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Outreach to the 'Global South' to hold China accountable for violations in Xinjiang: Questioning cross- regionality

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Executive Summary

^{English} In recent years, human rights violations against Uyghur and other Turkic minorities in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region have been extensively documented and raised international criticism. At the United Nations Human Rights Council and the General Assembly Third Committee, joint-statements condemning the situation in the province have been led by Western liberal democracies. In response, the Chinese government and allies have issued counter-joint statements praising its policies in Xinjiang. A tit-for-tat dynamic has prompted a race to signatures with China's supporters' statements systematically gathering more support. In this context, Western liberal democracies have reached out to the Global South to gain more signatories. By improving the regional representativity of the statements, Western liberal democracies also hope to enhance the legitimacy of criticism on Xinjiang. Indeed, China discredits this criticism by qualifying it as coming from Western countries that are politicizing human rights to contain its rise. However, outreach to the Global South has showed very limited successes.

While human rights have always been politicized, the geopolitical confrontation between China and the United States has brought a special sense of urgency to the topic of human rights politicisation and double standards. In addition, the current war in Ukraine and in Gaza have reinforced Global South countries perception of double standards. Western liberal democracies' strong mobilization against the Russian invasion has highlighted their inaction towards other crisis

around the world. Furthermore, their failure to strongly condemn Israel's assault on Palestinians in Gaza while showing concern for Muslims in Xinjiang has reiterated accusations of double standards. The report starts from the standpoint that every country has double standards and politicises human rights. It questions assumptions behind Western liberal democracies' outreach to the Global South in order to be more vocal on China. Based on semi-structured interviews with diplomats, civil society organisations and scholars, it argues that by promoting human rights as moral values standing above politics, Western liberal democracies have failed to live up to their own standards. As some Western governments are reengaging with China and attention on Xinjiang has decreased, there is a momentum to take a step back to reflect on the failure to hold China accountable and Western liberal democracies' legitimacy crisis in defending human rights, as well as think about the way forward.

The report calls for an acknowledgement of the political nature of human rights in order for Western liberal democracies to achieve more transparent policies. Furthermore, it demonstrates how fear of China instrumentalizing criticism of the international human rights regime has prompted Western liberal democracies to defend the status quo, overlooking this regime contentiousness since its inception and ignoring its weaknesses. By adhering to a self-romanticized version of human rights, Western liberal democracies have demonstrated a lack of self-reflectivity preventing them to remain credible actors.

Français Ces dernières années, les violations des droits humains commises à l'encontre des ouïghoures et autres minorités turques dans la région autonome du Xinjiang ont été largement documentées et ont suscité des critiques internationales. Au sein du Conseil des droits de l'homme des Nations unies et de la troisième commission de l'Assemblée générale, les démocraties libérales occidentales ont mené de déclarations communes condamnant la situation dans la province. En réponse, le gouvernement chinois et ses alliés ont publié des déclarations conjointes louant ses politiques au Xinjiang. Cette dynamique de représailles du tac au tac a provoqué une course aux signatures, les déclarations positives envers la Chine en recueillant systématiquement davantage. Dans ce contexte, les démocraties libérales occidentales se sont tournées vers le Sud Global pour obtenir davantage de signataires. En améliorant la représentativité régionale des déclarations, les démocraties libérales occidentales espèrent également renforcer la légitimité des critiques face à la situation des droits humains au Xinjiang. En effet, la Chine discrédite ces critiques en affirmant qu'elles proviennent de pays occidentaux qui politisent les droits humains pour contenir sa montée en puissance. Cependant, les efforts de ralliement du Sud Global n'a connu que des succès très limités.

Si les droits humains ont toujours été politisés, la confrontation géopolitique entre la Chine et les États-Unis a conféré un caractère d'urgence à la question de la politisation des droits humains et de la pratique de doubles standards. En outre, les guerres actuelles en Ukraine et à Gaza ont renforcé la perception des pays du Sud Global de l'existence de „deux poids, deux mesures“. La forte mobilisation des démocraties libérales occidentales contre l'invasion russe a mis en lumière leur inaction face à d'autres crises dans le monde. De

plus, leur incapacité à condamner fermement l'assaut d'Israël contre les Palestiniens de Gaza tout en se préoccupant des musulmans du Xinjiang a réitéré les accusations de doubles standards. Le rapport part du principe que tous les pays politisent les droits humains. Il remet en question les hypothèses qui sous-tendent les efforts des démocraties libérales occidentales pour rallier les pays du Sud Global afin de s'exprimer contre les violations en Chine. Sur la base d'entretiens semi-structurés avec des diplomates, des organisations de la société civile et des universitaires, la recherche montre qu'en promouvant les droits humains comme des valeurs morales supérieures à la politique, les démocraties libérales occidentales ne sont pas à la hauteur de leurs propres standards. Alors que certains gouvernements occidentaux renouent avec la Chine et que l'attention portée au Xinjiang a diminué, il est temps de prendre du recul pour réfléchir à l'incapacité des démocraties libérales de rendre la Chine responsable et à la crise de légitimité de ces pays en matière de défense des droits humains, ainsi que de repenser la voie à suivre pour l'avenir.

Le rapport appelle à la reconnaissance de la nature politique des droits humains afin que les démocraties libérales occidentales puissent mettre en place des politiques plus transparentes. En outre, il démontre comment la crainte de voir la Chine instrumentaliser les critiques du régime des droits humains a incité les démocraties libérales occidentales à défendre le statu quo, négligeant le caractère contesté de ce régime depuis sa création et ignorant ses faiblesses. En adhérant à une version romantisée des droits humains, les démocraties libérales occidentales font preuve d'un manque d'autoréflexion qui les empêche de rester des acteurs crédibles.

Deutsch In den letzten Jahren wurden die Menschenrechtsverletzungen gegen Uiguren und andere türkische Minderheiten in der autonomen Region Xinjiang ausführlich dokumentiert und haben internationale Kritik hervorgerufen. Der Menschenrechtsrat der Vereinten Nationen und der Dritte Ausschuss der Generalversammlung haben unter Federführung westlicher liberaler Demokratien gemeinsame Erklärungen abgegeben, in denen die Lage in der Provinz verurteilt wird. Die chinesische Regierung und ihre Verbündeten gaben daraufhin gemeinsame Gegenerklärungen ab, in denen sie ihre Politik in Xinjiang loben. Diese "Auge für Auge"-Dynamik hat zu einem Wettlauf um die Unterschriften geführt, bei dem die Erklärungen der chinesischen Befürworter systematisch mehr Unterstützung finden. In diesem Zusammenhang haben sich die westlichen liberalen Demokratien an den globalen Süden gewandt, um mehr Unterzeichner zu gewinnen. Indem sie die regionale Repräsentativität dieser Stellungnahmen verbessern, hoffen die westlichen liberalen Demokratien auch, die Legitimität der Kritik an Xinjiang zu erhöhen. Tatsächlich diskreditiert China die Kritik an Xinjiang, indem es sie als Kritik aus westlichen Ländern bezeichnet, die die Menschenrechte politisieren, um den Aufstieg Xinjiang einzudämmen. Die Bemühungen um den globalen Süden haben jedoch nur sehr begrenzte Erfolge gezeigt.

