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"The enemy of my friend is my enemy": Chinese leaders' foreign visits and transnational repression of Uyghurs

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Abstract

China has been targeting Uyghurs indiscriminately in many countries around the world. However, the Uyghur diasporas in some countries are more susceptible to China's repressive practices than in other countries. What explains cross-country variations regarding China's repression of Uyghurs abroad? In this study, we explain this variation by laying out a causal linkage between Chinese leaders' foreign visits and transnational repression of Uyghurs. We argue that China's rising global power translates into political weight over countries it frequently interacts with. For such countries, maintaining the status quo in bilateral relations is advantageous, whereas alienating China is costly. This dynamic highlights the importance of complying with China's strategic interests, one of which is the repression of the Uyghur diasporas around the world. As such, we expect countries that host the Uyghur population and witness the visits of Chinese leaders to operate according to the logic "the enemy of my friend is my enemy" and allow and even help China's (the friend's) repressive activities against Uyghurs (the enemy of my friend) on their soil. Drawing on the Transnational Repression of Uyghurs Dataset and examining 43 countries in the period 1998–2020, we find a positive and statistically significant relationship between Chinese leaders' foreign visits and transnational repression of Uyghurs: the more a Chinese leader visits a country, the more likely it is that diaspora Uyghurs are subject to Chinese repression. We also find a positive relationship between Chinese leaders' foreign visits and the severity of China's transnational repression.

Keywords

China, diaspora, leader visits, transnational repression, Uyghurs

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Introduction

Millions of Uyghurs in East Turkestan[1] are subject to China's repression and nefarious surveillance with the grid-style social management system[2] and political re-education camps where Uyghurs go through severe forms of indoctrination and physical punishment (Karluk, 2022; Zenz and Leibold, 2017; Zenz, 2019). The United Nations Human Rights Office Of The High Commissioner (2022) released a report defining China's policies and acts in the region as serious human rights violations, even pointing out the possibility of crimes against humanity.

China's violations of Uyghur human rights are not idiosyncratic to its territory, but extend transnationally. The Transnational Repression of the Uyghurs Dataset reveals 7108 cases regarding China's transnational repression of the Uyghurs in 44 countries from 1997 until November 2021 (Lemon et al., 2023). Safeguard Defenders' investigation revealed the existence of 102 clandestine Chinese Overseas Police Service Stations in 53 countries that threaten and force targets to return to China (Safeguard Defenders, 2022).

Why are Uyghurs in some countries more susceptible to China's repression than those in other countries? The burgeoning literature on transnational repression is ill-equipped to answer this research question. In this study, we develop a rational theory of China's transnational repression of Uyghurs by giving analytical weight to Chinese leaders' foreign visits. We treat frequent leadership visits as an indicator of close political ties at the dyadic country level. Since China is one of the most powerful countries in the world, forming and maintaining close ties with China offers numerous strategic advantages. Based on the assumption that states are interested in utility maximization, we reason that countries that have close ties with China have high incentives to maintain this status quo. We argue that when these countries witness China's repressive practices against Uyghurs on their territory, they weigh the benefits of maintaining the status quo in bilateral relations against alienating China by protecting Uyghurs. As such, they prefer to allow and even assist China's repression of Uyghurs within their borders to maintain the status quo.

We test this argument with the Transnational Repression of the Uyghurs Dataset, covering the period between 1998 and 2020 for 43 countries. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study unveiling the relationship between Chinese leaders' visits and China's transnational repression of Uyghurs. The empirical findings provide ample support for the hypotheses derived from our theoretical argument. We find that a Chinese leader's visit to a country is associated with a greater number of incidents of Chinese repression against Uyghurs in that country. We also find a positive relationship between Chinese leaders' foreign visits and the severity of China's transnational repression.

Transnational repression and its determinants

There is an established literature on domestic repression (e.g. Davenport, 2007; Poe et al., 1999; Keith, 2002; Krain, 1997). Recent years have witnessed a growing body of studies on transnational repression (see Tsourapas, 2021; Dukalskis, 2021). Transnational repression refers to a state's efforts to extend its repressive capacity to control its dissidents, as well as potential dissident activities in foreign countries (Dukalskis, 2021). Currently, China, Russia, Iran, and Libya stand out as authoritarian states that fiercely target their citizens abroad (Lewis, 2015). There is a burgeoning literature on the determinants of transnational repression. Many scholars find evidence to suggest that domestic repression extends transnationally (Lewis, 2015; Collyer and King, 2015; Dalmasso et al., 2018; Glasius, 2018; Adamson, 2020; Tsourapas, 2021; Dukalskis, 2021; Dukalskis et al.,

2023). The recent study by Lemon et al. (2023), which analyzes China's increased transnational repression of Uyghurs in 44 countries, corroborates this finding.

Scholars have also scrutinized the transnational determinants of repression beyond borders. Olar (2019), for example, focuses on authoritarian learning mechanisms, suggesting that authoritarian states might employ transnational repressive activities by imitating other authoritarian states. Tsourapas (2021) identifies the cooperation of certain diaspora organizations, the complicity of some multinational corporations, and international organizations as facilitating conditions of transnational repression. Techagaisiyavanit et al. (2023) pay particular attention to the unwillingness of host states to protect political exiles from the repressive activities of their home countries.

Another strand of this literature investigates the differential impacts of transnational repression. By analyzing Türkiye, Baser and Öztürk (2020) demonstrate how authoritarian states divide their diasporas as loyal vs. dissident and dovetail public diplomacy and soft power practices with transnational repressive strategies. Similarly, Wackenhut and Orjuela (2023) analyze how some authoritarian states try to create a division among the second-generation diaspora. Examining the relationship between the Syrian government and the exiled Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, Conduit (2020) concludes that the impact of transnational repression is mediated by political context, the power position of the dissent, and the way the dissent negotiates the transmission of power. Adamson (2020) shows how some diaspora members utilize the same transnational repression methods used by authoritarian states to establish hegemony over other diaspora members.

