

Protests under threat

GOING GLOBAL

China's transnational repression of protesters worldwide

June 2025

ARTICLE19



Contents

05	Abbreviations
06	Executive summary
10	Methodology
11	Timeline of protest and repression in the PRC
13	Introduction
17	Transnational repression against protesters
18	Attacks against protesters during Chinese leaders' state visits
23	Attacks against protesters outside Chinese embassies and consulates
28	Other cases of physical violence and harassment against protesters
33	Harassment of PRC-based relatives in reprisal for overseas protests
39	Digital transnational repression targeting protesters
47	The psychosocial impact of harassment
50	International human rights law and the right to protest
52	Conclusion
54	Recommendations
57	Endnotes

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The logo for ARTICLE 19, featuring the word "ARTICLE" in orange and "19" in white on a dark orange background, all contained within a white, torn-edge paper shape.

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Front cover photo: Protesters demonstrate against plans for a Chinese super-embassy at the former site of the Royal Mint, London, UK, 8 February 2025. (Martin Pope / SOPA Images via Reuters Connect)



Tibetans living in exile attend a protest in New Delhi, India, on 8 August 2007.
(Photo: Vijay Mathur/Reuters)

'I would not mind facing harassment for me, if my families were here in exile but the most depressing, or difficult part is when you have your families in Tibet and because of your work you are not able help them or you not able to support them but instead because of your work they are under pressure, they face [police] harassment.'

'Tashi Gyaltzen'
(Tibetan environmental activist living in India)

Abbreviations

APEC	Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation
ASPI	Australian Strategic Policy Institute
CAC	Cyberspace Administration of China
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CDM	China Dissent Monitor
CDP	China Democracy Party
CECC	Congressional Executive Committee on China
CFU	Campaign for Uyghurs
CIB	Coordinated inauthentic behaviour
CSSA	Chinese Students and Scholars Associations
CUPP	Chinese Unification Promotion Party
DOJ	Department of Justice
HKDC	Hong Kong Democracy Council
HRIC	Human Rights in China
ICCPR	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
IRI	International Republican Institute
MIIT	Ministry of Industry and Information Technology
MPS	Ministry of Public Security
MSS	Ministry of State Security
OCAO	Overseas Chinese Affairs Office
PRC	People's Republic of China
RFA	Radio Free Asia
SFT	Students for a Free Tibet
TCHRD	Tibetan Centre for Human Rights and Democracy
TNR	Transnational repression
UFWD	United Front Work Department
UHRP	Uyghur Human Rights Project
UNGPs	UN Guiding Principles
UNGPO	Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization

Executive summary



Protests in Trafalgar Square, London, staged in solidarity with the Sitong Bridge protest in China earlier that month. 27 October 2022. (Photo: China Deviants)


Going Global: China's transnational repression of protesters worldwide is one of a series of research reports in our global [#FreeToProtest](#) campaign, which calls on the police, the media, and policymakers to advance the right to protest in line with ARTICLE 19's [The right to protest: Principles on the protection of human rights in protests](#).

This report examines how the People's Republic of China (PRC) has engaged in a systematic international campaign of transnational repression targeting protesters critical of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and its record of human rights violations. For this report, we define **transnational repression (TNR)** as when governments or their proxies engage in repression outside of their territories. It can take place in authoritarian states and democracies alike. It can include intimidation, digital threats, abduction, forced repatriation, assassination, or

targeting family members. The PRC is not unique in engaging in TNR (Iran, Russia, Rwanda, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey are also frequent perpetrators), but [‘the sheer scale of its operations makes it by far the most prolific perpetrator’](#). Freedom House [estimates](#) that China's TNR ‘tactics affect millions of Chinese and minority populations from China in at least 36 host countries across every inhabited continent’.

‘China's transnational repression tactics affect millions of Chinese and minority populations from China in at least 36 host countries across every inhabited continent.’

Freedom House



China has experienced a number of high-profile protests domestically over the past three decades, which, following crackdowns and censorship at home, have inspired memorialisation and commemoration protests globally. At the same time, waves of ongoing human rights abuses in China give rise to new protest actions overseas. As the CCP has cracked down on and censored discussion of protest at home, it has also escalated acts of TNR, targeting diaspora communities and other protest movements seeking to raise awareness of human rights abuses in China or to commemorate high-profile protest anniversaries – from the 1989 Tiananmen Square Massacre to the 2019 Pro-Democracy protests in Hong Kong to the 2022 White Paper Protests.

Protesters targeted by TNR frequently live in fear of surveillance; targeting; abduction and forced repatriation, especially around embassies and consulates; and ‘collective punishment’ retaliation against relatives still in China, which also leads people to cut ties with their family. Such fears contribute to burnout, self-censorship, isolation, and other psychosocial harms. Meanwhile, the importance of cross-movement solidarity and coordination, especially between Hong Konger, Uyghur, Tibetan, and Taiwanese protest networks, is critical for building durable networks and sustaining protest movements around the world.

ARTICLE 19 has noted a lack of specific research into the use of TNR to target PRC-related protesters worldwide. This report

aims to fill this gap. It documents the coordinated role of TNR in the targeting of protesters around the world through harassment, violence, surveillance, censorship, and other forms of digital TNR. It shows how information-manipulation operations have delegitimised peaceful protest movements in the PRC, arguably to close off foreign avenues of solidarity and support and to influence global narratives on China-related protests abroad. It concludes with a series of recommendations for the Chinese government, host governments, and technology companies.

Drawing on existing research and new interviews with 29 representatives of diaspora communities, this report documents episodes of protest by people from China and Hong Kong – including East Turkistan (Xinjiang), Tibet, and Inner Mongolia – and the targeting of protesters in Taiwan. The incidents documented took place between 2011 and 2024 in 12 countries in Asia, Europe, and North America. As such, the report offers the most comprehensive narrative yet of the myriad tactics and actors involved in China’s ongoing TNR of protesters around the world, while contributing to the evidence base on China’s global assault on freedom of expression.

Key findings

- **Scope and targets:** China's TNR campaigns are among the most sophisticated and comprehensive globally, especially in targeting diaspora communities, including Uyghurs, Hong Kongers, Tibetans, and others perceived as threats to the CCP. These campaigns rely on a complex network of coordinated actors, including from the United Front Work Department, embassy and consulate officials, and online influencers (among others). TNR of protesters is most pronounced during state visits, outside of embassies and consulates, and during sensitive anniversary dates such as historical episodes of protest or repression.
- **Tactics:** These TNR campaigns involve various tactics, such as physical assault and intimidation, coercion, misuse of international legal systems, digital surveillance and online harassment, and collective punishment targeting family members of protesters. These methods are used to silence dissent and control critics abroad.
- **Impact:** Public acts of physical violence and online intimidation, especially against high-profile protest leaders, serve to dampen wider participation in protests, to silence dissent, and to chill freedom of expression. Meanwhile, information-manipulation operations have delegitimised peaceful protest movements in the PRC, arguably to close off foreign avenues of solidarity and support and to influence global narratives on China-related protests abroad. In part, such efforts by the CCP to alienate diaspora communities point to the importance of strengthening solidarity networks and global movement resilience.



Key recommendations

To the government of the PRC

- Abolish or amend, in line with international human rights law, key provisions that have been used to justify TNR of those engaged in free expression and peaceful assembly, including the 2024 [guidelines](#) to the 2005 Anti-Secession Law (targeting Taiwan), the 2023 revised Counter-Espionage Law (used to encourage greater harassment of overseas protesters), or in Hong Kong the 2020 National Security Law, among others.
- Take immediate steps to cease international wrongful acts, as per Resolution 56/83 on the responsibility of states for international wrongful acts, guarantee non-repetition, and support full reparations for harms caused by actions of state actors, such as embassy or United Front actors, or their proxies.

To host governments

- Take concrete steps to reduce the noted disparity in awareness and response capacity between national- and local-level officials in addressing TNR of protesters.
- Regularly conduct open consultations with members of the diaspora community and its allies involved in protest against PRC human rights abuses, as part of systemic efforts to monitor and address TNR.

- Distinguish TNR targeting individuals from foreign influence and other espionage actions (which tend to target the state) to ensure a human rights-forward, needs-based response that is centred on individuals.
- Expand state funding for psychosocial and community support to ensure that efforts to counter TNR not only focus on national security but also prioritise support for the marginalised communities most often targeted by TNR.

To technology companies

- Working collaboratively with human rights organisations, and ensuring representation from those targeted by TNR, expand existing corporate human rights policies to include distinct acknowledgment of and provisions for TNR, such as within corporate human rights policies or community guidelines.
- Ensure greater transparency and disclose supply-chain entanglements that may create the opportunity for economic or political pressure that contradicts companies' responsibilities under the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, among others, especially those that may result in undue censorship or surveillance of those engaged in protest in China or overseas.
- Closely monitor and label information threats, and work with freedom of expression organisations to ensure any measures to limit the impact of such threats are in line with human rights standards on permissible limitations of freedom of expression and information.

Methodology

This report is based on desk research and interviews with 29 representatives of diaspora communities from China, including ethnic Han Chinese, Uyghurs, Tibetans, Kazakhs, and Mongolians, as well as Hong Kongers. We also spoke with Taiwanese citizens facing PRC harassment in Taiwan. Interviews were mainly carried out between April–July and November–December 2024. The interviews were conducted in English and Chinese via secure messaging applications. Interviews covered protests taking place between 2011 and 2024 in 12 countries. Interviewees were located in Australia, Canada, Germany, India, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Taiwan, the UK, and the US. Interviews have been verified and supplemented with desk research, credible news media, and other reports of the relevant cases.

ARTICLE 19 also relied on preceding research on broader TNR themes to inform our desk research, including research by Amnesty International, Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI), Citizen Lab, Doublethink Lab, Freedom House, Hong Kong Democracy Council (HKDC), Human Rights Watch, Safeguard Defenders, Tibetan Centre for Human Rights and Democracy (TCHRD), and the Uyghur Human Rights Project (UHRP).

Some of those approached expressed concerns about retaliation against their relatives in their hometowns in China. In line with ARTICLE 19's *do no harm* principle, interviewees gave informed consent to participate in online interviews and for the publication of all the information in this report. Interviewees understood the potential risks of participating in the interviews. They understood that they could choose to talk or have their information published anonymously, and that they could withdraw their consent to the publication of their testimonies at any time.

ARTICLE 19 thanks everyone who shared their experiences for this report.



Timeline of protest and repression in the PRC

1989

Tiananmen Square

After months of pro-democracy demonstrations in Beijing and around the country, the 4 June [massacre](#) in Tiananmen Square caused the deaths of possibly thousands. Its legacy has become the [epitome](#) of the PRC crackdown on protest and commemoration, while Beijing has sought to censor any trace of the incident or its legacy at home and abroad. Its anniversary is a major annual protest observed around the world.

2008

Tibetan uprising

On 10 March, hundreds of monks and nuns marched in Lhasa and other Tibetan areas in peaceful [protest](#) to commemorate the Dalai Lama's 1959 escape from Tibet and protest rights violations against Tibetans ahead of the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing. Over successive days, authorities responded with violence, thousands were arrested, and several hundred were [reportedly](#) killed.

2009

Ürümqi protests

On 5 July, a peaceful protest against government inaction over the killing of several Uyghur migrant workers in a factory in Southern China quickly escalated into brutal inter-ethnic violence. The Uyghur Human Rights Project [documented](#) security forces' use of deadly force against peaceful protesters, with Human Rights Watch [reporting](#) other violations. To prevent information flow, authorities implemented an [internet shutdown](#) for 10 months.

2014

Umbrella Movement

From 26 September to 15 December, millions of demonstrators occupied major sections of central Hong Kong calling for genuine multi-party democracy in the election of Hong Kong's Chief Executive, as promised under the [Basic Law](#). Police responded with [excessive force](#). The US State Department [2014 Human Rights Report on China](#) noted censorship of terms including 'umbrella', 'Hong Kong police', and 'tear gas'.

2019

Hong Kong pro-democracy protests

Beginning in March, [protests](#) swelled following a draft extradition bill, reaching [nearly](#) 2 million participants in June. Police responded throughout the protests with [indiscriminate](#) violence. In June 2020, Hong Kong imposed the National Security Law (NSL), arbitrarily criminalising all such dissent. The Human Rights Committee has [called](#) on Hong Kong to repeal the NSL. Hong Kong has expanded a global hunt for protest leaders, including through issuing bounties of HK \$1 million (US \$128,650).

