

# The World Cannot Afford to Look Away From Xinjiang

**Article by Natalie Bennett**

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Revelations of the persecution of Uighurs on a massive scale are merely the tip of the iceberg when it comes to repression by Chinese authorities. Governments in the West have long turned a blind eye to human rights abuses, both in China and around the world, for the sake of political and economic expediency. This failure has come at great cost, both to human lives and to the moral standing and integrity of these countries on the global stage. European states must urgently change course.

Reading Clinton-era US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's latest book, *Hell and Other Destinations*, I was struck by its binary understanding of the world, and quaint, if disturbing, blithe assumption that the US and "the West" were forces for democracy and human rights around the world. It's a personal book, and being charitable about the long and pioneering life of a girl who was forced to flee Soviet-dominated Prague and who lost family members in the Holocaust, it is easy to see where that Cold War perspective came from.

However, the idea that the West has historically acted or acts now as a champion of democracy around the world is a lazy and plainly wrong assumption that is repeated unchallenged far too often. Today's world is scarred by the long-term US and UK backing of repressive regimes and leaders and moral and practical support for indefensible wars and human rights abuse. From Thailand, where the monarchy was built up by decades of US support linked to the Vietnam War, to the desperate chaos of Libya and Iraq, where Colonel Gaddafi and Saddam Hussein were "our men" until they weren't, the damaging repercussions of Western involvement are many. The situation hasn't changed. The dreadful human rights record of "friend and ally" Saudi Arabia has not prevented massive arms sales from the UK and France.

Abusive regimes are responsible for their own behaviour. But other states are also responsible if they stand by and fail to speak out, or, even worse, offer tacit or active support.

## Overlooked atrocities in Xinjiang

This responsibility is not just a historical legacy. The fate of the Uighurs is one of the largest human rights issues in the world today. It stands as a shocking example of how millions suffer when abuses are left to escalate and expand, particularly if the international community offers even tacit support for the situation.

The Uighurs are a Muslim minority in China, located primarily in the far north-west region, Xinjiang. Since the 1950s, the region has seen massive state-sponsored migration of Han Chinese from the east. With this movement has come the long-term discouragement of community expression that, over the past decade, has intensified into the repression of local identity, culture, and religion.

In November 2020, Human Rights Watch China Director Sophie Richardson presented the situation in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (to give it its inaccurate full title) and Tibet to the UK Parliament's All Party Parliamentary Group on Hong Kong.

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The picture of Xinjiang society that emerged was one of total surveillance and mass detention. The distant eyes of satellites show that, in a significant expansion that began in 2017, at least a million people are held in re-education camps. The detainees are subjected to forced labour, often for commercial companies, including Western brands. Increasingly, Richardson suggested, these camps are no different from prisons. Language and culture are systematically repressed, while exiles who can speak out tell of large numbers of people “disappeared”. Many families are too afraid to have even the most innocent contact with the outside world and credible well-documented reports of forced sterilisation and abortions have emerged.

The amount of coverage that Xinjiang and the Uighurs receive does not match the scale of the horror. Certainly, in autumn 2020, a Canadian parliamentary committee labelled the treatment genocide, the Pope called the Uighurs a “persecuted people”, and the UN Human Rights Council has been urged to investigate. But the world remains a long way from where it needs to be to defend any kind of human rights order.

## **China’s track record of repression**

Normally, expatriate communities are strong advocates for the safety of their relatives, friends, and compatriots. However, a deep, disturbing investigation in *The Economist* has shown how the repressive hand of Beijing manages to keep the Uighur diaspora silent in every corner of the world. Honourable and brave exceptions, such as Dolken Isa, have spoken out about the silence in most parts of the EU. For a credible first-hand account, survivor Ömir Bekali paints a vivid, disturbing, and nightmarish picture. Nevertheless, global awareness and attention remains limited.