Despite the growing body of literature on the determinants of transnational repression, existing studies lack comprehensive explanations for the diverse patterns of China's transnational repression of Uyghurs across different countries. We make a novel contribution to the literature by analyzing China's transnational repression of Uyghurs. Our study is relevant beyond the specific case of China's repression of Uyghurs. It contributes to the broader literature on states' repressive practices in general and transnational repression in particular by laying out a causal mechanism between leadership visits, repressive practices beyond borders, and host states' strategic decision.

We also add to the burgeoning literature on leadership visits. This literature can be grouped into two strands. The first strand of the literature analyzes the causal determinants of high-level diplomatic visits (Balci and Pulat, 2024; Koliev and Lundgren, 2021; Kastner and Saunders, 2012). The second strand of the literature analyzes the impact of leader visits on trade (Nitsch, 2007; Lin et al., 2017), security (McManus, 2018), regime longevity (Malis and Smith, 2021; Bader, 2015), and foreign public opinion (Goldsmith et al., 2021). A more recent study found that host governments ameliorate their human rights records before papal visits (Endrich and Gutmann, 2024). Despite the burgeoning literature, scarce attention has been paid to the link between leader visits and transnational repression. We make a novel contribution to the literature by analyzing the impact of Chinese leader visits on China's transnational repression of Uyghurs. At a more general level, our study is situated at the intersection between diplomacy, foreign policy, transnationalism, and international relations. The following section explains the theoretical underpinnings of this study.

Theoretical expectations

Leader visits constitute a pivotal pillar of bilateral relations. World leaders devote their limited and precious time to destinations they deem important (Balci and Pulat, 2024; Wang and Stone, 2023). More specifically, top leaders' travel necessitates a significant commitment of resources and high opportunity costs owing to their absence from their regular duties (Kastner and Saunders, 2012). In this context, a top leader's visit signals strategic priority given to the host country. Specifically, it showcases the visitor's commitment to collaboration and cooperation with the host country. In the

same vein, host countries have a limited capacity to accommodate visitors; therefore, they must make strategic decisions, giving priority to certain countries over others, which in turn sheds light on their strategic priorities, diplomatic hierarchies, and practices (see Koliev and Lundgren, 2021). Taken together, this article treats leadership visits as a proxy of shared strategic priorities and objectives between countries (see Koliev and Lundgren, 2021).

This section develops a theory of China's transnational repression of Uyghurs by anchoring it to Chinese leaders' foreign visits. The metatheoretical orientation of our theory falls under the umbrella of rationalism, which propels the view that states act in their own self-interest based on calculations of costs and benefits, rather than ideational or social–psychological motivations (see Fearon and Wendt, 2002). In other words, the rationalist perspective highlights the importance of strategic calculations in driving state behavior. At the meso-level, our theory distinguishes three main dynamics: China's status and power in the world; China's strategic interest in repressing the Uyghur diaspora; and the strategic incentives of foreign countries to comply with China. These dynamics allow us to explain how allowing and assisting China to repress Uyghurs in their territories can be a utility-maximization strategy for countries that witness frequent Chinese leaders' visits. At this juncture, it is important to specify that the causal mechanism outlined in this study is between leader visits and transnational repression. We treat China's rising global power, China's strategic interests in repressing diaspora Uyghurs and host states' strategic incentives to cooperate with China as the underlying dynamics of this relationship.

China's rising global power

Many scholars define China's current status in world politics as "rising global power" or "emerging great power" (see Breslin, 2010; Chung, 2015; Dollar, 2015). There are many indicators attesting to China's growing power on the global stage. China has become the second largest economy in the world and a net provider of foreign aid after more than 30 years of economic reform and development (Bader, 2015; Kai, 2017). China's share of global exports by 2023 was 14.42% (Ma, 2024). The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched in 2013, has enabled China to expand its influence globally as the country uses the BRI to its own sphere of political and economic influence (Steinert and Weyrauch, 2024). The BRI (which encompasses both land and maritime routes) reaches at least 60 countries, which account for 64% of the world's population (4.4 billion people) and 30% of global GDP ($21 trillion) (Huang, 2016). Through BRI projects, China has allocated more than $1 trillion in loans and grants to more than 100 countries to support infrastructure development (Denoon, 2021). In addition to the BRI, the China-based Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank contributes to China's growing economic influence in regional and global contexts (Cai, 2023). China also plays an active role in global governance through the Boao Forum for Asia, the Xiangshan Forum, and the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation (Alden and Alves, 2017).

China ranks second among countries with the highest military spending worldwide (Statista, 2022a). The country's influence in the UN is growing, as it is the second highest contributor to the UN peacekeeping budget and a major contributor to UN peacekeeping troops (Arrey, 2023; Lagon and Lou, 2018). Taking into account five key characteristics (military alliances, international alliances, political influence, economic influence, and leadership), the US News & World Report (2023) ranks China as the second most powerful country in the world after the United States. China has great ambitions in the global AI race, driven by its permissive environment derived from the abundant data collected from its population (Lee, 2018). China's global rise also encompasses its soft power. According to the Lowly Institute Global Index (2024), which compares the

diplomatic networks of countries, China is ranked first. By 2019, China's diplomatic network had become the most extensive in the world, surpassing that of the United States (Lowly Institute Global Index, 2024).[3]

China's strategic interests in repressing diaspora Uyghurs

China's rapid economic development has bolstered the country's influence on the world stage. On the other hand, the use of quasi-economic capitalist policies since the 1970s has created an ideological vacuum derived from the contradiction between the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) commitment to communism and the country's capitalist economic orientation (Zeng, 2016). Ideological contradictions coupled with socioeconomic inequality, rapid transformation of values, corruption, and the fear of an invasion of liberal political values after the Cold War have aggravated the CCP's concerns about regime security (Zeng, 2016). Against the backdrop of these concerns, public security expenditure in China has experienced a significant increase over the last decade, even exceeding the country's expenditure on national defense in 2020 (Statista, 2021, 2022b).

While China pervasively uses high-tech instruments and apparatuses to monitor its population, it has gone to extremes in controlling and repressing Uyghurs in East Turkistan. China's increased repression of Uyghurs has an economic dimension, as six major BRI land routes (including the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor) run through East Turkistan. The CCP worries about the exposure of Uyghurs to external influences from Central Asia and the Middle East as the connectivity of East Turkistan with these regions increases through the BRI projects (Cho and Turner 2021). The Chinese government's repression of Uyghurs is manifested through many measures, including the imposition of restrictions on international travel, the curtailment of religious freedoms and cultural practices, forced assimilation, forced labor, political re-education camps, and the inundation of the region with CCTV cameras and facial-recognition surveillance systems (Human Rights Watch, 2019a, 2019b).

