Communicating state repression to the international community: A case study of how China frames its policies in Xinjiang online[*]

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Abstract

Regimes and their proxies seek to legitimize overt state repression abroad to avoid economic and reputational costs. Yet, few scholars have studied the international dimension of repression image management. I examine how countries communicate their repressive actions to the international community depending on the audience. Framing repression as a legitimate response to a credible threat (threat strategy) is more likely when communicating with countries facing higher levels of domestic threat. But due to in-group favoritism, when addressing in-group audiences of the repressed, governments are more likely to frame repression as necessary to protect the repressed (benevolent rule strategy). To test these claims, I collect 88,011 tweets about activities in Xinjiang published by 88 Chinese diplomatic accounts from 2014 to 2020. The results suggest that regimes change their repression image management strategies depending on the audience. Chinese government accounts in countries with higher levels of domestic conflict are more likely to use the threat strategy than those in countries with lower levels of conflict, while those in countries with a similar in-group to Xinjiang (Muslim countries) are more likely to use the benevolent rule strategy than those in out-group states. This expands our understanding of the communication strategies of human-rights-abusing regimes.

Keywords: Repression, Social media, China, Authoritarian, Diplomacy, Human rights

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Introduction

One of the most prominent stories about Chinese politics in the Xi Jinping era has been the state repression against Uyghurs and other ethnic minorities in Xinjiang, an autonomous region in the northwest of the country.[1] While the troubled relationship between the Uyghurs and the Chinese state has been going on for a long time (Bovingdon, 2010), Chinese authorities have recently established mass-detainment camps and created a totalitarian system of surveillance, control, and propaganda in the region.[2] As a result, repression in the northwestern region has attracted increasing international attention. In the summer of 2019, a group of twenty-two countries sent a letter to the UN Human Rights Council condemning China's actions in Xinjiang. Interestingly, the move was countered by a letter from thirty-seven other countries, including influential actors like Russia, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia, praising China's "remarkable achievements" in human rights and its "counterterrorism" efforts in Xinjiang.[3] The different perceptions of China's actions raise questions about how China and other regimes manage their repressive image.

Authoritarian rulers and their proxies, such as government diplomats or state media, often seek to legitimize state repression to the international community by engaging in "repression image management." I define this concept as efforts by the state or its proxies to strategically frame repressive actions in a way that advances the interest of the regime. Framing repression involves engaging some justifications of repressive actions and subsequently amplifying those justifications through foreign-facing messages (e.g., state-owned newspapers, press releases, online communications) to promote a particular rationale, causal interpretation, and/or moral evaluation.[4]

Using Chinese foreign-facing tweets about state repression in Xinjiang, I examine how countries change the ways they communicate their overt repressive actions to the international community depending on the target audience. Few scholars have studied the discursive justification of repression (Edel and Josua, 2018, 884), let alone its international dimensions. However, a government's international justification of repression is important for understanding how authoritarian legitimation discourses extend beyond domestic audiences to the international sphere. Moreover, what a regime says about domestic repression against its citizens and the extent to which repression is legitimized internationally can have major consequences, such as preventing economic sanctions or influencing other states to block multilateral action on human rights violations (Cronin-Furman, 2020). This topic is also important because recent studies on the international dimensions of authoritarian rule have highlighted patterns of diffusion and learning between autocracies (Heydemann and Leenders, 2014). Understanding these authoritarian narratives allows scholars, human rights advocates, and politicians to effectively counter them while calling for international accountability.

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[1]The region is known by other names such as the "Uyghur region" and "East Turkestan," but the term Xinjiang is used here because it is the Chinese government's official name for the region.

[2]Maizland, Lindsay. 2021. "China's Repression of Uyghurs in Xinjiang." *Council on Foreign Relations*. March 1. https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/chinas-repression-uyghurs-xinjiang.

[3]Ibid.

[4]This definition of framing repression builds upon Robert Entman (1993, 52) depiction of general political framing.

Scholars have argued that regimes adjust what they say abroad about domestic repression against their citizens conditional on who the target audience is (Edel and Josua, 2018; Cronin-Furman, 2020). Depending on who the target audience is, framing repression can have legitimizing, neutral, or backlash effects. Building upon these studies, this study theorizes why certain frames are more likely to be used depending on the recipient audience and its characteristics. Specifically, it introduces two repression image management strategies (threat and benevolent rule) and discusses how they are associated to certain audiences.[5]

To justify repression abroad, I argue states can frame their repressive actions as a legitimate response to a credible threat and/or portray targets of repression as dangerous individuals — the "threat strategy." An example of this is when Beijing uses the rhetoric of terrorism to justify repressive actions in Xinjiang (Greitens, Lee and Yazici, 2020). In addition to the threat strategy, I argue states can frame their repressive actions as measures taken to ensure the social and economic development of the target of repression (e.g., region, ethnic group, religious minority, etc.), which I refer to as the "benevolent rule strategy." An example of the benevolent rule strategy is Beijing framing detention camps in Xinjiang as vocational schools that enhance ethnic minorities' professional and language skills.[6]

Since regimes and their proxies strategically frame repressive actions in a way that legitimizes the regime, I propose two hypotheses regarding these repression image management strategies. The first hypothesis suggests the threat strategy is more likely when communicating with countries experiencing an instance of high-level threat to the government like a civil war. This is because a heightened perception of threat makes people more likely to justify repressive behavior against threatening groups (Piazza, 2015; Wilson, Hugenberg and Rule, 2017). Also, exploiting threats (e.g., separatism or terrorism) as a pretext for repression is likely to echo narratives in countries facing domestic conflict (Cronin-Furman, 2020). While the threat strategy might help legitimize the regime's actions when communicating with countries facing domestic conflict, it is likely to provoke a backlash when communicating with in-group audiences of the repressed. This is because people show in-group favoritism and out-group discrimination (Brauer, 2001), and are therefore more reluctant to accept in-group members as violent (D'Orazio and Salehyan, 2018). Thus, the second hypothesis suggests that the benevolent rule strategy is more likely when an in-group audience of the repressed is a key addressee of legitimization. Regimes benefit from using the benevolent rule strategy when communicating with an in-group audience of the target of repression, as people prefer to see in-group members doing well.

To evaluate these hypotheses, I collect over 88,000 tweets and retweets that were published between 2014 and 2020 by 88 Chinese embassies and consulates on Twitter. Diplomatic messages on Twitter are a useful source to study how Beijing frames its treatment of Uyghurs because tweets are tailored messages and social media is increasingly becoming the most common medium for

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[5]The choice of these two strategies is determined by our case study. They are the most common way Chinese diplomatic tweets talk about state repression in Xinjiang. However, this list is by no means complete. Future studies should explore additional framing strategies by Beijing and other regimes.

[6]Cui, Jia and Zhao Xinyin. 2019. "Education helping fight terror." *The China Daily*. August 17. http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201908/17/WS5d57330fa310cf3e35566449.html.

governments to communicate their policy decisions to foreigners (Manor, 2019). From the diplomatic corpus, tweets about Xinjiang are identified and classified according to the threat and benevolent rule strategies.

The findings support the hypotheses. First, there is a positive and significant relationship between the threat strategy and countries with higher levels of domestic conflict. Chinese diplomatic missions in countries experiencing a civil war (an instance of high-level conflict for the government) are more likely to frame Chinese state repression in Xinjiang as a legitimate response to a credible threat. Second, there is a positive and significant relationship between the benevolent rule strategy and in-group audiences. Chinese diplomatic missions in Muslim-majority countries (in-group audiences of the targets of repression in Xinjiang) are more likely to portray Beijing's repressive actions as measures taken to ensure the social and economic development of Xinjiang's ethnic minorities than those in non-Muslim states. The results suggest regimes strategically adapt the way they frame their actions to the international community depending on the target audience.

This article makes four main contributions to the literature. First, this study contributes to the authoritarian image management literature by explaining why some audiences might be associated with certain frames to justify repression. It introduces the concept of repression image management strategies and two framing strategies used by China and other regimes. Second, it departs from previous studies that focus on the domestic frameworks used to justify repression (e.g., Roscigno et al., 2015; Dukalskis, 2017), and advances our knowledge about what regimes say abroad about domestic repression against their citizens. Third, previous studies (e.g., Edel and Josua, 2018) have typically analyzed frames from one authoritarian state directed towards a single country. However, this study advances the literature by analyzing the frames from one state to many recipients. Finally, this paper presents a novel approach using social media data and text-as-data methods to quantitatively examine how regimes legitimize their repressive actions to the international community. Previous studies have mostly conducted qualitative analysis to study authoritarian image management strategies (e.g., Cronin-Furman, 2020; Edel and Josua, 2018). Due to the sensitive nature of the topic, collecting big amounts of data on repressive environments can be difficult, but the massive amount of data generated by government officials using social media platforms is a good source to study authoritarian discourses of legitimacy.

