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POLICY UPDATE: CHINA

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To advance international freedom of religion or belief, by independently assessing and unflinchingly confronting threats to this fundamental right.

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Countering China's Techno-Authoritarianism, Transnational Repression, and Malign Political Influence

Overview

Despite efforts to integrate human rights as an important part of the U.S. government's China policy, religious freedom and human rights concerns remain sidelined—including in the U.S. government's multilateral engagement—due to overriding security, economic, and other foreign policy priorities.

This policy update highlights the U.S. policy on religious freedom and human rights in China, the U.S. government's technology policy and China's human rights abuses, and China's transnational repression and malign political influence in the United States. The report concludes with specific recommendations for steps the U.S. government can take to further elevate religious freedom and other human rights matters in its policy toward China.

U.S. Policy on Religious Freedom and Human Rights in China

In recent years, the U.S. government has framed its bilateral relationship with China as one of "strategic competition" and it has grown confrontational. In the [National Security Strategy](#) (NSS) released in October 2022, President Joseph R. Biden's administration expressly considered China as posing the broadest and most significant challenge to the United States, calling the country "America's most consequential geopolitical challenge" and "the only competitor with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to advance that objective." This heightened concern about China was repeated throughout the NSS and reiterated in the administration's March 2023 [National Cybersecurity Strategy](#) and the U.S. Department of State's [Integrated Country Strategy on China](#). A key area of contention between the two countries is China's worsening human rights record, particularly its systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom targeting virtually all religious groups in China, including Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims, Tibetan Buddhists, underground Catholics, house church Protestants, and Falun Gong practitioners.

The Biden administration has sought to put human rights at "the [center](#) of U.S. foreign policy," and has [highlighted](#) the importance of coalition building with like-minded international partners and allies to advance shared values and interests.



These multilateral partnerships are critical to holding China accountable in international fora, including in the United Nations (UN), the Group of Seven (G7), and through other emerging platforms such as the new Camp David [trilateral partnership](#) with Japan and South Korea. However, other competing foreign policy priorities such as [trade](#), [climate change](#), and [security](#) issues can at times override concerns about religious freedom and other human rights as the U.S. government seeks to “responsibly manage” its strategic competition with China and to cooperate with the country on key issues of mutual interest. In these instances, the protection of human rights, including religious freedom, is often sidelined, rather than treated as a priority at the center of U.S. foreign policy.

Multilateral Partnerships for Religious Freedom and Human Rights

The U.S. government has taken some significant actions in concert with Western partners and allies to hold China accountable for its violations of religious freedom and other human rights. Examples include the [imposition](#) of multilateral targeted sanctions against abusers and the joint [diplomatic boycotts](#) of the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics, in protest against the Chinese government’s ongoing “genocide and crimes against humanity” in Xinjiang. Following the United States’ determination of genocide in Xinjiang, a number of Western countries’ [parliaments](#) and the [European Parliament](#) also [declared](#) that the atrocities [amount to](#) genocide and crimes against humanity. At the UN, the United States has [worked with](#) like-minded partners to [condemn](#) and [press](#) China to address its human rights abuses and religious freedom violations.

However, the Chinese government has increasingly [used](#) its economic, geopolitical, and other influence to silence, punish, and retaliate against countries that criticize its human rights record or otherwise refuse to bend to its will. China has made human rights an area of strategic importance in its policy by intertwining it with other issues—such as its economic and trade policy—giving the government significant leverage to silence international condemnation and weaken the effectiveness of a multilateral coalition critical of its human rights abuses.

The response by the G7—comprised of the seven largest industrialized democracies, including the United States—to China’s human rights record provides a case in point. Jointly, the G7 has been vocal in [condemning](#) the Chinese government’s human rights and religious freedom abuses, particularly in Xinjiang and Tibet. However, observers have [noted](#) that it has not [translated](#) this joint expression of concern into coordinated and actionable policy responses due to its members’ economic and trade [dependence](#) on China and fear of retaliation.