China's domestic repression of Uyghurs has extended transnationally, witnessing an exponential increase over the years. The number of China's repressive practices against Uyghurs abroad jumped from 14 incidents in 1997 to almost 2000 incidents in 2016, reaching a peak in 2019 with 3941 incidents (Lemon et al., 2023). Xinjiang Police Files reveal that all citizens who leave East Turkestan are designated as risks and that there is an official manual on how to monitor them.[4]

In view of China's regime dynamics and repressive practices, there are strong reasons to argue that the country has high strategic incentives regarding the repression of diaspora Uyghurs. Indeed, previous research finds that people who migrate to new countries might engage in dissident activities (Adamson, 2002; Sheffer, 2003). As seen in the Ukrainian, Serbian, Albanian, and Armenian diasporas after the end of communism (Koinova, 2009) and Arab diasporas during the Arab Spring protests (Moss, 2016), diaspora communities might work actively to democratize their home countries. Diaspora communities may even influence their host country's foreign policy vis-à-vis their home countries. Numerous studies find that certain diasporic interest groups are effective at shaping US foreign policy (Ambrosio, 2002; Rubenzer, 2008; Smith, 2014). By the same token, it is well documented that the Kurdish diaspora in Sweden and the Somali diaspora in Norway affect their host countries' relations with Türkiye and Somalia respectively (Aggestam et al., 2023; Tellander and Horst, 2019).

Strategically, it is in the best interests of authoritarian states to eliminate criticisms of their politics in the international context (Dukalskis, 2021). As such, transnational repression is inextricably linked to authoritarian regimes' pursuit of regime security (Furstenberg et al., 2021). In this context,

China perceives Uyghur diaspora communities around the world as a threat since it does not want to be held accountable or condemned in the international community for what is happening in East Turkestan in general and political re-education camps specifically (see Perlez, 2019). It is crucial to stress that China denied the existence of these camps until they were disclosed through satellite images. Then, China changed gear and attempted to soften its global image by justifying the camps as "vocational training centers" (Aljazeera, 2024).

China's deliberate attempts to hide the reality of the situation in East Turkestan from the world can provide insight into how it perceives Uyghurs who have fled East Turkestan. China tells the world its official story on the Uyghur issue. From the perspective of Chinese authorities, the diaspora Uyghurs present a threat to China's global image with their "knowledge" and "experience" about the real situation in East Turkestan. This fear is compounded by the fact that diaspora Uyghurs have access to non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and social media platforms, which give them the power to raise awareness about the Uyghur issue and even tarnish China's reputation on the international stage. In this context, targeting diaspora Uyghurs not only allows China to reinforce its authoritarian rule and avoid scrutiny in the international community for its human rights abuses, but also serves as a warning to potential dissidents internationally.

The strategic logic of complying with China

This article treats China's leader visits as an important indicator of strategic interaction between China and host countries. As pointed out previously, international travel by top leaders is a signal of high-level attention at the government level (Kastner and Saunders, 2012). This opportunity cost is especially high in the Chinese political system, as the Chinese president and premier play pivotal roles in decision-making processes. It is important to stress that Chinese leaders generally travel with a significant number of government officials and businesspeople. During most of these visits, they announce aid commitments and investment deals, and sign political and economic agreements. Therefore, a visit by a top Chinese leader usually signifies a significant allocation of the Chinese government's economic and foreign policy resources (Kastner and Saunders, 2012).

Our theory is based on the assumption that Chinese leaders' frequent high-level visits translate into China's political influence on the countries being visited. In associating Chinese leader visits with political influence, we rely on the study of Kastner and Pearson (2021) which puts forward different causal logics through which China's foreign ties might lead to its increased political influence abroad. First, China could use its economic ties as a bargaining chip to ensure compliance over its preferred policies. Second, China's foreign ties might generate pro-China interest groups in the related countries. Third, China's foreign ties might translate into soft power, positively affecting the public and elite opinion about the country (Kastner and Pearson, 2021).

Building on and moving beyond the burgeoning literature on Chinese leader visits, we argue that the more Chinese leaders visit a country, the more China exerts political influence on that country, resulting in an inclination to align with China's strategic interests. Our argument is corroborated by Custer et al. (2018) finding that there is a positive relationship between increased visits between China and countries in the East Asia and Pacific region and greater voting alignment in favor of China at the United Nations General Assembly.

Considering states as rational actors interested in utility maximization, we expect that countries that form close bilateral relations with China have strategic incentives to maintain the status quo in bilateral relations. China's rising global power implies that there is a huge power asymmetry between China and most countries it interacts with. In other words, China's rising power mediates the relationship between Chinese leaders' visit and China's political influence on host country.

Cooperating with China offers numerous advantages, including but not limited to investment, trade, military aid, technology transfer, and security guarantees. By the same token, overlooking China's sensitivities has serious repercussions for countries. As indicated by Fuchs and Klann (2013), countries that host the Dalai Lama (the highest spiritual leader of Tibet, an autonomous region in China) at the highest political level are punished by the Chinese through a reduction of their exports to China. Equally important, Dreher et al. (2018) find a pattern revealing China's punishment of nonpermanent members of the UN Security Council that vote in favor of the West's interests, through a reduction of their aid.

Overall, owing to China's growing power, cooperating with China is advantageous, whereas going against its strategic interests is costly for many states in the world. As pointed out previously, China has high strategic interests in repressing diaspora Uyghurs to avoid scrutiny in the international community regarding its human rights violations in East Turkestan and preserve its global image. At this juncture, countries that host the Uyghur population and witness Chinese leaders' visits find themselves in a dilemma between protecting Uyghurs' human rights or allowing and even assisting China in its repression of Uyghurs in their territory. We reason that this dilemma pushes countries to make a cost–benefit analysis: alienating China, consequently losing China's economic/political/military/technological support or maintaining the status quo in bilateral relations. Given China's rising economic, military, and political power globally, alienating China is much more costly than alienating middle powers or small countries. The combined effect of China's power and Chinese leaders' visits may push host countries to succumb to China's pressure and influence.

