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**Article**

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## Weaponized interdependence versus economic sanctions: The case of human rights abuses in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region

Emilian-Marian STOICA\*

### Abstract

*The situation of the human rights abuses in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) is frequently reported in the Western media and it has gained a central place in the Euro-Atlantic political discourse which condemns Beijing's attitude towards human rights at home. However, the sanctions adopted by both the US and the EU in relation to the treatment applied by the Chinese government to the Uyghurs in the XUAR are strongly discouraged and limited by the economic dependencies of the two Western giants on China. The goal of this paper is to discuss the effectiveness of the economic sanctions in supporting the human rights international regime in the context of current economic interdependence between the European Union (EU) and the United States (US), on one side, and China, on the other side. The hypothesis of the paper is that the asymmetrical economic interdependence is undermining the effectiveness of the economic sanctions in supporting the human rights international regime. When there is an increased interdependence between a supporter and promoter of human rights, in this case the US and the EU, and a great economic power that does not regard the human rights as having a universal value in the current international order, the effects of the economic sanctions are inefficient in addressing this problem due to the high economic and political costs for both their issuers and their targets.*

**Keywords:** interdependence, economic sanctions, human rights, China

### Introduction

The paper focuses on the case of the abuses to which the Uyghur community in XUAR is subjected. These abuses have been reported in recent years by several international non-governmental organizations, including Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, and have also been closely analysed by the United Nations Human Rights Council. A significant number of members of the international community protested and expressed dissatisfaction with the Chinese authorities' treatment of ethnic Uyghurs in western China but, according to the United States Institute for Peace, the “toolkit” used by those actors that support and act in order to protect human rights at international

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level have failed to influence Beijing to stop its discriminatory policies in XUAR (Baillie and Vandenbrink, 2020).

Because of the current economic interdependencies and highly concentrated global value chains, international actors, states and international governmental organizations, use economic sanctions in exceptional cases, such as the violation of fundamental norms of the international order by other state and non-state international actors. As a response, China is weaponizing the asymmetrical interdependence with the US and the EU, which leads to a reduction in the effects of sanctions aimed at ending the Chinese government abusive policies in the XUAR.

The goal of this paper is to discuss the effectiveness of the economic sanctions in supporting the human rights international regime in the context of current economic interdependence between the European Union (EU) and the United States (US), on one side, and China, on the other side. The hypothesis of the paper is that the asymmetrical economic interdependence is undermining the effectiveness of the economic sanctions in supporting the human rights international regime. In this sense, the present paper has three secondary objectives. First of all, the paper aims to highlight the harmful link between economic interdependence and human rights international regime. The second objective of the paper is to reveal the fragility of international sanctions as a response to the human rights abuses by great powers that have a strong influence over the international economic networks. The third objective of the paper is to point out the vulnerabilities of the US and the EU in front of China's economic power as an obstacle for the promotion and protection of liberal ideals such as human rights.

The reactions of the US and EU can be identified in the political discourse of the officials of the American and European high officials. However, the focus will be mainly on the sanctions imposed by the US and the EU on Chinese government officials and Chinese state-owned companies operating in the XUAR, as well as on the local industry. We will be able to observe a common pattern of the US and the EU regarding the type and intensity of the sanctions they are deploying in the case of the Chinese government's human rights abuses in the XUAR. The discourses of the Beijing leadership that categorically rejects Western accusations and, on the other hand, the instrumentalization of China's power in economic sectors important to the US and the EU are relevant to explain this phenomenon.

Discussions regarding economic sanctions will start from the broader framework of international sanctions so that, following the analysis of the theoretical views on international sanctions, they will be limited to the concept of thematic sanctions (targeted sanctions). The logic of the present paper is one of causality. The US and the EU are supporters and promoters of human

rights on the international stage. However, the application of sanctions on China's human rights abuses in XUAR is discouraged and therefore limited by the US and EU's economic dependencies on China, which the latter effectively exploits. The US and EU's imposition of sanctions only on certain Chinese individuals, institutions and companies reflects the relation of causality between the weaponized interdependence and the limited and low intensity sanctions.