Managing Images of State Repression Abroad

State repression and physical integrity rights violations (e.g., extrajudicial killings, torture, disappearances, political imprisonment, etc.) are widely considered to be aberrant acts, and as such, countries that engage in these acts can face serious costs. Repressive behavior can provoke economic costs imposed by third parties via foreign aid withdrawal, trade sanctions, visa restrictions or sanctions on individuals and multinational firms linked to human rights abuses. In extreme cases, repression can also lead to the threat of foreign military intervention. In addition, state repression may damage a country's international reputation due to social

sanctions like naming and shaming by NGOs, journalists, and international organizations (Hafner-Burton, 2008).

To avoid these costs, a government may try to conceal what is happening within its borders. However, this is not always effective because information about repressive actions might leak out. Therefore, regimes engage in authoritarian image management.

Dukalskis (2021, 4) defines authoritarian image management "as comprising efforts by the state or its proxies to enhance or protect the legitimacy of the state's political system for audiences outside its borders." These efforts also include what the state says abroad about domestic repression against its citizens (Dukalskis, 2021, 7). Some of these efforts include state-driven soft power public diplomacy initiatives (e.g., China's Confucius Institutes) and foreign-facing propaganda. Image management may also include the cultivation of key opinion leaders overseas, extraterritorial censorship to control bad news about the state abroad, and repression of threatening messengers of critical ideas abroad. For example, autocracies like Bahrain and Qatar spend millions of dollars on arranging travel for U.S. Congressional members and communicating priority issues regarding bilateral relations to relevant U.S. audiences, including Congress, the executive branch, and the policy community (Dukalskis, 2021, 195-197).

All of the above efforts can be used by authoritarian rulers to legitimize repressive actions against their own citizens to the international community. But what frames are used for justifying repression?

Edel and Josua (2018) argue governments often label their opponents' activities as "harmful behavior" threatening underlying values, such as national unity, sovereignty, legality, security, public order, and stability. For example, Egyptian officials made extensive use of the security, order, and terrorism frames while cracking down on the protesters in Rabi'a Al-Adawiya Square in 2013 (Edel and Josua, 2018). Similarly, Dukalskis (2017) studies popular protests in China in 1989, Myanmar in 2007, and Iran in 2009-2010, and finds that protesters were framed as criminals for inciting disorder and being manipulated by foreigners. These kinds of strategies are not new. For instance, American authorities justified the massacre at Wounded Knee in 1890 by framing it as a legitimate response "to violence to people or depredation upon property" by the Sioux (Roscigno et al., 2015).

Scholars have argued that an important factor that influences how regimes frame their repressive actions is the target audience. The framing literature shows that "frames do not have a single, universal effect" on the recipients (Watson, 2012). The results of framing processes, like framing repression as counter-terrorism efforts, are not predetermined. Depending on who the target audience is, the framing of repression can have legitimizing, neutral, or backlash effects.

Previous studies have highlighted the importance of the target audience when regimes speak about human rights violations against their citizens to an international audience. Using a qualitative case study of Sri Lanka's response to international pressure for postwar justice, Cronin-Furman (2020) argues that repressive states create human rights commissions to target swing states that can act as veto points on multilateral efforts to enforce human rights. Human rights commissions that investigate allegations of state-sanctioned mass atrocities are meant to convince fellow developing states on the UN Human Rights Council to oppose the creation of a formal international inquiry rather than to appeal to a Western audience.

Other studies also highlight the importance of the target audience. Using a qualitative content analysis of a corpus of speeches and press statements by Uzbek President Karimov, Edel and Josua (2018) argue that Uzbek authorities frame state repression as attempts to stop foreign agents in the country when addressing Russia but not when addressing a Western audience. For instance, Uzbek authorities often frame anti-government protesters as "Islamist radicals and Taliban fighters' [who had] infiltrated from Afghanistan" when addressing Russia (Edel and Josua, 2018, 895). The foreign interference frame resonates with Russia's security concerns over the Taliban support for Chechen rebels. Framing repression as deterring foreign interference echoes narratives that prevail in Uzbekistan's regional surroundings but not in the West.

Building upon these studies, my research seeks to contribute to the authoritarian image management literature by examining how international audiences influence what regimes say abroad about domestic repression against their citizens. Previous studies about framing repression have mostly focused on the domestic frameworks justifying repression. In fact, "[f]ew political scientists have studied the discursive justification of repression" (Edel and Josua, 2018, 884), let alone its international dimension. However, authoritarian legitimation discourses extend beyond domestic audiences to the international sphere. Yet, we know little about what regimes say abroad about domestic repression against their citizens.

In addition, we do not know how human-rights-abusing regimes communicate their repressive actions to the international community depending on the audience. Most countries do not speak to a single audience. In our globalized world, repressive states have to communicate with foreign governments (e.g., executives, legislatures, etc.), online communities, international organizations, journalists, human rights groups, etc. Regimes are simultaneously talking to multiple audiences and, as my theory suggests, they adapt their frames accordingly.

Strategies and Audiences of Repression Image Management

Threat Strategy

To justify repression abroad, states can frame their repressive actions as a legitimate response to a credible threat and/or portray targets of repression as dangerous individuals — the "threat strategy." A single person and those associated with them can be portrayed as a threat. The threat message can then be delivered through foreign-facing messages, such as state-owned newspapers distributed abroad or diplomatic social media accounts. An example of this is the Turkish state's campaign of repression against people affiliated with the movement of religious leader Fethullah Gülen, which the government blames for the 2016 coup attempt.[7] The Turkish Embassy in Washington has tweeted messages calling the Gülen movement a terrorist organization and equating it to

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[7]Freedom House. 2021. "Turkey: Transnational Repression Case Study." *Freedom House Special Report 2021.* https://freedomhouse.org/report/transnational-repression/turkey.

ISIS.[8] Authorities not only can frame individuals as a threat, but also their entire geographic region, ethnic group, religion, political ideology, etc. as a threat to the rest of the country.

A real example of the threat strategy is shown in Figure 1. This is a tweet by the Chinese Embassy in Burundi that reads: "The East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), which has close links with international terrorist organizations, has carried out countless terrorist attacks aimed at separating the Uyghur Autonomous Region of #Xinjiang from #China."[9] The embassy also shares a link to a YouTube video by CGTN French that chronicles terrorist attacks by ETIM, a Uyghur Islamic extremist organization. The tailored message in French not only connects Xinjiang to terrorism and organizations like ETIM, but also frames the northwestern region as a threat to average citizens, as if claiming that Beijing is acting in defense of the population against terrorists.

Figure 1: Example of the threat strategy by the Chinese Embassy in Burundi
(https://twitter.com/AmbChineBurundi/status/1204383359155220480)

Using the threat strategy to justify repression is not unique to China or Twitter. The Venezuelan government has also used this strategy to legitimize the arrests of various opposition leaders and anti-government figures. For example, during the 2014 protests, Caracas arrested many Venezuelans, including opposition leader Leopoldo López, who was charged with terrorism. The arrest attracted a lot of international attention and condemnation by U.S. President Barack Obama, the U.N. High Commissioner for

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[8]Turkish Embassy DC (@TurkishEmbassy). 2016. Twitter. August 1. https://twitter.com/TurkishEmbassy/status/760266248118738944.

[9]Ambassade de Chine au Burundi (@AmbChineBurundi). 2019. Twitter. December 10. https://twitter.com/AmbChineBurundi/status/1204383359155220480.

Human Rights, and others.[10] In response, the Venezuelan government and its proxies used the threat strategy to legitimize López's arrest. Telesur, the Venezuelan state-media network, used its Facebook account to frame López's arrest as a fight against "right-wing terrorists."[11]

Threat Strategy and Domestic Conflict

The threat strategy is more likely to have legitimizing effects when communicating with countries experiencing higher levels of domestic conflict. A heightened perception of threat makes people abroad more likely to justify repression, and thereby, less likely to punish those committing human rights violations. Additionally, exploiting separatism, terrorism, and other types of threats as a pretext for repression is likely to echo narratives in countries facing violent domestic conflict.

First, a heightened perception of threat (as experienced in environments of domestic conflict) makes people abroad more likely to justify repression and thereby less likely to punish a regime committing human rights violations. A real or perceived threat can increase intolerance, prejudice, ethnocentrism, and xenophobia among members of a group. Threatening groups elicit intolerance and face heightened restrictions on their civil rights and liberties (Huddy et al., 2005; Piazza, 2015). For instance, survey experiments have shown that Americans often perceive black men as larger and more threatening than similarly sized white men, and as a result, participants believe that black men are more capable of causing harm in hypothetical altercations and that police would be more justified in using force to subdue them, even if the men were unarmed (Wilson, Hugenberg and Rule, 2017). Threat makes people more likely to justify or even support punitive actions against threatening groups.