2020

Inner Mongolia protests

Beginning in late August, plans to replace the Mongolian language with Chinese in most subjects across schools in Southern Mongolia (also known as Inner Mongolia) sparked [widespread](#) protest across the province. By October, the Southern Mongolian Human Rights Information Center [estimated](#) that at least 8,000 Mongolians had been rounded up in the crackdown on those protesting for greater language and cultural rights.

2022

Beijing Sitong Bridge Protest

On 13 October, lone protester Peng Lifa (彭立发) unfurled a banner [calling](#) for the removal of 'dictator and national traitor Xi Jinping'. [Censors](#) scrambled to expunge images and the videos of the protest, even blocking use of 'Beijing' online for a time; yet the hashtag 'I saw it' was seen some 180,000 times before it, too, was blocked. As of October 2024, Peng Lifa remains [disappeared](#).

2022

White Paper Protests

Beginning in November in multiple cities across the PRC, people [gathered](#) – sometimes in groups of thousands – to protest ongoing Covid-19 restrictions and broader frustrations, using blank A4 pages to symbolise rampant censorship. The PRC [arrested](#) many, censored discussion or documentation, and sought to quell the protests' growth. Meanwhile, Italy-based Chinese diaspora member, Li Ying, who posts under the X (then Twitter) [account](#) *Teacher Li is not your Teacher* (李老师不是你老师), rose to prominence for [disseminating](#) posts, videos, and other protest-related content to a global audience. He now has some 1.7 million followers on X, but has been [subjected](#) to increasing TNR as a result of his protest advocacy.

Introduction

The right to protest is a formidable tool for inspiring change and improving human rights, especially for groups who have been traditionally marginalised. Peaceful protest allows for the expression of opinion, exposure of government abuses, and the nonviolent demand for accountability and remedy.

The People's Republic of China (PRC, or China) has experienced high-profile episodes of domestic protest, which, following crackdowns and censorship at home, have often inspired memorialisation and commemoration around the world.

Protests as high-profile as those outlined in the timeline above are rare – unsurprisingly, given the near-totalitarian level of surveillance and reprisal against domestic protesters – but smaller-scale acts of protest, including online (despite sophisticated [censorship](#)), are common.

As of November 2024, Freedom House's [China Dissent Monitor \(CDM\)](#) data showed a 27 percent increase from 2023. At the time of writing (early 2025), CDM has logged 7,377 episodes of dissent since June 2022.

As the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has sought to crack down on and censor discussion of domestic protest, it has also escalated acts of transnational repression.

For this report, we define **transnational repression (TNR)** as when governments or

their proxies engage in acts of repression outside their territories. It can take place in authoritarian states and democracies alike. It can include intimidation, [digital threats](#), abduction, forced repatriation, assassination, or targeting family members.

China is not unique in this regard (Iran, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Rwanda, and Turkey are also serious perpetrators), but 'the sheer scale of its operations makes it by far the most prolific perpetrator', [notes](#) Safeguard Defenders, which focuses on TNR. Citing China's own data from 2014–22, Safeguard Defenders finds that the PRC has forcibly returned [upwards](#) of 230,000 individuals from overseas. Although these numbers mainly account for those accused of fraud and other financial, rather than political, crimes, it is emblematic of the PRC's reach. Meanwhile, Freedom House [estimates](#) that the PRC's 'tactics affect millions of Chinese and minority populations from China in at least 36 host countries across every inhabited continent'. In April 2023, they [found](#) that, since 2014, China had been responsible for some 30 percent of all recorded acts of physical TNR alone. While such figures point to the sheer scale of Chinese TNR operations, there is a lack of documentation of TNR specifically targeting protest movements.

This report, and other human rights organisations, have documented this broader TNR against overseas ethnic and religious minorities – such as Kazakhs, [Mongolians](#), [Tibetans](#), [Uyghurs](#), and [Falun Gong](#) practitioners – as well as exiled ethnic Han Chinese and, increasingly, dissidents fleeing [Hong Kong](#) since the crackdown on the 2019 pro-democracy movement and imposition of the 2020 National Security Law. The PRC has also targeted non-citizens, such as Taiwanese nationals (both [abroad](#) and inside of Taiwan). Beijing denies Taiwan's sovereignty under its One China Principle. [Freedom House](#)

and [Amnesty International](#) have also documented TNR on university campuses around the world; Amnesty has drawn attention to students being pressured, before going abroad, to be patriotic and 'not do anything that harms the interests of the Chinese state' while overseas.

'Patriotism', under Xi Jinping, means Party-centric nationalism.¹ Despite prohibitions in the [Constitution](#), it is nationalism guided by Han chauvinism (大汉族主义).² This is seen in particular through efforts to erase cultural and linguistic uniqueness among Uyghur, Tibetan, and Mongolian populations. When combined, the strong ideological pressures of Party-centric ethno-nationalism can be a guiding force beyond the country's borders, whether directly communicated to officials or implied through proxies that stimulate proliferating TNR of protests against official CCP narratives.

The CCP perpetrates TNR through a diverse ecosystem of government agents, institutions, and proxies – including the Ministries of State (MSS) and Public Security (MPS), which operate a massive network of overseas [police stations](#) – as well as through embassy and consular officials and [volunteers](#). This decentralised approach makes it difficult to provide concrete evidence of Chinese officials' or their proxies' direct role. This intentionally complicates more direct attribution of state responsibility behind such human rights abuses abroad.

When it comes to TNR targeting protest abroad, arguably one of the most influential entities – and, by design, the least attributable – is the United Front system (the United Front Work Department or UFWD) (中共中央統一戰線工作部), which oversees all overseas Chinese affairs as well as ethnic and religious minority issues. As the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI), which has studied the system extensively, [explains](#):

'[U]nited front work is constantly evolving to reflect the CCP's global ambitions... Today, the overseas functions of united front work include increasing the CCP's political influence, interfering in the Chinese diaspora, suppressing dissident movements, [and] building a permissive international environment for a takeover of Taiwan.'

This includes targeting protesters abroad.

The UFWD coordinates with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as well as with the State Ethnic Affairs Commission and the State Administration for Religious Affairs. The Chinese Students and Scholars Associations (CSSA) also plays a major role in United Front work among overseas students. It includes other groups like the China Overseas Exchange Association, China Association for International Friendly Contact, and Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries, and – especially – the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office (OCAO).

In a 2018 report on United Front work, the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission, for example, [cited](#) US intelligence officials reporting Chinese

agents monitoring and directing counter-protesters to block thousands of Chinese students during Olympic torch relay protests in San Francisco in 2008.

More recently, in January 2022 a Canadian federal court [upheld](#) a previous decision finding that OCAO engages in acts 'contrary to Canada's interests', pointing in particular to its interactions with overseas Chinese communities as surreptitious through 'intelligence gathering, surveillance, and subversion'. Furthermore, as [reported](#) by *Global News*, a Canadian government report at the time found that OCAO was 'involved in covert action and coercion against [overseas Chinese] communities and other minorities around the world by targeting Chinese dissidents overseas', and that it 'organizes and monitors overseas Chinese business, student, cultural, media, and political networks'.

Some of the individuals interviewed for this report noted seeing representatives from several such overseas associations involved in harassment against them at protests.

This is not to say that *all* acts of TNR are directed by the CCP or affiliated actors, as some counter-protesters are plausibly acting of their own volition based on their own beliefs. One such group of pro-CCP influencers, often but not always acting on instruction, is [dubbed](#) the 'little pinks' (小粉紅): online youth supporters who engage in information manipulation and digital TNR.

For this research, ARTICLE 19 identifies protests during high-level state visits or outside embassies and consulates as key sites of dissent and repression. We

document how the PRC targets family members living in China as reprisal for overseas protest activity. We add to the documentation on agents of the state, such as embassy or consulate officials, perpetrating TNR, as well as the appearance of United Front and other proxies engaged in counter-protest. We assess the role of digital TNR in the targeting of protesters around the world, as well as how online information-manipulation operations have sought to delegitimise protest in China and influence global narratives on China-related protests. Recognising the distinct psychosocial harm associated with being targeted by TNR, we also examine how protesters are experiencing such harms. The report concludes with a series of recommendations.

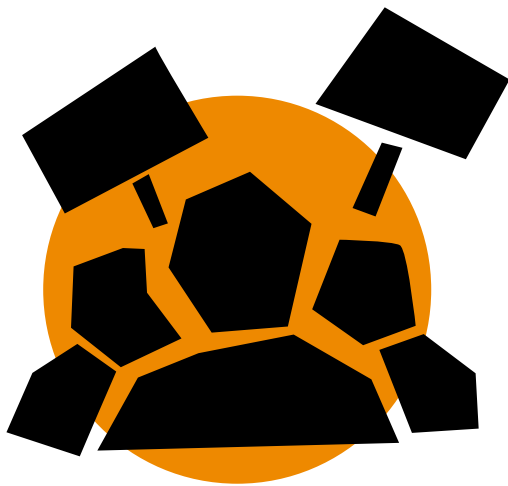
This report points to a campaign of international harassment and intimidation designed with one purpose: to systematically stifle global protest movements that seek to defend human rights in China.





Protest on Human Rights Day
(10 December) 2022 in London.
(Photo: China Deviants)

Transnational repression against protesters



The CCP's crackdown on the right to protest has gone global. The Party and its proxies have embraced TNR to harass, intimidate, and assault protesters around the globe for exercising their rights to expression and protest.

As noted above, TNR affects millions of ethnic Chinese and minority populations from China across the world. While these numbers encapsulate the totality of tactics employed against all demographic groups, there is arguably not enough documentation of the scale of TNR directly targeting protesters. While it is impossible to determine an exact number of global PRC-related protests each year and the frequency of TNR, some big-picture context to frame the issue is possible before moving on to present emblematic case studies.

The World Uyghur Congress shared estimates with ARTICLE 19 that there may be some 150–300 Uyghur related protests every year. Many of these are timed around key dates, such as in recognition of the 2009 Ürümqi protests (5 July) or the National Day of the PRC (1 October). For each of these, there could be 20–25 protests in cities around

Europe, Canada, and the US alone. While the frequency of harassment tends to vary from place to place, most respondents shared with ARTICLE 19 their perception that TNR tends to be most pronounced against protests taking place during Chinese leaders' state visits. That said, Uyghur rights defenders interviewed for this report, and in other conversations with ARTICLE 19, all drew attention to the protracted fear of TNR over their ongoing rights advocacy and protest involvement.

The Tibetan diaspora also organises protests on key dates, such as Tibetan Uprising Day (10 March) or the Dalai Lama's birthday (6 July). While the largest Tibetan diaspora community is in India, which also hosts the Central Tibetan Administration government in exile, there are sizeable communities across North America, Europe, and Australia who mark these dates with rallies or protests. However, diaspora community presence alone does not indicate frequency of protest; the Tibetan Centre for Human Rights and Democracy (TCHRD) informed ARTICLE 19 that, despite Nepal hosting a sizeable population of Tibetans, heavy restrictions are in place to pre-empt and detain those who might protest. We made similar findings in Nepal on the appearance of quid pro quo securitisation in exchange for development cooperation from China in our earlier report, [The Digital Silk Road: China and the rise of digital repression in the Indo-Pacific](#).

For a sense of the scale of protests organised by Chinese human rights defenders in exile, one example is the

near-weekly protests in Los Angeles and New York organised by the overseas China Democracy Party (CDP) (中国民主党). In terms of sheer numbers, the CDP alone is responsible for some 100 protests a year just in the US. Human Rights in China (HRIC) Director, Zhou Fengsuo, told ARTICLE 19 that he believes TNR targeting protesters in the US has become less frequent in recent years following recent FBI indictments, but

that more awareness raising is needed, especially for local-level law enforcement.

As explored below, measuring the scale of TNR against those engaged in protest is complicated by the fact that it is not confined to single acts or episodes. Instead, for many, it is a protracted form of violence characterised by daily fear – not just for themselves, but for their loved ones.

Attacks against protesters during Chinese leaders' state visits

ARTICLE 19 analysed coordinated harassment and attacks against protesters during Chinese leaders' state visits in the US, Hungary, and New Zealand.