The first part of the paper outlines the theoretical framework that will be used to explain how China's is weaponizing the US and EU dependencies on its economy in order to limit the intensity of the sanctions imposed by them. In this section, the concepts of weaponization of interdependence and sanctions will be analysed in relation with the international regime of human rights. The second part focuses on the human rights situation in XUAR and the inconclusive reaction of the international community to it. The third part of the paper highlights the economic sanctions imposed by the US and the EU on the Beijing government for abusing the local Muslim population in XUAR. The last part of the paper is dedicated to explaining how China is using the US and the EU dependencies on its economy to limit the effects of economic sanctions and to continue its abusive policy in XUAR. Also, the last part pays special attention on how the Beijing regime is exercising its institutional control over the domestic economy and on how China is weaponizing economic power in two important economic segments for the US and the EU.

## **1. The harmful link between interdependence and human rights**

When analysing the effects of interdependence on the effectiveness of the economic sanctions in supporting human rights, one should must have in mind two defining elements of the liberal international order.

The interdependence is one of the basic characteristics of the state of the global market economy and it also reflects the fact that the expansion of global economic networks plays a key role in maintaining international peace and security in the post-World War II era. In other words, as the leading theorists of interdependence in the twentieth century, Keohane and Nye (2011), argue, economic cooperation and the emergence of interdependence are essential pillars of international peace. According to them, interdependence means "situations characterized by reciprocal effects among countries or among actors in different countries" (Keohane and Nye, 2011, p. 8). Keohane and Nye considered that the concept of interdependence should be developed beyond this basic definition and proposed complex interdependence as an updated version that will better suit the current features of the global economy and which is defined by three main characteristics: the multiple channels that

connect societies, the absence of hierarchy among issues (in a situation of complex interdependence between two actors, military security loses its place on the agenda of the parties), and the diminished relevance of military power in managing conflicts between states in conditions of complex interdependence (Keohane and Nye, 2011, p. 21). In many cases, the relation of complex interdependence that take place between two parties generates asymmetries regarding the dependencies. These asymmetries can “provide sources of influence for actors in their dealings with one another. Less dependent actors can often use the interdependent relationship as a source of power in bargaining over an issue and perhaps to affect other issues” (Keohane and Nye, 2011, p. 9).

Drezner (2021) defines weaponized interdependence as “a condition under which an actor can exploit its position in an embedded network to gain bargaining advantage over others in a contained system” (Drezner, 2021, p. 8). At first, the concept was developed by Farrell and Newman (2019). They are providing a different theoretical framework regarding the interdependence and its effects through “a structural explanation of interdependence in which network topography generates enduring power imbalances among states” (Farrell and Newman, 2019, p. 45). Farrell and Newman emphasize that weaponized interdependence is the product of asymmetric network structures “in which some states are able to leverage interdependent relations to coerce others”, and those states that have political authority over the “central nodes” of these structures “through which money, goods, and information travel are uniquely positioned to impose costs on others” (ibidem.). There are two ways to weaponize interdependence. Those states that have “superior institutional capacity in these asymmetric networks”, a strong economy and are as less dependent as possible can use their control over the complex interdependencies in order to “gather information or choke off economic and information flows, discover and exploit vulnerabilities, compel policy change, and deter unwanted actions” (ibidem.). In order to support their thesis on the weaponization of interdependence, Farrell and Newman show how the US use the logistical and political advantages over The Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication (SWIFT) payment system and the global Internet to increase domestic security, but also to manage external threats such as terrorism and nuclear proliferation in the case of Iran.

The discussion regarding the weaponization of interdependence is essential for the subject of this paper because it offers the theoretical explanation necessary to understand the interdependence beyond the liberal account of this concept and how great powers use the rules that weave global economic networks in order to exert power and enhance their security in international politics.

Following the logic of complex interdependence in the absence of a hierarchy of international issues, after the end of the Cold War we are witnessing a growing interest from the international

community, especially the Western powers, in protecting human rights globally, particularly in former regions that were in the Soviet Union's sphere of influence.

Currently, the protection of human rights is one of the main normative principles on which the liberal international order is based on. The international regime of human rights was born as a reaction to the atrocities committed in World War II that resulted in the deaths of millions of innocent people. Since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the international regime of human rights has been supplemented by a series of normative additions and practical tools designed to ensure “the dignity and worth of the human person and the equal rights of men and women and have determined to promote social progress and better standards of life in greater freedom” (United Nations, n.d.). Despite the prominent international dimension of human rights protection, states are legally primarily responsible for the domestic implementation of human rights treaties and conventions (Donnelly and Whelan, 2018, p. 16).

