

**City University of Hong Kong**

**2021/22 Semester A**

**POL 3113**

**Issues in Contemporary World Politics**

**Analytical Essay**

**Essay Title: Discuss the role of global NGOs on the allegations to China of human rights abuses in  
Xinjiang.**

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The development of world politics is full of dynamics as there are more non-state actors involved in the international community and the inter-actor and intra-actor interactions are being more influential to the policy change in different international affairs. According to Keck and Sikkink (1999), they emphasize the importance of transnational advocacy networks in world politics, a kind of interaction that involves international, regional and domestic non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that are eager to share information and knowledge with each other based on common values and beliefs. The major themes of these kinds of interactions are commonly about the issues on universal values such as human rights, environmental protection and women's rights. Such kinds of networks could improve the circulation of information to accelerate the progress of disclosing important issues to the world, gaining the public's attention and boosting the bargaining power to negotiate matters with large organizations and governments (Keck, & Sikkink, 1999). This essay would focus on how global NGOs participate in the transnational advocacy networks to try to advocate policy change on injustice matters in a real-world case, which this essay has chosen the allegations of human rights abuses in Xinjiang to study. It is necessary to clarify that although there are some questions about the truthfulness of the allegations, this essay is neither going to examine the credibility nor to present any opinion in this regard. This essay would like to focus on analyzing the role of global NGOs in this case by understanding how they discover and investigate the issues, and how they respond to that and how they make use of their findings to bring this notion forward to the international community and the public eye.

The disclosure of the human rights abuses in Xinjiang was one of the examples of how the information could circulate rapidly from the domestic to the international level. The official documents about the mass detention camps in Xinjiang were collected by multiple global NGOs such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch (HRW) and International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ) by the channel of the exiled Uyghurs' group from their connections in Xinjiang. The mass detention of Uyghurs had been reported in September 2017 by HRW (2017) as they had interviewed the relatives of the detainees to understand the situation of Uyghurs in Xinjiang, which include illegal detention, forced labor and thought control. More concrete evidence became available after several confidential official documents leaked to ICIJ (2019), which have shown the local authority in Xinjiang has been severely violating the human rights of Uyghurs since 2017. Later, a vice-chairperson of a committee in the United Nations confirmed that the human rights abuses in Xinjiang include detaining more than a million Uyghurs in mass detention camps without legal process, using mass surveillance to monitor the Uyghur population and collecting blood samples and iris scans of all Uyghurs to obtain their

full DNA. (“One Million Muslim”, 2018). Global NGOs attach importance to human rights abuses in Xinjiang because human rights are the fundamental element of civilized society. Under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights together with several additional international human rights treaties, the authority’s policies on Uyghurs are significantly violating these human rights treaties. Global NGOs have been following the case continuously to collect more crucial and substantial evidence and disclose what the Uyghurs are experiencing by publishing reports to the public regularly. Since the first report by HRW in 2017, they have published further reports in 2018 and 2021 to give the latest updates. Amnesty International has also published a report in 2021 to summarize what information they have received since 2017.

In transnational advocacy networks, four strategies are commonly used to utilize their influences on world politics, namely information politics, symbolic politics, leverage politics and accountability politics (Keck, & Sikkink, 1999). Global NGOs have also used these four strategies to put pressure on the Chinese authority to change their policy on Uyghurs. The following paragraphs will be analyzing how these strategies have been used in this case.

For information politics, this strategy concerns the circulation of the information in both formal and informal channels to gather all available facts and reliable testimonies to establish the legitimacy of the claim and arouse people’s attention (Keck, & Sikkink, 1999). While some of the global NGOs, such as ICIJ, have collected official documents, photos and satellite pictures about the mass detention camp through multiple sources, some of the global NGOs, such as HRW and Amnesty International, have also gathered testimonies from the suffered people to show the world what they were experiencing, how are they being under mass surveillance and collected biometric data involuntarily, as well as how they feel about the unfair treatment. Only global NGOs have the capabilities to gather and analyze these kinds of information because they have the connection to the local people through their formal and informal channels with the aid of some local organizations which also agree to safeguard human rights. No state actor can do such things because that would be assumed as interference to internal affairs which is an act of breaching international law. By collecting important information and testimonies, global NGOs can make good use of them to bring the issue forward to the public by using the mean of symbolic politics.