Moreover, the U.S. government has also sidelined its attention toward China’s human rights violations as it pursues other pressing foreign policy priorities like security. For example, the United States’ new trilateral partnership with Japan and South Korea has overwhelmingly [underscored](#) the importance of security and other areas of cooperation while downplaying human rights. Official statements on the trilateral partnership [provided](#) either [no](#) mention or mere [passing reference](#) to “protecting human rights.” The United States could use the partnership with these two crucial Indo-Pacific countries to do more to hold China accountable for its worsening human rights record. Such a values-based multilateral policy approach elevates human rights as a core strategic

objective in U.S. policy toward China, rather than treating it as an expedient means to other foreign policy ends. The protection of human rights, including religious freedom, and other foreign policy goals should be complementary—rather than mutually exclusive—objectives. This principled, human rights-centered partnership should guide U.S. policy actions, in coordination with like-minded partners, to uphold our shared commitments to human rights and religious freedom.

U.S. Technology Policy and China's Human Rights Abuses

Techno-authoritarianism

U.S. partnerships with key like-minded countries are especially critical for addressing China's technology-enabled violations of religious freedom and other human rights. The Chinese government has been a leading player in implementing and promoting *techno-authoritarianism* at home and abroad. Domestically, Chinese authorities have aggressively *employed* “*smart city*” technologies—including artificial intelligence (AI), big data, biometric collection, and facial, voice, and gait recognition—to carry out mass surveillance throughout China. For example, the government has *used* these surveillance technologies to target religious groups throughout the country, including Christians and Falun Gong practitioners. In the ethno-religious minority regions of Xinjiang and Tibet, such technologies have *played* a critical role in the government's violent repression of Uyghurs, other Turkic Muslims, and Tibetan Buddhists, including the placement of millions of Uyghurs in Xinjiang concentration camps where they experienced torture, rape, forced sterilization, and forced abortion.

Through Chinese companies like Hikvision, Huawei, and *AI startup Cloudwalk*, the government has *exported* its “*smart city*” products and services and its *underlying* techno-authoritarian approach to over 100 countries. Many of these countries participate in China's “*Belt and Road Initiative*” and its Digital Silk Road program. China's techno-authoritarianism poses a significant challenge to the protection of human rights, including religious freedom, globally. Chinese Communist Party leader Xi Jinping has *declared* his determination to make China a global leader in critical emerging technologies, such as AI and quantum computing.

Export Control of Critical Technologies

The U.S. government and partners must continue to tighten export controls of critical technologies to China, especially advanced semiconductor chips and chip-making equipment that are vital to China's technological

ambition and, by extension, its technology-enabled repression of religious freedom and other human rights at home and abroad. The NSS explicitly *expresses* concern over the misuse of technology that threatens security and human rights, and highlights the need to modernize and strengthen export controls to ensure that strategic competitors like China “cannot exploit foundational American and allied technologies, know-how, or data.”

In October 2022, the Biden administration *issued* an unprecedented set of export control rules, *banning* the export of advanced semiconductor chips and chip-making equipment to China, as well as restricting U.S. citizens and permanent residents from supporting the development or production of chips in certain Chinese facilities. A year later in October 2023, the administration *updated and strengthened* existing export controls by closing loopholes in the October 2022 rules, allowing the U.S. government to more effectively *ban* exports of high-end chips for AI used in military applications and human rights violations. Moreover, in August, the Biden administration *signed* an executive order *prohibiting* certain U.S. investment in China and other countries of concern in the *sensitive technology* sectors of semiconductors and microelectronics, quantum information technologies, and AI.

The U.S. government cannot engage in this effort alone. Key international partners—notably the Netherlands, Japan, Germany, the European Union, South Korea, and Taiwan—are needed to implement export controls more effectively on China so the Chinese government does not obtain advanced semiconductor chips and chip-making equipment from other countries. The U.S. government has *engaged* in such multilateral efforts with partners like the Netherlands and Japan, and both countries *announced* in 2023 export restrictions on advanced semiconductor chips and chip-making equipment to China. Some partners like Taiwan have already *implemented* comparably rigorous export control regimes prior to the U.S. government's October 2022 export control rules.

However, China's retaliatory *economic coercion* against the United States and other countries with economic and trade dependence on China could threaten the effectiveness of multilateral export control measures. For example, China accounts for roughly *40 percent* of Taiwan's total annual export and *60 percent* of Taiwan's semiconductor export, *60 percent* of South Korea's annual semiconductor export, and *60 percent* of the entire world's semiconductor demand, giving it significant economic leverage over key chip-producing countries. In addition, China *produces* 98 percent of the global supply of gallium and 68 percent of germanium—two key raw materials critical to the global chip-making industry.