There are situations in which the international human rights regime is not effective enough to combat the “systematic, massive, and flagrant violations of certain key rights that lead to significant loss of life and destruction of livelihoods” and, in these circumstances, “the international community may be empowered to intervene coercively” to prevent genocide and crimes against humanity (Donnelly and Whelan, 2018, p. 171). After the end of the Cold War, in the context of the decline of geopolitical competition, the practice of humanitarian intervention became a recurring feature in international politics (Forsythe, 2018, p. 82).

In the context of global economic networks and the interdependencies generated by them, in order to punish acts that endanger international peace and security or that lead to mass human rights violations, the international community is resorting to economic sanctions to correct the slippage of some states, to the detriment of use of military force. When the costs of other actions (such as economic incentives and military intervention) are too high, the sanctions are one of the most often used instrument on the international stage in order to manage and to shape the actions of the other actors.

In a recent comprehensive study regarding the evolution of the economic sanctions enforced by the EU, the United Nations and the US since the end of the Cold War, Weber and Schneider are observing that the economic sanctions applied from 1989 to 2015 were not very effective in achieving their goals (Weber and Schneider, 2022, p. 97). The two provide a definition of economic sanctions that can be easily identified with the definition of power as it was shaped by Robert Dahl (Dahl, 1957, pp. 203-204). According to the authors, “the sanctions are, generally speaking, a measure of economic coercion through which senders try to force a target to change a behavior that they deem unacceptable” (Weber and Schneider, 2022, p. 99). The EUSANCT study provides that most

economic sanctions are addressing “issues that directly affect the international community, such as exercising political influence over a third state, militarized actions, territorial disputes, alignment choices, weapons production and proliferation, illegal nuclear enrichment, support of terrorist group, and drug trafficking”, but also issues that concern the domestic policies of the third state including “human rights violations, electoral frauds, violation of the constitutional order, and enhancing leadership change” (Weber and Schneider, 2022, p. 102).

David P. Forsythe identified three means used by states in their foreign policy to protect human rights when they are violated in other states: diplomatic, economic and military. According to him, states “do sometimes suspend full trade, and also development aid or other types of foreign assistance [...] for the lack of other appealing options – e.g., diplomacy alone has proven ineffective but military action is not desired” (Forsythe, 2018, p. 219). Forsythe does not consider that economic sanctions are useful enough in addressing the protection of human rights against violations because of their “unintended or unwanted effects” as in the case of the sanctions imposed on the Saddam Hussein regime in 1990s (*ibidem.*). Despite these shortcomings, when countries such as China and Russia systematically violate human rights within their own territory, sanctions may become the only reliable tool for the international community to remedy humanitarian situations.

A similar understanding of the shortcomings of the application of economic sanctions in the case of human rights violations by different states can be considered as the one that gave rise to a new paradigm of sanctioning such abuses. In a recent European Parliament (EP) report dedicated to global human rights sanctions framework implemented by the US, Canada, the UK and the EU, Martin Russell highlights the new Western approach to address human rights abuses at the global level, whether they are systematic or not (Russell 2021). Russell makes a clear distinction between thematic and geographic sanctions. Depending on their scope, geographical sanctions are “limited to a particular country” while thematic (global) sanctions “can be applied to particular types of perpetrators, regardless of the geographical location” (Russell, 2021, p. 2). This new approach is defined by the targeted sanctions which are dedicated to specific individuals, firms and political institutions without having direct effects on states and their economies.

This model of sanctions applied by the West, including that of the EU, is based on the one implemented by the US since 2012. Called today the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act, the US sanctions regime was originally used to sanction a number of Russian citizens after the suspicious death of Sergei Magnitsky, a Russian tax expert, who revealed several financial irregularities in the high circles of the Kremlin regime. The current US Global Magnitsky Act has an “unlimited geographical scope; whereas previous measures targeted individuals and entities from



specified countries (Russia in the case of the 2012 US Magnitsky Act), no such restrictions apply to the global version of the act” (Russell, 2021, p. 2). According to this EP report, “the choice of global sanctions could be explained by a wish to limit the damage to bilateral relations with countries that are geopolitically important or significant trade partners” (Russell, 2021, p. 11). But as we will see below, the targets of these sanctions, whether imposed by the US or the EU, are individuals and entities who carry out the orders of a national government (in this case the Chinese central government) and implement a series of policies which negatively affects the human rights situation.