In addition, the threat strategy is more likely to resonate with narratives in countries experiencing higher levels of domestic threat. This is because the tolerance of repressive behavior is likely to increase in times of high-level domestic threat. Studies of state repression suggest that domestic conflict is one of the strongest predictors of state repression (Hill and Jones, 2014). In times of civil war (an instance of high-level threat for the government), it is less likely that there will be any disagreement regarding the state's repressive response (Davenport, 2007). There is likely to be an increased willingness to repress challengers because the safety of the nation is at stake (Davenport, 2007).

Since tolerance of repression is higher in times of conflict, states can recruit international support by framing their repressive behavior in a way that is consistent with other countries' narratives. Previous studies suggest that repressive states can recruit peer states' support by framing their human rights violations in a way that is consistent with the peer states' existing normative commitments (Cronin-Furman, 2020). The repressive state does not need to convince or persuade the recipient of the rightness of its actions. After all, persuasion does not exhaust the ways through which rhetoric might shape political rhetoric (Krebs and Jackson,

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[10]Redacción. 2014. "Opositor Leopoldo López con orden de captura por 'terrorismo'." *El Universo*. February 2. https://www.eluniverso.com/noticias/2014/02/14/nota/2181101/opositor-orden-captura-terrorismo/.

[11]teleSUR. 2014. Facebook. February 13. https://www.facebook.com/teleSUR/posts/10200605861667782.

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2007). However, regimes can deflect or reduce international pressure by simply framing their repressive actions consistent with peer states' narratives. A repressive state, for example, can reduce international pressure by exploiting separatism, terrorism, religious extremism, or other types of threat as a moral "blank check" for human rights abuses.

There is evidence of countries curbing human rights under the pretext of domestic security while facing domestic conflict. Since 9/11, China, Egypt, and Russia have gone to great lengths to link their conflicts with the Uyghur community, Muslim Brotherhood, and Chechen rebels to the global campaign against terrorism to reduce international pressure for their repressive actions (Hoffman, 2004). More recently, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and other Central Asian states have been increasing restrictions on religious freedom while combating terrorism and violent extremism.[12]

Framing repressive actions as a legitimate response to a credible threat is more likely when communicating with countries experiencing higher levels of domestic conflict. This is because a heightened perception of threat makes people more likely to justify repressive behavior against threatening groups. Also, exploiting threat as a pretext for repression is likely to echo narratives in countries confronted with violent domestic conflict. Thus, the first hypothesis is:

Hypothesis 1 (H1): *Relative to a country facing lower levels of domestic conflict, using the threat strategy will be more likely when communicating with a country facing higher levels of domestic conflict.*

Benevolent Rule Strategy

While the threat strategy might help legitimize the regime's actions when communicating with countries facing domestic threats, it is likely to provoke a backlash effect among in-group audiences of the repressed. This is because individuals are more hesitant to accept in-group members as violent. An alternative approach for regimes is to frame their repressive actions as protective measures for the target of repression, which can be a geographic area, an ethnic group, a religious group, or any other group. The main goal is to make repression appear as a necessary step toward the greater good of the target of repression. I call this the "benevolent rule strategy."

An example of the benevolent rule strategy is Beijing's attempts to frame detention camps in Xinjiang as vocational schools. Beijing operates mass internment camps in Xinjiang, but these camps are officially described as "education and transformation centers" (教育转化培训中心). Although the detention centers and other measures have been criticized for alleged human rights abuses (e.g., forced labor and religious oppression) by the international community, Beijing has portrayed the camps in Xinjiang as vocational education and training centers that provide ethnic minorities with the professional skills necessary for them to enter society. According to state-media, individuals detained in camps are provided with lessons in standard spoken and written Chinese, educated in Chinese law, and trained in various vocational skills, including sewing, assembly of electronic products, typesetting

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[12]Putz, Catherine. 2015. "Terrorism as Pretext: Religious Repression in Central Asia." *The Diplomat*. October 15. https://thediplomat.com/2015/10/terrorism-as-pretext-religious-repression-in-central-asia/.

and printing, hairdressing and beauty services, automotive mechanics, livestock breeding, household services, handicrafts, flower arrangement, rug weaving, painting, etc.[13]

Chinese foreign-facing messages often highlight the "achievements" of former trainees in the camps. For instance, Figure 2 shows a tweet by the Chinese Embassy in Turkey. "Vocational #training centers produced 4,800 graduates in #Xinjiang", writes the overseas mission.[14] The embassy also shares a link to the Turkish language version website of China Radio International that provides more details on the "high-skilled personnel graduated from vocational training centers across Xinjiang." Following the benevolent rule strategy, the camps allegedly are for Uyghurs' betterment because they help minorities acquire skills and obtain jobs, while reducing poverty and religious extremism in the region.

Figure 2: Example of the benevolent rule strategy by the Chinese Embassy in Turkey
(https://twitter.com/ChinaEmbTurkey/status/1020262040995127296)

The benevolent rule strategy to justify repression is not unique to Twitter nor China. One of the arguments made by supporters of the Jim Crow laws (state and local laws that enforced racial segregation and disenfranchisement in the US South) was that races were too different to coexist (Goldberg, 1998). According to Jim Crow laws supporters, segregating blacks was beneficial, each race could stay in its lane and flourish on its own with minimal contact with the others. Another example of this good governance discourse to legitimize repression comes from recent struggles for media freedom in Uganda. Ahead of the 2021 general election,

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[13]Cui, Jia and Zhao Xinyin. 2019. "Education helping fight terror." *The China Daily*. August 17. http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201908/17/WS5d57330fa310cf3e35566449.html.

[14]Çin Büyükelçiliği Ankara/中国驻土耳其使馆 (@ChinaEmbTurkiye). 2018. Twitter. July 20. https://twitter.com/ChinaEmbTurkiye/status/1020262040995127296.

multiple reporters were detained or attacked by the police while covering opposition rallies. While responding to questions by foreign journalists, Uganda's police chief Martin Okoth Ochola said "reporters would be stopped from trying to go to areas where their lives could be at risk." [15] In other words, the police officers were beating reporters for their own good.

Benevolent Rule Strategy and In-Group Audiences

I argue the benevolent rule strategy is more likely to be useful when communicating with in-group audiences of the target of repression due to in-group biases. Authorities prefer to frame their repressive actions in a benevolent way because in-group and out-group audiences interpret violent behavior in different ways. It is widely accepted in the literature on intergroup relations that there is an "ethnocentrism effect." This effect refers to the tendency to derogate out-groups and/or favor the in-group. When asked to attribute positive and negative attributes to target groups or to indicate liking for several groups, individuals generally favor their in-group over the out-group (Brauer, 2001). As a result, people have different reactions to objectively similar behavior depending on which category the perpetrator falls into.

There is plenty of evidence on in-group favoritism and out-group discrimination. For instance, U.S. media practice a different policy when covering crimes involving Whites and non-Whites. African Americans and Muslims are quickly characterized as terrorists and thugs, while White suspects are framed as lone wolves. Violence by Black and Muslim people is systemic, while violence by White individuals is anomalous behavior.[16] In addition, survey experiments have shown that violent behavior by in-group members tends to be seen as aberrant and not systematic. In a survey with American participants, for example, an Arab ethnicity increased the likelihood of labeling violent acts as politically motivated "terrorism", while similar attacks by White suspects were more likely to be called "mass shootings" perpetrated by mentally ill individuals (D'Orazio and Salehyan, 2018).

Considering in-group favoritism and out-group discrimination, portraying the target of repression as a threat to an in-group audience does not always work, so an alternative for regimes is focusing on good governance. Regimes benefit from framing repressive actions as measures taken to ensure the social and economic development of the target of repression, like an ethnic group, a religious minority, etc. This is because some groups evaluate political decisions or actors using the effect of the policy on (or position of) the actor toward the group as a whole, rather than more individualized effects. This process is often called "linked fate."

The basic idea of linked fate is that people feel that what happens to members of their own racial or ethnic group affects what happens in their own lives. The concept was originally used to explain persistent Democratic voting bloc patterns among Black Americans (Dawson, 1994). However, scholars have extended the idea to Whites, Hispanics, Asians, and sexual minorities in the

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[15]Reuters Staff. 2021. "Uganda's police chief: beating of reporters for their own good." *Reuters*. January 8. https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-uganda-election-idUSKBN29D1A7.

[16]Butler, Anthea. 2015. "Shooters of color are called 'terrorists' and 'thugs.' Why are white shooters called 'mentally ill'?." *Washington Post*. June 19. https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2015/06/18/call-the-charleston-church-shooting-what-it-is-terrorism/.