In 2023, the Chinese government imposed retaliatory measures against the United States and its partners by [sanctioning](#) U.S. chip maker Micron in May and by [restricting](#) the export of gallium and germanium in July. In that regard, the U.S. government and its partners must find ways to lessen their economic and trade dependence on China and to diversify supply chains. These actions would strengthen the effectiveness of their export control measures, counter China's economic coercion, and deter China's ability to perpetrate technology-enabled human rights abuses.

Additionally, the U.S. government and partner nations could consider a formal, binding, multilateral export control regime—similar to the [Wassenaar Arrangement](#)—to prevent the proliferation of critical technologies that could enable egregious human rights abuses, including mass atrocities against religious minority groups. Currently, the United States [participates](#) in four major multilateral export control regimes, including the Wassenaar Arrangement, that are aimed at preventing the “proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and destabilizing accumulations of conventional weapons and dual-use technologies.” Following the December 2021 Summit for Democracy, the U.S. government and its partners [established](#) a multilateral voluntary, nonbinding written [code of conduct](#) “outlining political commitments by Subscribing States to apply export control tools to prevent the proliferation of goods, software, and technologies that enable serious human rights abuses.”

Standards for Governing Advanced Technologies

The United States and the international community must update and establish standards for governing emerging critical technologies that are consistent with international human rights law, including the right to freedom of religion or belief. This is particularly important given China's efforts to promote and institutionalize its own techno-authoritarian vision for developing and using critical technologies.

In June 2021, senior officials of the Biden administration and the European Union jointly [established](#) the [U.S.-E.U. Trade and Technology Council \(TTC\)](#) to coordinate policies in this area, including standardizing rules related to emerging technologies. The joint council consists of ten working groups, [including](#) on Technology Standards, Secure Supply Chains, Data Governance and Technology Platforms, Misuse of Technology Threatening Security and Human Rights, Investment Screening Cooperation, and Cooperation on Export Controls of Dual Use Items. Since 2021, the TTC has held four ministerial meetings to enhance cooperation on various technology, trade, and economic issues. In the fourth meeting

held in June 2023, the TCC [announced](#) important initiatives, including: advancement of shared standards in critical and emerging technologies; implementation of the Joint AI Roadmap; alignment of approaches to address risks associated with outbound investment in sensitive technologies, in coordination with G7 allies; enhancement of coordination to counter economic coercion; and [cooperation](#) on export controls and sanctions-related export restrictions.

The U.S.-EU transatlantic partnership on technology governance is vital but needs to expand to include other like-minded countries and key stakeholders in the Indo-Pacific region—including Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan—with a particular focus on the intersection between technology and human rights. U.S. government statements [indicate](#) the Biden administration has started high-level [bilateral](#) and [multilateral initiatives](#) with [Japan, South Korea](#), and Taiwan to [deepen](#) cooperation on technology standards and export controls. In October 2023, G7 nations developed the [Hiroshima AI Process Comprehensive Policy Framework](#) and jointly [issued](#) the [Hiroshima Process International Guiding Principles](#) and the Hiroshima Process [International Code of Conduct](#).

Both the Guiding Principles and the Code of Conduct underscored the importance of respecting and protecting human rights in line with international frameworks such as the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, as states and organizations develop and deploy AI systems. The G7 also [stated](#) its intention to consult governments outside of the G7 to further advance the Hiroshima Process. In November 2023, the United States and 17 other countries [signed](#) a non-binding [agreement](#) providing general recommendations for industry providers to develop AI systems securely and to prevent their misuse. However, many of these partnered multilateral initiatives—apart from the G7 Hiroshima AI Process—tend to overwhelmingly focus on technology's military application and other uses, thus lacking a human rights emphasis.

China's Transnational Repression and Malign Political Influence in the United States

Transnational Repression

The Chinese government relentlessly pursues, harasses, and intimidates diaspora religious communities, political dissidents, and others with ties to China who reside in the United States, including Uyghur Muslims, Tibetan Buddhists, Christians, and Falun Gong practitioners. In response, the U.S. government has prosecuted individuals who engage in these illegal activities on behalf of the Chinese government.