In this context, we expect countries that host Chinese leaders to operate on the logic that "the enemy of my friend is my enemy." More specifically, we anticipate such countries to make a calculated move and prioritize the status quo in bilateral relations, which eventually leads to their lack of action and even complicity in China's (the friend's) repression of Uyghurs (the enemy of my friend). Complicity, in this case, might take the form of host countries' arrests, denying or cancelling residence permits, deportations, and extraditions under China's pressure. Our theory predicts that even a host country's lack of action against China's repression of Uyghurs on its territory (which is a tacit approval of China's actions) is a calculated move that is indicative of the host country's prioritization of relations with China. This theoretical argument allows us to derive two testable hypotheses:

H1: Uyghurs in countries that witness frequent Chinese leader visits are more likely to witness China's transnational repression.

H2: The severity of China's transnational repression of Uyghurs is greater in countries that witness frequent visits from Chinese leaders.

Illustrative case study

Before we lay out alternative arguments and present the results of the statistical analysis, we report descriptive evidence to illustrate our theory. We present a hard test of our theory by shining light on Türkiye's stance on China's transnational repression of Uyghurs. Uyghurs in Türkiye constitute the largest Uyghur diaspora in the world outside Central Asia (Reuters, 2022; Karluk, 2020). Given the cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and religious affinities between the Turkish and the Uyghur people, Türkiye's historical record of accepting Uyghur migrants, and its previous role in defending

Uyghur rights, one might think that how Uyghurs in Türkiye experience Chinese repression may be different from the experience of Uyghurs in other countries. Surprisingly, Türkiye ranks third regarding the highest number of China's repressive incidents against Uyghurs (Lemon et al., 2023).

For a long period of time, Türkiye was a safe haven for Uyghurs who escaped China's repression (Kuşçu Bonnenfant, 2022). Following the 2009 Ürümchi massacre, a large number of Uyghur immigrants and asylum seekers arrived in Türkiye through Southeast Asia. Türkiye even helped Uyghurs who faced deportation in Southeast Asia by offering them asylum (Karluk, 2022). In 2009, then Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan harshly criticized China's repression of Uyghurs in the aftermath of 2009 Ürümchi protests and went so far as to call it "an act of genocide" (Lemon et al., 2023). Although this statement put a strain on bilateral relations, from 2010 onwards, Türkiye–China relations have seen significant improvement, and the frequency of state visits has increased (Karluk, 2023).

After the Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao visited Türkiye in 2010, bilateral relations were elevated to "strategic cooperation" (Colakoglu, 2015). Türkiye–China relations have become even more dynamic during the Xi Jinping era. In 2012, Xi paid a visit to Türkiye as vice president during which large-scale projects topped the agenda. Then Prime Minister Erdogan visited China only a couple of months later (Colakoglu, 2018), signaling the importance of China in Turkish foreign policy. Türkiye's closer alignment with China occurred against the backdrop of the country's growing alienation from the West in the aftermath of the 2016 coup attempt (Colakoglu, 2018; Adisonmez and Oztig, 2024). Several months after the failed coup, Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi visited Türkiye and stated that "China's support for Türkiye in the wake of the coup attempt proves that China is a friend in need" (Anadolu Agency, 2016).

In addition to Türkiye's reversal of its traditional, Western-centric geopolitical orientation, frequent Türkiye–China visits have primarily an economic dimension. China is Türkiye's second largest trading partner and biggest import source (Isik and Zou, 2019). The weakening of the Turkish lira pushed Türkiye to ask for China's assistance in 2018, as a result of which China provided Türkiye with a $3.6 billion loan (Anadolu Agency, 2018). China's central bank transferred $1 billion worth of funds to Türkiye at a critical time before the 2019 municipal elections (Karakaya and Kandemir, 2019). China became Türkiye's largest importer in 2020 (Altay, 2021). When President Erdogan visited China in 2019, he praised Chinese investments in his country, while making no mention of China's treatment of Uyghurs (Perlez, 2019). When the Chinese Foreign Minister visited Ankara in 2021, the Turkish authorities expressed their intention to elevate bilateral relations to a level of "strategic partnership" (Cetin, 2021).

Türkiye's deepening ties with China coincide with the country's overlooking China's repression of Uyghurs on its soil. In 2017, after meeting with his Chinese counterpart, then Turkish Foreign Minister Cavusoglu stated that China's security is tantamount to Türkiye's security and that Türkiye would not allow any activity opposing China on its soil (Reuters, 2017). Türkiye, traditionally regarded as a safe haven for Uyghurs, is increasingly becoming unsafe for diaspora Uyghurs. The country is no longer vocal about the Uyghur human rights issue (Lemon et al., 2023). China actively monitors Uyghurs living in Türkiye through its established networks, Chinese diplomatic missions, and Uyghur informants in Türkiye (Safeguard Defenders, 2023). Chinese police also frequently contact Uyghurs by phone (including WeChat) or through Chinese mission staff in Türkiye and threaten them to get them to stop their activism work, make pro-Chinese propaganda, and spy on Uyghurs living in Türkiye (Safeguard Defenders, 2023).

In addition to turning a blind eye to China's repressive activities, Türkiye has joined China's efforts to repress Uyghurs. It is now extremely difficult for Uyghurs to receive resident permits or citizenship in Türkiye (Karluk, 2018; Altay, 2021). Uyghurs are persistently asked for

documents such as birth and marriage certificates (that are impossible to obtain from China) by Turkish civil servants and sometimes face arbitrary and rude behavior in state offices (Karluk, 2020). The Turkish authorities are increasingly conducting raids on Uyghurs' houses, arresting Uyghurs, transferring them to repatriation centers, and even collaborating with China for their deportation (Karluk, 2022; Altay, 2021). These developments generate fear among the Uyghur community and lead some to seek shelter in safer countries (Karluk, 2022).