United States.[17] Linked fate has also been used to explain political behavior in other countries and beyond race or ethnic groups, such as religion, region, and class (Donnelly, 2021).

Considering in-group favoritism and out-group discrimination, portraying the target of repression as a threat to an in-group audience does not always work. People will be hesitant in accepting in-group members as violent. Therefore, an alternative for regimes is focusing on good governance. Regimes benefit from using the benevolent rule strategy when communicating with an in-group audience of the target of repression This is because people prefer to see in-group members doing well since they believe that their interests are tied to those of the groups of which they are members. Regimes can portray their repressive behavior as good governance, and as a results, have better results in legitimizing their actions to the international community. Thus, the second hypothesis is:

Hypothesis 2 (H2): *Relative to an out-group audience, using the benevolent rule strategy will be more likely when communicating with an in-group audience of the target of repression.*

Research Design

I use China and the situation with Uyghurs in Xinjiang as a case study to examine how countries change the ways they communicate their repressive actions to the international community depending on the audience. Specifically, I use the messages of Chinese embassies and consulates on Twitter to test the hypotheses. Chinese state repression in Xinjiang is important to study because of the severity of repression in the region, the international attention it has generated, and how it might affect Beijing's relations with the international community. It has been said that the internment of Uyghurs and other ethnic groups (mostly Muslims) in camps constitutes the largest forced incarceration of an ethnoreligious minority anywhere in the world since World War II (Smith Finley, 2021). We can expect the CCP leadership to respond with different frames to deflect or reduce international pressure and justify repressive actions in Xinjiang.

Chinese diplomatic tweets are a novel way to gather data on foreign-facing messages about repression. They are also a good source of data to study how Beijing frames its treatment of Uyghurs and state repression in Xinjiang for several reasons. First, social media platforms have become one of the most common platforms for public officials and governments to communicate their policy decisions to overseas populations. In 2020, for instance, 98 percent of the 193 U.N. member states had established a Twitter presence.[18] While the Chinese diplomatic network currently has active YouTube, Instagram, and Facebook accounts, it is on Twitter where Chinese diplomats are more active.[19] Second, diplomatic tweets are tailored foreign-facing messages. There is an active

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[17] See Donnelly (2021) for a summary of the linked fate literature.

[18] Lüfkens, Matthias. 2020. *Twiplomacy 2020*. Twiplomacy[blog]. https://twiplomacy.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Twiplomacy-Study-2020.pdf.

[19] Feng, Zhaoyin. 2019. "China and Twitter: The year China got louder on social media." *BBC*. December 29. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-

debate in the literature about whether the use of social media to conduct diplomacy targets domestic or foreign audiences because the same social media profiles can attract both audiences and facilitate interactions with both domestic and foreign constituencies (Bjola and Holmes, 2015; Manor, 2019). While settling this debate is beyond the scope of this research, this paper understands online public diplomacy as targeting, in part, foreign publics.

Foreign ministries, embassies, and consulates tailor their online messages to the language, values, norms, and even slangs of foreign audiences (Manor, 2019, 184). For instance, Chinese embassies and consulates mostly tweet using the native language of their host country. For example, based on this study's data, 96% of the tweets published by the Chinese Embassy in Brazil (@EmbaixadaChina) are in Portuguese. If the Chinese diplomatic network was targeting Chinese audiences, we would expect to see a higher percentage of tweets in Chinese. A final reason to consider Chinese diplomatic tweets as foreign-facing messages is that Twitter is banned in Mainland China. While citizens can open Twitter accounts using VPNs, the number of active live Twitter users on the Mainland is very low.[20]

Collecting Diplomatic Tweets

China has the largest diplomatic network in the world. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs website provided a list of 272 currently operating diplomatic missions of China to other countries.[21] For each of the 272 Chinese diplomatic missions in the world, I performed a manual search for an associated Twitter account. The accounts were included in the sample if they had a blue verified badge[22] next to their name or they were followed by official Chinese government accounts, such as the Chinese MFA, embassies, ambassadors, etc.

I was able to locate accounts and tweets for 88 embassies and consulates. Chinese diplomatic missions in every region of the world have adopted Twitter into their communication strategies. Figure 3 shows the geographic distribution of overseas missions using Twitter. Most of the Chinese diplomatic missions active on Twitter are located in major or regional powers, such as the U.S., France, Japan, and Brazil. There are also active accounts in countries facing intense domestic conflicts, such as Turkey, Ethiopia, or Sri Lanka, and Muslim-majority states, such as Saudi Arabia, Algeria, or Pakistan.

Figure 3: Chinese diplomatic missions using Twitter by country

asia-china-50832915.

[20]Mozur, Paul. 2019. "Twitter Users in China Face Detention and Threats in New Beijing Crackdown." *New York Times*. January 19. https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/10/business/china-twitter-censorship-online.html.

[21]Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. 2020. *Mission Overseas*. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/zwjg_665342/.

[22]The blue verified badge on Twitter lets people know that an account of public interest is authentic.
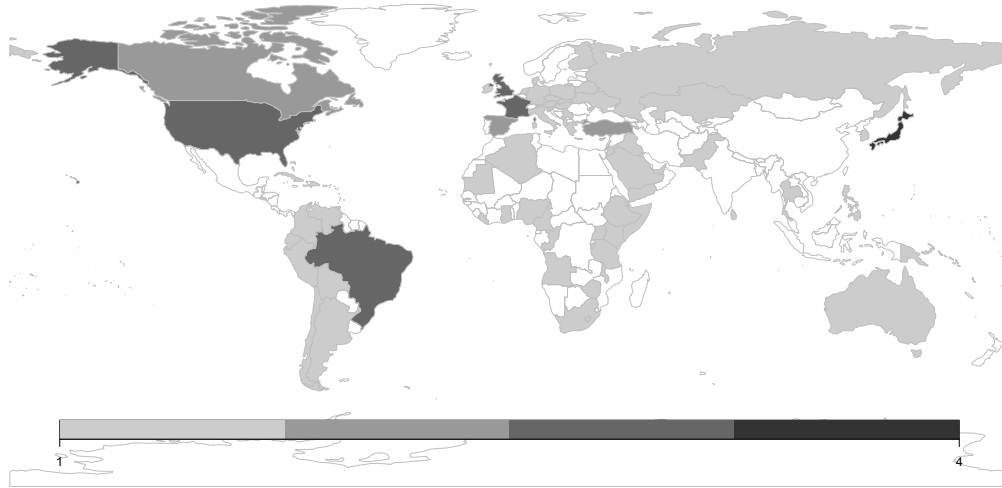
I used Twitter's API via `rtweet`, in the R programming language, to collect the 3,200 most recent tweets for each account (Kearney, 2020). The tweets were gathered in December 2020. The search yielded a total of 82,110 tweets (including retweets) from 88 different Chinese diplomatic Twitter accounts. During data pre-processing, I translate all tweets into English using the Google machine translation API. This strategy has been used by political scientists to simultaneously analyze text in different languages (e.g., Lucas et al., 2015; Loyle and Bestvater, 2019).

The data collection approach has three limitations. The first limitation is that solely focusing on Chinese diplomatic accounts may not accurately represent the full range of Chinese communication strategies on Twitter. Beijing also uses accounts from state media, journalists, local governments, and even foreign supporters to engage in repression image management. To address this limitation, I augment the data by including retweets.[23] This increases the data quality by extending the data collection not only to original messages by Chinese overseas missions but also to tweets by individual diplomats (e.g., Zhao Lijian) and state media (e.g., Global Times or China Daily) that are retweeted by the overseas missions. The second limitation is that Twitter API limits returns to the most recent 3,200 tweets posted or retweeted by each user.[24] Only 5 of the 88 Twitter accounts in the sample surpassed the 3,200 tweets threshold. The third limitation is that data requests via Twitter's API do not include deleted or private Tweets. This could impact the results if Chinese diplomatic Twitter accounts delete tweets about Xinjiang following protests by groups that accuse Beijing of spreading disinformation.

Dependent Variables

The dependent variables capture the most common repression image management strategies used in Chinese foreign-facing tweets. I apply a dictionary method in a two-step process. A dictionary method is appropriate when text documents are being classified into

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[23] A retweet is when you re-post someone else's Tweet on your account.

[24] The initial Twitter API limited users to obtaining only 3,200 tweets per account. In November 2021, Twitter released API v2, which enables users to retrieve all tweets from an account.

known categories (Grimmer and Stewart, 2013). It also reduces the risk of having false positives – a result that indicates a given condition exists when it does not – in the text data.