In May 2022, the U.S. Department of Justice [indicted](#) Wang Shunjun and four of Chinese Ministry of State Security agents for transnational repression activities targeting Uyghurs and Tibetans in the United States. Additionally, in April 2023, the Justice Department arrested and [charged](#) Lu Jianwang and Chen Jinping in connection with opening and operating an illegal Chinese overseas police station in New York City. Lu has a history of engaging in transnational repression on behalf of the Chinese government—including the Ministry of Public Security—targeting religious groups and dissidents on U.S. soil. Chinese overseas police stations [operate](#) in at least 53 countries, including Canada, [Japan](#), the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom.

China’s Lobbying and Malign Political Influence

The Chinese government’s malign political influence campaigns in the United States, too, warrant the U.S. government’s attention and tangible policy response. China’s lobbying efforts in the U.S. Congress represent a particularly insidious form of political influence, aimed at shaping federal policymaking in furtherance of the Chinese government’s interests and goals. China’s state-owned and private companies hire American lobbyists—including former members of Congress and other former U.S. government officials—to represent the Chinese government’s interest on Capitol Hill. For example, former members of Congress lobbied on behalf of the Chinese government-owned surveillance company [Hikvision](#), which the U.S. government has sanctioned for its [complicity](#) in human rights abuses against Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims in Xinjiang concentration camps. Such malign political influence activities undermine religious freedom and broader human rights and threaten U.S. national security and sovereignty.

Given the severity of this influence, members of Congress from both parties have begun to work together to introduce legislation that would address this alarming trend. In 2023, a bipartisan group of senators and representatives in Congress [reintroduced](#) the Disclosing Foreign Influence in Lobbying Act ([H.R.1190](#)) to close existing loopholes in the Foreign Agents Registration Act of 1938 (FARA) and the Lobbying Disclosure Act of 1995 (LDA). It would require registered lobbyists to disclose “any foreign countries or political parties that are involved in the direction, planning, supervision, or control of the lobbyist’s activities.”

More stringent disclosure requirements alone, however, may not deter lobbyists—including former members of Congress—from representing the interests of

their Chinese clients. The Stop Helping Adversaries Manipulate Everything Act (also known as the SHAME Act; [H.R.9140](#)), introduced in 2022, would further ban registered agents or lobbyists of foreign adversaries like China from receiving compensation for their services. The Congressional and Executive Foreign Lobbying Ban Act ([H.R.3389](#)) would prohibit “any individual from registering or otherwise serving as the agent of a foreign principal if the individual at any time served as a Member of Congress, a senior political appointee, or a general or flag officer of the Armed Forces.” Congress can help combat this kind of foreign malign influence by increasing transparency on foreign lobbying and by banning outright lobbying by agents acting on behalf of foreign adversaries, like the Chinese Communist Party and its government.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Human rights and other foreign policy priorities are not mutually exclusive but can be closely integrated so that human rights concerns are not sidelined in U.S. policy toward China. To address the Chinese government’s worsening domestic abuses of religious freedom and other human rights, perpetration of an ongoing genocide, and expanded transnational repression and influence, USCIRF recommends that the U.S. government:

- Work with like-minded partners to address China’s technology-enabled human rights and religious freedom violations by strengthening the effectiveness of existing export control regimes, countering China’s economic coercion, reducing economic and trade dependence on China, and diversifying supply chains;
- Build on existing multilateral efforts by establishing a formal, binding, multilateral export control regime that is focused on preventing technology-enabled human rights violations, especially by countries like China that carry out mass atrocities against religious and ethnic minorities; Expand the network of countries that abide by U.S.-led technology governance regimes that respect and protect religious freedom and other human rights, including rules governing the development and use of AI systems and other emerging critical technologies;
- Work in close coordination with international partners to exchange intelligence and to continue prosecuting those engaging in transnational repression activities against religious minorities on behalf of the Chinese government; and
- Require increased transparency on foreign lobbying and ban lobbying by agents acting on behalf of foreign adversaries, like the Chinese Communist Party.



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The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is an independent, bipartisan federal government entity established by the U.S. Congress to monitor, analyze, and report on religious freedom abroad. USCIRF makes foreign policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress intended to deter religious persecution and promote freedom of religion and belief.