Drawing on the data of Lemon et al. (2023), Table 1 displays the number of China's repressive activities against Uyghurs in Türkiye between 1997 and 2021. The sharp increases in incidents over the years is indicative: one incident in 2003, 10 incidents in 2009, and 102 incidents in 2016. China's repression reached a peak in 2019 with 238 incidents.[5]

Data

Independent variable: China's leadership visits

To measure the impact of foreign visits by Chinese leaders, we rely on the *China Visits* dataset introduced by Wang and Stone (2023) that covers the period between 1998 and 2020. The visits include goodwill visits, working visits, official visits, state visits by the Chinese president, and working visits and official visits by the Chinese premier. The independent variable is a binary variable that takes the value of 1 if a country receives a leadership visit from China in a given year and 0 otherwise. Attuned to the question of reverse causality and potential endogeneity issues (Chinese leaders' deliberately selecting countries that create a permissive environment for the repression of Uyghurs), we take the one-year lag of the leader visit variable.[6]

The dependent variable(s): transnational repression of Uyghurs

We use the Transnational Repression of Uyghurs Dataset introduced by Lemon et al. (2023) to measure our dependent variable: China's repressive practices against Uyghurs.[7] This dataset covers 44 countries for the period between 1997 and 2021. To provide synchronization between this dataset and the *China Visits* dataset, our analysis covers the period between 1998 and 2020. Our dataset includes 43 countries for which there is complete data source availability.[8]

We split the dependent variable into two distinct types of China's repression of Uyghurs.[9] $Repression_1$ is a count variable, measuring the number of China's repression incidents against

Table 1. China's repressive activities against Uyghurs in Turkey.

Country	Year	Number of incidents
Türkiye	2002	2
Türkiye	2003	1
Türkiye	2009	10
Türkiye	2016	102
Türkiye	2017	46
Türkiye	2018	8
Türkiye	2019	238
Türkiye	2020	3
Türkiye	2021	64

Uyghurs per year. These incidents include assets frozen or seized; calls to return home; cyberattacks and malware; intelligence and data gathering; intimidation including active surveillance or threats; recruitment as informants; restrictions on movement and legal status via passport control; restrictions on free speech and assembly; smear campaigns; the use of proxies and threats to relatives; formal detention; irregular detention; house arrest; physical assault; destruction of property; deportation; extradition; rendition; coercion to return; and assassination or attempted assassination (Lemon et al., 2023).

Repression$_2$ is a categorical variable, indicating the severity of China's repression of Uyghurs. The stages of China's repression are divided into three categories, with higher scores representing higher levels of repression. Stage 1 involves cyber-attacks and malware; the use of proxies and threats to relatives; recruitment as informants; restrictions on movement, and intelligence and data gathering; assets (in China) frozen or seized; smear campaigns, etc. Stage 2 involves irregular and formal detention, house arrests, etc. Stage 3 involves deportation, coercion to return, (attempted) assassination, and rendition.[10]

Control variables

To provide a comprehensive explanation of the variations in China's repression of Uyghurs, it is important to consider alternative causal mechanisms. Since the literature on transnational repression is recent, we also extracted the arguments highlighted in the literature on domestic repression and included them in our analysis as control variables.

Democracy

There is a striking difference between democracies and non-democracies with respect to domestic repression. Democracies tend to be less repressive even when they face domestic challenges (Davenport, 2007; Keith, 2002; Krain, 1997; Poe et al., 1999). Democracies typically protect civil liberties more effectively than autocracies (Møller and Skaaning, 2013) that are characterized by strong coercive apparatuses to suppress political demands (Grugel and Bishop, 2002). Considering the findings from the extant literature (e.g. the stark differences between democracies and autocracies with respect to judicial independence, accountability, transparency, and human rights), there are strong reasons to expect that democratic states would prioritize human rights and be more inclined to prevent China's repression of Uyghurs on their soil compared with autocracies.

To measure the level of democracy, we used the Liberal Democracy Index of the V-Dem project (V-Dem, 2024) which measures civil liberties, strong rule of law, an independent judiciary, and effective checks and balances, as well as the level of electoral democracy. *Democracy* is a continuous variable, that takes values between 0 and 1, with 1 indicating the highest respect for civil liberties (Coppedge et al., 2021).

Civil war

Civil war is one of the most examined variables in research on domestic repression. Scholars have found a positive association between civil wars and domestic repression (Davenport, 2007; Poe et al., 1999; McNitt, 1995; Krain, 1997). In examining our research query, we take into consideration the possibility that conflict-ridden states that are embroiled in a cycle of violence and repression may be reluctant or incapacitated to protect their Uyghur population from China's repressive activities.

To capture the impact of the civil war on China's transnational repression of Uyghurs, we use the Uppsala Conflict Data Program/Peace Research Institute Oslo Armed Conflict Dataset (UCDP, 2024). An armed conflict is defined as a civil war when the fight between a government and domestic opposition groups leads to at least 25 battle-related deaths in a given year (Gleditsch et al., 2002). The variable is labeled as 1 if a state is engaged in civil war in a given year, and 0 otherwise.

The Refugee Convention

In explaining our research query, an alternative argument might emphasize the socialization of states into refugee-related norms. The 1951 Refugee Convention set standards for the treatment of refugees in their host countries by outlining norms, such as non-refoulment (which prevents states from sending asylum-seekers back to countries where their lives are at risk) (UNHCR, n/a). According to a norm-based argument, transnational norm diffusion might become decisive in explaining the variation in China's repression of Uyghurs. This argument gives analytical weight to norms that legitimize and delegitimize actions by acting as channels that link values to behaviors (Katzenstein, 1996; Björkdahl, 2002).

Finnemore and Sikkink (1998) theorize the impact of international norms on state practices under three consecutive processes: norm emergence, norm acceptance, and norm internalization, a final stage during which state authorities comply with norms, eventually believing in their appropriateness. According to the spiral model developed by Risse and Sikkink (1999), international human rights norms might prompt a change in state policies through myriad processes that include adaptation, strategic bargaining, moral consciousness-raising, argumentation, persuasion, institutionalization, and habitualization.

