The Situation:

Xinjiang, a region in Northwest China, is home to about eleven million Uighurs, a mostly Muslim ethnic group. The region is resource rich and strategically important to China’s Belt and Road Initiative due to its proximity to China’s Central Asian neighbors. In recent years, Chinese authorities have cracked down on Uighur communities claiming they hold extremist and separatist views. More than one million Uighurs and other Muslims in Xinjiang have been arbitrarily detained in camps, where many are subjected to religious restrictions, sexual abuse, torture, family separation, and forced labor. Since 2017, the Chinese government has forced tens of thousands of Uighurs to work in factories to support the supply chains of more than eighty prominent global brands. Outside the camps, China enforces cultural and religious restrictions on Uighurs and conducts intense surveillance in Xinjiang that makes it difficult for Uighurs to exercise their basic human rights. The Chinese government has also overseen a campaign to forcibly sterilize hundreds of thousands of Uighur women in 2019 and 2020, causing the Uighur birth rate to plummet. These conditions have sparked criticism from governments and accusations from human rights organizations that China’s actions constitute genocide.

However, meaningful international pressure against China has been limited. Beijing wields growing global influence as a giant in global trade and a cornerstone of global supply chains—all iPhones, for instance, are assembled overseas. China is the United States’ largest trading partner and holds more than $1 trillion of U.S. debt. China is also a powerful member of multilateral institutions such as the United Nations and has invested in many countries’ development. This influence has led several governments to remain silent on Xinjiang. The United States has condemned Chinese repression of the Uighurs, sanctioned Chinese officials, and blacklisted dozens of Chinese companies connected to the abuses of Uighurs, yet so far these efforts have not altered China’s behavior. As the severity of state repression in Xinjiang grows more apparent, Washington has an opportunity to stand up more forcefully as a leader for human rights and convince other countries to see Beijing’s treatment of Uighurs as a stain on its international reputation.

The United States has long sought to support human rights and has taken a leading role in confronting violators in the past, whether by implementing sanctions and supporting multilateral arms embargoes as it has in South Sudan or intervening militarily such as in Libya in 2011. However, upholding human rights in this case could carry a considerable cost. Given China’s economic power and global influence, the U.S.-China relationship is crucial to the United States. Amid already rising tensions between Washington and Beijing, robust action in support of the Uighurs risks not only retaliatory action from China but also collateral damage to the U.S. economy. Policymakers will therefore need to carefully consider what trade-offs are they willing to incur to confront Chinese repressin in Xinjiang.

Decision Point: Set in January 2021

A new presidential term has started, and the president has called a meeting of the National Security Council (NSC) to reassess U.S. policy toward China in light of its ongoing repression of Uighurs in Xinjiang. Recent reports indicate that China is increasing its efforts, having built or expanded over sixty new detention facilities over the past year. Amid increasing claims that China is committing genocide, policymakers need to consider whether the United States should take a firmer stand against repression in Xinjiang and how to uphold human rights values while taking into account U.S. economic interests. Given China’s expanding global influence, policymakers also need to consider which actions could realistically alter Chinese behavior.

NSC members should consider the following policy options:

- **Continue current, limited actions**, including targeted sanctions on officials and businesses connected with Xinjiang. This option has the lowest risk of escalating tensions with China and causing economic fallout but would represent a largely symbolic response that would do little to curb Chinese repression in Xinjiang and could leave the United States open to criticism for turning a blind eye to genocide.

- **Strengthen existing measures**, including by broadening current sanctions to target higher-level officials in the Chinese government, blocking imports of goods tied to forced labor in Xinjiang, and sanctioning not only Chinese businesses that use forced Uighur labor but also any companies worldwide with which they do business. This option would constitute a more forceful rebuke of China and could put pressure on businesses using forced Uighur labor. However, it increases the risk of economic fallout or retaliatory sanctions from Beijing.

- **Pursue aggressive diplomatic measures**, including by vocally condemning China’s actions as genocide, coordinating international calls for China to allow an independent investigation in Xinjiang, advocating for coordinated international sanctions, or calling for the matter to be referred to the International Criminal Court. Many of these measures would be difficult to pursue given China’s influence and veto power on the UN Security Council and could spark Chinese retribution, but they could considerably increase international attention and pressure on the Chinese government.

Additional Resources:

1. To the Brink With China (Council on Foreign Relations)
2. China’s Repression of Uighurs in Xinjiang (Council on Foreign Relations)
3. U.S. and Multilateral Policy Options to Address Abuses Against Uyghurs in Xinjiang (Just Security)

Like Model Diplomacy? Try a full case at modeldiplomacy.cfr.org.
Pop-Up Case Guidelines

Pop-up cases from Model Diplomacy are short case studies on current events that put students in the shoes of policymakers facing the most pressing issues in international relations. There are lots of ways to organize a discussion using a pop-up case. It is always helpful to think about your goals for the discussion and then to consider any time or participation constraints you could have. If you are teaching online and cannot discuss synchronously, consider a short writing assignment or using an online discussion board (see some excellent tips here and here). If you are teaching face-to-face or over videoconference and are looking for some inspiration, here are a few ideas:

Gauge reaction:

If you want to show what students are thinking before diving into the discussion, here are two easy ways to do it. In one, often called “four corners,” assign each policy option to a corner of the room, and then ask students to stand in the corner associated with the policy option they support. In the other, if you want your students to think along a spectrum instead (e.g., interventionist-isolationist, unilateral-multilateral, more urgent–less urgent), put the ends of your spectrum at either end of your blackboard and have students stand along the board to indicate where along the spectrum they fall. With both approaches, everyone will sit down again with a sense of where they stand regarding the case. Use this knowledge to shape discussion—eliciting less popular opinions, challenging more popular ones, encouraging like-minded students to further develop their ideas, or having students who disagree discuss in small groups.

Think-Pair-Share:

This exercise is particularly useful for groups where some students are hesitant. Ask everyone to spend a few minutes quietly gathering their thoughts and articulating them in a notebook (“think”), then have them turn to the person sitting next to them to compare notes (“pair”), and then have students report out to the whole group (“share”), knowing that everyone will have had time to think through something to say.

Whiparound:

Ask students to briefly share their position one after the other without responding to each other. Typically, everyone speaks in the order they are sitting. This can be a way to see where everyone stands before launching into a discussion. If you expect a topic to be particularly contentious, you could have students listen to each other and then reflect in writing.

Simple NSC simulation:

If you would like to simulate a simplified version of a more realistic policy debate, you can appoint yourself (or a randomly chosen student) president. Ask students to debate the policy options (or come up with new ones) and try to reach consensus on a recommendation to the president.

NSC simulation with assigned opinions:

While assigning individual roles for a brief case study is complicated, you could assign opinions. For example, assign one-third of the class to be isolationist, one-third to favor a military response, and one-third to favor a diplomatic response. Let the groups caucus for a few minutes, then present their policy options and debate them, leaving the final decision up to you (or a student) as president.

Note: In our experience, simulations are often most productive if students imagine they are advising a generic president rather than a specific one.

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