



Freedom House Statement for the Record

Congressional-Executive Commission on China
The Threat of Transnational Repression from China and the U.S. Response
June 15, 2022

Transnational Repression is a Driving Factor of the Decline in Freedom Around the World

Freedom House has tracked sixteen consecutive years of decline in democracy and freedom around the world. In nondemocratic countries all over the globe, political leaders rule without the consent of their citizens. They preside over brittle regimes that harass, assault, detain, and surveil those whom they perceive as threatening their grip on power. The same impulse that drives authoritarians to crush opposition at home also motivates them to pursue critics abroad. This is the phenomenon known as transnational repression, in which governments reach across borders to silence dissent among exiles and diasporas. Transnational repression is a potent tool of global authoritarianism, and it poses a threat to freedom and democracy worldwide, not only endangering those who are targeted but also violating the sovereignty of the nations in which transnational repression is perpetrated.

Freedom House has released two reports detailing this growing threat, and documenting at least 735 direct, physical incidents of transnational repression since 2014—including assassinations, abductions, assaults, detentions, and unlawful deportations.¹ Instances of non-physical transnational repression, such as threatening phone calls and messages, frequently occur, but because they are often difficult to verify with open source information, Freedom House did not include non-physical transnational repression in our database of 735 incidents.

The Chinese Communist Party Conducts the World's Most Comprehensive Campaign of Transnational Repression

The information in Freedom House's database of physical incidents shows that China's ruling regime conducts the world's most sophisticated, comprehensive, and far-reaching campaign of transnational repression. The Chinese government's use of transnational repression is part of Beijing's broader campaign to extend its influence abroad, which includes media influence, economic investment, and military expansion. The Chinese government uses transnational repression more than any other country and attempts to exert political and legal influence over all overseas citizens. Since 2014, Freedom House has found evidence of Beijing being responsible for 229 of the 735 recorded incidents of physical transnational repression. But we know this is a conservative estimate of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) campaign, since these numbers do not include pressure put on the China-based relatives of targeted individuals, digital tactics like harassment and surveillance, or foiled attempts at physical violence such as those recently uncovered by the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

Mirroring patterns of repression at home, Beijing targets both individuals and whole groups abroad. At risk are people living in at least 36 countries around the world, including current and former pro-democracy activists, Falun Gong practitioners, Tibetans, Mongolians, Hong Kongers, Uyghurs, human rights defenders, journalists, and others who criticize the Chinese Communist Party. The CCP's

¹ <https://freedomhouse.org/article/new-report-transnational-repression-growing-threat-global-democracy>;
<https://freedomhouse.org/article/new-report-more-governments-reaching-across-borders-silence-dissent-responses-lagging>

campaign of digital transnational repression is unparalleled in the world. Employing spyware and digital surveillance, the PRC has infected phones and whole telecommunications networks to track targeted individuals.

Unilateral acts of transnational repression – such as the forced landing of plane by Belarus in May 2021 – are rare. Instead, our research shows that the vast majority of successful cases of transnational repression involve either overt cooperation between the origin state and host governments where targeted individuals live or manipulation of their agencies and institutions. In this respect, the Chinese government wields transnational repression especially skillfully. The PRC is adept at utilizing and exploiting established networks of cooperation, legal agreements, and vulnerabilities in countries around the world.

Last year, Beijing continued to abuse Interpol Red Notices, including to successfully detain Idris Hasan in Morocco despite the fact that Interpol cancelled the notice shortly after he was arrested. Hasan, a Uyghur activist, is now awaiting extradition to China. Ironically, Hasan had left his home in Turkey because of the increasing pressure from Turkish authorities acting on behalf of Beijing to silence vocal members of the Uyghur diaspora. Ankara's actions against the Uyghurs, a group to which it has traditionally offered safe haven, was driven by increased Chinese economic investment in the country and closer diplomatic ties. Turkish authorities threatened several groups of Uyghurs with deportation after they had participated in protests outside that country's embassies. Uyghurs in Gulf states, such as Saudi Arabia, where many travel to make the Hajj pilgrimage, are at risk of being detained and deported to China. Freedom House is aware of information suggesting that at least four Uyghurs, including one child, face deportation currently.