Zwar wurden die Menschenrechte schon immer politisiert, doch die geopolitische Konfrontation zwischen China und den Vereinigten Staaten hat dem Thema der Politisierung der Menschenrechte und der Doppelmoral eine besondere Dringlichkeit verliehen. Darüber hinaus hat der derzeitige Krieg in der Ukraine und im Gazastreifen die Wahrnehmung der Länder des Globalen Südens hinsichtlich der Existenz von Doppelstandards verstärkt. Die starke Mobilisierung der westlichen liberalen Demokratien gegen die russische Invasion hat ihre Untätigkeit gegenüber anderen Krisen weltweit deutlich

gemacht. Darüber hinaus hat ihr Versäumnis, Israels Angriff auf die Palästinenser in Gaza scharf zu verurteilen, während sie sich um die Muslime in Xinjiang sorgen, den Vorwurf der Doppelmoral bekräftigt. Der Bericht geht von der Prämisse aus, dass jedes Land mit doppelten Standards misst und die Menschenrechte politisiert. Er hinterfragt die Annahmen, die hinter den Bemühungen westlicher liberaler Demokratien stehen, sich im globalen Süden zu engagieren, um China gegenüber mehr Gehör zu finden. Auf der Grundlage halbstrukturierter Interviews mit Diplomaten:innen, zivilgesellschaftlichen Organisationen und Wissenschaftler:innen wird argumentiert, dass die westlichen liberalen Demokratien, die Menschenrechte als moralische Werte propagieren, die über der Politik stehen, ihren eigenen Standards nicht gerecht werden. Da einige westliche Regierungen ihre Beziehungen zu China wieder aufgenommen haben und die Aufmerksamkeit für Xinjiang nachgelassen hat, ist es an der Zeit, einen Schritt zurückzugehen, um über das Versagen Chinas und die Legitimitätskrise der westlichen liberalen Demokratien bei der Verteidigung der Menschenrechte sowie über das weitere Vorgehen nachzudenken.

Der Bericht ruft dazu auf, die politische Natur der Menschenrechte anzuerkennen, damit die westlichen liberalen Demokratien eine transparentere Politik betreiben können. Darüber hinaus wird aufgezeigt, wie die Angst vor einer Instrumentalisierung der Kritik an Chinas Menschenrechtsregime die westlichen liberalen Demokratien dazu veranlasst hat, den Status quo zu verteidigen. Sie übersehen dabei, dass dieses Regime von Anfang an umstritten war und seine Mängel ignoriert werden. Mit ihrem Festhalten an einer selbstromantischen Version der Menschenrechte haben die westlichen liberalen Demokratien einen Mangel an Selbstreflexion gezeigt, der sie daran hindert, glaubwürdige Akteure zu bleiben.

1. Introduction: Holding China accountable for violations in Xinjiang

In recent years, human rights violations against Uyghur and other Turkic minorities in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (hereafter Xinjiang)¹ have been extensively documented, particularly their internment in camps (Raza 2019; Zenz 2021), forced sterilisation of Uyghur women (Zenz 2020; Drieu 2022), forced labour (Murphy & Elima 2021; Zenz 2023), surveillance techniques (Steenberg & Rippa 2019; Millward & Peterson 2020) as well as the counterterrorism discourse used by the Chinese government to violate these rights (Clarke 2010; Roberts 2020). It is currently debated whether these violations amount to a genocide (Finley 2021; Boissoneault 2022; Chotiner 2022; Uyghur Tribunal 2022), with some countries and parliaments adopting this qualification.²

Aim of the report

The report starts from the standpoint that the People's Republic of China's (hereafter China) human rights violations in Xinjiang may amount at least to crimes against humanity under the international human rights law,³ and analyses the efforts made to hold China accountable. Various initiatives have been undertaken in this regard, such as sanctions,⁴ diplomatic boycott of the 2022 Winter Beijing Olympics,⁵ qualification of the situation in Xinjiang as genocide⁶ or regulation of supply chain against forced labour.⁷ This report focuses on the call of mainly Western liberal democracies to gather more support from Global South⁸ countries to be vocal on these violations in multilateral fora, such as the Human Rights Council (HRC) and United Nations (UN) General Assembly Third Committee. In particular,

the report questions Western liberal democracies' rationales and assumptions behind this strategy and analyses the political dynamics at play in how accountability is pursued. The report is based on semi-structured interviews with diplomats, civil society organisations and scholars mainly from Western liberal democracies.⁹ The aim is, therefore, not to explain Global South countries' internal and political reasons for not taking part in accountability initiatives, nor to explain their voting and joint-statement signature patterns,¹⁰ but to understand the limits of Western liberal democracies' approach.

A thorough analysis of the assumptions behind the outreach to the Global South is crucial, as cross-regionality remains a key component in Western liberal democracies' strategy to hold China accountable for Xinjiang. However, it is important to acknowledge the pitfalls of phrasing this strategy in terms of Western and liberal democracies confronting the Global South and authoritarian countries. First, the idea that condemnations of China's human rights violations in Xinjiang are limited to 'some Western countries'¹¹ feeds into Beijing's narrative of Western imperialism and double standards (Kanat 2019). The United States, United Kingdom, European Union, Germany, the Netherlands, France and Canada have been among the most proactive to pursue accountability for violations in Xinjiang. Nevertheless, other countries from the Global South have also expressed concern about Xinjiang. For example, while Turkey's position has been fluctuating, Prime Minister Erdogan called the situation in Xinjiang a genocide in 2009.¹² Furthermore, some Western liberal democracies have refrained from systematic condemnation, for example, by not signing joint statements on some occasions¹³ or sometimes hiding behind the EU umbrella for some member states.¹⁴ In addition, the narrative of democracy versus authoritarianism – which has regained momentum with the war in Ukraine (Genoud 2023) – has only been of limited appeal to Global South countries (Feldstein 2022), and reviving power competition around this narrative even risks reinforcing the democratic decline (Brenes & Jackson 2022). Furthermore, as some authors have indicated, one reason for this narrative to be appealing to 'Western' countries is their democratic decline¹⁵ (Repucci & Slipowitz 2021), as well as their governments' inability to unite on anything else than fighting against some authoritarian countries (Dionne 2022).

Context

Since 2018, at the HRC¹⁶ and the UN General Assembly Third Committee,¹⁷ tit-for-tat dynamics have been taking place with joint and counter-joint statements, condemning and praising, respectively, China's policies in the province. This report does not aim to present detailed lists of signatories on each side, which has been partially done elsewhere.¹⁸ However, some major trends can be observed here. First, these alliances have been fluctuating on both sides, prompting particular attention to 'swing' countries such as Turkey.¹⁹ Second, both sides have been raising their number of signatures with Western-led joint statements aiming to reach more cross-regionality. The signatures to joint statements led by Western countries increased from 23 in 2019²⁰ to 51 in 2023.²¹ Nevertheless, China has always maintained a significantly higher number of signatures (37 in 2019²² to around 70 in 2023²³). Third, there is a consensus in the scholar and practitioner community that, despite Western countries' efforts to gain more signatures from the Global South, the chances that statements criticising China's policies in Xinjiang would gather more signatures than counter-statements praising them are almost in-existent.

These tit-for-tat dynamics are happening in the context of China's increasing assertiveness in challenging the international human rights regime. Substantial research has demonstrated the Chinese government's activities within the human rights regime to rewrite norms and reframe existing procedures to better serve its own interests and minimise scrutiny of government violations (Chen 2021; Foot 2020; Fung 2019; Inboden 2021, 2023; Piccone 2018; Richardson 2020; Sceats & Breslin 2012; Worden 2019). Beyond the Xinjiang issue, these authors have also demonstrated China's reinterpretation of key concepts such as sovereignty, universality and development based on cultural relativism, which other authoritarian countries have also used to disempower human rights.²⁴

A key request that Western countries expressed in their joint statements and on other occasions is for China to grant unfettered access to Xinjiang to independent observers, especially the High Commissioner for Human Rights, and a report from her office on the situation in the province.²⁵ In May 2022, after years of negotiations,

the former High Commissioner for Human Rights conducted a controversial visit to China,²⁶ followed by the publication of a report²⁷ on August 31st, a few minutes before her stepping down from the position without seeking a second mandate. The report concluded that China's human rights violations in Xinjiang amount to crimes against humanity. In October 2022, a resolution was tabled at the HRC, asking for a debate on the report. The resolution failed by two votes, with an important geographic divide.