First, I translate all tweets into English using the Google machine translation API. This strategy has been used by other political scientists to simultaneously analyze text in different languages (e.g., Lucas et al., 2015; Loyle and Bestvater, 2019). Second, I create a list or "dictionary" of terms closely associated with Xinjiang and use it to extract a sample of 1,000 tweets that contain at least one of the terms.[25] I manually code these 1,000 tweets into a binary variable equal to 1 if they are talking about Chinese state repression in Xinjiang, and 0 otherwise. Third, I calculate Fightin' Words statistics, created by Monroe, Colaresi and Quinn (2008), to identify terms highly associated to Chinese state repression in Xinjiang. Fourth, I create a second dictionary of words highly associated with Chinese state repression in Xinjiang, according to the Fightin' Words statistics. I use it to identify all 3,292 tweets that contain at least one of the terms.[26] Finally, I manually hand-code these 3,292 tweets according to how they talk about Chinese state repression.

The most common way Chinese diplomatic tweets talk about state repression in Xinjiang is by using the threat and benevolent rule strategies.[27] There are a total of 2,628 tweets (3%) talking about Chinese actions in Xinjiang in the 82,110 tweets diplomatic corpus. Among these, Beijing used the threat strategy in 290 tweets (11%) and the benevolent rule strategy in 545 tweets (21%). It should be noted that tweets can fall under both categories.

Table 1: Repression image management classification scheme

Category	Possible messages	Examples
Threat	Terrorism and counter-terrorism Security and rule of law De-radicalization Religious extremism Ethnic separatism	"From the 1990s to 2009, terrorists, extremists and separatists were very active in Xinjiang, in which the fifth july incident broke out, terrorists killed and harmed thousands of innocent people including uygur. The Chinese people need justice, order and the rule of law." @ChinaEmbGrenada; Chinese Embassy in Grenada (12/26/2020)
Benevolent rule	Vocational schools Economic and social development Jobs creation Poverty reduction Ethnic minorities' success stories	"What we are doing in Xinjiang, including the establishment of vocational training centers, is directed exclusively against terrorism and extremism. This is a noble cause, its welcome and support all who are sincerely interested in ensuring peace and stability in the region." @ChinaEmbKazakh; Chinese Embassy in Kazakhstan (03/05/2020)

Table 1 depicts the classification scheme used. Foreign-facing messages in the threat strategy mainly associate the state's actions to curbing terrorist, extremist, or separatist actors in a dangerous and unstable region. In the case of China and Xinjiang, this translates to talking about radical Islam, terrorist attacks, drug trafficking, ETIM, money laundering, etc. The benevolent rule strategy includes foreign-facing messages that frame repressive actions as good governance. For instance, tweets presenting detention camps as educational centers. This category also includes tweets that show ethnic minority success stories, such as Uyghurs finding jobs or

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[25]My first dictionary contains the following keywords: "xinjiang (s)", "uyghur (s)", "uighur (s)", "uygur (s)", "urumqi".

[26]My second dictionary contains the following keywords: "xinjiang (s)", "uyghur (s)", "uighur (s)", "uygur (s)", "urumqi", "kashgar", "terrorism", "counterterrorism", "minority (ies)", "deradicalization", "terrorist (s)", "vocational", "East Turkistan", "East Turkestan", "extremism", "extreme (s)", "mosque (s)", "muslim (s)", "islam", and "islamic."

[27]There are other ways Beijing talks about Xinjiang that are worth exploring in the future (See Discussion).

becoming entrepreneurs after attending Beijing-sponsored "vocational schools."

Table 2: Top 20 terms associated with each dependent variable ordered by Fightin' Words statistic (Monroe, et al. 2008)

Threat strategy	Benevolent rule strategy
terrorism	training
terrorist	poverty
fight	education
counterterrorism	people
human_rights	vocational
fighting	million
measures	life
extremism	2019
documentary	ethnic
religion	employment
attacks	billion
efforts	centers
support	development
cgtn	yuan
deradicalization	2014
hand	mosques
ethnicity	uygur
separatism	year
past	residents
east	thousand

To illustrate the content of the tweets, Table 2 shows the top 20 terms associated with each dependent variable ordered by Fightin' Words statistic (Monroe, Colaresi and Quinn, 2008). This value is obtained by comparing the terms used more frequently overall and terms used more frequently in the category.[28] Keywords in the dictionary like "terrorism" and "counterterrorism" are associated with the threat strategy, but the table shows other relevant words, such as "fighting", "extremism", and "attacks." Chinese diplomats frequently share documentaries produced by state-affiliated media that highlight terrorism in Xinjiang, making "documentary" a term highly associated with the threat strategy. Similarly, the word "east" is also linked to the threat strategy because it refers to the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, which Beijing considers a terrorist organization. On the other hand, terms like "education", "vocational", "training", "poverty", "development", "life", and "employment" are associated with the benevolent rule strategy. Those words reflect Beijing's attempts to frame detention camps and other repressive behavior in Xinjiang as a way to reduce poverty and improve the lives of average citizens in the region. Terms like "million" and "yuan" related to spending are used by China when boasting about its investments in building "vocational schools."

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[28]Three general terms are removed from the text data analysis, namely "xinjiang", "autonomous" and "region." Details regarding other data pre-processing decisions and the Fightin' Words statistic are explained in the Appendix.

Independent Variables

The first hypothesis is that framing the target of repression as a threat will be more likely when communicating with a country facing higher levels of domestic threat. Following Davenport (2007), I measure an instance of high-level domestic conflict using civil wars. Specifically, I use a binary variable equal to 1 if the target of repression image management faces a major state-based armed conflict, and 0 otherwise.[29] This is defined as a contested incompatibility that concerns government and/or territory where the use of armed force between two parties, of which at least one is the government of a state, results in at least 1,000 battle-related deaths in a year (Davies, Pettersson and Öberg, 2022).[30] Data for the *Civil war* variable comes from the UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Dataset. Some of the countries experiencing a civil war in the data include Ethiopia, Nigeria, Somalia, Yemen, etc.

The second hypothesis is that relative to an out-group audience, framing repressive behavior as benevolent rule will be more likely when communicating with an in-group audience of the target of repression. Since I use China and the situation with ethnic minorities in Xinjiang as a case study, I need to identify the in-group audience of the targets of repression, namely Uyghurs, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, etc. These groups are predominantly Muslim ethnic groups. Furthermore, in the case of China and Xinjiang, religion is the main social cleavage and is recognized as such by the public and media in Muslim countries.[31] Therefore, in-group members of the targets of repression in this case study would be audiences in Muslim-majority countries.

The independent variable to test the second hypothesis is a binary variable (*Muslim-majority*) identifying Muslim countries. A country is considered a Muslim-majority country if 50 percent or more of its population identifies as Muslim.[32] I obtain data on religion from the World Religion Database (WRD), which contains detailed statistics on religious affiliation for every country in the world (Johnson et al., 2008). There is a total of fourteen Muslim-majority countries in the data, including Pakistan, Kuwait, Jordan, Albania, etc.

Control Variables

I control for a set of relevant variables in the empirical analysis. First, I include a pair of country-level variables, namely regime type and economic development, which may correlate with repression image management strategies and the independent variables. I

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[29]The appendix includes a robustness check that uses a continuous variable measuring battle-related deaths to test the first hypothesis, and the results confirm the findings obtained with the binary variable.

[30]While the main models use the standard 1,000 death threshold dummy, similar results are obtained when using lower thresholds, such as at least 750 and 500 battle-related deaths in a year

[31]Azad, Maulana. 2021. "Chinese Muslims enjoying all rights." *Daily Times*. April 14. https://dailytimes.com.pk/745360/chinese-muslims-enjoying-all-rights-maulana-azad/; Brunnstrom, David. 2021. "China possibly committed 'genocide' against Xinjiang Muslims." *Al-Jazeera*. January 4. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/1/14/china-possibly-committed-genocide-against-xinjiang-muslims.

[31]All theories are a simplification of the observed real world. For operationalization purposes, I simplify the identity of the biggest ethnic minorities in Xinjiang as Muslims. However, different individuals might have different conceptions of in-group and out-group membership. Muslims are not a monolithic identity group. Most ethnic minorities in Xinjiang are Sunni Muslims, but there are major differences across different denominations. Also, the in-group identity might be language rather than religion for some ethnic minorities in Xinjiang. The Uyghurs, for example, speak a Turkic language, so their in-group audiences could be Turkic-language speaking countries like Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan or Uzbekistan.

[32]The appendix includes a robustness check using a continuous variable measuring the percentage of Muslims in the host country's population to test the second hypothesis, and the results confirm the findings obtained with the binary variable.

measure economic development using GDP per capita from the Worldwide Governance Indicators and regime type using Freedom House's "electoral democracy" binary variable. Second, I include two measures to control for ties between the regime and the host country. I employ the logged value of monthly bilateral trade share (as a proxy for China's economic relationship with the host) and the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) annual voting similarity between China and the host (as a proxy for China's political relationship with the host). Third, I include a series of Twitter account variables that might influence the online behavior of Chinese diplomatic missions, namely the logged value of the number of followers per account, the logged value of the number of tweets per account, and the logged value of the number of friends per account. Finally, I include the raw number of Xinjiang-related tweets per account in the model to account for the fact that some accounts may simply tweet more about Xinjiang than others, and include month fixed-effects to account for increasing or decreasing international coverage about Xinjiang over time. More information on sources and rationale can be found in the Appendix.