When contemplating the causal mechanism between the Refugee Convention and China's targeting of Uyghurs in foreign countries, it is important to take into account the pivotal role played by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees in socializing states to adhere to the fundamental norms of the refugee regime (Bradley, 2023). In this context, we take into account the possibility that parties to the Refugee Convention might eventually socialize into refugee-related norms and become more protective of the Uyghur population in their territories.

The data on the Refugee Convention is taken from the website of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR n.a.). *Refugee* is labeled as 1 if a state ratified the Refugee Convention in a given year, and 0 otherwise.

ICCPR

Hafner-Burton and Tsutsui (2007) found that the ratification of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) has no impact on the most repressive states. More interestingly, Neumeyer (2005) finds that the ratification of the ICCPR is associated with worsening human rights records in pure autocracies with no civil society. Despite these findings, we include the ICCPR variable in our analysis by taking into consideration the possibility that the Human Rights Committee (a body that monitors the implementation of the ICCPR) plays an influential role in the prevention of repressive practices against Uyghurs around the world.

The data on the ICCPR is taken from the United Nations website (The United Nations, 2024). *The ICCPR* takes the value of 1 if a state ratified the treaty in a given year and 0 otherwise.

Belt and Road Initiative

The argument on BRI shares a similar logic to our argument. According to this argument, BRI countries might make a calculated move and prioritize economic and financial advantages associated with BRI projects over Uyghurs' human rights in their territories.

The data on BRI countries is taken from the Green Finance and Development Center (2024). States join the BRI by signing a memorandum of understanding with China. If a state is a participant of BRI in a given year, it is coded 1, otherwise 0.

GDP per capita and population

Mitchell and McCormick (1988) indicate that wealthy states repress their populations less than poor states. Furthermore, Boix (2003) argued that in highly unequal societies, the worse off citizens are more likely to put pressure on the government for redistributive policies. Therefore, such states become more likely to rely on violent repression to demobilize the poor. Landman (2005) finds population size to be positively related to greater restrictions on civil liberties. In the extant literature, dissident activities (Poe et al., 1999; Raleigh & Hegre, 2009; Soysa & Nordås, 2007) and resource scarcity (Henderson, 1993) in populous states are highlighted as potential theoretical explanations for the impact of demographic dynamics on state repression. Given these findings, one could derivatively suggest that the limited resources of host states (owing to economic or demographic dynamics) may exacerbate tensions with Uyghurs who live within their borders, leading such states to ignore or actively participate in China's human rights abuses.

We take GDP per capita as a proxy to determine the economic well-being of a country. The data on GDP per capita (constant 2015 US$) and population size are obtained from the World Bank Data Bank (the World Bank, 2024). We include natural logs of GDP per capita and population size to account for the potential non-linear relationship between these indicators and the dependent variables. In other words, these variables are transformed to address the issues of heteroscedasticity (Manning, 1998) and ensure a more robust examination.

The empirical strategies

Since $Repression_1$ is a count variable, we estimate Model 1 with Poisson regression. The Poisson distribution is a crucial tool for modeling count data (Hayat and Higgins, 2014), where the random variable Y represents the count of rare events within a fixed interval. Its probability mass function (P) is defined as

$$P(Y = k) = \frac{e^{-\lambda}\lambda^k}{k!}$$

with λ denoting the average rate of events (Coxe et al., 2009).

$Repression_2$ is a categorical variable. As such, we estimate Model 2 with the ordered logistic regression, suitable for modeling categorical outcomes with an ordinal structure (Armstrong and Sloan, 1989). In this model, Y_i assumes values from 1 to J, each denoting a specific ordinal tier of the outcome (Gutiérrez et al., 2015). The model suggests the existence of an unobservable latent variable Y_i^*, such that $Y_i = j$ if $\alpha_{j-1} < Y_i^* \leq \alpha_j$ wherein α_j represents threshold parameters (Liu et al., 2017).

The ordered logistic regression model employs a cumulative probability link function rooted in the cumulative logistic distribution function (Torra et al., 2006). This link function encapsulates the relationship between the observed outcome Y_i and the latent variable Y_i^* (Wang et al., 2017).

In the ordered logistic regression model, the threshold parameters a_j serve to delineate the boundaries between the ordered categories (Gamso, 2019). These thresholds undergo estimation concurrently with the coefficients β, collectively capturing the intricate association between the explanatory variables and the latent variable.

Findings

Appendix Table A1 contains the summary statistics for all variables. Table 2 reports the results of the regression analyses (Model 1 and Model 2). All models were estimated using Stata/SE version 15. The variance inflation factor analysis was performed to provide a measure of multicollinearity among independent variables in both models. The regression models are stable and reliable based on the absence of significant multicollinearity issues (see Appendix Table A2)

In Model 1, the likelihood ratio is 1824.62 and the probability value is 0.0000, which underscores the robustness of the model in explaining the variability observed in the data. The

Table 2. The regression models.

Variables	Model 1	Model 2
Visit$_{t-1}$	1.325***	2.096**
	(0.0773)	(0.958)
Democracy	−0.459**	−11.96***
	(0.227)	(4.586)
Civil war	0.345***	−0.808
	(0.126)	(1.427)
Refugee	−0.278***	−1.254
	(0.0990)	(1.042)
IICPR	3.604***	−0.111
	(0.235)	(1.076)
BRI	2.282***	−0.623
	(0.129)	(1.034)
GDP per capita (log)	0.303***	−0.804*
	(0.0394)	(0.435)
Population (log)	−0.207***	−0.0119
	(0.0549)	(0.576)
		(10.18)
Constant	−0.676	
	(0.920)	
Pseudo R^2	0.5077	0.3442
Log likelihood ratio	1824.62 (0.0000)	59.5 (0.0000)
Number of observations	139	139

Standard errors in parentheses.

*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

In the ordered logit model in Stata, the constant term is not explicitly included because the model automatically accounts for the baseline category of the dependent variable.

pseudo-R^2 value for Model 1 is 0.5077, indicating that the model accounts for approximately 51% of the variance in incident frequency.