Since the report, limited new information on the situation in Xinjiang has been published. Non-governmental organisations and scholars have continued to document violations and China's tactic to cover them,²⁸ but the international press has paid less attention to the issue. Beijing's repression of the Uyghurs and other Turkic minorities is becoming less visible and more insidious. As the Chinese government declared that detainees have "graduated",²⁹ camps have closed or been transformed. Security apparatus such as checkpoints and police presence is being replaced by more subtle tools of control, such as mass tourism,³⁰ and digital surveillance continues. This normalisation also takes place in the context of Western countries re-engaging with Beijing and other international crises gaining more spotlight – especially the war in Ukraine and the war in Gaza.

Since October 2023, the war in Gaza has also confronted Western countries with revived accusations of human rights double standards and politicisation,³¹ as they are seen as caring about the fate of Muslims in Xinjiang while failing to strongly condemn Israel's assault on Palestinians in Gaza.³² While China has instrumentalised this narrative,³³ its echo has reached a wider audience³⁴ and poisoned efforts to build consensus with significant developing countries on condemning Russia's war against Ukraine and on the need to uphold a global rules-based order.³⁵ This crisis of legitimacy also risks eroding Western countries' efforts to hold China accountable for Xinjiang. The report does not consider whether these specific accusations are true. Double standards and politicisation have always been present in defending human rights.³⁶ Instead, the report starts from the standpoint that every country has double standards and politicises human rights, and that these accusations – whether true or not – do influence Global South countries' position on Xinjiang.

2. Cross-regionality: rationale and cases

As mentioned previously, the HRC and the UN General Assembly Third Committee are the main fora where cross-regionality has proven important. As of today, Western countries have achieved at least some kind of cross-regionality in their joint statements criticising China's human rights violations in Xinjiang. These joint statements have until now included some Muslim countries (e.g. Albania and Somalia), Latin America (e.g. Paraguay, Guatemala, Belize and Honduras), Africa (e.g. Somalia, Eswatini and Liberia), Asia (e.g. Japan), the Pacific (e.g. Palau, Marshall Islands, Nauru and Tuvalu) and the Middle East (e.g. Turkey). Among these countries, some are systematically signing the joint statements, while others have shown significant fluctuations (e.g. Turkey). In contrast, China has gathered a significant number of Muslim countries to praise its policies in Xinjiang.

There is a consensus that cross-regionality is key to holding China accountable at the multilateral level. Nevertheless, it is difficult to assess exactly how much effort is dedicated to this endeavour. Not all Western countries signing joint statements are involved in lobbying the Global South. As a representative from one of these countries mentioned, 'We need first to make sure internally that we ourselves can participate in those joint-statements, so we are not in a position to do outreach to the Global South'. In this sense, while the emphasis is often put on outreaching the Global South, it is never ensured that all Western democracies will sign the joint statements. As a diplomat mentioned, 'At least the Global South is honest about why and whether they will follow or not, with our like-minded there are always excuses and it is complicated'. The countries most proactive in lobbying are usually considered to be the United States, United Kingdom, Germany, France, the Netherlands and Canada. Some coordination, as well as some kind of informal repartition of tasks, exists among like-minded Western countries, according to the ties maintained with targeted countries.

Why is cross-regionality important?

The importance of cross-regionality is attributed to two main reasons. First, cross-regionality is necessary to obtain enough signatures for specific initiatives, such as passing resolutions at the HRC, which requires a simple majority. The most cited example is the HRC's vote on a resolution asking for a debate on the High Commissioner's report on Xinjiang. In general, resolutions are not tabled when they are not considered as having sufficient chances to pass. With very few exceptions, draft resolutions are rarely defeated.³⁷ The lack of cross-regionality, therefore, prevents envisioning certain avenues towards accountability.

The second reason is to reinforce the credibility of criticism of Xinjiang by rebuking China's accusations that this criticism comes only from Western countries,³⁸ that it represents a form of neo-imperialism³⁹ and that it demonstrates politicisation and double standards,⁴⁰ especially in the context of China-US rivalry. Some Global South countries are sensitive to this narrative and have refrained from signing joint statements criticising China to avoid giving the impression that they are aligned with the United States. More broadly, there is a sense that rallying the Global South is part of defending the universality of human rights and the international human rights regime put in place following World War II. In this sense, most interviewees highlighted that human rights are universal values – not Western values – that countries from the Global South have accepted and that defending these rights is not only in Western countries' interest.

HRC's vote on debating Xinjiang

So far, the most tangible illustration of why cross-regionality is important is the HRC's rejection of the 'draft decision' (A/HRC/51/L.6) on a debate on the situation of human rights violation in Xinjiang. Voted in October 2022, the resolution called for a debate to follow up on the report published by the High Commissioner for Human Rights in August the same year.⁴¹ The vote failed by 17 in favour, 19 against and 11 abstentions,⁴² with a significant geographic division.

A/HRC/51/L.6 - DEBATE ON THE SITUATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE XINJIANG UYGHUR AUTONOMOUS REGION, CHINA

ABST	ARGENTINA	YES	HONDURAS	YES	NETHERLANDS
ABST	ARMENIA	ABST	INDIA	NO	PAKISTAN
ABST	BENIN	NO	INDONESIA	YES	PARAGUAY
NO	BOLIVIA (PLURINATIONAL STATE OF)	YES	JAPAN	YES	POLAND
ABST	BRAZIL	NO	KAZAKHSTAN	NO	QATAR
NO	CAMEROON	ABST	LIBYA	YES	REPUBLIC OF KOREA
NO	CHINA	YES	LITHUANIA	NO	SENEGAL
NO	CÔTE D'IVOIRE	YES	LUXEMBOURG	YES	SOMALIA
NO	CUBA	ABST	MALAWI	NO	SUDAN
YES	CZECHIA	ABST	MALAYSIA	ABST	UKRAINE
NO	ERITREA	YES	MARSHALL ISLANDS	NO	UNITED ARAB EMIRATES
YES	FINLAND	NO	MAURITANIA	YES	UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND
YES	FRANCE	ABST	MEXICO	YES	UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
NO	GABON	YES	MONTENEGRO	NO	UZBEKISTAN
ABST	GAMBIA	NO	NAMIBIA	NO	VENEZUELA (BOLIVARIAN REPUBLIC OF)
YES	GERMANY	NO	NEPAL	YES 17	ABST 11 NO 19

Two different visions of the vote can be presented. On the one hand, as the resolution failed only by three votes, it can be seen as a success because of the pressure it has put on China and for building momentum. The interviewees generally considered that the current configuration at the HRC is not favourable to pass resolutions on China, be it in terms of current members or because of the 47-seat geographical repartition since the Human Rights Commission was replaced by the HRC in 2006. On the other hand, as the debate was rejected, the vote can also be interpreted as a failure of Western countries' outreach to the Global South.⁴³ For some interviewees, the vote was winnable, but Western countries lacked solid coordination and engagement. In particular, the fact that, on the Chinese side, outreach came from the highest level,⁴⁴ which was not equalled by Western countries, is seen as crucial.⁴⁵ It is difficult to assess how much effort has been put into demarching countries from the Global South. It is acknowledged, however, that the timing of the vote announcement added difficulty because of the short notice and the fact that another important resolution on Russia was tabled during the same HRC session.⁴⁶ The different interpretations of the vote results are also to be situated in a broader strategic debate related to whether resolutions should only be tabled when there is a real chance of winning or whether they should systematically be tabled even without a chance of winning in order to maintain constant pressure on China. Regarding the second option, some interviewees mentioned the dynamics at the Human Rights Commission following the 1989 Tiananmen massacre with the United States tabling resolutions on China.⁴⁷ Paradoxically, some Western countries consider that the best strategy would be a systematic tabling of resolutions while admitting that they would not be ready to table these resolutions themselves.