Our findings show that Chinese leaders' state visits are among the most common targets for protest and organised pro-CCP counter-protests. This emphasises the responsibility of host countries' governments to ensure their preparations for Chinese leaders' state visits support the right to protest, including by increasing resources to prevent TNR targeting protesters.

'We thought, you know, we must protest there because that was definitely the closest distance we could ever get to Xi Jinping and that our voices could actually be directly heard by him.'

Anna Kwok

(Executive Director, Hong Kong Democracy Council)

United States

From 11–17 November 2023, leaders from the 21 member states of the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation Forum (APEC) [met](#) in San Francisco. The Associated Press [reported](#) thousands of protesters during the summit. This included demonstrations from human rights groups highlighting abuses in the PRC, as well as pro-CCP



counter-protesters. At least 35 pro-CCP groups [received](#) money and travel support from the Chinese Consulate General in Los Angeles. An [investigation](#) by *The Washington Post* uncovered coordinated efforts by Chinese diplomats and United Front affiliated groups connected to TNR against Chinese, Tibetan, Hong Kong, and Uyghur activists. ARTICLE 19 has heard from observers that similar tactics were at play during the smaller-scale 2024 APEC summit in Lima, Peru.

Anna Kwok (郭鳳儀), Executive Director of Hong Kong Democracy Council (HKDC), witnessed first-hand many attacks and the harassment of protesters during the 2023 APEC summit. In July 2024, HKDC and Students for a Free Tibet (SFT) published a [joint report](#) extensively documenting cases of well-organised harassment, intimidation, and assault during the summit. They found that, 'in many cases, united front groups and figures were present during acts of assault, intimidation, and harassment, and some actively participated in them'. Speaking with ARTICLE 19, Kwok highlighted the harassment, intimidation, and assault that occurred during the protests:

'Assaults by people who appeared to be supporters of the CCP happened often during the week of APEC. These assaults were so violent that protesters had to be sent to the hospital... [they] sustained injuries and impacts that required months of treatment.'

However, despite the level of violence, she also spoke highly of the value of solidarity across movements: a critical point on resilience, and one echoed by many within the overseas Hong Kong human rights movement:

'In every protest I have attended, especially the ones [during APEC] with Hong Kongers and Tibetans, fellow protesters kept me surrounded to protect me against possible physical assault. Our community's resilience and strength are the reasons I have not been physically attacked thus far.'

Speaking at a US Congressional Executive Committee on China (CECC) [press conference](#) on the APEC protest crackdown on 12 December 2023, Pema Doma (SFT Executive Director) [argued](#) that the APEC protest marked an escalation in TNR against protesters.

She relayed an account, from 15 November, of a group of four Tibetan students unfurling a banner from the upper floor of a car park reading: 'Dictator Xi, your time is up'. As Doma expressed in her testimony, it was 'a message that millions of Tibetans and billions of Chinese would wish to tell Xi Jinping but may not have the freedom'. They were confronted by around 10–15 counter-protesters, who pulled the banner so violently that it almost caused several student protesters to fall from the fifth-floor building. Doma told us that one of the protesters, a 20-year-old Tibetan American student, called her after the attack and was traumatised. Doma said she had never witnessed such a level of fear and intimidation in her activism in the US.

In December 2023, the US Congressional Executive Committee on China (CECC) issued a [letter](#) to the Attorney General pointing to the appearance of coordinated TNR operations from the CCP. Between 2022 and 2024, in particular, the Justice Department issued a number of indictments against various CCP-affiliated actors accused of TNR activities in the US.

Hungary

Chemi Lhamo (SFT Campaign Director) and another protester attacked during the 2023 APEC summit shared a case that took place in Hungary with ARTICLE 19.

In May 2024, Xi Jinping concluded a European delegation by meeting with Viktor Orbán, the Prime Minister of Hungary, who has sought to [deepen](#) cooperation with the PRC while [blocking](#) the EU's criticism of its human rights record. In May 2024, the leaders [agreed](#) to an 'all-weather comprehensive strategic partnership'.

Lhamo told ARTICLE 19:

'In Hungary, our fellow Tibetan activist, who was protesting with a Tibetan flag against Xi Jinping's visit, was told by pro-Beijing protesters that they would throw him off the cliff.'

United Front organisations appear to have also played a role in coordinating pro-CCP demonstrations to welcome Xi Jinping in Hungary. One example is the Hungarian Qingtian Association, which has [ties](#) to overseas Chinese police stations in Hungary. [According](#) to Member of Parliament Márton Tompos, the Hungarian Qingtian Association was responsible for coordinating 'security and welcome'. It would [appear](#) they had some impact on the Hungarian authorities, which refused a number of requests from protesters seeking to raise human rights concerns during Xi's visit. One such group, the Hungarian Tibet Supporter Society (*Tibetet Segítő Társaság*), was [refused](#) formal requests to display Tibetan flags along Xi Jinping's motorcade route.

Xi's visit was met by various demonstrators seeking to raise awareness and protest human rights abuses in the PRC, including Márton Tompos. In an interview with Taiwanese media, he [expressed](#) criticism of closer ties between Hungary and the PRC, noting that Taiwan would be a far better strategic partner. In this vein, [some](#) protesters wore Taiwanese flags or images

of Winnie the Pooh, including at least one person dressing in a costume of Winnie the Pooh – an often-censored [symbol](#) that has been used to evade suppression of direct criticism of Xi Jinping.



A person dressed as Winnie the Pooh holds a balloon as people gather to protest against Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to Hungary. Budapest, 9 May 2024. (Photo: Bernadett Szabo/Reuters)

Chemi Lhamo [told](#) Radio Free Asia (RFA) she had come to 'peacefully protest Xi's genocidal policies in Tibet, East Turkistan, Hong Kong and beyond'. Other Tibetan protesters reported being harassed by pro-CCP demonstrators, who ripped banners and flags from their hands and physically assaulted them, while police did not intervene.

Talking to ARTICLE 19 from Geneva, where she was a [speaker](#) at the Geneva Summit for Human Rights and Democracy, Lhamo recalled how she and fellow Tibetan protesters felt unsafe in Hungary when suspicious unidentified Chinese individuals followed them. 'We have watched and seen security agents following us at various spaces, be it in Hungary or right now in Geneva,' she said.

New Zealand

Similar experiences have been reported in the Pacific. In June 2024, Chinese Premier Li Qiang [visited](#) Auckland, New Zealand, where he met with New Zealand Prime Minister Christopher Luxon. During the visit, New Zealand media [pressed](#) Li Qiang on PRC foreign influence operations in the country, including allegations of kidnapping, assault, and harassment, as well as targeted hacking of members of parliament and a prominent academic, Anne-Marie Brady. He did not reply.

On 14 June, amid a larger [crowd](#) of some 200 pro-CCP demonstrators waving Chinese flags, two protesters demonstrated outside the Cordis Hotel, where Li Qiang was staying. One demonstrator, Xing Jian (刑堅), [filmed](#) as his fellow protester Michael Zhuang carried the Taiwan flag through the crowd and chanted: 'Freedom and independence for Taiwan, Hong Kong, Tibet, Uyghurs and for China'.

Xing continued filming as a group of pro-CCP protesters attacked them. He relayed the attack to ARTICLE 19. His account is [corroborated](#) by video published by the New Zealand media outlet *Stuff*. He explained how the pro-CCP demonstrators confronted Michael and started to beat him up, and then turned their aggression against Xing, who was knocked to the ground and lost his glasses. He recalled an official-looking person in a suit, who he thought might have been from the consulate, telling the pro-CCP demonstrators to attack them. The attack stopped when a passer-by intervened.

Xing shared a screenshot with ARTICLE 19, from a WeChat group, calling on overseas Chinese students to volunteer to 'show patriotic enthusiasm', 'create a friendly social atmosphere between China and New Zealand', and welcome 'our motherland with youthful enthusiasm' during the premier's visit. The notice said the organisers would express 'sincere gratitude' by providing free meals during the event and issuing 'surprise thank you letters to all volunteers', which Xing assumed meant financial compensation. This tactic has been [reported](#) in other instances, too, such as support from the Chinese Consulate General in Los Angeles during the 2023 APEC summit.

The message included a link to a Google Forms registration, which referred to the event as a 'CSSA' activity. CSSA is the acronym for the Chinese Students and Scholars Associations: a major coordinator of United Front work among overseas students, according to research by [ASPI](#) and [Amnesty International](#). CSSA often works under the guidance of embassies and consulates. The registration [link](#) is no longer active.

Xing recounted seeing banners of United Front-affiliated organisations at the event. These included New Zealand Chinese Women's United Foundation, China–New Zealand Cultural Exchange Center, New Zealand Chinese Entrepreneurs Association, New Zealand Chinese Association, and the New Zealand Guangxi

Association. He told ARTICLE 19 that one of the assailants was the former chairman of the New Zealand Association for Promoting Peaceful Reunification of China. The man's identity was confirmed, along with other senior roles he had held with the Asia-Pacific Cultural Exchange Centre (another United Front organisation), after a parallel [investigation](#) by *Stuff* applying facial recognition to Xing's video.

Xing believes these groups were supported by the Chinese embassy and Overseas Chinese Affairs Office (OCAO) as part of their United Front work in New Zealand. He said:

'It shows that the Chinese government's infiltration in New Zealand is very serious. The New Zealand government should step up more measures and take actions to protect the safety of Chinese people who are not pro-Beijing here. That's the way to protect the values that New Zealand treasures.'

Attacks against protesters outside Chinese embassies and consulates

Another key site of TNR is outside Chinese embassies and consulates. Our research shows that embassy and consular staff have also perpetrated harassment and violence, hence ARTICLE 19 finds Chinese state responsibility for these actions.

ARTICLE 19 looked at two illustrative cases of protest suppression outside embassies and consulates in the UK and Kazakhstan, and examined the trend more broadly in other countries in Europe and North America.

United Kingdom

On 16 October 2022, the National Party Congress, which saw Xi Jinping assume an unprecedented third term, kicked off in Beijing, which was already on high alert, especially since the Sitong Bridge Protest three days earlier. Information operations were in [overdrive](#). This included increased intimidation of petitioners and the deployment of 'bridge watcher' security forces to prevent follow-on protests; redoubled Party propaganda extolling Xi Jinping's accomplishments; and intensified online censorship. *China Digital Times* [leaked](#) a Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC) list of nearly 35,500 phrases to be censored if appearing in relation to Xi Jinping's name.



Hong Kong diaspora protest outside the Chinese embassy in Canada. (Photo: Anonymous protester; with thanks to Lady Liberty Hong Kong)

Timed with Xi Jinping's opening remarks, some 5,000 miles away, a group of largely Hong Kong pro-democracy protesters gathered in front of the Chinese Consulate in Manchester, UK. Among their [displays](#) was a life-sized poster depicting Xi Jinping as a half-naked emperor gazing at his own reflection in a mirror, grasping bloodied symbols of Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Ukraine. Banners read 'End CCP'.

The demonstration quickly turned violent as consulate officials dressed in motorcycle helmets and padded vests attacked the protesters. One of them, Bob Chan, a [British National \(Overseas\) visa](#) holder since fleeing Hong Kong, was violently [dragged](#) by masked men into the consulate grounds and beaten. A Facebook Live video from the incident, [republished](#) by *The Guardian*, depicts consulate officials attempting to destroy protest banners; another angle clearly shows Chan being beaten after he was dragged into the consulate grounds.

British police pulled him out to safety, and he was treated at a hospital for his injuries.

At a press conference on 19 October, in addition to detailing his assault, Chan [shared](#) fears that his family in Hong Kong might face reprisal – a typical tactic in TNR of overseas protesters, as explored below.

PRC Consul General in Manchester, Zheng Xiyuan (郑曦原), later admitted to the attack, [telling](#) Sky News that Chan 'was abusing my country, my leader, I think it's my duty'.

On 24 October, some 1,000 Hong Kongers in London [marched](#) from Downing Street (the UK Prime Minister's residence) to the Chinese Embassy in solidarity with Chan and the other protesters in Manchester. At a rally ahead of the march, speakers included Hong Kongers, Tibetans, and Uyghurs as a show of cross-movement solidarity, the importance of which numerous activists emphasised to ARTICLE 19.