The final dataset includes over 82,000 tweets by 88 Chinese missions from May 2014 to December 2020. The data starts in May 2014 because that is the first time a Chinese overseas mission created a Twitter account. Since the dependent variables can only take two values (1 or 0), the data will be analyzed using logistic regression models. The unit of analysis is at the Twitter account-day (or Chinese mission-day) level and I use robust standard errors to account for within-group error correlation.

Results

This section discusses a series of logistic regression models estimating the effect of *Civil war* and in-group audiences *Muslim-majority* on repression image management strategies. The discussion focuses on odd ratio plots for visualization purposes. The odds ratio (OR) measures the relationship between a variable and the likelihood of an event occurring, indicating that the odds of an event occurring are $100 * (OR - 1)$ percent higher in the presence of the variable than in its absence. Appendix Table 1 shows the logit models of all the plots.

Figure 4: Odds ratio of a logit model using the threat strategy as a dependent variable (Model 1)
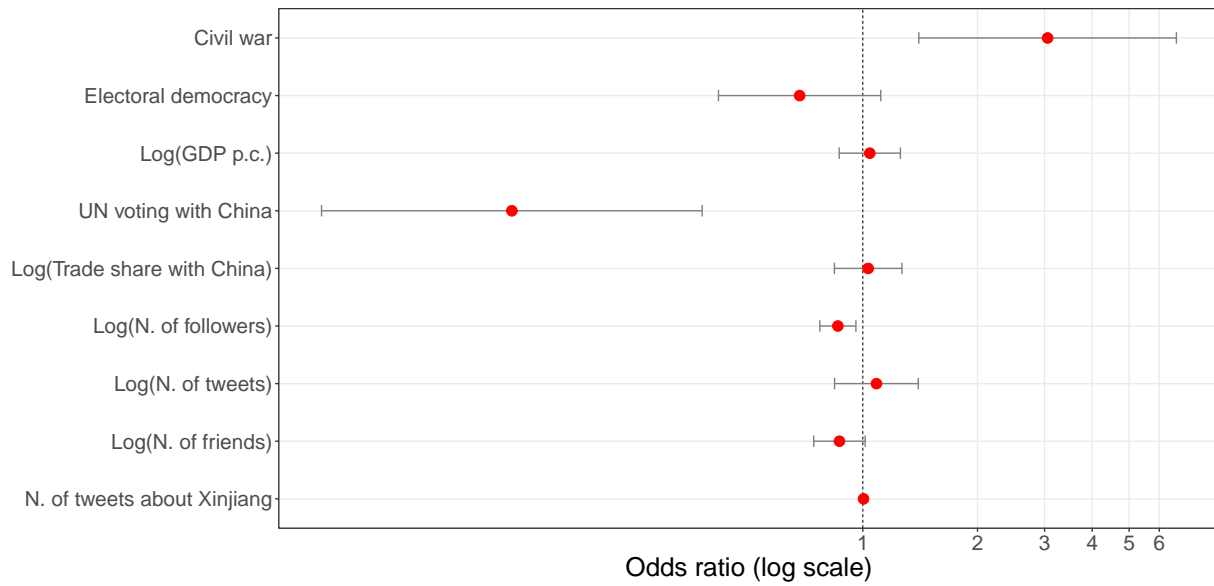
Figure 4 plots the odds ratio of a logit model estimating the relationship between the threat strategy and countries experiencing high levels of domestic conflict. Support for H1 would be a positive and significant relationship between the dependent variable and *Civil war*. The results support the first hypothesis. There is a positive and significant relationship ($p < 0.01$) between the threat strategy and high levels of intrastate conflict. In terms of percent change, we can say that the odds of using the threat strategy in countries with a civil war are 200 percent higher than the odds for using it in countries without a civil war. Compared to Chinese diplomatic missions in countries facing lower levels of domestic threat, those in countries facing higher levels of domestic conflict (e.g., Ethiopia or Yemen) are more likely to frame Chinese state repression in Xinjiang as a legitimate response to a credible threat.

Figure 5: Odds ratio of a logit model using the benevolent rule strategy as a dependent variable (Model 2)
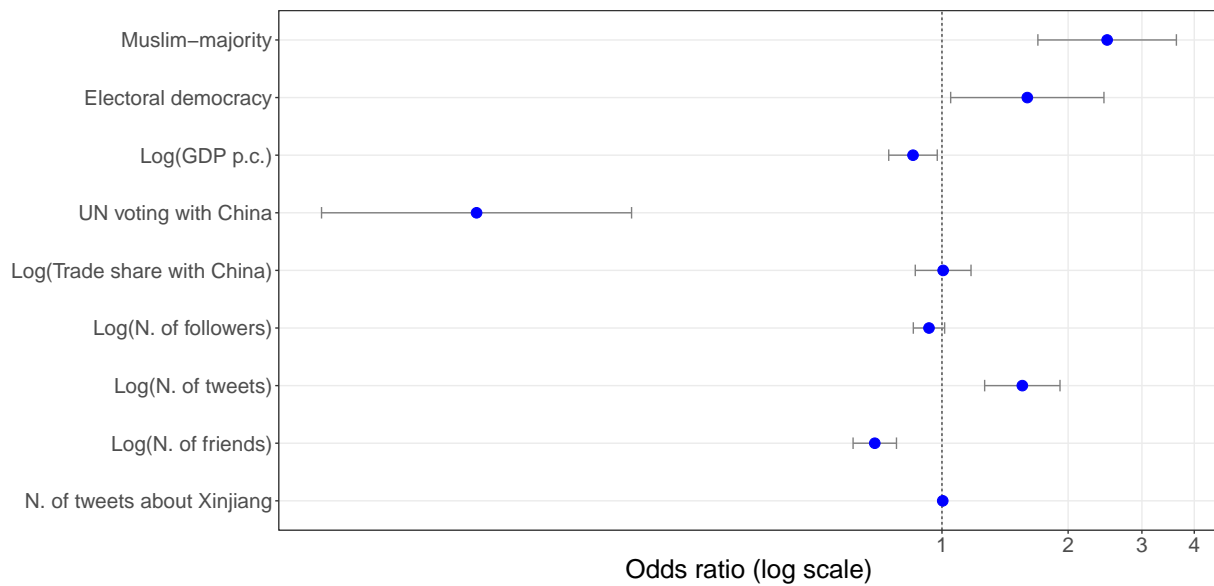
Figure 5 plots the odds ratio of a logit model estimating the relationship between the benevolent rule strategy and in-group audiences. As a reminder, the in-group audiences of the targets of repression in Xinjiang are Muslim-majority countries. Support for H2 would be a positive and significant relationship between the dependent variable and *Muslim-majority*. As the figure shows, the results support the second hypothesis. There is a positive and significant relationship ($p < 0.01$) between using the benevolent rule strategy and overseas missions in Muslim countries. Chinese diplomatic missions in Muslim countries (e.g., Kazakhstan or Saudi Arabia) are more likely to frame Beijing's actions as good governance than those located in non-Muslim states. In terms of percent change, we can say that the odds of using the benevolent rule strategy in Muslim countries are 147 percent higher than the odds for using it in non-Muslim countries. Regimes are more likely to frame repressive actions as measures taken to ensure the social and economic development of the target of repression when taking to an in-group audience of the repressed.

The estimated coefficients for most of the control variables are not consistent across the two models, except for *UN voting with China*. There is a negative and significant relationship ($p < 0.01$) between voting with China and the two repression image management strategies. As a reminder, the voting similarity between China and the host in the UNGA is a proxy for the political relationship between the host and China. The findings suggest that using either the threat or benevolent rule strategies is less likely as the voting similarity between the regime and host increases. A possible explanation for this is that regimes are less likely to use framing strategies with political allies because allies are less likely to raise human rights issues and create problems for them. For instance, countries politically close to China like Pakistan have embraced Beijing's policies toward ethnic minorities in Xinjiang.[33] There is no need for Chinese overseas missions to frame repression as good governance nor a legitimate response to a credible threat

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[33]Westfall, Sammy. 2021. "Pakistan's prime minister embraces China's policy toward Uyghurs in remarks on Communist Party centenary." *Washington Post*. July 2. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/07/02/pakistan-prime-minister-backs-china-on-uyghurs/.

in these countries.