3. Questioning assumptions behind outreach to the Global South

Despite the consensus that cross-regionality is key to holding China accountable for human rights violations, shortcomings in how this strategy is conceived can be mentioned. First, it is important that cross-regionality remains one avenue among others and that governments do not focus on outreach to the Global South to the detriment of initiatives that require courageous political stance and economic trade-offs. Indeed, when asked about the next step to hold China accountable, the interviewees often limited themselves to cross-regionality without engaging with other possible avenues, especially at the bilateral level. Joint statements at the HRC are seen as the minimum to keep the pressure on China, but this minimum is already demanding a certain amount of resources. Furthermore, the tit-for-tat dynamics seem to have almost imposed themselves on Western countries, and getting out of them would require a concrete and coordinated strategy, as well as prioritisation of other options, which are currently lacking. The interviewees' responses hint towards a lack of alternative and continuation despite doubts on the usefulness of joint statements. For example, 'No, the tit-for-tat is not very productive, but it has been imposed on us by China. We have no other choice than keep going', 'It is difficult to say if we should pursue with joint-statements and to what degree to qualify it as a success. But the option not to say anything is not a good option either', 'We know that we are never going to win it, this race on the numbers. We also know that in the end, it means nothing (to win it or not). We are talking about finding other paths, but we won't let down this one because this is the system we have, and even if the numbers are against us, we will still try to have more support'.

Second, as illustrated above, underlying Western countries' efforts towards cross-regionality is sometimes an idea of defending the universality of human rights and, by extension, the international human rights regime from the threat posed by China and other authoritarian countries.⁴⁸ This endeavour sometimes implies a defence of the status quo (i.e. the human rights regime seen as emanating from the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights), overlooking that this status quo has been contentious from its inception (Hopgood, Snyder & Vinjamuria 2017) and that both 'activists and autocrats have become unlikely bedfellow in critiquing the international human rights framework'.⁴⁹ In this sense, the literature on neoliberalism and human rights has demonstrated how the human rights regime tends to remain market-compatible, as these rights promote values such as individualism and the right to property (Douzinas 2007; Goodale 2016; Heintz 2018; Morefield 2020; Moyn 2018; O'Connell 2007; Whyte 2019). Furthermore, critical legal studies and the literature on human rights history have both put forward the influence of colonialism in the shaping of these rights (Anghie 2004, 2013; Burke 2010, 2012; Douzinas 2007; Mazower 2004; Mutua 2016, 2017; Terretta 2012; Yamin 2020). In recent years, a debate on the limits of universality and of the human rights regime has reappeared in academia, with leading scholars on human rights (Moyn 2018; Goodale 2022; Hopgood 2013; Whyte 2019) critically assessing their achievements and calling for their reinvention. However, scholars working on human rights in China have remained isolated from this debate, as risks of China's instrumentalisation of this crisis have prevented a genuine and candid questioning of the limits of universality. Consequently, the perception that the international human rights regime needs to be defended against the threat posed by China has sometimes led to defending an idealised view of this regime that has become out of touch with acknowledgment from scholars and practitioners that this regime has shown serious shortcomings.

Third, while cross-regionality is sometimes perceived as helping ground the universality of human rights, there is some caveat in considering the cross-regionality achieved in Western liberal democracy-led joint statements as representing a genuine universal concern for violations in Xinjiang. As one interviewee interestingly

mentioned, 'Western governments like to say that their joint-statements are now cross-regional, but in fact there are not many States for each other regions, and those states have individual reasons to join that are often not related to Xinjiang. Their position is not representative of their region's position. So there is some kind of exaggeration in saying that these statements are cross-regional but civil society also plays the game and presents them as cross-regional'. For example, countries that recognise Taiwan often sign Western-led joint statements, and their vote might reflect this recognition more than a specific concern for violations in Xinjiang, although the two dimensions are also related to each other. Consequently, while cross-regionality has made improvements in terms of the number of signatures, it does not necessarily equate to the defence of universal values that is often mentioned by Western countries as a main goal for achieving cross-regionality.

Furthermore, when asked about the reasons for cross-regionality to show limited success, many interviewees mentioned Global South countries' economic dependence towards China, especially through the Belt and Road Initiative. There seems to be a persistent belief in debt trap diplomacy despite it having now been widely discredited.⁵⁰ Brautigam (2020) observed a negativity bias in much of the West's reaction to China's role in Africa. This perception of a zero-sum game between economic relations and human rights criticism as a major obstacle towards cross-regionality is interesting given that economic vulnerabilities, including dependencies on trade and foreign direct investment, have unsurprisingly played a role in shaping all EU member states' willingness to raise human rights issues (Genoud & Pils 2023).

Another reason often mentioned to explain cross-regionality limited success is the authoritarian nature of countries rallying with China. As mentioned earlier, while more authoritarian countries are signing with China, reducing China's support to these countries does not represent a fully accurate picture. For example, Somalia – classified as not free according to Freedom House⁵¹ – has at times criticised China. In addition, Eswatini – also classified as not free according to Freedom House – has joint statements criticising China's policies in Xinjiang. In contrast, Dominica (free) and Morocco (partly free) have supported China. The assumption that authoritarian

countries support China to fend themselves against criticism of their own violations is also not helpful to rally these countries' support, as it might blur Western countries' understandings of legitimate Global South countries' revendications regarding unbalances created by the liberal world order. This echoes attitudes following the war in Ukraine, when leaders supporting Ukraine reprimanded Global South countries for not condemning Russia. For some Global South countries, this position overlooks the fact that their requests towards a more equal world order are systematically denied.⁵²

4. Why is cross-regionalism difficult to achieve?

Accusations of double standards and politicisation

Various reasons can explain the difficulty for Western liberal democracies to gain more support from Global South countries to be vocal on China. As already mentioned, experts have documented China's use of coercion and persuasion, economic dependence towards Beijing as well as China's questioning of the international human rights regime.

In addition, since the war in Gaza, a sense of double standards and politicisation has been increasing because of Western countries' support to Israel.⁵³ This concern is not new and is situated in a wider dilemma. Despite studies showing worldwide support for human rights, the perception that they are applied selectively or even punitively remains, pointing to the complicated relationship between human rights and power (Griffiths 2023). The perception of double standards, whether accurate or not, risks affecting Western liberal democracies' capacity to rally support from the Global South, not only against the Russian invasion of Ukraine⁵⁴ but also against China's human rights violations in Xinjiang. For example, Indonesia has been of specific interest in outreach efforts. The country has the largest Muslim population in the world, is a member of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and has demonstrated important democratic gains recently (rated as partly free by Freedom House).⁵⁵

Nevertheless, Jakarta has blasted the EU for double standards on Gaza,⁵⁶ which will probably complicate efforts to convince it to be vocal on Xinjiang. At the same time, Jakarta has not shown consistency in its solidarity with Muslims around the world, as the lack of protection to Rohingya refugees illustrates.⁵⁷