Masked men drag Bob Chan into the grounds of the Chinese Consulate, where he was beaten, following a Hong Kong pro-democracy protest in Manchester, UK, 16 October 2022. (Photo: c/o Bob Chan)

For example, Ni Peiqing (倪沛晴), a UK-based organiser with the overseas student activist collective [China Deviants](#), explained to ARTICLE 19 how her group seeks to create a safe space for Chinese overseas students to benefit from interacting with diverse groups of protesters. In this way, she explained, they could build a solidarity network and promote civic awareness. She hopes that those who return to China can bring back with them this perspective to lay the foundation for a civil society ready someday for democratic reforms.

Police launched an investigation into the Manchester incident, and the UK Foreign Office sought clarification of consular official actions with the Chinese government. A month later, police [had](#) identified a number of offences committed by the officials. The incident [escalated](#) with the UK government requesting the Chinese consulate officials to waive their right to diplomatic immunity for the investigation. In December 2022, the Chinese government recalled the six officials from the consulate back to Beijing. Then-UK Foreign Secretary James Cleverly [expressed](#) disappointment that none of the officials would face legal consequences for the attack on peaceful protesters in the UK.

For Chinese protesters abroad, the incident raised other serious concerns in addition to the use of violence by CCP officials, especially the fear of forcible rendition if forced inside embassy or consulate grounds.

In an opinion piece published in *The Guardian* two days after the incident, prominent Hong Kong pro-democracy figure Nathan Law, who now lives in exile, [wrote](#):

'I can't help but imagine what would happen if I was taken to a Chinese embassy. Would I be detained in a small blackout room? Extradited to mainland China and have a forced confession on state television? Or disappeared for ever, like some of the dissidents in other embassies of autocracies?'

Despite all that transpired outside the consulate in 2022, protester Chan told ARTICLE 19: 'I will never give up on my fight for freedom and democracy.'

On 8 February 2025, some 30 human rights groups, including Hong Kongers, Tibetans, Uyghurs, Taiwanese, and Chinese allies gathered outside the Royal Mint Court in London to protest the proposed site for a new Chinese Embassy. The action, [attended](#) by an estimated 4,000 people and dubbed 'Space for Free Speech', was organised to oppose the establishment of what would be the largest Chinese embassy in Europe, at a site of strategic vulnerability in London. A number of protesters [told](#) the Guardian they were concerned the embassy would risk fuelling greater transnational repression in the heart of London. On 15 March a second protest drew some 6,000 participants, [according](#) to organisers, while a third demonstration on 3 May 2025 saw an [estimated](#) 3,000 protesters taking to the streets of London to protest the planned Chinese embassy and concerns over mounting TNR.

Kazakhstan

Baibolat Kunbolat, an ethnic Kazakh originally from the Ili Prefecture in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, immigrated with his wife and three children to Kazakhstan in 2002.

Second to the region's estimated 11 million Uyghurs, Kazakhs comprise around 1.6 million of the population in Xinjiang – or [East Turkistan](#), as preferred by many. Like [Uyghurs](#) and other Muslim minorities across East Turkistan, Kazakhs have [faced](#) persecution, surveillance, torture, and mass internment. This persecution spiked following the 2016 appointment of Chen Quanguo (陈全国) as Xinjiang Party Secretary after his time in Tibet (2011–16), where he has been [accused](#) of perfecting his fascistic policies of 'intense securitisation and forced assimilation'.

The PRC has invested considerable economic and political capital in pursuing a strategy of holistic influence in Kazakhstan, according to a recent report³ by the International Republican Institute (IRI). Since 2022, IRI finds that Kazakhstan has offered assurances that it will not join any alliances or treaties which could harm 'the sovereignty and security of the PRC', and that it commits to deeper cooperation in supporting the PRC on Taiwan- and Uyghur-related affairs, including 'to arrest

activists opposed to China's expanding economic influence in Kazakhstan'.

In Kazakhstan, PRC influence has been met by protests highlighting a [range of issues](#). They often focus on the mass internment and disappearance of over 1 million ethnic Kazakhs, Uyghurs, and other Muslim minorities in China. These actions are often organised under the banner of the Almaty-based grassroots movement [Nagiz Atajurt](#). In addition to organising protests, the group also operates a YouTube channel – which was briefly [blocked](#) in 2021 for vague 'violation of community guidelines' – that regularly posts video testimonies from family members of those imprisoned in East Turkistan.

Nagiz Atajurt [often](#) organises protests in front of the Chinese embassy or consulate in Kazakhstan, or during state visits. For example, on 8 June 2022, when Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi (王毅) [visited](#) Kazakh Foreign Minister Mukhtar Tileuberdi, protesters picketed outside the embassy in Nur-Sultan. Baibolat Kunbolat, one of the demonstrators, [told](#) Radio Free Europe:

'[W]e have been demanding our relatives' release since 2016. Today, when the two nations' foreign ministers are meeting, we want to let them know that we want them to contribute to the release of our loved ones.'

Kunbolat's protests have mainly focused on securing freedom for his brother, [Baimurat Nauryzbek](#), who was sentenced to 10 years in prison in 2018 over an online article he wrote in 2012. In addition to such episodes outside the embassy, Kunbolat demonstrated in front of the consulate in Almaty from late 2019 until 2024. Kazakh police detained him a number of times. At first, Kunbolat says, he was held for between 7 and 15 days, although he also cited the impact of international advocacy in securing shorter administrative detention periods. On 1 July 2021, police detained Kunbolat, along with others who regularly protested in front of the Chinese consulate, in an incident that relatives [speculated](#) to Radio Free Europe was linked to China's celebration of the centenary of the founding of the CCP. Kunbolat's mother was also briefly detained at her home in Almaty.

Kunbolat told ARTICLE 19 that, during his detention, authorities threatened his children. They also menacingly asked what would happen if he died in detention like [Dulat Agadil](#), a well-known pro-democracy activist who campaigned for Kazakhstan to speak out over persecution in East Turkistan. Agadil [died](#) in police custody in February 2020. For Kunbolat, the warning was clear. In February 2024, he and his family fled the country.



'Because I protested outside the Chinese Embassy in Kazakhstan, I believe that it's the Chinese government that put pressure on the Kazakh government to target me. As it's threatening to my family, I have no choice but to find ways to leave Kazakhstan and flee to the United States. I will continue my protests for my brother and other Kazakhs.'

Baibolat Kunbolat

Europe and North America

The Tibetan Centre for Human Rights and Democracy (TCHRD) has also [documented](#) cases of intimidation against Tibetans protesting outside consulates and embassies. In a 2024 report on TNR against Tibetan diaspora communities, they noted how, following regular Wednesday protests outside the Chinese consulate in Toronto, Canada, Tibetan visa applicants were suddenly only being called for interviews on Wednesdays. One diaspora community member speculated that the resulting awkward confrontations were a 'deliberate attempt to sow discord'.

Tenzin Dawa, TCHRD Executive Director, shared with ARTICLE 19 other cases of Chinese consular officials intimidating Tibetans applying for visas. For example, officials will ask visa applicants about not only their own personal information but also the broader Tibetan community, the kinds of events (such as rallies or protests) that might be taking place in the future, and the identities of politically active community members.

In other cases [documented](#) by TCHRD, consular officials explicitly told Tibetan visa applicants to abandon their protest activities if they wanted a visa to the PRC. TCHRD noted a decrease in Tibetans protesting at the UN compound and Chinese consulate in New York as a response to fears of reprisal against family members inside the PRC (an issue explored

further below). Dawa informed ARTICLE 19 that she believes this decrease really started around the time of Xi Jinping's second term in 2018, after which, repression against Tibetans intensified significantly.

TCHRD relayed cases of Tibetans who were photographed protesting outside Chinese consulates, and who later discovered that Chinese officials and police had shown these photos to their family members in China with a warning. As a form of collective punishment (explored further below), police order family members to instruct their overseas kin to stop their protest behaviour, or else their family could lose their jobs, be demoted, or have their identity cards or household registration cancelled. TCHRD has documented cases of this happening against Tibetan protesters in France, the Netherlands, North America, Switzerland, the UK, and elsewhere.

Other cases of physical violence and harassment against protesters

Ai-Men Lau, who worked with the Taiwan-based Doublethink Lab when she spoke with ARTICLE 19, has tracked TNR against Hong Kongers in Canada and elsewhere. She told us that, while protesters have almost come to expect physical assault, they may not always anticipate the speed and extremity of the violence. Our findings point to pro-CCP actors utilising varied forms of threats and physical violence, while United Front operations have even employed networks of organised crime. Such violence has also often involved the use of improvised weapons: from flagpoles and umbrellas to projectiles, including throwing bottles and red paint.

Another form of TNR against protesters includes exploitation of Interpol Red Notices and international arrest warrants: a tactic increasingly deployed by authorities in Hong Kong to target overseas Hong Kongers. Anna Kwok, Carmen Lau, Ching Kim-wah, Chloe Cheung, Dennis Kwok, Elmer Yuen, Finn Lau, Frances Hui, Joey Sui, Johnny Fok, Joseph Tay, Kevin Yam, Mung Siu Tat, Nathan Law, Simon Cheng, Ted Hui, Tony Choi, Tony Chung, and Victor Ho have been arbitrarily [charged](#) with national security crimes in Hong Kong and each subjected to a HK \$1 million (US \$128,373) bounty. Anna Kwok, Dennis Kwok, Elmer Yuen, Frances Hui, Joey Siu, Kevin Yam, and Ted Hui have also had their Hong Kong [passports arbitrarily cancelled](#). The arbitrary charges under national security laws in Hong Kong and the resulting TNR is part of

the broader trend of harassment of Hong Kong activists. The 19 Hong Kongers reside in Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

Those targeted by international arrest warrants have furthermore experienced myriad forms of TNR. Some have had threatening letters mailed to their [neighbours](#), while others have had their family harassed and detained in Hong Kong, as explored below.

Below, we also show how the PRC and its proxies have weaponised patriotic and nationalist memes on social media to promote and praise counter-protest and threats against overseas protesters. Taken with the other tactics noted in this report, we argue that this points to a coordinated effort at plausible deniability of state involvement in the proliferation of TNR against protesters. This section focuses on cases in the US, UK, and Taiwan.

United States

Chemi Lhamo was among the 34 [documented](#) protesters who were physically attacked during APEC 2023. Posting [images](#) of her bruises on X (formerly Twitter) on 15 November 2023, she explains how she was hit by a thrown water bottle. On 18 November, she [posted](#) a video of a separate attack, narrating that her hair was pulled and someone punched her head. In an apparently well-organised tactic, Chinese flags and poles were used as cover to prevent onlookers from more clearly documenting the assault. Lhamo's phone was grabbed and thrown into water to seemingly try to destroy the evidence she had been collecting of other physical attacks.

Speaking about the ordeal, she told ARTICLE 19:

'Our fellow young Tibetans were surrounded and beaten by Chinese thugs. We were attacked with flag poles without flags, and closed umbrellas aimed at the top of our heads.'

United Kingdom

'Before returning to China, the most satisfying thing I did was to crush Hong Kong independence supporters in the street.'

Southampton Hong Kong protest attacker

On 11 June 2023, advocacy group Hongkongers in Britain organised a small demonstration in Southampton, UK, to commemorate a key day for the pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong (12 June 2019, when some 40,000 protesters gathered to stall the reading of the Extradition Bill) when a group of pro-CCP activists [attacked](#) them.

A video [posted](#) by HKDC on X shows three Chinese men physically assaulting a young woman wearing a T-shirt bearing the slogan ‘Fight for Freedom, stand with Hong Kong’, as well as another Hong Konger. The assailants were heard chanting ‘Hong Kong belongs to China’ in Mandarin, and one of them was waving the Chinese flag. The video went viral, with 190,000 views at the time of writing. Another X user, The Great Translation Movement (大翻译运动), which has over 235,000 followers, [posted](#) what appeared to be Weibo and WeChat screenshots from the attackers praising themselves. One of them, identified as Gong Zheng (公正), wrote: ‘Before returning to China, the most satisfying thing I did was to crush Hong Kong independence supporters in the street.’ (回国前最爽的一件事就是在街上爆杀港独). The police [launched](#) an investigation.