## **2. The case of human rights violations in Xinjiang and the reactions of the international community**

XUAR is an autonomous region in the West of China with a population of 25.85 million people (Statistics Bureau of Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, 2021). In XUAR the Uyghur ethnic majority make up 45% of the total population, while the religious majority is Muslim and accounts for 60% of the region's residents.

Tensions between the Chinese government and the Xinjiang Uyghur ethnic community have their origins in the violent riots of 2009 and Beijing's harsh crackdown on them. The main cause of these riots in XUAR is the mass migration of Han ethnic groups, accompanied by a series of economic and social policies that offer them an advantage in the labour market and in the economy of the autonomous region to the detriment of the local Muslim population (Human Rights Watch, 2009). These policies have caused Uyghurs dissatisfaction and as a result individuals identified as belonging to this ethnic group have committed a series of attacks such as the one in Tiananmen Square in 2013 and the one in Kunming Railway Station in 2014.

Beijing's response to these attacks came shortly after. Thus, since 2014, the Chinese authorities have developed and implemented the concept of "re-education camps" in which detainees, most of whom are Uyghurs, are subjected to detention, torture and deprivation of rights. The main purpose of these practices is thought to be the political indoctrination of the Uyghurs and the destruction of their identity in order to achieve the cultural assimilation of the Muslim ethnic groups and a stronger governmental control over the local population (Cronin-Furnam, 2018). The tightening of political control can be justified by Beijing's intention to fundamentally change the XUAR due to its geographical location, which plays a central role to the Belt and Road Initiative. According to the 13th Five-Year Plan for Economic and Social Development of the People's Republic of China, the Chinese government must ensure that “Xinjiang becomes an important window for opening up



westward” and “the core region for the Silk Road Economic Belt” (Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, 2016).

Under the pretext of fighting terrorism, the Muslims in XUAR have been subjected to treatments that can easily be described as inhumane and degrading for any human being. According to the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, since 2017 the Chinese authorities in the XUAR have implemented a birth control campaign targeting the detained Uyghur women (Zenz, 2020). Moreover, the Chinese government declared Islam “a contagious disease” (Samuel, 2018). In order to hide these actions, the Chinese authorities prevent millions of people living in XUAR from communicating freely about Beijing’s abuses and ban foreign journalists and investigators from entering the region (Amnesty International, 2022, pp. 126-127).

These events in XUAR should be understood in the light of a somewhat ambivalent view of China regarding human rights. Beijing's human rights policy is different from that promoted under the UN system, or at least the concept is given a different meaning. For this reason, the issue of human rights is a sensitive topic for the Chinese Communist Party policy, and therefore a red line in China's foreign policy. The Chinese concept of human rights is not a liberal one as that in Western democracies, where individual rights and liberties prevail over those of the society as a whole (Xie, 2019, p. 428). Since 1989, several narratives about the role of human rights in the Chinese society and economy have been promoted by the political leadership of the Chinese state. When it comes to protecting human rights, the arguments of Chinese officials support authoritarian conceptions of sovereignty and national interest, deny the relevance of the liberal conception of human rights in relation to Chinese interpretations of the concept of justice, support the cultural relativization of human rights and the primacy of socio-economic well-being to the detriment of the protection of human rights (Pils, 2018, p. 40).

Although the government's activities in XUAR do not comply with the current international human rights regulations, the reactions of relevant international actors to the issue are still quite ambiguous and undecided. One of the most expected reactions is that of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR).

The situation of human rights violations in XUAR came for the first time to the attention of the OHCHR in 2018. During the 39th session of the UN Human Rights Council, Michelle Bachelet, the High Commissioner for Human Rights, pointed out that the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination had identified “deeply disturbing allegations of large-scale arbitrary detentions of Uyghurs and other Muslim communities in so called re-education camps across Xinjiang” (HC Bachelet Global Update, 2018). Only recently, in 2021, the OHCHR has identified in XUAR “the use

of arbitrary detention and ill-treatment in institutions, coercive work practices and the erosion of social and cultural rights in general" and is due to report on the human rights situation in this region of China (Richardson, 2021). But the completion of the report depends on an on-site analysis by OHCHR specialists. In this context, China has put pressure on OHCHR to delay as much as possible the visit of its human rights specialists to XUAR and, as a consequence, to postpone their report on the situation (Bermingham, 2022).