As mentioned earlier, a major reason why interviewees consider cross-regionalism as key in holding China accountable is precisely to counter Beijing's accusations that criticism against Xinjiang's policies comes from Western countries which are politicising human rights to contain its rise. For example, at the UN, Chinese representatives often assert that 'What the US and a handful of Western countries really care about is not China's human rights but interfering in China's internal affairs under the pretext of human rights with the aim of suppressing and containing China, safeguarding their own hegemony'.⁵⁸ In this sense, regarding the much-awaited publication of the report on Xinjiang by the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, and her renouncement of seeking a second mandate after its publication, Chinese state media titled that 'China opposes politicizing human rights as Bachelet steps down as UN human rights chief' based on Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian's declaration that 'China firmly opposes the release of the so-called Xinjiang-related report by the UN Human Rights Office, which is a pure stunt orchestrated by the US and a few other Western countries'.⁵⁹ Recently, on the occasion of China's Universal Periodic Review, Chinese state media ran the headline 'China calls for non-politicized UN review on its human rights',⁶⁰ and the Chinese head of delegation asserted that countries adhering to the 'principle of non-politicization' are also those that 'actively affirm China's unremitting efforts and great achievements in promoting and protecting human rights'.⁶¹ The Chinese government plays on a neo-colonial rhetoric to assert that politicisation is a Western plot led by the United States and that developing countries oppose it: 'The international community, especially the developing world, opposes the politicization of human rights issues. The scheme of some Western countries to contain China's development with the Xinjiang issue will never succeed'.⁶²

Accusations of human rights politicisation are not new. When asked about China's accusations of politicisation, the interviewees often recalled that such accusations can also be made regarding

China and the Global South's position on human rights. Indeed, while Global South countries have criticised Western liberal democracies for their position on the war in Gaza,⁶³ it can also be highlighted that some Global South countries are demonstrating solidarity with Palestinians based on Muslim solidarity while remaining silent on Xinjiang. In its 2024 world report, Human Rights Watch denounced as much 'Governments that are vocal in condemning Israeli government war crimes against civilians in Gaza but silent about Chinese government crimes against humanity in Xinjiang' than those who 'demand international prosecution for Russian war crimes in Ukraine while undermining accountability for past US abuses in Afghanistan',⁶⁴ hinting at the existence of double standards in both Western liberal democracies and Global South countries. It is often argued that double standards and politicisation constitute a threat to the international human rights regime.

Relationship between politics and human rights

In the political debate, accusations of human rights politicisation are often articulated without a clear definition. In the academic literature, there is no consensus on the definition of politicisation. This state of the art has led some authors to question the usefulness of the concept of politicisation while acknowledging the political impact of accusations of politicisation (Lyons, Baldwin & McNemar 1977). This report starts from the standpoint that China's accusations of human rights politicisation have found some echo towards Global South countries and impeded Western countries' outreach to these countries, and that it is therefore necessary to understand how to tackle these accusations.

Concretely, in the political and academic discourse, there is a tendency to see politicisation negatively, as human rights are considered moral values standing above politics.⁶⁵ The fact that governments rarely, if ever, describe their own policies as attempts to politicise human rights is the revelation of the negative connotation of the term. In this sense, politicisation refers to an issue that is

politicised but is not or should not be political in the first instance. In the academic literature, human rights politicisation presupposes the possibility of human rights without politics. It is broadly defined as actors inappropriately operating on political considerations rather than human rights-based considerations (i.e. instrumentalising human rights for ulterior political purposes) (Carraro 2017; Dominguez-Redondo 2020; Freedman & Houghton 2017; Lyons, Baldwin & McNemar 1977). For example, politicisation 'describes a situation in which principled neutrality is compromised in favor of political discretion' (Terman & Byun 2022). It happens in instances such as when the most common tool of human rights advocacy, 'naming and shaming', does not reflect the impartial application of values and agreements such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights but rather the political interests of individual states (Donnelly 1998). According to some authors, politics and politicisation can be distinguished by assumptions about the desirability or legitimacy of the relationship between politics and human rights. For example, according to Freedman and Houghton (2017: 753), 'The difference between politics and politicisation hinges on the extent to which national objectives are related to the subject at hand. Of course, states will always seek to advance national objectives, but pernicious politicisation occurs when states introduce unrelated objectives that undermine the body's (human rights council) mandate'.

In contrast to the idea that politics should stay out of human rights, the pluridisciplinary literature on human rights politics presupposes the impossibility of human rights without politics. It adopts the perspective that while the ambition of human rights is to reach universal moral values, their nature is deeply and irrevocably political, and they are in practice therefore always used to advancing political goals. This political nature emerges from two main observations. First, human rights are contentious and contingent as they are the result of power struggles among people aiming to achieve moral legitimacy in particular historical, social and economic circumstances (Moyn 2010; Stammers 1999; Evans 2005; Falk 2002). According to Shivji (1999), 'Human rights mirror the struggles and concerns of the dominant groups in society at a particular time as these groups organize and reorganize to maintain their position'. In addition, the political nature of human rights comes from the fact

that they can be used as much to question the status quo as to legitimise strategies of domination (Balibar 2013; Evans 2013, 2011; Ignatieff 2001; Ingram 2008; Moyn 2017; Perugini & Gordon 2015; Rajagopal 2006). Consequently, human rights politics is defined as power struggles for the definition of human rights, as well as the use of human rights in power struggles to defend a vision of the world. Nevertheless, the literature on the politics of human rights has remained mainly at the theoretical level and refrained from engaging with case studies, with the danger of reading human rights disagreements simply and only as political disagreements.

Claims that human rights are politicised are not the same as acknowledging that these rights are political, but no clear line can be drawn between them. In the case of China, fears are that acknowledging the political nature of human rights would feed into Beijing's challenge to the international human rights regime.

China's accusations that Western countries are politicising human rights

China's accusations that Western countries are politicising human rights are situated in the negative image of politicisation described above. In China's discourse, accusations of human rights politicisation are regularly linked to a narrative of double standards. As for politicisation, accusations of double standards have a history that predates Beijing's current narrative on the issue, as some Western countries, such as the United States, also feel disproportionately targeted at the UN⁶⁶ (Franck 1984). The blurriness of the frontier between politicisation and double standards is present in the political discourse as well as in the academic literature. For example, Franck (1984) attributed the existence of double standards to the prominence of political motives when dealing with unrelated principles. Overall, double standards usually have two dimensions: 1) One government criticises others for human rights violations while violating human rights itself. 2) One government criticises some countries for human

rights violations while closing the eye on other countries' violations. As for politicisation, double standards are seen negatively, with the assumption that even-handedness in human rights criticism is necessary to ensure the legitimacy of the human rights discourse (Turner 2003). In this sense, Heinze examined what he called 'selective' condemnation of human rights violations to determine whether even-handedness is required for criticism to be legitimate. According to the author, selectivity becomes illegitimate when condemnations of human rights violations reflect political, social, or cultural conflict that is extraneous to the content of the relevant human right (Heinze 2008). Consequently, what makes selectivity illegitimate is not its mere existence but the political agenda behind it. According to Heinze (2008), 'Even-handedness is neither possible nor desirable for the fair and effective promotion of human rights law' (15). Instead, the author argued that legitimacy in human rights advocacy requires the accuser to act even-handedly in applying its own declared human rights mandate. Nevertheless, in the political discourse, there is a tendency to assume that even-handedness is an absolute prerequisite for human rights criticism to be legitimate, with accusations of double standards used as a trump card annihilating any type of concern.