Although not necessarily directly attributable to PRC proxies acting on direct instruction from the authorities, the attack – and the attackers’ attempts to attract publicity on Chinese social media – points to pro-CCP nationalist actors seeking attention for engaging in their ‘patriotic’ duties in line with entreaties from the state.

In August 2023, the Ministry of State Security (MSS) unveiled its own WeChat channel. Following the passage in April 2023 of an enhanced [Counterespionage Law](#), the MSS released guidelines [stipulating](#) that everyone should promptly report violators and anyone who is ‘coerced or deceived into joining espionage organisations or hostile organisations abroad, and engage in activities harmful to the national security of the country’. The law applies to any critical actions, including peaceful protest. As such, the MSS WeChat channel and reporting directive effectively operate as an imperative for Chinese people abroad to report on the activities of overseas protesters.

Taiwan

On 1 October 2024 (National Day of the PRC), Chinese nationals attacked a small pro-Hong Kong protest in Taiwan. The counter-protesters knocked down flags bearing a slogan associated with the 2019 pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong: ‘Restoration of Hong Kong, Revolution of Our Times’. As they pulled at the protest banners, the attackers [shouted](#): ‘Taiwan and Hong Kong belong to China’, and: ‘Today is China’s National Day, and I won’t allow the displaying of these flags’. The protest organisers – Sky Fung (馮詔天) (Secretary General of [Hong Kong Outlanders](#)) and Kacey Wong (黃國才) (Hong Kong artist), who both live in exile in Taiwan – witnessed the assault.

Fung says of the four protests his group organised in Taiwan in 2024, this incident was one of two where pro-CCP proxies targeted them. Fung told ARTICLE 19 he believes the counter-protesters’ actions reflect the impact of CCP brainwashing. He said he appreciated the Taiwanese authorities’ quick response: the Chinese nationals were [deported](#) the next day, after being found to be faking their claims of being in Taiwan to visit relatives, and their entry permits were revoked.

Other anti-protest actions targeting Hong Kong solidary protests in Taiwan have involved attacking high-profile activists with red paint. On 29 September 2019, for example, Hong Kong pop singer and Canadian citizen Denise Ho Wan-see (何韻詩) was [assaulted](#) with red paint during a solidarity rally attended by around 100,000 people in Taipei. Such solidarity rallies are an important type of protest across the global China human rights movement – and such assaults are common at them, as Ho [told](#) *Straits Times*:

‘[A] lot of social activists in Hong Kong are actually subjected to situations like this every day. I think this is very obviously a sort of suppression and intimidation.’

Following an investigation of the attack against her, authorities arrested 11 individuals, many of whom were [members](#) of the Dachen Nostalgia Culture Association (大陳島鄉情文化促進會) and Chinese Unification Promotion Party (CUPP) (中華統一促進黨): pro-CCP groups in Taiwan.

Similarly to how the Southampton attackers were praised on Chinese social media, following the paint attack the *Global Times*, a CCP propaganda outlet, [quoted](#) a Beijing professor justifying the assault as the ‘indignation of Chinese patriots’ in Taiwan. Such online messaging, praising acts of violence against protesters, can supplant direct guidance from the authorities as more plausible deniability of state responsibility in ongoing acts of TNR.

In April 2020, prominent Hong Kong bookseller Lam Wing Kee (林榮基) was also [attacked](#) with paint days before opening [Causeway Bay Books](#) in Taipei, which specialises in texts critical of CCP leaders. The bookstore was located in Hong Kong until it was forced to close: in 2015, authorities [disappeared](#) Lam and four colleagues, including Swedish citizen Gui Minhai (桂民海), who was abducted from

Thailand and remains arbitrarily imprisoned in China, and UK citizen Lee Bo (李波), who was abducted from inside Hong Kong. All three have appeared on Chinese television delivering [forced confessions](#). Lam fled to Taiwan in 2019, where, in addition to running his bookstore, he has since participated in protests denouncing the PRC’s human rights violations and other actions decrying PRC pressure over Taiwan’s sovereignty.

Following the paint attack, Facebook user Jonathan Gao posted the following [warning](#) on Taiwan’s Mainland Affairs Council (大陸委員會) Facebook page:

‘Lam Wing Kee, be careful. This is just the first warning to you. We have many brothers in Taipei and can kill you in a flash.’

Gao’s profile declared that he was a member of the Republic of China Patriots Association (中華愛國同心會) and others, including CUPP.

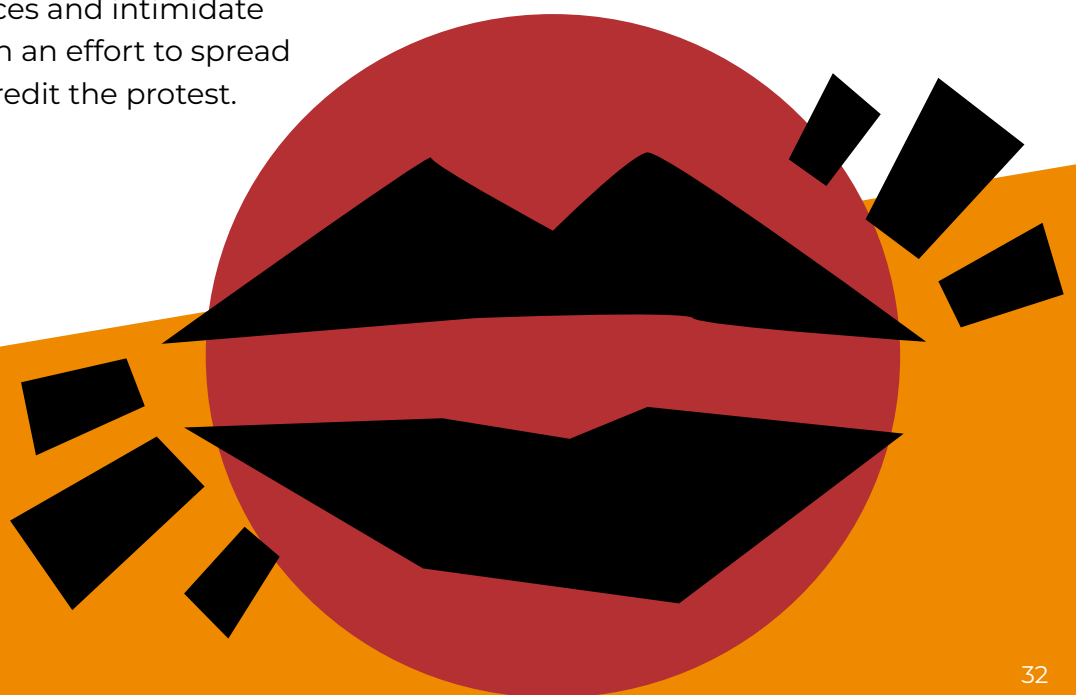
These cases are emblematic of TNR trends in Taiwan, as relayed to ARTICLE 19 by Shih Yi-hsiang (施逸翔) (Secretary General of Taiwan Human Rights Association) and Chiu Eeling (邱伊翎) (Executive Director of Amnesty International Taiwan), who explained that members of CUPP harass, intimidate, and attack protesters.

CUPP was founded in 2005 by [Chang An-Le](#) (張安樂) – also known as the White Wolf (白狼) – in Guangdong, Southern China, while he lived there as a fugitive. Chang had [previously](#) served around 10 years in prison in the US for drug trafficking. CUPP has [documented](#) ties to organised crime and has relied on [violent](#) influence tactics. Its establishment in China, preoccupation with ‘reunification’, and subversive and destabilising tactics bear the hallmarks of a [United Front operation in Taiwan](#). On 6 November 2024, Taiwan’s Ministry of the Interior said it was seeking the forcible dissolution of CUPP, [noting](#) that CUPP had systematically operated on behalf of the CCP in Taiwan in ways that undermine ‘public security and social order, infringe on physical freedoms and rights of assembly, and clearly endanger the liberal democratic constitutional order’.

Shih and Chiu told ARTICLE 19 how CUPP proxies attend demonstrations that support Tibet, the annual Tiananmen Square Massacre memorialisation, or other protests, pretending to be supporters. They then create disturbances and intimidate others, while filming, in an effort to spread disinformation to discredit the protest.

One example Shih highlighted took place in June 2022, when suspected CUPP agitators [vandalised](#) a replica of the Pillar of Shame, sculpture by Danish artist Jens Galschiøt commemorating those killed in the Tiananmen Square Massacre, which had been [installed](#) on Democracy Boulevard on 4 June that year. The best-known version of the sculpture had been displayed at the University of Hong Kong for 23 years until it was removed by authorities in 2021 following the passing of the National Security Law.

One of the commemoration organisers in Taipei, Zeng Jianyuan (曾建元), [told](#) the Central News Agency he believed such acts of vandalism are meant to warn Taiwanese protesters not to focus on the Tiananmen Square Massacre and CCP issues. He added that, if Taiwanese people stop speaking up, then nobody in the Chinese-speaking world will be left to speak up.



Harassment of PRC-based relatives in reprisal for overseas protests

Human rights groups, from [Safeguard Defenders](#) to [Chinese Human Rights Defenders](#), have documented the expansion of 'collective punishment' under Xi Jinping: the targeting of family members – including children – of human rights defenders to coerce confessions or halt their rights defence. Escalation of TNR has likewise seen increasing collective punishment targeting family members for the actions of the diaspora, a task often [overseen](#) by the Ministry of Public Security (MPS). This is often most pronounced for Uyghur and Tibetan activists, but is also increasingly being noted by the Hong Kong diaspora community.

One recent example: following the 8 February 2025 protest in London against the planned Chinese super embassy, on 10 February Hong Kong National Security police [took](#) Carmen Lau's aunt and uncle for questioning: a clear case of collective punishment for her ongoing human rights activities abroad.

Carmen Lau is a former Hong Kong district councillor (elected during the 2019 pro-democracy protests) and Deputy Secretary General of the now-disbanded Civic Party. In 2021, she fled Hong Kong for the UK, where she resides and now works with the HKDC. Like her colleague Anna Kwok, she is one of 19 Hong Kongers charged under the National Security Law and [subjected](#) to an international arrest warrant and HK \$1 million bounty. Speaking after her family members' arrest, Carmen [told](#) *Radio Free Asia*:

'The timing and intent behind this move are quite obvious – coming after our meeting with the Foreign Secretary and the protest against the Chinese Super-Embassy ... This is nothing more than an attempt to intimidate Hong Kongers, both in Hong Kong and overseas.'

In an escalation of collective punishment against overseas Hong Kong activists, on 30 April 2025, Hong Kong National Security Police arrested Anna Kwok's father. Police also arrested her brother, but he was released on bail. On 2 May 2025, Hong Kong National Security Police formally [charged](#) her father with 'directly or indirectly' dealing with the finances of an 'absconder' under Section 90 of the Safeguarding National Security Ordinance, which carries a maximum penalty of seven years in prison. On 8 May 2025, her father – who is 68 years old – was [denied](#) bail on national security grounds upon custody hearing.

The paranoia among activists that one day they are going to get a phone call from their family members at the police station confirming all their worst fears – that the authorities are surveilling them, and that their activism has impacted their family – is also a major source of mental anguish. Ai-Men Lau, the activist focusing on the psychosocial impact of TNR, explains that this is a kind of cognitive dissonance for Chinese overseas protesters, who want to protect their family but also want to engage in the international activism they believe in.

For example, Abdujelil Emet, originally from Aksu Prefecture in East Turkistan, has lived in Germany for over two decades, where he is a volunteer with the Munich-based World Uyghur Congress, which often organises protests across Europe. In 2019, Emet relayed an emblematic case to *The Guardian*. Two days after attending a human rights hearing in the German parliament, Emet received a call from his sister, who was still in East Turkistan and with whom he hadn't spoken for three years. She began by extolling the CCP and how much better her life was under its guidance, before telling him that their brother had died a year earlier. Hearing whispers in the background, Emet asked to speak to the unknown voice, upon which the phone was handed to a Chinese official who refused to identify himself. In tears, Emet's sister begged him to stop his activism. The official took back the receiver to deliver the final warning:

'You're living overseas, but you need to think of your family while you're running around doing your activism work in Germany ... You need to think of their safety.'