A similar cooperative dynamic can be seen with other countries. Authorities in the United Arab Emirates detained a teenage Chinese activist transiting through the Dubai airport in May 2021 and allowed Chinese embassy staff to interrogate him in an effort to have him return home. The activist's girlfriend, also a Chinese citizen, was taken from a hotel in Dubai and detained for eight days at what she described in media accounts as a "black site" run by the Chinese government. She was released only after signing documents accusing her partner of threatening behavior.

The PRC's Transnational Repression in the United States

In countries where official channels of cooperation are less susceptible to manipulation, the PRC nevertheless finds methods for targeting individuals. In the United States, the PRC has targeted individuals since at least the early 2000s, when Congress passed a resolution condemning physical attacks and break-ins targeting U.S.-based Falun Gong practitioners. More recently, since 2016, through its Fox Hunt campaign, which tries to pressure individuals to either return to China to face criminal accusations or else take their own lives. Fox Hunt, and its partner campaign, SkyNet, attempt to export China's legal system beyond its territorial borders. The PRC has also targeted pro-democracy activists, including a candidate running for a seat in the House of Representatives. Agents of China's Ministry of State Security plotted to collect or fabricate damaging information on this individual or even physically assault him, fearing the impact his critical stance on China would have if he were elected to office. The PRC also surveilled artists, other pro-democracy activists, and members of the Tibetan diaspora in the United States. In these efforts, they hired private investigators, a New York City Police officer, and attempted to bribe officials at the Internal Revenue Service. It is common for those living in the United States who are targeted by Beijing to receive threatening messages on social media. One Hong Kong-born American activist even discovered a drone hovering outside the windows of his

home, apparently looking through his windows with a camera, though he was unable to determine who was operating it.

Possibly the biggest challenge in terms of transnational repression for the United States and other democratic countries that are home to dissidents and political exiles is the impact of coercion by proxy, in which a person's family, loved one, or business located in origin state is targeted. Even when the dissident is out of reach of direct violence or harassment, they continue to be vulnerable to transnational repression because other people close to them can be taken hostage by autocrats. As with other tactics, the Chinese regime makes wide use of this, not only threatening family members of U.S.-based activists in China with detention or financial ruin, but also arresting and sentencing them to prison. Alongside other tactics—such as harassment, surveillance, and intimidation—transnational repression by proxy changes the way people communicate with friends, family members, and professional associates in China or even among the local Chinese, Hong Kong, Tibetan, or Uyghur community in the United States.

The CCP's Campaign of Transnational Repression Poses a Threat to Democracy That Must be Urgently Addressed

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. Codification should be accompanied with appropriate training for law enforcement and other agencies that may encounter transnational repression. The Federal Bureau of Investigation has begun this effort.
3. Resilience also encompasses strategic outreach to communities that are at risk of experiencing transnational repression in order to equip them with the resources to report these activities.
4. The United States should also use its voice and vote to limit the ability of Interpol member states to target individuals through the misuse of Red Notices and other alerts.
5. The United States can also deploy a robust strategy for targeted sanctions against China for the use of transnational repression and appropriate screen 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.²

The CCP's campaign of transnational repression is a threat to the sovereignty, democratic institutions, and exercise of fundamental rights in the United States and around the globe, including by individuals who have fled abroad precisely to escape horrific violations in China. Building resilience and imposing accountability are key to curbing the CCP's campaign of transnational repression. Taking actions such as those above to impede this practice, which literally brings authoritarianism to our front doorstep is vital to protecting US residents and upholding democratic values.

² <https://freedomhouse.org/policy-recommendations/transnational-repression#US>