The geopolitical confrontation between China and the United States has brought a special sense of urgency to the topic of human rights politicisation and double standards. Western liberal democracies and China share the same negative image of human rights politicisation and double standards, both assuming that they should be avoided but for different reasons. For Beijing, Western countries are politicising human rights to contain China's rise. In liberal democracies, human rights tend to be seen as moral values that stand above politics. By rejecting human rights politics, these countries promote a self-romanticised understanding of human rights that overlooks legitimate criticism of these rights by fearing that any acknowledgement of weaknesses would be instrumentalised by authoritarian countries to further damage the human rights regime (Rieff 2018; Hopgood 2013; Goodale 2022). This position has sometimes led to an uncritical belief in Western liberal democracies' understanding of human rights informed by the perception that these

rights are uncontested and dismissive of alternative understandings.⁶⁷ Nevertheless, the global deficiencies of the human rights regime and its politicisation have mainly remained absent from the analysis of the threat that China is perceived to be posing to this regime. As these two topics have remained isolated from each other, there is a risk of associating a defence of the international human rights regime against authoritarian countries, such as China, with that of the status quo that omits the shortcomings of this regime. This is also illustrated by the interviewees' answers: 'I agree with the fact that we all have double standards but if we acknowledge it, China would use it to further weaken the human rights system. If we acknowledge our double standards, we would be opening a Pandora box that would not be helpful'.

Deadlock of denying human rights politicisation and double standards

This report does not enter into the debate on the moral nature of human rights.⁶⁸ Instead, it starts from the standpoint that despite human rights inspiration as moral values, human rights always have a political component, as they question power relations. This political nature means that human rights politicisation is almost unavoidable, or at least that delimiting the boundaries between politics and politicisation is sometimes impossible. Nevertheless, the perception that human rights politicisation is negative and that these rights are moral values standing above politics has pushed Western countries into a deadlock and forced them to defend untenable positions.

The interviews showed different opinions on whether Western countries are politicising human rights and having double standards. Some interviewees dismissed the idea, or at least tempered it, by comparing Western countries' double standards (often referring to

the situation in the United States in relation to racism or the war in Iraq) to China's double standards.⁶⁹ For example, when asked about the accusations of Western countries' double standards regarding the war in Gaza, one interviewee answered, 'I don't think that regarding Gaza we have double standards. There might be some time when we are more comfortable to raise human rights than others. It is rare for the West to be vocal on racism in US, it is true. But there is no equivalency there, the situation is different'.

While other interviewees admitted the existence of Western countries' double standards, comparisons between Western and China's double standards remained recurring in the interviews: 'We can call against human rights abuses and be hypocritical at the same time. But the situation is slightly better in the US because at least it is possible to talk about it. The fact that we are hypocritical does not absolve them (China) of their faults. They (China) just want to shut down the conversation (by using accusations of double standards)'.

Other interviewees were very open about the existence of double standards but insisted on anonymity, explaining that the topic is not something that is openly discussed in their organisation. 'For Xinjiang, China has learned from what the US and Canada did to the indigenous. They copied them in so many ways. But we don't really talk about that (internally)'. Similarly, another interviewee replied on the existence of double standards in Western countries: 'As an organization, we dismiss it totally. We are not even 1% considering this. From my perspective, we should be careful about the way we say things. We cannot say that as we have been the biggest human rights violators in the history, we learned it the hard way and now we know we should not do it again. Our governments in the West do not want to admit that we have double standards'.

Finally, while some interviewees admitted double standards, they were also sceptical about how acknowledging them would materialise concretely. This scepticism comes back to the idea that acknowledging double standards might weaken the human rights regime, and that

defending this regime implies sticking to the status quo: 'Democracies of course need to look at themselves in the mirror, but how do you articulate this in the diplomatic arena? There are already breaches, but we should not question the international human rights system'.

These examples demonstrate that, while even-handedness is not necessary for human rights criticism to be legitimate, denying the existence of their double standards – or only admitting them by underlying that China's double standards are worst – and focusing on human rights as moral values has put Western countries in a deadlock. Indeed, by promoting an understanding of human rights as moral values standing above politics, Western liberal democracies have raised very high expectations for themselves, with Global South countries perceiving failures to stand up to these expectations.

5. Should cross-regionality be continued and how?

Outreach to the Global South also poses strategic dilemmas. There is a trade-off between a sharper statement including stronger condemnation and more substance, but which risks gathering fewer signatures, and a broader statement gathering more signatures. As the number of around 50 signatories that has now been reached seems to constitute a threshold that is difficult to outperform, some Western countries would prefer returning to more substantial joint statements, while others are more favourable to keep raising the number with thematic joint statements instead of country-specific ones. For example, during the 53rd HRC, the United States delivered a statement on indigenous and local cultures which gathered 67 signatories.⁷⁰ By recalling the right to culture of ethnic and religious minorities, this statement was targeted at China and its treatment of the Uyghur minority. Nevertheless, as the declaration was thematic and not country-specific, its content applied to all countries without any mention of China. This broader phrasing enabled the joint statement to reach a number of signatures that no country-specific joint statement on China had. However, the impact on China was also very different. Indeed, Beijing has not significantly engaged with the joint statement and felt very limited concern. There is a consensus that thematic joint statements are a valid tool. One of the benefits mentioned by one interviewee was that thematic joint statements show that 'Western countries are not only obsessed about China, but that it is really about human rights'. Nevertheless, some interviewees warned that thematic statements should not replace country-specific statements but should be considered as an addition; otherwise, the pressure on China would not be sufficient to have any impact. Furthermore, outreach to the Global South would require overcoming the democracy versus autocracy binary to take into consideration dynamics inside the different regions.

As discussed in this report, Western liberal democracies have pursued strategies to gain cross-regional support, in particular, to gather more Global South countries' signatures to their joint statements at the HRC and at the General Assembly Third Committee. These joint statements are important in naming and shaming violations and submitting China to international scrutiny. They have also led to concrete actions by requesting that China grants access to Xinjiang to the High Commissioner for Human Rights and by requesting the High Commissioner to write a report on Xinjiang, both having materialised in 2022. Nevertheless, joint statements are non-binding. Concretely, even if more countries from the Global South were to join, to the extent that these statements would gather more signatures than China-led joint statements, including a significant geographical representation, that would not make them binding. Of course, there is a reputational dimension at stake. China's increasing assertiveness at the HRC is a sign that Beijing cares about its international image as a responsible player.

Another avenue towards accountability that is currently debated is the ILO following China's ratification of the two forced labour conventions [i.e. the Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (No. 29) and the Abolition of Forced Labour Convention, 1957 (No. 105)]. China's ratification of the two conventions will indeed bring increased international scrutiny as the ILO monitors implementation through a committee of experts and a tripartite committee that considers submissions by member states and observations by workers' organisations and employers' organisations. However, authors warn that there is a risk of 'further weakening of the UN system and the authority of international law if China fails to approach implementation in good faith',⁷¹ recalling that Beijing's signing of core human rights instruments has not prevented the deterioration of violations, as highlighted by 50 United Nations Special Procedures in an unprecedented joint statement.⁷² Scholars have also cast doubt on the applicability of ILO rules to political exploitation sponsored by the state.⁷³

Considering the limits of the international human rights regime, there is a need for Western liberal democracies to question assumptions on which outreach to the Global South is based and reconsider how to reach accountability. Here are some recommendations for governments of liberal democracies to achieve this:

- In parallel to cross-regionality, Western liberal democracies should keep pursuing other avenues towards accountability, including those involving a strong stance and being singled-out, such as sanctions and supply chain law making companies liable for human rights abuses. Cross-regionality is only one avenue among others and should be accompanied by other measures.
- Abandon the idea that defending the human rights regime equals defending the status quo and acknowledge that this regime needs to be in constant development to adapt to new challenges. To do so, Western liberal democracies should engage in Global South countries' initiatives that can strengthen the international human rights regime, such as third-generation human rights. While some countries have instrumentalised the push for third-generation human rights to weaken civil and political rights, this should not lead liberal democracies to neglect these rights. The present report supports Freedman's call⁷⁴ for liberal democracies to play a strong role in the development of third-generation human rights, particularly in the sphere of transnational corporations' responsibilities. The report shares Freedman's assessment, according to which reluctance to engage with these rights feeds into China's narrative of double standards and politicisation. It also reiterates concrete steps articulated by the author, such as identifying third-generation human rights that Western liberal democracies will support and ensure that all human rights are foregrounded in the development of third-generation human rights.