Nearly everyone interviewed for this report relayed similar experiences to ARTICLE 19 of their families in China being subjected to harassment by the authorities. Through cases in Australia, Germany, India, the Netherlands, and the US, our research points to PRC practices of harassing, threatening, and in some cases overseeing the deaths in custody of family members of activists. The experiences of Uyghurs and Tibetans have tended to be the most severe. The rationale, based on interviewees' determinations, ranged from efforts to threaten them into ending their protests and other advocacy to outright reprisal for their advocacy.

United States

Enghebatu Togocho, Director of Southern Mongolian Human Rights Information Center, told ARTICLE 19 that local officials from the Ministry of State Security and Provincial Ministry of Public Security often visit his family in his hometown and question them about his human rights advocacy in the US. He explained how his parents and relatives are often coerced to 'educate' him about the CCP's 'amazing' achievements, and to relay Party messages that 'the door is always open to [him] if he



Mass protest organised by the World Uyghur Congress and Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO) in Brussels, 27 April 2018. (Photo: World Uyghur Congress)

admits to his mistakes and is willing to take the path of becoming a good person’.

[Rushan Abbas](#), a leading US-based international Uyghur rights advocate and Executive Director of Campaign for Uyghurs (CFU), is a frequent speaker at international events and a fixture at global protests for Uyghur rights. Her sister, Gulshan Abbas, a retired medical doctor in China, was disappeared on 11 September 2018 in Ürümqi, East Turkistan. Many have [speculated](#) that Gulshan’s disappearance was in retaliation for Rushan’s activism; she was taken only six days after Rushan delivered a major speech at a public event in Washington, DC. In 2019, Gulshan was [sentenced in secret](#) to 20 years in prison. Her fate and whereabouts remain unknown. In a June 2024 communication, the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders [wrote](#): ‘I am appalled by the continued imprisonment of Gulshan Abbas in apparent retaliation for her sister’s criticism of the Chinese authorities’ treatment of Uyghurs’.

The Netherlands

Abdurehim Gheni, originally from Aksu Prefecture, fled persecution in East Turkistan in 2007 and resettled in the Netherlands, where he still lives. In 2018 he started a [weekly](#) protest in Amsterdam, and since 2021 he has staged several protests in front of the Chinese embassy. He began protesting in order to demand information from the Chinese government on the whereabouts of his 19 missing family members, who he had last heard from in 2014. With support from the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in 2020 he found out that several of his relatives had been sentenced to prison, including his brother Mijit Gheni, who had been sentenced to more than 16 years in 2018, and his brother-in-law Turghun Hamit, who had likewise been sentenced to more than 16 years in 2019.

He has [denounced](#) the charges, including ‘ethnic separatism’ and ‘inciting racial discrimination’.

In May 2024, ahead of the aforementioned Europe trip in which Xi Jinping also visited Hungary, Gheni says he reached out to a fellow Uyghur activist in France about protesting Xi Jinping in Paris. He told ARTICLE 19 that a few days later, he received a call from one of his brothers in China asking him not to participate in the protest. He believes the Chinese police forced his brother to call. This was not the first time the Chinese authorities had used his family against him, he explained in a follow-up interview; on 11, 17, and 27 April 2024, the Chinese police had taken his father and a brother from their internment camp to pressure him to stop his protests:

‘The Chinese government has used my brothers to threaten me to stop my protest. In 2019 my younger brother has called me a lot and told me so many times to stop my protest. Three weeks ago [May 2024], before Xi Jinping came to Europe, my older brother called me and asked me not to participate in a protest in Paris. I saw that his face was injured.’

After a protest in Amsterdam on 6 July 2024, Gheni says the police again forced his father and a brother to call him, this time to pressure him not to deliver his planned [testimony](#) at the Court of the Citizens of the World: a quasi-judicial organisation in the



Hague convening the China Tribunal from 7–12 July. After his refusal to comply, Gheni told ARTICLE 19 he believes the Chinese government retaliated by sending his father and brother back to an internment camp. In September, his father **died** in detention.

Australia

Nurgul Sawut is a prominent Uyghur activist who has been based in Australia since 2001. Her activism has included protests against Chinese leaders' visits to Australia, such as when hundreds of Uyghur and Tibetan activists **protested** Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi's visit in March 2024.

In November 2018, Sawut **told** Australian ABC radio station that she believed nearly 50 members of her extended family had been detained, in part as collective punishment to pressure her to end her activism abroad. She explained how she had last spoken with many of them in February of that year, but that each time she had reached out, they were taken into custody and questioned until she stopped contacting them for their safety.

Sawut told ARTICLE 19 that in May 2021, the police forced her mother from Shenzhen, Southern China, to Ürümqi in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region – more than 2,000 miles away. Despite being severely ill, her mother was placed under house arrest. She died on 26 May 2021, but different

versions of how she died complicate what Sawut knows.

She believes other family members have been beaten in detention, including one of her sisters, who was then released and given a WhatsApp account to contact her. Sawut believes this was a ploy to influence her. This is plausible, since WhatsApp is banned in China and requires a VPN to access, which is itself a potentially **criminal** act; since 2017, only VPNs **approved** by the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (MIIT) are allowed. Such provisions are even more harshly pursued in East Turkestan. For example, one Uyghur student is currently serving a 13-year prison sentence for using a VPN to access 'illegal information', which he **said** was mainly Zoom.

Sawut told ARTICLE 19 that she believes State Security officials were responsible in 2023 for pressuring another sister in Canada to threaten her: 'you are hurting your own family with your activism and the Chinese government won't let you walk away with this easily'. Sawut explains that she lashed out at her sister, telling her to never pass on messages to her from the Chinese authorities again:

'My relationship with my eldest sister is frozen for the time being. But I do not blame her for anything at all. However, she could have made a better choice as she lives in Canada, a free country.'



Hundreds of Tibetans in Australia march through the centre of Sydney on 10 March 2017, marking the 58th anniversary of China's presence in Tibet. (Photo: Jason Reed/Reuters)

India

'Tashi Gyaltzen', a Tibetan environmental activist and protester in India, who wished to be referred to by pseudonym for their own safety, told ARTICLE 19:

For Gyaltzen, Chemi Lhamo, and many others, fear of retaliation against their relatives still living in Tibet has meant cutting all ties with their family.

In a recent study of TNR targeting the overseas Tibetan community, the Tibetan Centre for Human Rights and Democracy (TCHRD) [found](#) that, 'out of 84 respondents, 48 received threats of harm to their relatives in Tibet ... mostly coercing them into renouncing their activism'.

'I would not mind facing harassment for me, if my families were here in exile but the most depressing, or difficult part is when you have your families in Tibet and because of your work you are not able help them or you not able to support them but instead because of your work they are under pressure, they face [police] harassment.'



Digital transnational repression targeting protesters

The PRC also engages in widescale digital TNR. We identify censorship, online harassment and threats, surveillance and other forms of targeted cyberattacks, and information-manipulation operations as key tactics in digital TNR against protesters. While some tactics remain online, digital TNR is not confined to the online space; it can intersect with other tactics. Digital repression against women protesters also often takes the form of online sexual and gender-based violence. Recent [research](#) by CitizenLab on gender-based digital transnational repression in 24 countries, including China, reiterates the experiences noted below by identifying how this form of TNR ‘frequently involves the amplification and exploitation of entrenched patriarchal norms’.

This section highlights the critical role of tech companies in documenting and responding to TNR – and, in particular, safeguarding users’ human rights and access to redress on their platforms.

‘My harassment is mainly around smearing campaigns, spreading misinformation and trying to defame me. Cyberattack is another form of attack which caused me greater mental stress after protests.’

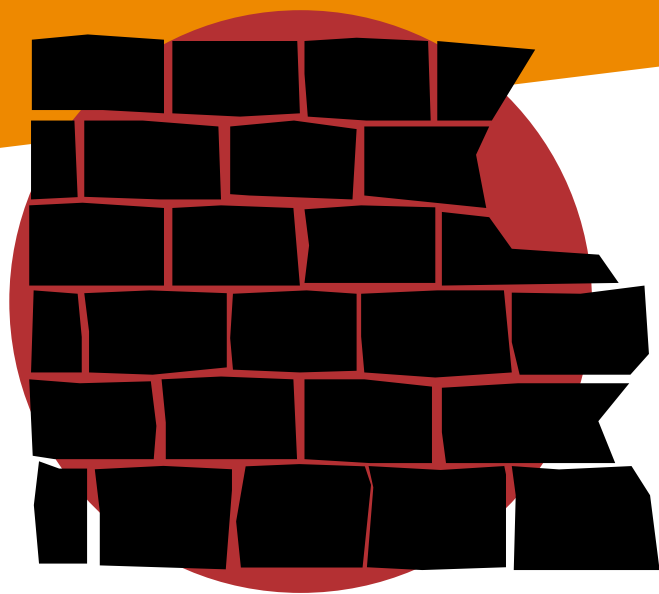
Nurgul Sawut
(Uyghur activist in Canberra, Australia)

Online censorship

On 31 May 2020, Zhou Fengsuo (周锋锁) – formerly a student leader in the 1989 Tiananmen Square Protest, now Director of the US-based Human Rights in China (HRIC) – organised an online commemoration event ahead of the Tiananmen Square anniversary on 4 June. The event took place on a paid Zoom account associated with his other organisation, Humanitarian China. A statement at the time [said](#) over 250 people joined the Zoom event, with over 4,000 more streaming on other platforms. On 7 June, Zoom shut down their account.



Promotional flier for the online commemoration event organised by Zhou Fengsuo (周锋锁) on 31 May 2020, ahead of the Tiananmen Square anniversary. A week later, Zoom shut down the account that hosted the event.
(Image: Zhou Fengsuo/Humanitarian China)



Another former Tiananmen student leader, US-based Wang Dan (王丹), [said](#) Zoom twice interrupted his commemoration event. Lee Cheuk Yan (李卓人), a former parliamentarian in Hong Kong and chairman of the Hong Kong Alliance in Support of Patriotic Democratic Movements of China, [also](#) reported that Zoom shut down his account ahead of his own planned online protest event. In April 2021, Hong Kong authorities [arrested](#) Lee for his pro-democracy activities and charged him with a number of protest-related offences. At the time of writing, he remains in prison in Hong Kong.

Following public outcry, Zoom released a statement (which is no longer accessible on their website) [admitting](#) it had acted to block the online protest events following pressure from the PRC. The statement said that the government had notified the company about 'four large, public June 4th commemoration meetings on Zoom', and that the authorities had informed them that 'this activity is illegal in China and demanded that Zoom terminate the meeting and host accounts'. In its statement, the company reiterated that the

US-based accounts had been reinstated; but it also sought to justify its censorship on the grounds that some participants were PRC-based, despite the event owner being based in the US.

Related to these cases on Zoom and illustrative of the wider scale, in April 2023 the US Department of Justice (DOJ) unsealed two indictments, one against [44](#) individuals and one against [34](#) individuals, who were affiliated with the MPS, Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC), and others for their role in TNR targeting Chinese dissidents and other US residents, particularly online. They were charged with belonging to an elite security unit called 912 Special Project Working Group, whose purpose, the DOJ [says](#), is to target Chinese dissidents globally. It alleges how:

'[Members of 912] created thousands of fake online personas on social media sites, including Twitter, to target Chinese dissidents through online harassment and threats ... [and to disseminate] official PRC government propaganda and narratives to counter the pro-democracy speech of the Chinese dissidents.'

Harassment, trolling, and online threats

Anna Kwok (Executive Director of HKDC) also told ARTICLE 19 she was targeted online in relation to the APEC protests in 2023. Hours after posting on X that she had arrived in San Francisco for protests against Xi Jinping's visit, trolls [swarmed](#) her post with online death threats and other harassment. She said:

'I have received online harassment and gender-based violence from time to time. Some can constitute threats but nothing could compare to the ones I have received ahead of the APEC protest. The number and intensity of death threats peaked ahead of the protests against Xi during APEC.'

Anna explained that she understood the threats were intended to intimidate her and other Hong Kongers into cancelling their cross-movement protests. Although the threats did not seem to deter her, accounts from other interviewees in this

report point to similar tactics that did succeed in intimidating people away from protesting. During a December 2023 hearing before the US Select Committee on the CCP, Anna [testified](#) to this effect, noting how online harassment led to potential APEC protesters hesitating. She explained that even though the online threats were directed at her, the impact was a chilling effect on the entire Hong Kong community:

'What if they got beaten in the protest? What if their family back home got harassed for their participation of the protest here on American soil? ... In the end, some Hongkongers actually decided to censor themselves, while others decided to drop out.'