### **3. The sanctions imposed by the US and the EU on China in the case of human rights abuses in XUAR**

Over the last few years, the US has taken the strongest position on the international stage on the human rights situation in XUAR. The reactions of the last two US administrations have followed and complemented each other so that the measures taken by the Trump administration against China's actions in XUAR have been continued and even tightened by the Biden Administration. In March 2019, after meeting with several Uyghur minority survivors in XUAR detention camps, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo highlighted the US's awareness of the human rights situation in the western region of China and called on the Chinese government to release all abusively detained persons (U.S. Department of State, 2019).

In October 2019, the US enforced its first sanctions to Chinese officials responsible for managing XUAR detention camps and human rights violations. The Trump administration's Commerce Department also imposed a series of restrictions on US companies that were banned from exporting goods and services to a number of Xianjiang-based entities that were suspected of being involved in the implementation of the detention, repression and surveillance system (U.S. Mission China, 2019). The US sanctions on Chinese companies for their involvement in the Chinese government's abusive activities in XUAR have continued for the next two years. Thus, in July and December 2020, the US Treasury imposed restrictions on US exports to several Chinese companies operating in the field of textile and cosmetics manufacturing, in the medical field, but also in the field of artificial intelligence (Whalen, 2020). The Biden administration has imposed new sanctions on the Chinese company SenseTime Group for developing the facial recognition system used in XUAR for tracking people belonging to Muslim ethnic groups (U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2021), as well as 23 other Chinese companies (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2021a).

On June 17, 2020, the US Congress passed the Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act. This act authorized the use of U.S. resources "to address human rights violations and abuses, including gross violations of human rights, by the People's Republic of China" (U.S. Congress, 2020). Following the

enactment of this normative act, the Trump administration imposed new sanctions on the visas and properties of several Chinese officials - including Chen Quanguo, a member of the Political Bureau of Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (XPCC) - for their role in "serious violations of human rights" in the XUAR. The Biden Administration continued the sanctions policy of the Trump administration and, in March 2021, the US Treasury imposed new restrictions on the tangible and financial assets of Wang Junzheng and Chen Mingguo, senior Chinese XUAR officials working for the XPCC and the Xinjiang Public Security Bureau (XPSB) (U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2021).

The toughest economic sanction imposed on China by the United States is the restrictions on all imports of goods from XUAR. This sanction was enacted on December 8, 2021 by the adoption of the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act by the US Congress (U.S. Congress, 2021). In adopting this normative act, the American Congress starts from the presumption that all goods imported from Xinjiang region are produced by forced labor. Thus, in order to be able to export goods to the USA, companies operating in XUAR must clearly demonstrate that their products do not result from the subjection of Chinese citizens in this region to forced labour and slavery.

On the other hand, the EU-China relationship in matters related to human rights is defined by the broader framework of strategic cooperation between the two. This is made clear in the conclusions of the 2016 Council of the European Union, which emphasizes "that the promotion of human rights and the rule of law will continue to be a core part of the EU's engagement with China" and that draws attention to the EU's focus on measures China is taking to "ensure a safe and enabling environment for civil society - including foreign NGOs - and to protect the rights of people belonging to minorities, not least in Tibet and Xinjiang" (General Secretariat of the Council, 2016, p. 3).

Regarding the human rights situation in XUAR, the EU has expressed itself mainly through the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. She called on China to allow the OHCHR monitoring team access to XUAR. An urgent debate took place in the EP, in which Federica Mogherini supported the request of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights to approve his access to the XUAR and called on the Member States to provide protection for Uyghurs fleeing China and to respect the principle of non-refoulement, and in the EU-China Human Rights Dialogue raised the issue of re-education camps for the first time (EEAS Press Team, 2019).

At present, we cannot talk about a long history of major economic sanctions imposed on China by the EU in serious cases of human rights violations. The harshest such sanction was imposed by the European Communities after violent retaliation against the June 4 protests by the Chinese government, and was limited to an arms embargo on China, which is still in force. Until March 22, 2021, the arms embargo was the last and the only sanction imposed by the EU due to human rights

abuses in China. In accordance with The EU Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime, established on December 7, 2020, the Council of the European Union (CEU) has decided to impose sanctions on four Chinese officials operating in XUAR and on the XPCC, which was accused of using Uyghur forced labour. The sanctioned Chinese officials were Zhu Hailun, allegedly the architect of the mass surveillance against the Uyghurs; Wang Junzheng, Communist Party Secretary for the XPCC; and Wang Mingshan and Chen Mingguo, both charged with large-scale arbitrary detention and degrading treatment of Uyghurs (The Council of the European Union, 2021). Compared to the US sanctions regime applied in the same case, the EU Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime is weaker than the tools used by the US government.