- More broadly, engage with the Global South's call to build a more equitable and inclusive international order. The report shares Griffiths' analysis according to which Western liberal democracies need to accept the Global South's human rights agenda, such as the right to development and raising the bar on business and human rights,⁷⁵ including a binding treaty for transnational corporations. By ensuring a human rights-based approach to development, Western liberal democracies can counter China's appropriation of the concept.
- Acknowledge the political nature of human rights and do not reject criticism of the international human rights regime by fear of further weakening it. Organise internal discussions on the issue of double standards and politicisation, as well as with civil society organisations, to identify how they affect liberal democracies' outreach to the Global South.
- Address accusations of double standards by developing more transparent human rights policies and procedures that justify taking a stand on particular issues and not on others. Renounce to claims of absolute even-handedness by developing a clearer human rights mandate and showing self-reflectivism on the political dimensions of this mandate. Ensure even-handedness within a particular mandate by providing candid criticism of all governments and responsible entities within defined territorial or thematic boundaries.
- Develop a more nuanced outreach towards the Global South by including an analysis of regional dynamics and national dimensions influencing these countries' position on Xinjiang. In particular, mandate research on the role of local media in shaping populations' positions on Xinjiang and on the influence of local opinions on governments' positions.

- Rephrase the narrative on universality and stop defending an absolute and rigid version of universality. While the risk of China's use of a cultural relativism approach to water down criticism of its violations exists, governments in Western liberal democracies should not remain isolated from debates on the necessity to reinvent human rights. In this sense, the report supports Goodale's call⁷⁶ for reintegrating pluralism in human rights without allowing cultural differences to be manipulated as a weapon of exclusion and violence.
- Mandate an external analysis on policies regularly pointed at in accusations of double standards and politicisation against liberal democracies, such as the EU migration policy, racism in the United States, the war in Iraq, the war in Gaza and the war in Ukraine.
- Expose the failure of some proponents of economic, social and cultural rights as well as collective rights to actually deliver results to ensure that the promotion of these rights is not only used to water down on civil and political rights but genuinely to achieve a non-hierarchical vision of human rights.
- Show support for Global South concern towards other major human rights violations, such as the war in Gaza, particularly for legitimate initiatives such as South Africa's genocide case against Israel at the International Court of Justice.

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Endnotes

- 1 I use the Chinese term Xinjiang as it refers to the diplomatic efforts made to hold China accountable for the situation in the province. However, Uyghurs generally refer to the region as East Turkestan (<https://www.uyghurcongress.org/en/east-turkestan-2/>).
- 2 For example, the EU Parliament, the French Parliament, the Canadian Parliament, the UK Parliament, the Dutch Parliament and the US government.
- 3 United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner (2022). *Assessment of the situation of human rights in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, People's Republic of China*. <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/countries/2022-08-31/22-08-31-final-assessment.pdf>
- 4 By EU, US, UK and Canada. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/xinjiang-sanctions-european-union/2021/03/22/1b0d69aa-8b0a-11eb-a33e-da28941cb9ac_story.html
- 5 For a list of countries boycotting, see <https://www.politico.eu/article/boycott-winter-olympics-beijing-2022/>
- 6 See footnote 2.
- 7 <https://www.state.gov/xinjiang-supply-chain-business-advisory/>
- 8 For a debate on the notion of 'Global South', see: <https://chinaglobalsouth.com/podcasts/what-exactly-is-the-global-south/>
- 9 Fifty-one interviews were conducted between October 2023 and February 2024 with diplomats, civil society organizations and scholars in Geneva, New York, Beijing and capitals. All interviews were conducted based on anonymity.
- 10 This analysis – which has partially been conducted elsewhere (see footnote 18) – would also be necessary but would require to conduct interviews with stakeholders mainly from the Global South and, more precisely, with countries having specific voting patterns, such as Turkey.
- 11 Global Times (2022). *More countries oppose US, West's politicization of human rights in China's Xinjiang region at UN*. <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202209/1276269.shtml>
- 12 <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-china-sb-idUSTRE56957D20090710/>
- 13 For example, Switzerland has, at occasions, renounced to sign joint statements condemning China's violations in Xinjiang, allegedly for economic concern over the upgrade of its 2013 free trade agreement: <https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/business/why-is-switzerland-refusing-to-follow-eu-sanctions-on-china-/48858108>; <https://www.voanews.com/a/why-israel-and-switzerland-stayed-silent-on-uyghur-human-rights-in-china-/6297319.html>
- 14 For example, in 2017, Greece vetoed a condemnation of China's human rights record at the UN, marking the first time the EU had failed to issue such statement. One explanation attributed Greece's decision to its dependence on Chinese investments: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/18/greece-eu-criticism-un-china-human-rights-record>
- 15 According to Freedom House, Global freedom declined for the 18th consecutive year in 2023. <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2024/mounting-damage-flawed-elections-and-armed-conflict>
- 16 At the Human Rights Council, in July 2018, 22 Western countries expressed concern about detentions and abuses in Xinjiang, against which China rallied its partners to fight back. <https://thediplomat.com/2019/10/rival-camps-clash-over-xinjiang-at-un-committee-session/>
- 17 In August 2018, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination expressed

alarm over numerous reports of the detention of large numbers of ethnic Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2018/08/committee-eliminatio-on-racial-discrimination-reviews-report-china>

18 See, for example, Basu (2020). More countries join condemnation of China over Xinjiang abuses. Axios <https://www.axios.com/2020/10/08/un-statement-china-uyghurs-xinjiang>; <https://thediplomat.com/2020/10/2020-edition-which-countries-are-for-or-against-chinas-xinjiang-policies/>; Wientzek, Ultes & Mendoza (2022). Joint statements on the situation of human rights in Xinjiang at the 51st UN Human Rights Council. Konrad Adenauer Stiftung <https://www.kas.de/en/web/multilateraler-dialog-genf/map-of-the-month/detail/-/content/gemeinsame-stellungnahmen-zur-menschenrechtslage-in-xinjiang-auf-dem-51-un-menschenrechtsrat>

19 See, for example, Süsler (2023).

20 Joint statement available at https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/supporting_resources/190708_joint_statement_xinjiang.pdf

21 Joint statement available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/joint-statement-on-human-rights-violations-in-xinjiang-at-the-un-third-committee>

22 Cumming, Bruce (2019). China's retort over its mass detentions: Praise from Russia and Saudi Arabia. New York Times <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/12/world/asia/china-human-rights-united-nations.html>

23 Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China to the United Nations Office at Geneva and other International Organizations in Switzerland (2021). Joint statement of 69 countries at the Interactive Dialogue on High Commissioner's annual report at the 47th session of the Human Rights Council. http://geneva.china-mission.gov.cn/eng/dbdt/202106/t20210624_9103595.htm. In contrast to joint statements led by Western countries, China does not always publish the list of signatories, simply articulating the number of these signatories.

24 For more on cultural relativism and its instrumentalization, see Donnelly (1984), Ibhawoh (2001).

25 Permanent mission of France to the United Nations in New York (2021). Cross-regional joint statement on the human rights situation in Xinjiang on behalf of 43 Member. <https://onu.delegfrance.org/we-call-on-china-to-allow-immediate-meaningful-and-unfettered-access-to>; Government of the Netherlands (2022). Joint statement on behalf of 47 countries in the UN Human Rights Council on the human rights situation in China. <https://www.government.nl/documents/diplomatic-statements/2022/06/14/joint-statement-47-countries-un-human-rights-council-situation-china> For an analysis of this request as well as the visit, see Genoud (2022a,b).