In Model 1, the coefficients of the $Visit_{t-1}$, *Civil War*, *IICPR*, *BRI* and *GDP (log)* variables are positive and statistically significant at the 1% level ($p < 0.01$). We find evidence in favor of Hypothesis 1. The null hypothesis is rejected. With its p-value less than 0.01, $Visit_{t-1}$ exerts an important and strong impact on the dependent variable. Countries that host Chinese leaders are more likely to witness higher numbers of China's repressive incidents against Uyghurs on their soil. We turn now to the question of substantive impact. A Chinese leader's visit to a foreign country is associated with an increase in the expected count of China's repressive practices against Uyghurs in that country in the following year by 1.32 units.

To grasp the matter in a concrete setting, let us imagine a country with 1000 Uyghurs with an average of 100 cases of repressive exercises by China. After a Chinese leader's visit, the expected count of repressive incidents against Uyghurs in that country would increase to 132 in the following year. This demonstrates the substantive impact that leader visits can have on human rights abuses of diaspora members in foreign countries. More specifically, Chinese leader visits serve as a catalyst for increased repression against Uyghurs outside of China's borders.

Countries experiencing civil wars are found to be more likely to witness higher numbers of China's repressive incidents against Uyghurs on their soil, reflecting how internal instability might enable or exacerbate external repressive actions. Participation in the BRI is also linked to higher numbers of repression incidents, indicating the importance of China's economic leverage on BRI countries regarding the treatment of the Uyghur diaspora. This finding lends support to the argument that BRI countries would prioritize economic ties they have with China and compromise their moral stance on the Uyghur issue when they witness China's repressive activities on their soil.

Conversely, the coefficient of *Democracy* is negative and statistically significant at the 5% level ($p < 0.05$), lending support to the argument that democracies are less likely to create permissive conditions for China's transnational repression of Uyghurs. *Democracy* exercises an important, but moderate impact on the dependent variable. A democratic host country reduces the expected count of China's repressive activities by 0.459 units, highlighting the protective role of democratic governance regarding vulnerable populations. This finding strengthens the argument that democracy may act as a deterrence against China's repressive activities beyond borders. The coefficient of *Refugee* is negative and statistically significant at the 1% level ($p < 0.01$), which points to the importance of a host county's integration into the global refugee regime in the case of China's transnational repression. This finding is consistent with the studies of Finnemore and Sikkink (1998) and Risse and Sikkink (1999) that establish a link between human rights norms and state practices. The coefficient of *Population* is negative and statistically significant at the 1% level ($p < 0.01$).

The findings are largely consistent with alternative theoretical expectations. In contrast to alternative theoretical expectations, countries with higher GDP per capita and lower population size are associated with higher incidences of China's repression of Uyghurs. An interesting result is the positive impact of IICPR on the transnational repression of Uyghurs. This finding, however, is consistent with the study of Neumeyer (2005), which indicates that some authoritarian states might even be more repressive after ratifying IICPR. This finding runs counter to the argument that accords a central role to the Human Rights Committee.

Model 2 examines the impact of *Visits* and control variables on $Repression_2$. The likelihood ratio chi-square test statistic yielded a value of 59.59 with 8 degrees of freedom, indicating the overall statistical significance of the model (the p-value is less than 0.01). The pseudo-R^2 value of 0.3442

indicates that 34.42% of the variability in the ordinal categorization of repression stages can be explained by the explanatory variables included in the model.

In Model 2, the coefficient of $Visit_{t-1}$ is positive and statistically significant at the 5% level, lending support to Hypothesis 1: the severity of transnational repression of Uyghurs is higher in countries that witness frequent Chinese leader visits. The null hypothesis is rejected. The coefficient of *Democracy* is negative and statistically significant at the 1% level, which supports the argument that Uyghur diasporas, who live in authoritarian states, witness more severe forms of China's repression than those who live in democratic states. Our results also indicate a negative relationship between GDP per capita and $Repression_2$: countries with a higher GDP are associated with lower stages of China's repression. All other variables do not exert statistically significant impacts on the dependent variable.

Robustness tests

We performed a number of alternative model specifications and added new data to increase confidence in the main results. The *Military* variable (interval from 0 to 1) was extracted from the Military Dimension Index of V-Dem (2024) to account for whether the impact of the military on the chief executive changes the hypothesized relationships. Models 1^a and 1^b include the *NATO* and *SCO* variables, taking into account the possibility of the reluctance of NATO countries to align with China's strategic interests and the incentives of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) members to align with China's strategic interests. Indeed, Chen (2023) presents evidence to suggest that the SCO supports authoritarian leaders' suppression of political dissidents in an effort to sustain cooperation. Models 2^a and 2^b include the *Turkic* variable, taking into account the possibility that Turkic countries (Türkiye, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan) could be more sensitive to Uyghur rights on their territory owing to common ethnic, cultural, and religious ties with Uyghurs.

Appendix Table A3 displays the results. Models with the tag (^{a}) investigate the determinants of $Repression_1$. Models with the tag (^{b}) investigate the determinants of $Repression_2$. The findings reveal that NATO membership does not mediate the impact of Chinese leaders' visits on repression incidents. Both SCO and NATO countries are associated with higher repression incidents against Uyghurs. Interestingly, Turkic countries are also associated with higher repression incidents and stages. The impact of the military on politics is positively associated with higher repression incidents.

We developed Model 3 with the exclusion of SCO countries as well as countries that share borders with China to determine further China's impact beyond a regional framework as well as its near geography. Overall, the hypothesized relationships between Chinese leaders' visits and transnational repression of Uyghurs are largely consistent across alternative model specifications.

Discussion and conclusion

This study makes important theoretical and empirical contributions to the literature on transnational repression. Building on a rationalist view of state behavior, we posit a theoretical argument, linking Chinese leaders' foreign visits with China's transnational repression of Uyghurs.

As illustrated, even a country like Türkiye, which has strong ethnic, cultural, and religious affinities with Uyghurs, can allow repression and cooperate with China to repress Uyghurs on its soil in the context of a strategic priority devoted to China. This study is the first quantitative analysis of the relationship between Chinese leaders' foreign visits and China's transnational repression of

Uyghurs. The implications drawn from our theoretical arguments are consistent with empirical evidence. We find that Chinese leaders' foreign visits are strongly associated with higher numbers of incidents of Chinese repression against Uyghurs in the countries being visited. Furthermore, we find a positive relationship between Chinese leaders' foreign visits and severe forms of Chinese repression against Uyghurs.

