billion Myitsone dam project, which, if built as previously designed, would flood 600 square kilometers of forestland in northern Kachin state and export 90% of the power produced to China.

[In exchange for the return of the dam, China has reportedly offered to support Myanmar](#), which has been condemned by the UN, Western countries, and some Muslim nations for its repressive campaign against the Rohingya, some 700,000 of whom fled to Bangladesh last year.

In a bid to pacify criticism of its Xinjiang policy in Central Asia, where anti-Chinese sentiment has been rising, Beijing recently agreed to [allow some 2,000 ethnic Kazakhs to renounce their Chinese citizenship and leave the country](#).

The decision follows testimony in a Kazakh court by a former employee of a reeducation camp detailing three facilities at which up to 7,500 Kazaks and Chinese nationals of Kazakh descent were allegedly being held. The testimony prompted sharp criticism in parliament and on social media.

China's and the West's diametrically opposed concepts of human rights are part of a larger contest for dominance over the future of technology and global influence.

Freedom House, a Washington-based freedom watchdog, reported last year that China was [exporting to at least 18 countries sophisticated surveillance systems capable of identifying threats to public order and has made it easier to repress free speech in 36 others](#).

"They are passing on their norms for how technology should govern society," said Adrian Shahbaz, the author of the report.

Added Nadège Rolland, a senior fellow at the National Bureau of Asian Research, a Washington think tank, to Bloomberg: "[There's a 1984 component to it that's kind of scary](#)."

Dr. James M. Dorsey, a non-resident Senior Associate at the BESA Center, is a senior fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies at Singapore's Nanyang Technological University and co-director of the University of Würzburg's Institute for Fan Culture.