Chinese officials' responses to the international allegations regarding Chinese authorities' treatment of Uyghurs and other Muslim ethnic groups do not follow an official common and unified line of argument. Thus, In 2020 the Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying denied US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's allegations and accused the US of hypocrisy over discriminatory and racist measures that gave rise to the Black Lives Matter movement in USA (Chunying, 2020). The Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi argued during the debates that took place on the sidelines of the 46th session of the Human Rights Council that the Chinese government was taking lawful counter-terrorism measures by implementing the UN Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism and the results were the four years during which Xinjiang enjoyed “social stability and sound development” without any “terrorist case” (Yi, 2021). Also, during the 49th Session of the United Nations Human Rights Council, Yi emphasized that China did not accept the use of double standards regarding human rights by the other members of international community, nor do other states' lectures on how international human rights norms should be implemented (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of People's Republic of China, 2022).

The approach in the case of Xinjiang human rights abuses indicates a high level of restraint on the part of the US and the EU regarding its political and economic relations with China. As the world's second largest economic power, China has some leverage over other great powers, including the United States.

#### **4. Weaponized interdependence - China's reaction to the sanctions imposed by the US and the EU**

Perhaps China's most important economic asset relative to Western powers is its status as the world's workshop. The Chinese products are located in many supply chains but most of the Chinese companies are manufacturing final goods whose main feature is that they cannot be easily identified

on international markets (Kroeber, 2018, p. 238). Unlike European products that have a strong global reputation, Chinese products are competitive in matters related to costs and supply efficiency. This is reflected in China's position as the world's largest exporter, with a total trade volume of 2,732 billion dollars in 2020 (The World Bank IBRD – IDA, n.d.). Also, the US-China trade balance is not favorable to the US, with a trade deficit of 355 billion dollars in 2021 (United States Census Bureau n.d.). China is the largest import partner of the US, most imports being composed of electronics, equipment and installations and textiles (Siripurapu, 2022). Also, of the total US exports, 7.6% of them are going to China (ibidem.). The EU is finding itself in the same situation, having a trade deficit with China of 249 billion euros (Eurostat, 2022). According to Eurostat, the most imported Chinese goods by the EU Member States are telecommunication equipment, automatic data processing machines, electrical machines and apparatuses, and electronic tubes, valves and related articles. On the other side, China is a big market for the motor cars, motor vehicles and motor vehicle parts that are produced in EU (ibidem.).

These trade imbalances work in China's favor, allowing Beijing to weaponize the attractiveness of the size and growth rate of its economy to shape the behavior of states that want to benefit from its dynamics and expansion. In the wake of sanctions imposed on China for abusing the Muslim population in XUAR, Beijing is exploiting US and EU dependence on exports of components for solar power systems and textiles produced in XUAR in order to reduce the possibility of further sanctions that could affect political and social stability in China.

XUAR is an important producer of cotton, polysilicon (a critical component of solar panels), cashmere, tomatoes, and other goods. The US sanctions on XPCC have a direct impact on polysilicon and cotton on the supply chains of American companies. XPCC plays an important role in the XUAR economy as it controls one third of cotton farms and produce 30% of the Chinese cotton (Dou, 2020), and has direct control over at least one of the largest polysilicon companies in XUAR (Funaiole, 2021). Moreover, these sanctions imposed on companies operating in the region do not affect them, as the commodities they produce are well integrated into global supply chains. But the sanctions have indirect effects on the local population, affecting the local labor market and people's incomes (Zhang, 2021).

The market for photovoltaic systems is a growing one. This trend is driven by global ambitions for climate neutral economies. Worldwide, approximately 95% of solar panel modules are made of polysilicon. China is the world's leading producer of polysilicon, but also has a dominant position in the production processes of other components such as ingots, wafers, and cells that are assembled into solar modules. Most of the photovoltaic panels produced worldwide are made of polysilicon.