Chemi Lhamo (SFT), who was physically attacked during the APEC protests, told ARTICLE 19 that she has likewise been targeted with death and rape threats online since at least 2019. She has also reported receiving random and suspicious phone calls that she would not pick up, and has been targeted by phishing attacks.

Targeted cyberattacks

A 2021 report on digital TNR by the Uyghur Human Rights Project (UHRP) [found](#) that, out of 72 interviewees from the Uyghur diaspora (spread across Asia Pacific, Europe, and North America), nearly three-quarters reported digital threats and online harassment. Threats identified by UHRP included [watering hole](#) attacks, [phishing](#) attacks, and [spear phishing](#) attacks. Around the world, UHRP [explains](#), Uyghurs face intense surveillance.

Rushan Abbas and her organisation, CFU, have been among those targeted; in November 2023, for example, their website was hacked and led visitors to a Chinese government website instead, [explains](#) a CFU statement at the time. In the statement, Abbas noted that the success of the CFU's advocacy against CCP narratives was the motive for the cyberattack: 'By un-veiling the truth about the CCP's genocide against the Uyghur people, we have become a target of their government sponsored efforts to suppress information and control the narrative'.



Speaking with ARTICLE 19, Abbas elaborated:

'Uyghur activists and organisations face a constant onslaught of threats and harassment, especially online ... our website and communications are targeted by hacking and phishing attempts, and there are continuous efforts to compromise my electronic devices.'

Nurgul Sawut has also been [targeted](#) by digital TNR, from online harassment to targeted cyberattacks. In 2021, she was named in a hacked Shanghai security [database](#) as one of some 10,000 'suspected terrorists' for her activism. She told ARTICLE 19 that three times in 2019, while running trauma-counselling sessions for the Uyghur diaspora on Zoom, pro-CCP agitators hijacked the sessions and drew Chinese flags and sexually explicit imagery on her screen. Afterwards, she said, she switched to other platforms.

Between 2018 and 2019 in particular, Sawat told us, her phone was hacked, and at least three times images of male genitals were set as her screen saver. She said she still receives spam messages and phone calls before and after big protests. All are in Mandarin.

Other examples include state-sponsored attacks against people's email accounts. Google [explains](#) its notification system to targets of such attacks as follows:

'[W]e send the alert to let you know that we believe government-backed attackers are trying to access the account of one of your users . There's a chance the alert is a false alarm. However, we believe we detected activities that government-backed attackers use to try to steal a password or other personal information.'

Chiu Eeling (Amnesty Taiwan) told ARTICLE 19 how protesters in Taiwan have also had their Gmail accounts hacked. She points to one example of a colleague and co-organiser of the annual 10 March Tibet Uprising Day protest rally, whose Gmail was hacked in 2017, who could see someone inside her account deleting emails in real time. She says that dealing with such issues can be a challenge because local police have told them it is beyond

their jurisdiction, as Google servers are overseas. Likewise, Sky Fung (Hong Kong Outlanders, Taiwan) told ARTICLE 19 that the organisation's work email accounts, as well as both his and their chairperson's personal Gmail accounts, were also targeted by suspected state-sponsored intrusion attempts on 14 November 2024 ahead of a planned 16 November protest.

Tenzin Dawa shared screenshots with ARTICLE 19 of at least four 'high severity' alerts from Google about potential '[government-backed attacks](#)' targeting the generic TCHRD office email and three individual work accounts, including her own. The coordinated attacks took place on 6 July 2024: the Dalai Lama's birthday and a significant date in the Tibetan calendar, often marked by protests and rallies by the diaspora.

Online information manipulation

Meanwhile, as part of its digital TNR, the PRC also engages in information manipulation targeting protesters at home and abroad. An online disinformation network called Spamouflage has been [identified](#) as the most prolific of the PRC's coordinated information-manipulation operators. Spamouflage has engaged in spreading misinformation and disinformation across multiple social media platforms, utilising generative AI to produce deepfakes, and engaging in coordinated inauthentic behaviour to drown out legitimate accounts.

Emblematic of PRC efforts to influence global narratives on peaceful protest, in 2019, amid the pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong and its solidarity protests around the world, the PRC launched a [coordinated effort to manipulate information](#) on X (then Twitter) and

Facebook. Graphika [identified](#) that Spamouflage was the lead actor behind this campaign. It pushed narratives that sought to delegitimise domestic grievances as inauthentic and to paint them as CIA- or foreign-funded: typical tactics employed by authoritarian states to delegitimise '[colour revolutions](#)'.

Social media platforms responded by removing accounts associated with Spamouflage. Their reporting on these account removals revealed high levels of coordination. On 19 August 2019, X [disclosed](#) the 936 most-active accounts, and more than 3.5 million tweets, out of an approximate 200,000 accounts originating within China. These accounts were engaged in 'deliberately and specifically attempting to sow political discord in Hong Kong, including undermining the legitimacy and political positions of the protest movement on the ground'. Following information from X, Meta [announced](#) it was removing 7 Pages, 3 Groups, and 5 Facebook accounts. Meta said the network was involved in coordinated inauthentic behaviour (CIB) originating in the PRC, with links to the government, and that it engaged in deceptive tactics targeting Hong Kong. On 22 August 2019, YouTube followed suit, [announcing](#) it was disabling 210 channels that were behaving in a coordinated manner to upload videos about the protests in Hong Kong.

Beyond its role in manipulating information in Hong Kong, Spamouflage operations have also targeted overseas Chinese activists and others critical of the CCP, including foreign journalists. Emblematic of how one form of repression can intersect with another, in reporting on the CCP's information manipulation, *New Yorker* journalist Fan Jiayang [told](#) CNN in 2023 that, after she

began covering the 2019 pro-democracy movement, she also started to experience increased targeted online harassment.

To date, most of the PRC's information-manipulation operations have focused on controlling narratives and delegitimising protest movements. This is linked with efforts to censor information flows. Domestic protests in China often have connections to global protests; emblematic of the interconnectedness of protest in China and the diaspora is the importance

of exiled netizens engaged in documenting and disseminating information about such protests. Their efforts are critical for global audiences, China-watching journalists, and solidarity-seeking protesters who are members of the diaspora. They are also important for civil society in China, who may rely on VPNs to access foreign social media to read about the protests happening – perhaps even in their own cities – that PRC censors do not allow domestic media to acknowledge. Few are as influential as Teacher Li.



Case study

Teacher Li is Not Your Teacher



Li Ying (李颖) posts to his 1.9 million followers on X under the account [@whyyoutouzhele](#), 'Teacher Li Is Not Your Teacher' (老师不是你老师). Li has lived in Italy since 2015. He used to be active on Weibo, where people would reach out asking him to post [sensitive content](#) on their behalf. His Weibo account was shut down 52 times until he was finally purged from the platform in April 2022. He switched to X, where, by November 2022, he was gaining hundreds of thousands of followers each week as a [clearinghouse](#) for content, [especially](#) for information about the then-ongoing White Paper Protests against China's Covid-19 restrictions and broader frustrations, which used blank A4 pages to symbolise rampant censorship.

On 28 November 2022, Li's personal information was doxxed for the first time, including his home address in Italy and pictures of his passport, and he received online death threats. On the same day, [reports](#) Safeguard Defenders, MSS in Li's hometown visited his parents, whom they continued to harass daily until mid-December, questioning them over Li's whereabouts and accusing him of receiving funds for anti-PRC behaviour. They threatened to block his parents' pensions if he refused to delete his X account. On 12 April 2023, Li [found](#) that all his Chinese bank accounts had been frozen.

In February 2024, Li [posted](#) that the MPS was investigating his China-based followers and anyone who had commented on his posts. Those who were identified were being 'invited for tea': a euphemism for being summoned for interrogation. He wrote that anyone who felt scared should unfollow him. In March, CNN [reported](#) that, within just a few days, he lost some 200,000 followers.

In November 2024, on the two-year anniversary of the White Paper Protests, Li posted that he believed he had been shadowbanned on X. While his original blue-checkmarked account was not showing up, ARTICLE 19 [documented](#) that, at the time, searching for his account name on X returned over 900 impersonator account results. Li's account was eventually reinstated – but not without disrupting access to information during a critical protest anniversary. X has not disclosed the cause of this shadowbanning, whether it was the result of an algorithmic error or the platform responding to requests from PRC authorities.



People hold white sheets of paper in protest over Covid-19 restrictions after a vigil for the victims of a fire in Ürümqi, in Beijing, China, on 27 November 2022.
(Photo: Thomas Peter/Reuters)



Women argue with a man as they protest outside a hotel where members of the Chinese delegation stay during the APEC Summit in San Francisco, US, 14 November 2023. (Photo: Carlos Barria/Reuters)

The psychosocial impact of harassment

Incessant harassment; fear of being watched, followed, harassed, or physically attacked; and/or fearing that your demonstrations abroad may lead to reprisals, including enforced disappearance of loved ones back home, carry a profound psychosocial burden. It leads to mistrust within the movement, burnout, self-censorship, isolation, and other lasting impacts that must be acknowledged and addressed to ensure the right to protest is

protected in the face of ongoing TNR. The psychosocial impact of TNR is so pernicious precisely because protesters carry this burden on a daily basis. It is also among the most challenging to address because it is protracted, rather than confined to timebound, more easily evidenced actions. The need for psychosocial and community support is all the more pronounced for protesters and protest leaders who already face oppression based on their sex, gender, race, or religion. Many accounts in this report have alluded to varied psychosocial impacts of TNR through cases of individuals living in India, the Netherlands, and the US.

Anna Kwok shared how the constant threat of TNR can extract a heavy toll, even without direct physical assault:

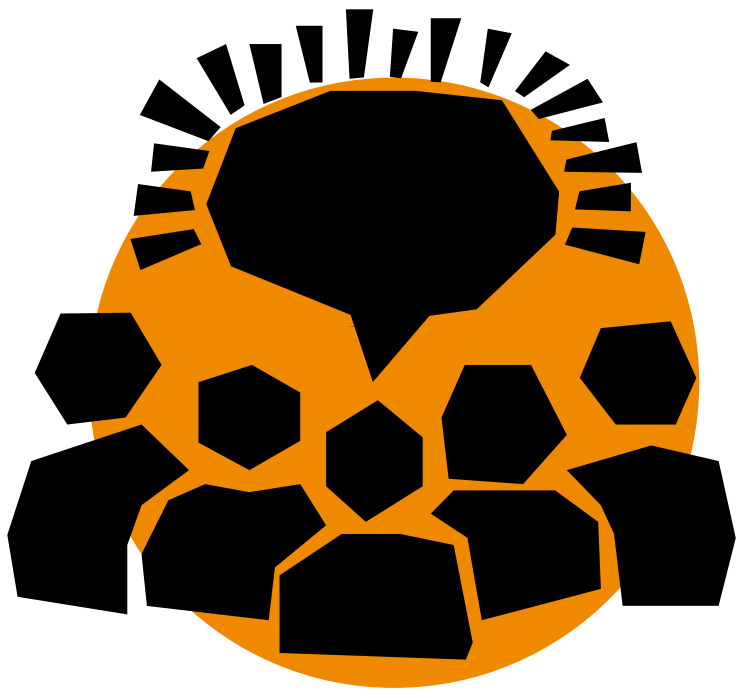
'Despite not getting physically attacked, the mental pressure in anticipation of getting assaulted anytime lingers. The psychological impact of TNR is one that instils a 24/7 alarm in your head: you tend to get suspicious and cautious about everything.'

Abdurehim Gheni (a Uyghur activist in the Netherlands) told ARTICLE 19 that, although he has not suffered physical attacks in the Netherlands, the psychological impact of threats has been severe – especially the death threats, which he received following protests in Amsterdam in February 2019 and November 2023, as well outside the Chinese embassy in the Hague in September 2020. He told ARTICLE 19 that after such incidents he contacts the police and Dutch Ministry of the Interior. Every time, he said, they promise to keep a record and investigate. While he does not know whether anyone has been arrested, he has some peace of mind in that when he protests, the police are around to protect him. He believes the threats come from PRC proxies in reprisal for his protest and advocacy, which damage China's reputation – especially when protesting in front of the Chinese embassy.

