

ISSUE BRIEF | Center for American Values

# MODERN DAY SLAVERY: CHINA'S PERSECUTION & ECONOMY OF FORCED LABOR

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## TOPLINE POINTS

- ★ The Chinese Communist Party's command and control economy exploits religious and ethnic minorities, such as the predominantly Muslim Uyghurs, through forced labor that directly contributes to a variety of products on the international market.
- ★ Through oppressive persecution tactics, including the demolition of religious buildings and symbols and the rewriting of holy texts, China's policy of Sinicization targets all religious and ethnic groups that do not follow the Chinese Communist Party's dictates.
- ★ The U.S. must lead with America First principles to pressure China to abandon Sinicization and foster greater religious freedom throughout the country.

### The Context

Since the beginning of the reign of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 1949, the regime has sought systematically to suppress and eradicate religion from the country. The party is officially an atheist entity but allows some extremely limited and tightly controlled religious activity. While the constitution of the People's Republic of China (PRC) states that citizens "enjoy freedom of religious belief," it does not guarantee the practice of those beliefs ([Pittman, 2013, para. 5](#)). In fact, it limits citizens to "normal religious activities" but does not further define what that means ([Pittman, 2013, para. 12](#); [U.S. Department of State, n.d.-a](#)). Much of the policy implemented by the CCP manifests in extreme measures targeted at religious groups that do not fall in line with the Communist Party.

The CCP government officially recognizes Catholicism, Protestantism, Taoism, Islam, and Buddhism, but only so far as these religions are under state control through the official Buddhist Association of China, Chinese Taoist Association, Islamic Association of China, Three-Self Patriotic Movement and Catholic Patriotic Association, which are

essentially state entities by which the Communist party maintains firm oversight over doctrine, teaching, and the practice of religion ([Pew Research Center, 2023](#)). All religious groups and their religious materials, such as the Bible, that do not fall into these state-sanctioned categories are deemed illegal, and these groups face varying degrees of persecution, from harassment to imprisonment and death in many cases.

This persecution has manifested in a series of anti-religious campaigns throughout China. These campaigns, initiated and enforced by the CCP, reflect a complex interplay of historical, political, and ideological factors. China's anti-religious stance must continue to be revealed to the international community with a careful examination of the policies, implications, and global concerns associated with this extreme domestic anti-religious agenda ([U.S. Department of State, n.d.-b](#)).

To fully understand these actions, it is crucial to consider the historical backdrop. The CCP has an extensive history of promoting atheism and the militant suppression of religious institutions. This dates to the early days of the PRC when religious institutions were viewed as threats to communism. Under the leadership of Mao Zedong, religious practices faced severe restrictions, and many religious leaders were severely persecuted.

The reform and opening-up era, which began in the late 1970s, ushered in a relatively more tolerant attitude toward religion as the Chinese government began to allow limited religious activities and even reopened some places of worship. However, the period was also marked by tight state control that required religious institutions to register with the government and become approved religious associations. This control aimed to ensure that religious groups adhered to CCP-approved interpretations of their respective faiths ([U.S. Department of State, n.d.-c](#)).

China's current anti-religious campaigns have intensified under the dictatorship of President Xi Jinping. Several key policies and practices highlight this shift, including the following ([U.S. Department of State, 2022](#)):

1. **Crackdown on unregistered religious groups:** The CCP has targeted unregistered and underground religious organizations, considering them a challenge to state authority. These groups often face severe repression and have been labeled as cults or extremist organizations.
2. **Sinicization of religion:** The Chinese government has promoted the “[Sinicization](#)” of religions, which essentially means conforming religious beliefs and practices to Chinese culture and socialist values. This often involves rewriting religious texts, controlling religious education, and promoting CCP-approved religious leaders ([ChinaAid, 2023](#)).