While this study provided a comprehensive analysis of the interstate dynamics that prevent host states from taking action against China's repression of Uyghurs on their territory, future studies could devote more attention to the dynamics that incentivize countries to stand up against Chinese activities within their borders. Future researchers, for example, might examine which aspects of democracy (democratic values, democratic institutions, and the transparency of decision making) act as intervening variables in specifying the causal pathway through the method of process-tracing. Equally important, the impact of the global refugee regime on transnational repression opens important avenues for theorizing in the scholarship on transnational norm diffusion. The researchers of this study highlight the lack of a dataset on the number of diaspora Uyghurs per country as one of the study's limitations. Future endeavors on creating datasets on the Uyghur population in the world are essential.

This study concludes with policy recommendations. States' strategic preferences with respect to the Uyghur issue highlight further the pivotal roles NGOs can play in "naming" and "shaming" countries that turn a blind eye to China's transnational repression against Uyghurs. NGOs should also engage in active efforts to revive the rich cultural and artistic activities of the Uyghur people in their host countries. These practices could empower the Uyghur diaspora community to feel a sense of identity and community in the face of China's incessant practices of harassment and repression.

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Notes

1. The Chinese official term for the region is Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR), which most Uyghurs view as colonial.
2. This system is based on ubiquitous deployment of enclosures, high-tech gates, CCTV cameras, police, and paramilitary forces (Zenz and Leibold, 2017)
3. It is important to emphasize that Confucian institutes around the world constitute a significant element of China's soft power.
4. For more information on this monitoring process, see Tobin and Elimä (2023).
5. This table serves as a preliminary illustration of the transnational repression of Uyghurs. More in-depth analyses are needed to fully understand the increases and decreases of repressive incidents targeting Uyghurs in Türkiye.
6. At this juncture, we would like to acknowledge a potential limitation of our study. Future studies could use longer lag periods to account for potential delayed effects of leader visits on transnational repression of Uyghurs.
7. For challenges associated with collecting data on transnational repression, see Dukalskis et al. (2022).

8. Owing to missing years of reported repression in the dataset, we have 139 country-year observations in our main analysis (in our robustness tests, the number of observations is 54 because we exclude certain variables and add new ones). Coding missing years as "no incident" would be highly problematic, as there might be "unreported" repression in these years. That would introduce bias and inaccuracies into our analysis, potentially skewing our results. We previously mentioned the challenges associated with collecting data on transnational repression (Dukalskis et al., 2022). Collecting data on China's transnational repression is especially challenging since China constantly intimidates diaspora Uyghurs not to speak out against the Chinese regime (see Oztig and Karluk, 2024a, 2024b). Owing to the absence of certain years in the dataset, we acknowledge that our analysis may inadvertently overlook some spillover effects.
9. We acknowledge that simultaneously accounting for the types and severity of repression is challenging. To address this, we developed two alternative measures: one capturing frequency (albeit without distinguishing types, as count variables aggregate binary events) and another capturing types (while assuming away frequency).
10. Both dependent variables involve incidents that include the active involvement of host countries, such as the threat of deportation, the rejection of asylum claims (Stage 1), detention, deportation, and house arrests (Stage 2), and deportation (Stage 3).

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Appendix

Table A1. Descriptive statistics.

Variables	Observations	Mean	Standard deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Repression$_1$	139	50.05036	237.2196	1	2000
Repression$_2$	139	1.711007	0.794492	1	3
Visit	139	0.18705	0.391362	0	1
Democracy	139	0.446547	0.328642	0.03	0.89
Civil war	139	0.316547	0.466811	0	1
Refugee	139	0.618705	0.487461	0	1
IICPR	139	0.798561	0.402526	0	1
BRI	139	0.258993	0.439666	0	1
GDP per capita	139	25,341.23	23,149.85	527.1973	87,123.66
Population	139	89,400,000	160,000,000	2,800,000	1,300,000,000

Table A2. Multicollinearity table (variance inflation factor, VIF).

Variables	Model 1 VIF	1/VIF	Model 2 VIF	1/VIF
Democracy	4.75	0.210651	4.75	0.210651
GDP per capita (log)	2.77	0.361232	2.77	0.361232
BRI	2.61	0.383373	2.61	0.383373
Civil war	2.49	0.401747	2.49	0.401747
Population (log)	2.39	0.418702	2.39	0.418702
IICPR	2.22	0.4498	2.22	0.4498
The Refugee Convention	2.06	0.486049	2.06	0.486049
Visit$_{t-1}$	1.3	0.770273	1.3	0.770273
Mean VIF	2.57		2.57	

Table A3. Robustness tests.

Variables	Model 1[a]	Model 1[b]	Model 2[a]	Model 2[b]	Model 3[a]	Model 3[b]
$Visit_{t-1}$	0.282***	1.148	0.729***	1.616*	1.830***	21.39
	(0.0687)	(0.714)	(0.0728)	(0.859)	(0.107)	(2956)
Democracy					−5.164***	−18.25**
					(0.310)	(7.965)
IICPR						
Refugee			0.0450	−2.361**	−0.858***	−16.79
			(0.0877)	(1.069)	(0.100)	(2956)
IICPR			2.840***	−1.243	6.211***	16.82
			(0.180)	(1.047)	(0.351)	(2956)
GDP per capita (log)	0.140***	−0.910***	0.531***	−0.611**	0.609***	−1.741
	(0.0334)	(0.279)	(0.0426)	(0.271)	(0.0916)	(1.192)
Population (log)	−0.155***	−0.375	−0.0416	−0.416	−0.192***	0.0820
	(0.0306)	(0.308)	(0.0369)	(0.346)	(0.0575)	(1.082)
Military	5.509***	0.182	6.641***	4.029		
	(0.257)	(2.428)	(0.280)	(2.664)		
SCO	1.302***	−1.144				
	(0.106)	(0.989)				
NATO	1.448***	−0.719				
	(0.0909)	(0.814)	2.136***	2.616***		
Turkic			(0.0923)	(1.011)		
Constant	2.896***		−5.596***			
	(0.651)		(0.680)			
Number of observations	54	54	54	54	24	24

Standard errors in parentheses.
*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.