Discussion

Overall, the results show that human-rights-abusing regimes strategically adapt the ways they frame their actions to the international community depending on who the target audience is. However, further research is necessary to evaluate the external validity of the theory and findings beyond the Chinese context. Although this study examines Chinese state repression in Xinjiang as a case study, the primary arguments can be applicable to any governance context in which human rights violations exist, and the perpetrator is willing to obscure them.

The theory about the threat strategy and domestic conflict could be relevant to other regimes facing allegations of physical integrity violations. Authoritarian leaders can reduce international pressure and gain support from other states by framing their repressive actions consistently with other countries' narratives (Cronin-Furman, 2020). Since threat narratives are likely to mirror those in countries facing severe internal threats, Beijing and other regimes can exploit separatism, terrorism, and other types of threats as a pretext for repression, legitimizing their actions to the international community.

The discussion about the benevolent rule strategy and in-group audiences is also useful beyond the China case. It is applicable to other contexts where the state and the repressed belong to distinct in-group and out-group populations. There are many prominent cases of state repression against minorities with visible in-group and out-group members across the world like Chechens in Russia, Kurds in Turkey, Rohingyas in Myanmar, etc. Some of these regimes may use repression image management to target in-group audiences of the repressed. In the last decade, for instance, Myanmar security forces have conducted multiple military operations in northern Rakhine state, which has a considerable population of Rohingya (an ethnic group who predominantly follows Islam). While many in the international community accuse the Burmese military of committing ethnic cleansing and genocide against the Rohingya, the Burmese government claims these are "clearance operations" aimed to curb ethnic and religious tensions in the region.[34] Adopting the benevolent rule strategy, for example, reports from the Burmese Embassy in Malaysia (a country with a similar in-group to the Rohingya) have said these "clearance operations" are to provide "humanitarian assistance and support [to the] Rakhine state".[35] It is plausible to expect a strong relationship between the benevolent rule strategy and in-group audiences (Muslim countries) in Myanmar.

In addition to the two framing strategies discussed in this research, future studies could explore other strategies used by regimes to legitimize their actions to the international community. What strategies do regimes use with countries that are not experiencing

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[34]Wa Lone. 2016. "After violence, Myanmar moves to curb religious extremism." *Reuters*. July 15. https://www.reuters.com/article/us-myanmar-politics-idUSKCN0ZV1AI.

[35]Embassy of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar in Kuala Lumpur. 2020. "Providing humanitarian assistance and support in Rakhine State." https://www.myanmarembassykl.org/index.php/new/100-uehrd-uehrd.

domestic conflict and are considered out-group audiences of the repressed? One such strategy could be refuting accusations by denying human rights abuses and attacking those who report them. For instance, the Chinese Embassy in Brazil tweeted a message in July 2020 that presented the "true history" of Xinjiang and claimed "the lies of American politicians cannot deceive the world."[36] It is important to note that there are many tools authoritarian rulers can use to make the world safe for dictatorships, and these are worth exploring in future studies.

Finally, future research is needed to analyze how Beijing is continuing to frame and legitimize its actions in Xinjiang beyond 2020, as Chinese state repression in the region and its international reactions are still ongoing. The current research only includes Chinese foreign-facing messages about Xinjiang from 2014 to 2020. Although patterns are still evolving and the full story is incomplete, this research focuses on China's response to the peak international scrutiny that followed the 2019 leak of the "Xinjiang papers," a 400-page document detailing the severity of the crackdown.[37]

Conclusion

To avoid the economic and reputational costs associated with overt state repression, regimes and their proxies seek to legitimize state repression to the international community by engaging in repression image management. This involves highlighting some aspects of repressive behavior and making them more salient in a foreign-facing message. For instance, Beijing often uses the rhetoric of terrorism to deflect or reduce international pressure and justify repressive actions in Xinjiang. It also promotes the claim that detention camps are vocational schools to improve the lives of locals in the region. At whom are China and other regimes targeting these strategies? Other studies (e.g., Edel and Josua, 2018; Cronin-Furman, 2020; Dukalskis, 2021) have argued that regimes adjust what they say abroad about domestic repression against their citizens conditional on who the target audience is. This research builds upon these studies on authoritarian image management to explain why some audiences might be associated with certain frames to justify repression.

The first hypothesis suggests that framing repressive actions as a legitimate response to a credible threat (i.e., the threat strategy) is more likely when communicating with countries experiencing higher levels of domestic conflict. This is because a heightened perception of threat makes people more likely to justify repressive behavior against threatening groups. Using threat as a pretext for repression is also likely to echo narratives in countries facing domestic, violent conflicts.

While the threat strategy could help legitimize the regime's actions when communicating with countries facing domestic threats, it is likely to provoke a backlash effect when communicating with in-group audiences of the repressed. This is because individuals tend to be hesitant in accepting in-group members as violent. Thus, the second hypothesis suggests that the benevolent rule strategy is

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[36]Embaixada da China no Brasil (@EmbaixadaChina). 2020. Twitter. July 20. https://twitter.com/EmbaixadaChina/status/1282492491477004291.

[37]Ramzy, Austin, and Chris Buckley. 2019. "'Absolutely No Mercy': Leaked Files Expose How China Organized Mass Detentions of Muslims." *New York Times*. November 16. https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/11/16/world/asia/china-xinjiang-documents.html.

more likely if an in-group audience of the repressed is a key addressee of legitimization. Regimes benefit from using the benevolent rule strategy when communicating with an in-group audience of the target of repression, as people prefer to see in-group members doing well.

The results support the hypotheses and show that regimes strategically adapt the ways they frame their actions to the international community depending on the audience. First, there is a positive and significant relationship between the threat strategy and higher levels of domestic conflict. Compared to Chinese diplomatic missions in countries without a civil war, those in countries with a civil war (an instance of high-level threat for the government) are more likely to frame Chinese state repression in Xinjiang as a legitimate response to a credible threat. Second, there is a positive and significant relationship between the benevolent rule strategy and in-group audiences. Chinese diplomatic missions in Muslim-majority countries (in-group audiences of the targets of repression in Xinjiang) are more likely to frame Beijing's repressive actions as measures taken to ensure the social and economic development of Xinjiang's ethnic minorities than those located in non-Muslim states.

In addition to contributing to the authoritarian image management literature, this research has important implications for those interested in advancing human rights in China and elsewhere. This research shows that regimes change the ways they frame their actions to the international community according to the audience. This means that activists, multilateral institutions, and other actors promoting human rights need to develop counter narratives depending on the audience as well. For instance, when promoting human rights in countries experiencing internal conflict, actors should emphasize narratives aimed to deconstruct or delegitimize foreign-facing messages framing the target of repression as a threat. In the case of China in particular, the research suggests that actors promoting human rights may need to counter narratives about Chinese good governance in Xinjiang, especially when audiences in Muslim countries are key recipients. This is increasingly important as Beijing's benevolent rule strategy and propaganda are repeated by local officials in Muslim-majority countries.[38] The effectiveness of counter narratives against repression image management strategies by China and other regimes might also hinge on the target audience.

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[38]Azad, Maulana. 2021. "Chinese Muslims enjoying all rights." *Daily Times*. April 14. https://dailytimes.com.pk/745360/chinese-muslims-enjoying-all-rights-maulana-azad/

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Online Appendix

Table 1: Logistic regression models estimating the effects of recipient characteristics on repression image management strategies

	Repression image management strategies	
	Threat	Benevolent rule
	(1)	(2)
Civil war	1.12***	
	(0.40)	
Muslim-majority		0.91***
		(0.19)
Electoral democracy	−0.38	0.47**
	(0.25)	(0.21)
Log(GDP p.c.)	0.04	−0.16**
	(0.09)	(0.07)
UN voting with China	−2.12***	−2.56***
	(0.59)	(0.43)
Log(Trade share with China)	0.03	0.01
	(0.10)	(0.08)
Log(N. of followers)	−0.15***	−0.07
	(0.06)	(0.04)
Log(N. of tweets)	0.08	0.44***
	(0.13)	(0.11)
Log(N. of friends)	−0.14*	−0.37***
	(0.08)	(0.06)
N. of tweets about Xinjiang	0.004***	0.004***
	(0.001)	(0.001)
Constant	−18.35	−18.09
	(13.10)	(35.00)
Month fixed-effects	Yes	Yes
Observations	79,238	79,238
Log Likelihood	−1,505.97	−2,856.18
Akaike Inf. Crit.	3,189.94	5,890.35

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses. *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table 2: Summary statistics of dependent and independent variables in Appendix Tables 1 and 2