26 United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner (2022). Statement by UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet after official visit to China. 28 May. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements/2022/05/statement-un-high-commissioner-human-rights-michelle-bachelet-after-official>

27 United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner (2022). OHCHR Assessment of human rights concerns in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, People's Republic of China. 31 August. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/country-reports/ohchr-assessment-human-rights-concerns-xinjiang-uyghur-autonomous-region>

28 See, for example, <https://uhrp.org/news/why-are-eu-travel-firms-offering-holidays-to-uyghur-region/>

29 <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/09/world/asia/china-xinjiang-muslim-detention.html>

30 This transformation has been observed by the author during a visit to Xinjiang in April 2021. See also Xiao, Eva (2023). Investing in Tourism in Xinjiang, Beijing Seeks New Ways to Control the Region's Culture. ChinaFile. <https://www.chinafile.com/investing-tourism-xinjiang-beijing-seeks-new-ways-control-regions-culture>; Davidson, Helen (2023). Travel firms urged to halt trips to Uyghur region over China rights abuses. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/aug/30/travel-firms-trips-uyghur-region-china-rights-abuses-xinjiang-tours>

31 The war in Ukraine had also brought the issue to the front. See Genoud (2023)

32 For an example, see Ruiz Casado, Juan Alberto (2023). The Global North's foreign policy has a glaring contradiction regarding China's abuses in Xinjiang and Israel's in Palestine. The Diplomat <https://thediplomat.com/2023/11/xinjiang-vs-gaza-the-wests-shifting-definition-of-genocide/>

33 Global Times (2024). Gaza crisis exposes last fig leaf of US double standards. Written by Wang Yan and Zhang Yuanshi <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202401/1304654.shtml>

34 Rabbani Khar, Hina (2024). Israel's war on Gaza and the West's credibility crisis. ALJAZEERA <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2024/1/16/israels-war-on-gaza-and-the-wests-credibility-crisis>

35 Foy, Henry (2023). Rush by west to back Israel erodes developing countries' support for Ukraine. Financial Times. <https://www.ft.com/content/e0b43918-7eaf-4a11-baaf-d6d7fb61a8a5>

36 See, for example, Sabatini (2023: 11): "For decades, from governments across the ideological spectrum, rhetoric and policy in defense of human rights have been instrumentalized for political agendas and national interests."

37 <https://untoday.org/resolution-process-of-the-human-rights-council-a-birds-eye-view/>

38 Global Times <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202210/1276607.shtml>

39 Global Times <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202308/1296836.shtml>

40 Xinhua http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-03/12/c_139806372.htm

41 <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/LTD/G22/505/63/PDF/G2250563.pdf?OpenElement>

42 <https://www.ohchr.org/en/news/2022/10/human-rights-council-adopts-21-texts-and-rejects-one-draft-decision-extends-mandates>

43 Regarding Latin America, there were hopes that Brazil, Argentina and Mexico would vote in favour following their traditional voting pattern at the HRC. However, Honduras and Paraguay voted yes. Other countries that were expected to abstain, such as Indonesia, ended up voting against. Regarding Africa, Gambia and Malawi, which have normally shown closer voting patterns to Western countries, also abstained. In contrast, Somalia surprisingly voted in favour, being the only African country and the only Muslim-majority country to back the resolution. Finally, Ukraine abstained, which it said was a mistake on the following day, but the procedure does not allow a change of vote.

For a detailed analysis of Somalia's vote, see: <https://chinaglobalsouth.com/analysis/somalia-voted-with-chinas-critics-at-the-un-human-rights-council-to-initiate-a-debate-on-xinjiang-but-why/>

44 According to some interviewees, Xi Jinping himself was involved.

45 According to one interviewee, for Global South countries, the hierarchical level of the pressure is seen as reflecting the importance of the issue for the lobbying country and impacts on these countries' voting decision.

46 <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G22/520/25/PDF/G2252025.pdf?OpenElement>

47 For more details on the diplomatic reactions following the Tiananmen massacre, see Foot (2000).

48 See, for example, Rana Siu Inboden 2023 on authoritarian states' influence in multilateral organizations.

49 Samarasinghe, Natalie (2023), foreword in Griffiths (2023) p. 3.

50 China Global South Project (2023). Biden renews debt trap allegation against China even though the charge has been widely debunked. <https://chinaglobalsouth.com/2023/11/06/biden-renews-debt-trap-allegation-against-china-even-though-the-charge-has-been-widely-debunked/> <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-08-19-debunking-myth-debt-trap-diplomacy-jones-hameiri.pdf>

- 51 https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2023-03/FIW_World_2023_DigitalPDF.pdf. For a critic of Freedom House classification, see Diego Giannone 2009
- 52 Boswell, Alan and Hassan Khannenje (2022). What Africa really thinks about the war in Ukraine. The Horn [podcast], May 19, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/what-africa-really-thinks-about-war-ukraine>
- 53 <https://mondediplo.com/2024/01/01editorial/>; <https://www.aljazeera.com/program/newsfeed/2023/11/11/amnesty-chief-calls-out-west-double-standards-over-gaza-war>
- 54 <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/23/us/ukraine-gaza-global-south-hypocrisy.html>
- 55 <https://freedomhouse.org/country/indonesia>
- 56 <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Indonesia-and-Sri-Lanka-blast-EU-for-double-standards-on-Gaza>
- 57 <https://chinaglobalsouth.com/analysis/explaining-indonesias-different-responses-to-palestine-xinjiang-and-myanmars-rohingya/>
- 58 <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202210/21/WS635200d7a310fd2b29e7dc80.html>
- 59 <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202208/1274333.shtml>
- 60 <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2024-01-23/China-calls-for-non-politicized-UN-review-on-its-human-rights--1qBfqtefXCo/p.html>
- 61 <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202401/1306074.shtml>
- 62 <https://global.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202211/09/WS636aece2a3105ca1f2274d36.html>
- 63 <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/commentary/2023/11/22/world/asian-muslims/>
- 64 <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2024>
- 65 For examples of the negative image of politicization in the political discourse, see Crawford, Julia (2022), Does the Human Rights Council ever criticise the West? In SWI swissinfo.ch <https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/does-the-human-rights-council-ever-criticise-the-west--/47372990>. This negative rhetoric is especially visible in Chinese State media, see, for example, GT staff reporters (2022), More countries oppose US, West's politicization of human rights in China's Xinjiang region at UN, In GT Global Times <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202209/1276269.shtml>
- 66 Franck analysed the allegation, according to which 'No indictment of the United Nations has been made more frequently or with greater vehemence than that it singles out Western and pro-Western states for obloquy, while winking at far worse excesses committed by socialist and Third World nations' to find 'that the charge is partly false, partly true and partly irrelevant' (1984: 811).
- 67 See Taylor (2022).
- 68 For an argument against human rights as moral value, see Hopgood (2017).
- 69 For a discussion on "whataboutism" see: Franceschini and Loubere (2020).
- 70 <https://geneva.usmission.gov/2023/06/20/joint-cultural-preservation-hrc53/>
- 71 <https://madeinchinajournal.com/2022/07/04/chinas-ratification-of-the-ilo-forced-labour-conventions-a-hollow-gesture/>
- 72 <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2020/06/un-experts-call-decisive-measures-protect-fundamental-freedoms-china>
- 73 <https://www.politico.eu/article/un-rules-useless-against-china-forced-labor-camp-uyghur-muslim-research-adrian-zenz/>
- 74 See Freedman's recommendation to the EU: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2023/702584/EXPO_IDA\(2023\)702584_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2023/702584/EXPO_IDA(2023)702584_EN.pdf)
- 75 See Griffiths (2023).
- 76 See Goodale (2022).

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