3. **Destruction of religious symbols and sites:** Reports of the [demolition](#) of churches, mosques, and temples have emerged from various regions in China, ostensibly in the name of urban development or safety regulations ([Sintash, 2019](#)). These serve as a convenient excuse for the Chinese government to suppress nonconforming religious groups.
4. **Mass surveillance and control:** Religious communities and clergy members are subjected to [intense surveillance](#), with authorities monitoring sermons, gatherings, and religious activities ([U.S. Department of State, n.d.-b](#)). Advanced technology, including facial recognition and AI, has also been employed to maintain control. Clergy face severe persecution when they resist government mandates<sup>1</sup>.

The ramifications of China’s anti-religious campaigns are multi-faceted. These campaigns blatantly infringe on the fundamental human right of religious freedom, as enshrined in international treaties to which China is a signatory. This includes the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights ([United Nations, n.d.](#)). Furthermore, the aggressive promotion of Sinicization risks erasing unique cultural and religious identities among minority groups, such as Tibetans, Mongolians, and Muslim Uyghurs ([U.S. Department of State, n.d.-a](#)). However, the CCP justifies these campaigns by citing concerns about extremism and social stability ([U.S. Department of State, n.d.-a](#)).

The campaigns also attract international attention and condemnation. These policies have strained China’s relations with several countries, particularly those with sizeable Chinese diaspora populations who are concerned about the treatment of religious minorities. The international community, including the United States, is very concerned about the severe human rights violations that result from these campaigns, including arbitrary detentions, forced labor, and cultural destruction. This persecution of religious minorities, such as the Uyghurs, has drawn comparisons to genocide, leading to calls for international action. Under the Trump Administration, the U.S. declared the treatment of the Uyghurs as genocide.

The circumstances of Uyghur Muslims, specifically, have prompted many countries to reevaluate their trade and diplomatic relationships with China. The U.S. passed the [Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act \(2021\)](#), which brought greater attention to the

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<sup>1</sup> According to the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, “Authorities have persecuted state-sanctioned clergy who opposed such policies. For example, authorities in Zhejiang province—a location with a large Christian population and previously known for its relative tolerance of Christianity—have intensified a crackdown on Christianity in recent years, including by persecuting state-sanctioned Christian leaders who opposed government policies. Notably, in 2016 and 2017, Zhejiang authorities removed from office and ultimately detained and arrested Protestant pastor Gu Yuese—a high-profile leader of the official Protestant group in Zhejiang—for his open opposition to the local authorities forced cross removal and church demolition campaign” (Chen, 2021).



commercial goods produced in Xinjiang, China, and the need for further scrutiny of supply chains that include forced labor.

The Muslim Uyghur ethnic community is located primarily in the northern province of Xinjiang, and they number roughly 12 million in the region. More than one million have been confined to concentration camps in Xinjiang. The CCP calls these concentration camps “re-education camps” ([BBC News, 2022, para. 2](#)). While the CCP officially denies any human rights violations, various organizations and advocates have reported horrendous stories emanating from these camps, including rape, forced abortions, forced organ harvesting, and forced labor ([Pompeo, 2021](#); [Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, 2022](#)). The U.S., the United Kingdom, and others have classified China’s actions as genocide, citing the CCP’s “intent to destroy in part or in whole a national ethnic, racial or religious group” ([BBC News, 2022, para. 16](#)).

The CCP’s oppression of Uyghurs through forced labor directly produces goods that make their way to the international market. Through legislative actions like the previously mentioned Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act, efforts have been made to curb the influx of goods produced by Uyghur forced labor, but too many loopholes remain throughout the supply chains. These loopholes then allow the CCP to circumvent the preventative measures that are in place. Materials produced by Uyghur forced labor include cotton, tomato, and other agricultural products, as well as materials needed for solar panels and electric vehicle products.

Western countries, including the U.S., must do more to pressure the totalitarian CCP Party regime to end their egregious violations of human rights against the Uyghurs and other religious communities. If the West does not take decisive action targeting the economic supply chains of goods produced by Uyghur forced labor, they will be turning a blind eye to the atrocities of the communist regime. The U.S. and its allies can take several steps immediately to counter the Chinese regime.