For symbolic politics, it is necessary for the global NGOs to make use of the information and testimonies they have obtained to maximize their values by creating public awareness (Keck, & Sikkink, 1999). In this case, global NGOs successfully arouse public attention on the human rights abuses in Xinjiang. After the situation of Uyghurs has been published to the world, some of the related keywords were circulating the globe. According to Google Trend (n.d.), some of the keywords about the human rights abuses in Xinjiang, such as “Xinjiang Camp”, “China Muslim Camp”, “Xinjiang Internment Camp”, “China Mass Detention” and “China Concentration Camp”, became highly trending keywords in the world in June and December 2018, February, October and December 2019, and throughout the whole year of 2020. The impression of mass detention in Xinjiang has been planted to the public and aroused their awareness of the matter. Global NGOs have achieved even greater success by the movement of boycotting Xinjiang cotton as the Better Cotton Initiative had once suspended licensing the cotton due to allegations of forced labor during production (Remington, 2020). Before that, the media were already covering the allegations of human rights abuses in Xinjiang since 2017, but the boycott on Xinjiang cotton has become a trigger point to attract massive media to cover what happened in Xinjiang, such as Sudworth (2020), who was a China-based journalist from the BBC, has conducted an in-depth investigative report on forced labor in cotton production in Xinjiang. The strategy of symbolic politics will be the key for using the strategy of leverage politics.

For leverage politics, global NGOs would seek supports from more powerful organizations such as government and international corporations to amplify their negotiating power beyond their initial capacity (Keck, & Sikkink, 1999). In this case, global NGOs have two major attempts at this strategy, one is the boycott on Xinjiang cotton mentioned in the previous paragraph, and the other one is to call for multinational corporations and governments to boycott the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics (Sevastopulo, Germano, Edgecliffe-Johnson, & Ahmed, 2021). The movement of boycotting Xinjiang cotton has been responded to positively by some large international corporations such as Uniqlo, Nike, Walmart and H&M (Rascouet, Hipwell, & Pham, 2021). The movement was later supported by the US government by imposing restrictions on importing certain materials produced in Xinjiang including cotton (Bermingham, Delaney, & Fromer, 2020). This is an attempt to give more pressure to urge the Chinese government and Xinjiang local authorities to stop their human rights abuses through economic means. Another movement is to urge multinational corporations and governments to boycott on 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics to give another massive economic and political blow to China. The attempt to urge governments to boycott has a good outcome. The US President Joe Biden has been considering a diplomatic boycott on the 2022

Beijing Winter Olympics, which the US would not send any government officials to attend the games. One of the reasons the US administration is considering boycotting is to protest against human rights abuses in Xinjiang (“Biden Mulls US”, 2021). However, it does not always have a good outcome as the attempt to persuade international corporations to boycott has reached an undesirable result. The corporations refuse to meet the requests of global NGOs on boycotting as they need to consider their business interests in China (Sevastopulo et al., 2021), but that would severely damage the reputation of these corporations by using the strategy of accountability politics, which will be further explained in the next paragraph. All and all, the objectives of the movement of diplomatic boycotting 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics are to damage the reputation of the Chinese government and show the determination of safeguarding human rights from other state and non-state actors. It is a hope from global NGOs that the political pressure from other state and non-state actors could persuade the Chinese authority to change their policies on Uyghurs. There is a very high chance of increasing tensions between countries, but the government would still manage to do that because it would be a disaster to the administration if global NGOs make use of the strategy of accountability politics, which will be discussed next.

For accountability politics, global NGOs would accuse the government and large organizations which promised to do something but failed to do so as dishonest and to embarrass them (Keck, & Sikkink, 1999). As Biden’s administration has made a very strong statement in safeguarding human rights as his fundamental part of his foreign policy (Biden, 2021), he has no choice but to keep his promise, or else the public would start questioning whether they can believe their government. Therefore, it is crucial for the government to keep her own words and implement its policies according to what they promise to do. And apart from the US diplomatic boycott, global NGOs also urged the international corporations to boycott the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympic games. But the corporations refuse to provide any answer to their request which leads to criticisms from global NGOs. Some of the corporations which have emphasized their commitment to human rights in their corporate policy such as Snickers, Mars and Airbnb are being particularly targeted by global NGOs. Global NGOs satirize these companies for making strong statements on their website about condemning human rights abuses, but they just ignore it when it comes to implementation (Sevastopulo et al., 2021). As the global NGOs have so many networks to spread information, if organizations and corporations failed to fulfill their commitments, their reputation will be damaged and affect their business, hence that could put more pressure on these organizations and corporations to think twice and try to fulfill what they have committed as a gesture of social responsibility.

The case study of human rights abuses in Xinjiang has been a perfect example to understand and analyze what is the role of global NGOs to deal with the affairs that they are concerned about. The transnational advocacy network is a very powerful method to attempt to influence a state to change its policies or behaviors. Even so, the state, especially a state that is as powerful as China, is not so easy to be influenced by other state or non-state actors. But transnational advocacy networks have successfully generated massive attention to the public and it forced many state and non-state actors to work closely with global NGOs and be concerned about the issue itself. This may not be succeeded so easily but it is definitely worth a try and must be persisted to keep on putting pressure on the authorities in a long period of time. The pressure might be strong enough one day to force the authorities to change their policies to cohere with universal standards.

(Word count: 1999)

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