XUAR's polysilicon production covers almost 50% of the world's market for this product (Funaiole, 2021). Given the US sanctions imposed on products that are based on forced labor, the US government is taking a significant part of its polysilicon imports out of the game. These sanctions have a direct effect on the efficiency of solar panel production in the United States and on the cost of installing new renewable energy capacity (Shepherd, 2021). In October 2021, John Kerry, United States Special Presidential Envoy for Climate, argued that a ban on imports of solar panels from XUAR could affect the US's ability to implement the Biden administration's ambitious climate change policy (Hudson and Nakashima, 2021).

Another economic sector that China is exploiting to counter Western internationally imposed sanctions is textiles. The XUAR produces 20% of the cotton on the international market. But this cotton is not exported by China in its raw form, but in the form of textile products produced by Chinese companies. In 2020, H&M, the Swedish company and the world's second largest clothing retailer, announced that it would no longer use cotton from XUAR to produce its clothing. This decision, based on the release of reports on forced labor in XUAR published by human rights and media NGOs, led to a boycott of H&M products by Chinese citizens. Several users of Weibo, the Chinese social media network, have denied the human rights abuses in XUAR and accused the political and conspiratorial nature of the Swedish company's statement. This campaign has led to the closure of several H&M clothing stores in several major Chinese cities, including Urumqi, the capital of XUAR.

The Chinese government has been directly involved in this boycott campaign through the Communist Youth League and Beijing-influenced media trusts (Reuters 2021). Also in June 2021, China's General Administration of Customs confiscated and destroyed several imported shipments of H&M, Nike, Gap and other products. According to the Chinese authorities, those products posed a potential threat to the health of consumers (Karen, 2021, p. 53). This was a clear escalation in a broader campaign of retaliation against these Western brands following their statements regarding forced labor in XUAR. In the next days, several e-commerce platforms have removed H&M products from their product lines. This led to a 23% decrease in sales of H&M products in China between March 1st, 2021 and May 31st, 2021.

According to recent studies published by Agroisolab in Jülich and the Hochschule Niederrhein University of Applied Sciences, two German research institutes, German clothing firms Puma, Adidas, Hugo Boss, Jack Wolfskin and Tom Tailor have broken their promises regarding the elimination of cotton products imported from XUAR (Oltermann, 2022). Using isotopic-based technology, the two institutes identified that the cotton used in several products of the five companies



was cultivated in XUAR. This hesitation on the part of German clothing companies undermines the homogeneity of the European discourse condemning the Chinese government's abuses against the Uyghur and Muslim minorities in XUAR and gives credibility to accusations from Beijing and the Chinese people regarding the political nature of European accusations.

The US isolation of 20% of world cotton production and almost 50% of polysilicon production is certainly having a negative effect on the international prices of these commodities. This affects both the US and the EU, as well as the competitiveness of American and European companies on the international markets in the field of solar energy and textiles, final or not.

The boycott of European clothing companies by Chinese citizens has been amplified by the Chinese authorities through the use of state institutions. This indicates that Beijing is taking seriously the effect that the withdrawal of Western companies from the Chinese market can have on its economy. Such actions can have a negative impact on the image of the Chinese state's political leadership as well as on the Chinese economy as a whole. Beijing's low intensity counter-measures mimic those taken by the US and the EU. The Chinese government did not react harshly to Western sanctions precisely because it understands that economic sanctions and boycott on XUAR have effects also on the United States and the EU due to existing interdependencies.

We cannot talk about China's ability to weaponize the existing interdependence in relation with US and EU without its strong institutional control over the central nodes of economic networks. Regarding the case study of this paper, this type of control is facilitated by the authoritarian nature of the Beijing regime which exercises strict institutional control over the foreign and Chinese companies, especially the state-owned ones.

In addressing the US and the EU allegations and sanctions regarding the situation in XUAR, the political rhetoric of the Beijing officials was accompanied by its counter-offensive on the Western objectors. In order to justify its response to sanctions imposed on Chinese companies by other states, the Chinese Ministry of Commerce (MOFCOM) has adopted the “Rules on Counteracting Unjustified Extra-territorial Application of Foreign Legislation and Other Measures” which compel the Chinese companies to report “unjustified extra-territorial application of foreign legislation and other measures” that “prohibits or restricts the citizens, legal persons or other organizations of China from engaging in normal economic, trade and related activities with a third State (or region) or its citizens, legal persons or other organizations” (Ministry of Commerce People's Republic of China, 2021). This normative act was completed in June of the same year by the Anti-Foreign Sanctions Law, which creates new internal institutional structures that deal with the implementation of restrictions on companies and individuals who take actions that endanger the situation of Chinese citizens or have



implications for internal affairs of China. These two regulations, along with the Export Control Law and the Unreliable Entities List adopted in 2020, shape the package of measures taken by China to combat Western sanctions.