### Policy Options

- 1) Amplify the use of [Global Magnitsky sanctions](#)<sup>2</sup>, specifically to target the following entities with sanctions such as asset freezes, visa bans, and the revocation of existing visas:
  - Relevant CCP officials.
  - Entities such as the forced labor camps and their administration.

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<sup>2</sup> “The Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act (Global Magnitsky Act, Title XII, Subtitle F of P.L. 114- 328; 22 U.S.C. §2656 note) authorizes the President to impose economic sanctions and deny entry into the United States to any foreign person identified as engaging in human rights abuse or corruption” (Congressional Research Service, 2020).



- Chinese businesses and corporations with known links to forced labor of Uyghurs.
  - Other foreign Chinese business entities housed in foreign countries with known links to Uyghur forced labor.
  - Known CCP government officials in charge of suppressing and persecuting other religious groups in China, such as Christians, Buddhists, and other communities of faith.
  - CCP's State Administration for Religious Affairs, in addition to its key leadership and administration.
- 2) Leverage the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue ([QUAD](#))<sup>3</sup> to challenge the CCP's active persecution of religious groups directly.
- Launch a robust public relations campaign exposing the atrocities of the CCP in Xinjiang targeting Uyghurs.
  - Make economic trade agreements contingent upon China's commitment to expanding religious freedom by eliminating the policy of Sinicization and all relative manifestations of it, such as the re-education camps, the rewriting of holy texts, and the destruction of religious sites. The trade limitations could include not only cutting off significant sectors of trade that include products known to have ties to slave labor but also implementing a scaled increase of trade limitations in additional key manufacturing areas that have significant implications in the global supply chains.
- 3) In each bilateral diplomatic meeting with Chinese officials, the U.S. diplomatic corps should do the following:
- Emphasize the importance of religious freedom as a strategic global priority for the U.S. and how China continues to fail to deliver this basic human right to the Chinese people.
  - Mention by name all known prisoners of conscience currently held in prison for their religious convictions. U.S. diplomats should name the prisons and all relevant known details of the detention of these prisoners.
- 4) The U.S. should leverage all current and future economic trade deals with China, contingent upon China taking significant steps to improve religious freedom and tolerance in China.

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<sup>3</sup> QUAD is composed of the U.S., Australia, India, and Japan. The partnership began in the wake of the Indian Ocean tsunami in 2004 but has since evolved to a far broader agenda addressing issues that include security, economics, and health (Smith, 2021).



- 5) The U.S. should redesignate China as a [Country of Particular Concern \(CPC\)](#) and implement all appropriate policy consequences as a result of the designation following the established criteria in the [Frank Wolf International Religious Freedom Act of 1998](#). A CPC designation of a country applies under the law to countries found to engage in particularly severe violations, meaning “systematic, ongoing, egregious violations of religious freedom, including violations such as (1) torture; (2) prolonged detention without charges; (3) forced disappearance; or (4) other flagrant denial of life, liberty, or security of persons” ([U.S. Department of State, n.d.-d](#)).
- 6) The U.S. must make the expansion and promotion of religious freedom abroad a core priority of all outward-facing agencies, such as the Department of State. The robust expansion and promotion of religious freedom should be in the strategic and missional calculation of all foreign policy decisions, especially with countries like China.

## Conclusion

The U.S. must continue to lead with its values based on the freedoms guaranteed in the Constitution. This leadership must be reflected in the way the U.S. partners with countries around the world in trade deals and other economic and security endeavors. The suppression of religious minorities must be considered at each bilateral and multilateral engagement, especially with countries such as China that continue to suppress religious freedom, expression, and exercise through brutal domestic policies that include their Sinicization campaign. Securing religious freedom abroad and standing up for the oppressed should be a priority of U.S. foreign policy.





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