Statistic	N	Mean	St. Dev.	Min	Pctl(25)	Pctl(75)	Max
Threat	82,111	0.004	0.06	0	0	0	1
Benevolent rule	82,111	0.01	0.08	0	0	0	1
Civil war	82,111	0.03	0.16	0	0	0	1
Battle-related deaths	82,111	122.30	346.07	0	0	25.00	2368.00
Muslim-majority	82,110	0.17	0.38	0.00	0.00	0.00	1.00
Muslim (pop. %)	82,056	19.99	34.41	0.003	0.33	11.72	99.83
Electoral democracy	82,110	0.68	0.47	0.00	0.00	1.00	1.00
Log(GDP p.c.)	79,238	9.23	1.43	5.57	8.16	10.59	11.35
UN voting with China	82,110	0.71	0.17	0.19	0.62	0.85	1.00
Log(Trade share with China)	82,110	-2.18	0.67	-3.53	-2.89	-1.52	-0.60
Log(N. of followers)	82,110	8.76	1.53	2.77	7.54	10.19	11.67
Log(N. of tweets)	82,110	7.39	0.93	1.39	6.85	7.99	9.23
Log(N. of friends)	82,110	5.28	0.95	2.08	4.61	5.72	7.62
N. of tweets about Xinjiang	82,111	63.59	80.92	0	11	70	393

Robustness check with continuous variable for battle-related deaths

Following Davenport (2007), I measure instances of high-level domestic conflict using civil wars to test the first hypothesis in the main text. Specifically, I use a binary variable that equals 1 if the target of repression image management faces a major state-based armed conflict and 0 otherwise. Appendix Table 3 Model 1 is a robustness check that uses a continuous battle-related deaths variable. As shown in the table, the main results are consistent regardless of whether a binary or continuous independent variable is used for the first hypothesis.

Robustness check with continuous variable for Muslim countries

In the main text, in-group audience is operationalized as a dummy indicating whether 50% or more of a host country's population identifies as Muslim. Appendix Table 3 Model 2 is a robustness check using a continuous variable measuring the percentage of Muslims in the host country's population. As the table shows, the main results are consistent regardless of using a binary or continuous independent variable for the second hypothesis.

Description of control variables

I control for a set of relevant variables in the empirical analysis. First, I include a pair of country-level variables, namely regime type and economic development, which might be correlated with repression image management strategies and the independent variables. For example, individuals in democracies generally accept liberal values that are challenged and undermined by the use of repression (Davenport, 2007), which could make regimes less likely to use repression image management in democracies. Similarly, regime

Table 3: Robustness check with continuous variable for Muslim countries

	Repression image management strategies	
	Threat	Benevolent rule
	(1)	(2)
Battle-related deaths	0.0004*	
	(0.0002)	
Muslim (pop. %)		0.01***
		(0.002)
Electoral democracy	−0.36	0.77***
	(0.25)	(0.22)
Log(GDP p.c.)	0.04	−0.17**
	(0.09)	(0.07)
UN voting with China	−2.19***	−2.69***
	(0.58)	(0.44)
Log(Trade share with China)	0.03	0.02
	(0.10)	(0.08)
Log(N. of followers)	−0.15***	−0.08*
	(0.06)	(0.04)
Log(N. of tweets)	0.05	0.45***
	(0.12)	(0.10)
Log(N. of friends)	−0.15*	−0.38***
	(0.08)	(0.06)
N. of tweets about Xinjiang	0.004***	0.004***
	(0.001)	(0.001)
Constant	−18.08	−18.14
	(103.87)	(16.19)
Month fixed-effects	Yes	Yes
Observations	79,238	79,227
Log Likelihood	−1,507.51	−2,851.10
Akaike Inf. Crit.	3,193.03	5,880.21

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses. *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

type and economic development might be both correlated with the presence of civil wars and Muslim-majority countries. I measure economic development using the Worldwide Governance Indicators and regime type using Freedom House's "electoral democracy" binary variable. An electoral democracy designation is a country with a score of 7 or better in the Electoral Process questions, overall political rights score of 20 or better, and overall civil liberties score of 30 or better.

Second, I include two measures to control for ties between the regime and the host country. What a regime says abroad about domestic repression against its citizens might be different depending on the degree of closeness between the regime and the recipient. For instance, a regime might be less likely to frame repression as a legitimate response to a credible threat when a political ally is the recipient because it is unlikely that the latter would criticize the regime over its human rights record due to their pre-existing relationship. In contrast, a regime might be more likely to frame repression as benevolent rule when an important economic partner is the recipient because it does not want the latter to impose economic sanctions that might affects business ties between the two countries. Thus, I control for economic and political ties between China and the host. I employ the logged value of monthly bilateral trade share, as a proxy for China's economic relationship with the host. I then employ the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) annual voting similarity between China and the host, as a proxy for China's political relationship with the host. Indicators of trade and UNGA voting similarity are frequently used in the literature to measure economic ties and political alignment between states (e.g., Bader, 2015; Dreher et al., 2018). Trade data is from the IMF, while voting similarity data is from (Voeten, 2013).

Third, I include a series of Twitter account variables that might influence the online behavior of Chinese diplomatic missions, namely the logged value of the number of followers per account, the logged value of the number of tweets per account, and the logged value of the number of friends per account. I also include the raw number of Xinjiang-related tweets per account in the model to account for the fact that some accounts may simply tweet more about Xinjiang than others, and include month fixed-effects to control for the increasing or decreasing international news coverage about Xinjiang over time.

Text data pre-processing and Fightin' Words statistics

This section describes the data pre-processing decisions for Table 2 in the main text and the figures below. First, I translate all tweets into English using the Google machine translation API. This strategy has been used by political scientists to simultaneously analyze text in different languages (e.g., Lucas et al., 2015; Loyle and Bestvater, 2019). In terms of data pre-processing, I create uni-grams from the tokens, lowercase them, and remove English language stop-words. Finally, I apply the "fightin' words" approach developed by Monroe, Colaresi and Quinn (2008). The "fightin' words" approach relies on a model-based approach to avoid inefficiency and shrinkage and regularization to avoid both infinite estimates and overfitting the sample data. The specific value is obtained by calculating the terms used more frequently overall and the terms used more frequently in the category. Table 2 in the main text shows the top 20 terms associated with each repression image management strategy. Appendix Figures 1 and 2 plot the top keywords in

each category by rank order.

Figure 1: Fightin' words plot for the threat category
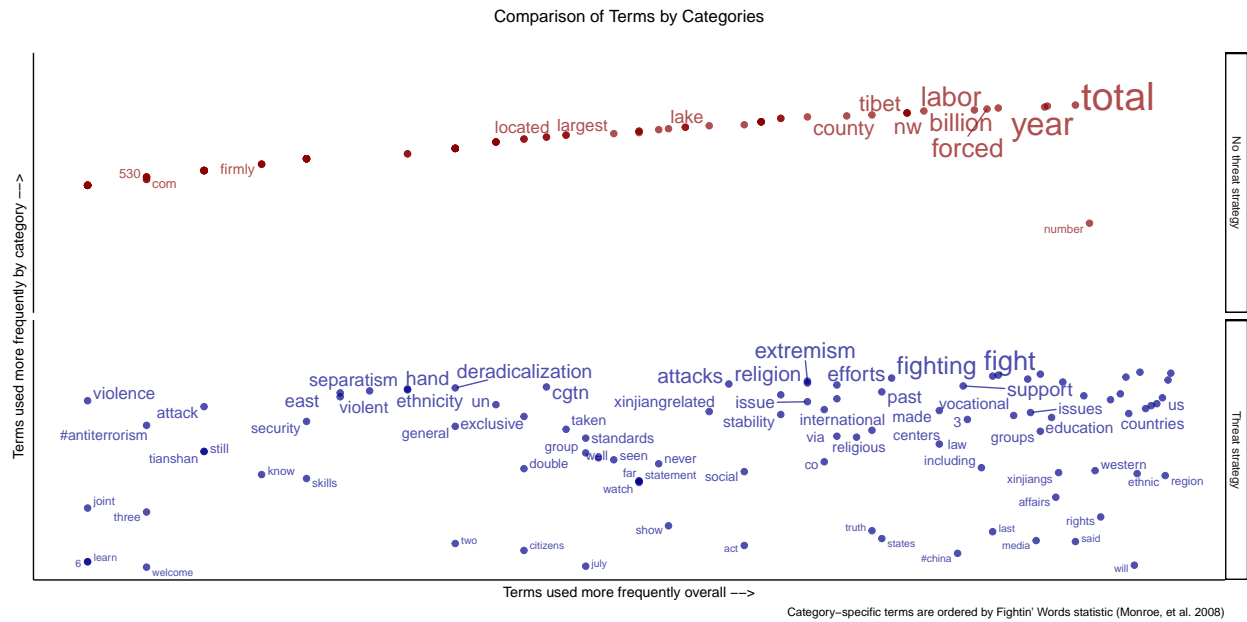

Figure 1: Fightin' words plot for the threat category

Figure 2: Fightin' words plot for the benevolent rule strategy

Figure 2: Fightin' words plot for the benevolent rule strategy