The elaboration of this normative framework in such a short time was a result of the sanctions applied by the western powers in the case of XUAR and indicates the high capacity of Beijing to control the domestic market in relation to foreign companies. These regulations also create the framework that Chinese companies can use to avoid the effects of sanctions, at least in part. With this response, the Beijing government sends a clear message to those who impose sanctions on Chinese companies and individuals: that it can protect its interests and not be intimidated.

China's retaliation against the US sanctions was imposed in December 2021. China announced sanctions on Tuesday on four members of the US government's Commission on International Religious Freedom. Wang Wenbin, a spokesperson for the Chinese Foreign Ministry, argued that these sanctions imposed on the basis of the principle of reciprocity and sanctions are intended to "defend China's sovereignty, security and development interests and protect the legitimate rights and interests of Chinese personnel, and pursuant to relevant provisions of China's Anti-Foreign Sanctions Law" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of People's Republic of China, 2022). Also, in 2021, counter-sanctions were imposed by the Beijing regime on several European parliamentarians and several European entities, including Parliament's Subcommittee on Human Rights, the Council's Political and Security Committee, and several European think tanks and academics (Parry 2021).

The reason why Beijing has not imposed tougher sanctions on the US and the EU is underlined by Robert Blackwill and Jennifer Harris in their study on economic techniques of statecraft in international politics. The two point out that the Beijing government does not attribute a positive connotation to international sanctions, considering them "an abuse of power by developed countries, notably the United States" and opposing them "out of fear of losing out on imports of vital commodities that support economic growth at home" (Blackwill and Harris 2017, p. 138).

But this reaction of Beijing gave the EP a chance to play its part in shaping the EU's position on the human rights situation in XUAR. This position was clarified on May 20, 2021, when members of the EP voted to block the ratification of the EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investments (CAI) and at the same time called for a tougher approach in relation to Beijing (European Parliament, 2021). Although members of the EP did not refer to it as a sanction, the decision to block the CAI can be considered a powerful blow to China's economic ambitions regarding the EU. The EP decision is all the more harsh as the CAI has been negotiated for seven years and was meant to create a more flexible and stable framework for trade and investment in each other's markets. Moreover, the

adoption of the CAI involves expanding the business of European companies in as many regions of China as possible, including XUAR. This means that these companies can directly or indirectly become involved in abuses against Muslims in XUAR, which is to be avoided by the EU.

## Conclusions

Human rights are currently an important issue in the dynamics of international politics, being a defining element for Western political identity as well as a disruptive element for powers with authoritarian regimes such as the China. The paper highlights the fact that the lack of effectiveness of the economic sanctions on matters that regards the violation of the human rights by the great economic powers like China is based on the asymmetrical economic interdependence from which the latter benefits in relation to the US and the EU.

Threats of strangling some global economic networks discourage the US and the EU from reporting objectively and decisively on Chinese government abuses against Uyghur minority in the XUAR region. The current global human rights sanctions regimes are not powerful enough to discourage China from further violating the human rights of the Muslim population in XUAR because they have little impact on China's economy and the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party, as perceived by its own citizens. The economic impact on China is extremely small compared to the scale of trade between China and the West. We can consider that the US and the EU are more interested in how China can influence their global economic interests and to a lesser extent in how China treats its own citizens.

Reducing dependencies on China-controlled economic nodes may increase the effects of economic sanctions to reduce human rights abuses in XUAR. The multilateral or concerted use of economic sanctions by Western powers, following the model of sanctions imposed on Russia in the context of the Ukrainian war, can have visible effects on China's economy, but there is the possibility of starting economic wars that can extend globally, beyond the geographical boundaries of Eurasia.

Therefore, by using the theoretical framework proposed in this paper, new research directions can be approached and developed regarding how China is taking advantage of its control over other essential economic nodes in the global economy to discourage political incursions by Western powers in issues that Beijing considers sensitive for the political stability of the Chinese state and for the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party, such as the democratic freedoms in Hong Kong or the contested status of Taiwan.

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