Why China continues to gather sway on the UN Human Rights Council

July 22, 2020

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Fox News

<https://www.foxnews.com/world/why-china-continues-to-gather-sway-on-the-u-n-human-rights-council>

Despite long being under a cloud of controversy for its human rights record – from the treatment of ethnic minorities to the muzzling of critics, all of which was amplified in the past year – China continues to climb the ranks as a human rights leader in the United Nations.

On April 1, it was no fool's trick that China scored a spot on the U.N.'s Human Rights Council panel, which is in charge of choosing human rights monitors globally. Then on April 27, in the throes of a controversy over its handling of the coronavirus and its questionable relationship with the World Health Organization (WHO), China was appointed chair for selecting the upcoming Special Rapporteur, or "U.N. expert on free speech."

That selection was announced this week — the Chinese Communist Party named Bangladeshi-born attorney Irene Khan, who has become something of a controversial figure in recent years for her support of the Beijing leadership.

Yet despite accusations of widespread human rights violations, China continues to ascend in the international body founded on principles of justice, peace and accountability.

"The U.N. is often an upside-down parallel universe. The election process and governance structure of organizations like the Human Rights Council make it easily susceptible to exploitation by China and other U.S. adversaries," Richard Goldberg, a senior advisor at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies (FDD) told Fox News. "We need a proactive diplomatic campaign to delegitimize and degrade the organization while establishing credible, alternative mechanisms to hold human rights abusers accountable."

According to Hillel Neuer, the executive director of the Geneva-based, independent human rights organization U.N. [Watch](https://unwatch.org/china-led-panel-picks-amnesty-internationals-ex-chief-irene-khan-as-u-n-free-speech-monitor/), Khan "enjoys close ties with the Communist regime" and has "showered praise for the Chinese regime" and its Belt and Road Initiative, which is [considered](https://unwatch.org/china-selects-u-n-free-speech-monitor-hillel-neuer-on-sky-news-australia/) one of the factors fueling the persecution of minorities like the Uighurs.

In addition, Khan is said to have lauded China's "contribution to global sustainable development" through a $1 trillion infrastructure program tailored to increase its reach and ownership of strategic places and organizations in at least 70 countries.

Khan – whose appointment as Special Rapporteur will go into effect next month – served as Secretary-General of Amnesty International from 2001 to 2009, and left under unclear circumstances. Throughout her tenure, critics accused Khan of redirecting the human rights watchdog into fighting poverty and away from its original mandate centered on advocacy for prisoners of conscience. In 2011, she went on to become director-general of the Rome-based International Development Law Organization, which focuses on the rule of law and sustainable development, of which China is one of the eight state financiers.

"[Khan] has a record of being a supporter of economic and social rights over political and civil liberties," noted Sean Roberts, director and associate professor of International Development Studies at the George Washington University. "As such, it is likely that China is banking on the idea that she will continue this legacy at the U.N. and avoid highlighting freedom of speech issues related to the internal politics of any given country, including China."

As chair of the five-nation Human Rights Council, which the U.S. withdrew from in 2018 at the behest of then-Ambassador Nikki Haley, China vetted and picked Khan out of 48 applicants to serve as the United Nations Special Rapporteur for freedom of expression and opinion, becoming the first woman to hold such a title.

"The Chinese government has been working hard to be a participant in as many of the U.N.'s initiatives as possible, both in terms of funding and engagement. At the same time, the United States is increasingly stepping back from the U.N., allowing China to take on an even greater role," Roberts underscored. "And China's soft power globally, especially in the developing world, is on the rise at the same time as that of the U.S. is on the wane. Thus, China is able to get support from a lot of other U.N. member states to achieve its goals of more authority in the U.N."

Roberts cautioned that while the U.N. "has never been effective enough to live up to its lofty mission," it remains a dominant force in global politics.

"If the U.S. continues to retreat from its role in the organization and allows China to expand its power there, China's position as a global leader will inevitably be enhanced regardless of its respect for human rights," he said. "Most of all, this threatens to deteriorate any power that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights still holds in the world."

But Chinese leadership and control of international organizations extend well beyond the scope of the United Nations.

The U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission (USCC) in April published an [extensive list](https://www.uscc.gov/prc-international-orgs) identifying "Chinese citizens serving in leadership positions in key international organizations: from U.N. principal organs, and U.N. funds and programs, to U.N. specialized agencies and international trade and financial institutions.

All the while, concerns are being raised by the United States and other allies with regard to the national security law that came into play inside the once autonomous [Hong Kong](https://www.foxnews.com/category/world/world-regions/hong-kong) this month.

The new law paves the way for a national security committee to be formed in Hong Kong under the jurisdiction of Beijing, and it also means that those accused of anti-government offenses now can be tried on the mainland and subject to significantly more stringent punishments.

At the U.N. Human Rights Council, which was led this month by Cuba, 53 countries voted in support of China's heavy-handed clampdown with the justification that the people of Hong Kong could now "exercise their freedom in a safe environment."

Those who opposed the controversial law were considerably outnumbered, led by the U.K., but garnering the support of just 26 other countries.

"China is ascending in the U.N. because the U.N. provides an environment of corruption in which the Chinese Communist Party thrives. Consider that the [World Health Organization](https://www.foxnews.com/category/world/world-health-organization), a part of the United Nations, praised the 'transparency' of the Chinese during the [coronavirus](https://www.foxnews.com/category/health/infectious-disease/coronavirus) when the Chinese government, in fact, censored and suppressed information," conjectured Will Coggin, managing director of the American Security Institute. "Much as the U.S. [pulled out of funding](https://www.foxnews.com/politics/trump-us-terminating-relationship-with-who) the WHO, we should consider whether it's worth continuing to spend $10 billion a year to fund the U.N. What does that money get us?"

Furthermore, Beijing's treatment and forced disappearance of more than a million Chinese minority Muslims, known as Uighurs, is also coming under increasingly blistering limelight.

The U.S. has long spoken out against reports of mass concentration camps, unjustified allegations of terrorism and subsequent imprisonment and torture of the minority group, which is mostly present in the Xinjiang region. And this week U.K. Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab took a bold step in denouncing China for "gross and egregious" human rights abuses against its Uighur population and said sanctions against those responsible cannot be ruled out.

Two years ago, as evidence of such camps was first exposed, China vehemently denied their existence. The government later admitted to their existence, vowing that they were "reeducation" institutions and a pivotal tool against terrorism.

Nonetheless, even the United Nations' own independent human rights experts have conveyed outrage over the repression of "fundamental freedom" by the Chinese leadership as it continues to cement its place on the Council.

In a joint [statement](https://ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=26006&LangID=E) last month, some 50 experts bemoaned that they had "repeatedly communicated" their "grave concerns," ranging from "impunity for excessive use of force by police and the alleged use of chemical agents against protesters; to the alleged sexual harassment and assault of women protesters in police stations; together with the alleged harassment of health care workers" in Hong Kong, along with the collective repression of specific communities – "especially religious and ethnic minorities, in Xinjiang and Tibet" – to the disappearances of human rights advocates across the country.

The U.S. took matters into their own hands this week, imposing [sanctions](https://www.foxnews.com/politics/trump-administration-adds-11-companies-to-sanctions-list-over-uighur-oppression) on 11 additional Chinese [companies](https://www.foxnews.com/category/politics/finance/sanctions) over human rights violations against the Uighurs. The fallout will have a direct impact on several suppliers to major international brands such as Google, Apple, HP, Ralph Lauren and Hugo Boss, which have financial liaisons with the newly sanctioned companies.

Whether there will be any change of course on China's part remains to be seen.