Belatedly, UK politicians are beginning to focus on the situation of the Uighurs, and not just from longstanding champions of international human rights such as the independent peer David Alton. In December 2020, the House of Lords is debating two amendments to new British legislation on international trade that would ensure human rights is considered in trade negotiations, and, going further, that a court ruling affirming genocide could lead to a deal being blocked. These moves are accompanied, not entirely incidentally, by growing concerns about China’s behaviour as a trading partner and a member of the global economy.

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[...]*

Yet what is lacking is an acknowledgement – in Britain as well as across much of the rest of “the West” – of Western complicity in the current situation. The West failed to stand up to China on Xinjiang and earlier cases of abuse when it wasn’t seen to be in our “national interest”, and thus failed to stand up for the universality of human rights around the world.

Chinese systematic destruction of human rights goes back decades to repression in Tibet, which the Dalai Lama labelled “cultural genocide”. At the time, the Western reaction varied from weak to spineless. The Western

response to the Chinese treatment of the Uighurs is even more disturbing. In the context of the “War on Terror” and Western military adventurism after 2001, the early years of repression against the Uighurs was actively supported and explicitly encouraged by Western countries. Without justification, the Uighur terrorist threat was portrayed as being on a par with Al-Qaeda or Isis. Yet there’s no evidence that that was the case; and, if there is now an extremely small and weak violent resistance to Beijing, it is a product of the repression. However, as the West turned a blind eye to the situation in Xinjiang, China gave the US and its allies an easy ride on interventions and human rights abuses elsewhere in the world.

## **From words to action**

The past actions of Western countries in no way excuse, explain, or should impact on the reaction to China’s human right abuses. The regime in Beijing is entirely responsible for its treatment of the Uighurs, the Tibetans, and the Hong Kong 12. But to guide actions now, and in the future – on matters from Saudi Arabia arms sales to the response to Hungarian autocracy and particularly on the extreme case of the Uighurs – governments, parliamentarians, campaigners, and citizens in Western countries need to vow to do better on upholding human rights.

Tools and strategies for credible action are not beyond their means. States can deploy what are known as Magnitsky-style sanctions. These targeted sanctions curtail the travel and financial activities of individuals involved in abuses. The chief executive of Hong Kong has complained about their impact. Coming together internationally, states can support the proposed United Nations-led action against the use of forced labour in global supply chains. Traditional options such as boycotts are also open to states, as well as citizens and movements. While boycotts face the challenge of hitting unintended targets (and, in the case of China, the pervasiveness of Chinese goods presents a practical hurdle), the ending of arms sales and direct military support to countries such as Saudi Arabia would be both precise and effective.

There is also an undeniable power to united international disapproval. It may not suddenly overturn the behaviour of a repressive state, but tacit approval or even turning a blind eye will only magnify the risk of abuses.

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Standing up for human rights will have costs. It will provoke threats of financial and even military retaliation. But the costs of inaction – in human lives, in torture and abuse, and in threats to all of our security – are far higher. The world has seen before how a genocide allowed to proceed unchallenged ends up. The world also knows the consequences of failing to actively support democracy, or actively destroying it as happened with Western support in the Congo with the assassination of Patrice Lumumba or across South America through the “Jakarta method”.

The international community is unlikely to see leadership from Joe Biden’s America, which is constrained domestically and uncertain of its international role. The United Kingdom is showing leadership on Hong Kong in a limited way, as the other signatory to the Joint Declaration that returned the city to China in 1997, but has more than enough problems of its own. Muslim states might have been expected to stand up for the Uighurs, but many have been noticeably silent, it can only be assumed due to their own records on rights and democracy.

It therefore falls to the EU – particularly Germany and France – to carve out a new approach to foreign

affairs and genuinely, independently, live up to frequent fine words on human rights and democracy. The Uighurs and the world need more than words with no action. Britain may now find itself buried deep in the Brexit chaos, but with a government that proclaims its desire to forge a new independent place on the global stage, EU-UK cooperation that puts aside narrow economic interests to strive for a stable, rights-respecting world governed by the rule of law is in everybody's interests.

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