Rushan Abbas has been attacked by Chinese students at universities in Australia, Europe, and the US, and has been followed, threatened, and verbally attacked in Boston, Jakarta, San Francisco, Sydney, and Tokyo. She told ARTICLE 19:

'The psychological impact of these attacks on me has been significant. Constantly living under the threat of harassment and violence takes a toll on a person's mental well-being, leading to chronic stress, anxiety, and hypervigilance. The relentless nature of these confrontations had caused me to feel isolated at times as the fear of being targeted persists even in seemingly safe environments. The trauma from being followed, threatened, and verbally attacked not only disrupts my daily life but also erodes the sense of personal security.'

Tenzin Dawa explained how Tibetans are withdrawing not only from protest but also from the larger Tibetan diaspora, which leads to serious psychosocial issues:



'I think this is one of the goals for the Chinese government: to really isolate Tibetans who are active, who have an activism background, to undermine the capability and really isolate them from the community by causing extreme psychological distress, sometimes trauma. And individuals in some cases go into depression. Because the level of awareness of [TNR] in the Tibetan community is really low at this time and we really need to raise more awareness, even in our own community.'

International human rights law and the right to protest

TNR tactics deployed by the PRC against individuals and episodes of protest, as outlined in this report, violate the exercise of a variety of interlinked and interdependent human rights of those engaged in protest. In particular:

- the right to freedom of expression (Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, ICCPR);
- the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association (Article 21 of the ICCPR);
- the right to protection from arbitrary or unlawful interference with privacy, family, home, or correspondence (Article 17 of the ICCPR); and
- the right to participate in the conduct of political affairs (Article 25 of the ICCPR).

Protection of these rights – guaranteed in international and regional treaties – is not provided in absolute terms. Each of them may be subject to narrowly tailored limitations, in strict compliance with the limited provisions of respective articles. Permissible justifications for restrictions on the rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly are to protect national security or public safety, public order, public health or morals, or the rights and freedoms of others. They must also be *necessary and proportionate* to the protected aim.

Additionally, engaging in protest involves respect and protection of other rights, such as the rights to life, liberty, and security of a person, and to freedom from discrimination.

All countries covered in this report – Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Hungary, Kazakhstan, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Taiwan, the UK, and the US – have signed and ratified the ICCPR. Although Taiwan is not recognised as a member of the United Nations, in 2009 it passed the domestic [Act to Implement the ICCPR and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights](#), making them binding in local law. The PRC has signed, but not ratified, the ICCPR. Meanwhile, Hong Kong is considered to have ratified the ICCPR.

Human Rights Council [Resolution 24/5](#), on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association, reminds states of their obligation to respect and fully protect the rights of all individuals to assemble peacefully and associate freely, online as well as offline, and to take all necessary measures to ensure that any restrictions on the free exercise of these rights are in accordance with their obligations under international human rights law.

Human Rights Committee [General Comment 37](#) holds that states have an obligation to create an enabling environment for protests, without discrimination, and must ensure the safety of participants and that participants have the full ability to exercise their rights. In addition, states have an obligation to protect journalists, monitors, and members of the public, as well as public and private property, from harm. The role of the state

is to ensure that assemblies are able to take place. While the foreign perpetrator of extraterritorial rights abuses bears primary responsibility, this obligation has clear relevance – especially for host countries – in the face of TNR amounting to intimidation, harassment, or reprisal against individuals for taking part in peaceful protest.

Moreover, under UN General Assembly [Resolution 56/83](#), on the responsibility of states for internationally wrongful acts, states bear the responsibility for the conduct of any state organ or individual empowered by the state, or acting on the instruction, direction, or control of the state, even if it exceeds its authority or instructions. Responsible states have an obligation to cease that act (if it is continuing), to offer appropriate assurances and guarantees of non-repetition, and to make full reparations caused by the wrongful acts for which it bears responsibility. The gross or systematic failure of the responsible state to fulfil its obligations is a serious breach under international law.

[The UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights](#) (UNGPs), endorsed by the Human Rights Council in 2011, lay out a set of guidelines for states and companies to limit and address the adverse human rights impacts associated with business operations, including the tech sector. Pillar I reiterates that states must prevent human rights abuses within their territory, including businesses, which imposes a requirement to ‘prevent, investigate, punish and redress such abuses’. States must also ensure that laws and policies do not constrain but enable business respect for human rights. Pillar II outlines the corporate responsibility to respect human rights, calling on companies to establish ‘a human rights due diligence process to identify, prevent, mitigate and account for how they address their impacts on human rights’. The UNGPs conclude with Pillar III, which emphasises access to remedy for individuals whose rights have been infringed. While the UNGPs are voluntary, they have been normalised in the ICT sector, including among leading social media companies.

Conclusion

As protests continue in China and the diaspora, the CCP and its proxies are likely to escalate efforts to harass, silence, and contain global protest. Those targeted by TNR live with often-protracted paranoia from not knowing who to trust, and fear being targeted themselves or their family facing retaliation. This contributes to burnout, isolation, and self-censorship. Women human rights defenders and members of other marginalised communities face additional and distinct threats. Digital TNR adds to and amplifies other forms of TNR. Without concrete measures from host countries and the international community, including the tech sector, TNR will continue to threaten voices that are critical of China's human rights abuses – at home and across the globe.

The international community must address TNR in all its forms, including when it targets the right to protest. The cases highlighted here are not exhaustive; rather, they are emblematic of trends and their impacts. While the tactics and harms are similar to broader themes of TNR, the specific timing and results when targeting protest movements have a particularly adverse impact on global freedom of expression. Without acknowledging global trends and the interconnectivity of protest narratives with repressive tactics, solutions will remain episodic. Addressing the challenges to the global right to protest arising from Chinese TNR must be holistic.

In particular, the role of the United Front and its entities in targeting protesters and protest movements requires greater documentation, toward more targeted policy solutions and accountability measures. Better understanding of how such groups operate in practice is of particular importance for ensuring that measures to counteract TNR of the right to protest do not inadvertently fuel new xenophobic or nationalist tropes targeting the broader overseas Chinese communities. Exposing specific PRC capabilities for digital TNR is important, moving forward, so that movement actors are best equipped to safeguard digital security. The role and responsibility of tech companies to document and address digital TNR on their platforms also needs greater consideration. More documentation is needed to scope coordinated efforts by the PRC to target the right to protest globally.

While this report has documented a range of threats, it is also vital to highlight the importance of cross-movement coordination. Many activists who have spoken with ARTICLE 19, both for this report and elsewhere, emphasised the importance of solidarity, especially between Uyghurs, Tibetans, and Hong Kongers. Malicious actors who seek to weaken a movement create factionalism; cross-movement solidarity helps to break down this paranoia and mistrust, forge durable networks, and support innovation – which, in turn, fuels sustainability. As such, it is important to acknowledge the importance of ongoing support for movement-building, including support for platforms for network coordination and communication.



Mass protest of Uyghurs, Tibetans, and others human rights defenders in Geneva organised by the World Uyghur Congress and UNPO, 5 November 2018.
(Photo: World Uyghur Congress)

Recommendations

To the government of the PRC

- In the absence of ratification of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), at a minimum, immediately halt international behaviour in violation of the ICCPR, especially articles 17, 19, and 21, in countries that are states parties to the Covenant.
- Take immediate steps to cease international wrongful acts, as per Resolution 56/83 on the responsibility of states for international wrongful acts, guarantee non-repetition, and support full reparations for harms caused by actions of state actors, such as embassy or United Front actors, or their proxies.
- Cease TNR and information-manipulation operations targeting civil society in Taiwan engaged in Hong Kong and Tibet solidarity, or in broader Taiwan identity and sovereignty expression.
- Cease all other acts of TNR targeting overseas Hong Kong, Uyghur, Tibetan, and broader Chinese diaspora and human rights community.
- Abolish or amend, in line with international human rights law, key provisions that have been used to justify TNR of those engaged in free expression and peaceful assembly, including the 2024 [guidelines](#) to the 2005 Anti-Secession Law (targeting Taiwan), the 2023 revised Counter-Espionage Law (used to encourage greater harassment of overseas protesters), or in Hong Kong the 2020 National Security Law, among others.

To host governments

- Protect, promote, and ensure the right to protest for all people is fully protected.
- Publicly condemn excessive use of force, arbitrary detention, legal harassment, and other human rights violations against peaceful protesters, making clear that they are prohibited and will not be tolerated under any circumstances, especially when such abuses are perpetrated by or on behalf of the PRC or its proxies.
- Investigate any reported incidents of attacks, harassment, and intimidation of protesters, and hold perpetrators accountable for these incidents.
- Raise these cases with the Chinese government, and impose necessary punitive measures if the incidents involve party-state actors or proxies in host countries.
- Take concrete steps to reduce the noted disparity in awareness and response capacity between national- and local-level officials in addressing TNR of protesters.
- Regularly conduct open consultations with members of the diaspora community and its allies involved in protest against PRC human rights abuses, as part of systemic efforts to monitor and address TNR.
- Distinguish TNR targeting individuals from foreign influence and other espionage actions (which tend to target the state) to ensure a human rights-forward, needs-based response that is centred on individuals.

- Establish accessible and safe mechanisms, like telephone hotlines, for reporting cases of TNR at the national and subnational levels, while ensuring they are designed to respect privacy and avoid potential re-traumatisation.
- Expand state funding for psychosocial and community support to ensure that efforts to counter TNR do not only focus on national security but also prioritise support for the marginalised communities most often targeted by TNR.
- Expand resources for research, documentation, and advocacy to address the myriad forms of TNR, especially those that involve targeting protest movements, and ensure that resources are set aside to encourage research in more diverse geographies, including lesser-known incidents in Asia, Africa, and Latin America.
- End or drastically reduce, and ensure greater transparency and accountability in law enforcement (or related security assistance cooperation) with the PRC and its security proxies, including between public, private, and academic institutions.
- Ensure greater transparency and disclose supply-chain entanglements that may create the opportunity for economic or political pressure that contradicts companies' responsibilities under the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, among others, especially those that may result in undue censorship or surveillance of those engaged in protest in China or overseas.
- Promote the right to privacy across all services and, where relevant, adopt end-to-end encryption by default.
- Take measures to streamline digital security protections for users – especially for marginalised communities, who are at heightened risk of cyberattacks – and ensure prompt notification and technical support is available to anyone suspected of being targeted.
- Closely monitor and label information threats, and work with freedom of expression organisations to ensure any measures to limit the impact of such threats are in line with human rights standards on permissible limitations of freedom of expression and information.
- While improving trust and safety, threat-actor identification, and other online protection mechanisms, ensure all measures are transparent and in accordance with international human rights law standards, which require that any measures to restrict freedom of expression are – at a minimum – legal, legitimate, necessary, and proportionate.

To technology companies

- Working collaboratively with human rights organisations, and ensuring representation from those targeted by TNR, expand existing corporate human rights policies to include distinct acknowledgment of and provisions for TNR, such as within corporate human rights policies or community guidelines.



Protest outside the Chinese Embassy in Berlin on 3 December 2022. (Photo: Michael Kuenne/PRESSCOV/Sipa USA)

'Regimes will always try to stop us from exercising our right to protest. They will try to silence us with fear. They will try to co-opt us with promises. This is the nature of oppression – to deny us our freedom to think and act for ourselves. But no matter the circumstances, there are always means of protest, no matter how small. Even in the darkest times, we can resist cruelty by small acts of kindness. We can outsmart them. We can be flexible. We can be creative. As long as we keep thinking and challenging ourselves, there is always a way forward.'

Nathan Law⁴

(Hong Kong pro-democracy activist living in exile)

Endnotes

- ¹ Steve Tsang and Olivia Cheung (2024) *The Political Thought of Xi Jinping*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- ² See, for example, Dru C. Gladney (2004) *Dislocating China: Muslims, Minorities, and Other Subaltern Subjects*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- ³ International Republican Institute (2023) *Countering China's Information Manipulation in the Indo-Pacific and Kazakhstan: A Framework for Understanding and Action*. Washington, DC: IRI.
- ⁴ Nathan Law (2021) *Freedom: How We Lose it and How We Fight Back*, London: Penguin Random House, p.219.





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