

The West versus Beijing?

Determinants of the UN Human Rights Council Vote (Not) to Debate Human Rights in Xinjiang



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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the factors shaping the vote of member states on the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) regarding whether to debate human rights conditions in the Xinjiang Autonomous Region of China. Explanations for the UNHRC's decision not to debate human rights in Xinjiang fall into three categories: 1) democracy, development, and human rights performance; 2) demographic factors; and 3) security and economic ties to major powers, specifically the United States and China. Bayesian model averaging identifies three factors as robust covariates of the Xinjiang UNHRC vote: liberal democratic domestic institutions, NATO membership, and Chinese arms transfers. Countries with higher democracy scores and NATO member countries were more likely to vote yes, while recipients of Chinese arms transfers were more likely to vote no. In addition to its direct effect, liberal democracy exerts a significant indirect effect via its effect on Chinese arms transfers, with less democratic countries more likely to receive Chinese arms. Participation in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is not a robust correlate when arms transfers are considered. Thus, our analysis lends support to interpreting the vote as a reflection of wider competition between the United States and China but rejects part of the conventional wisdom about how the two countries approach building and mobilizing coalitions in international institutions.

KEYWORDS: CHINA, ARMS TRANSFERS, BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE, XINJIANG, UNITED NATIONS HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL
JEL Codes: D7, D72, D74, F53, F55, H56

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The **East-West Center** promotes better relations and understanding among the people and nations of the United States, Asia, and the Pacific through cooperative study, research, and dialogue. Established by the US Congress in 1960, the Center serves as a resource for information and analysis on critical issues of common concern, bringing people together to exchange views, build expertise, and develop policy options. The East-West Center in Washington provides US and Indo-Pacific government stakeholders and program partners with innovative training, analytical, dialogue, exchange, and public diplomacy initiatives to meet policy priorities.

1. INTRODUCTION

The United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) is the United Nations (UN) body tasked with promoting and protecting human rights around the world. On October 6, 2022, the 47 members of the UNHRC voted on whether a discussion of an assessment from the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, which surveyed the human rights conditions in China's Xinjiang Autonomous Region, would be added to its agenda. The assessment's findings alleged that the Chinese government's actions under the auspices of counterterrorism and "extremism"—which include arbitrary and discriminatory detentions and more general infringements on fundamental rights of Uyghurs and other members of Muslim minority groups—may constitute "crimes against humanity."¹

The vote was called by a coalition of 26 mostly Western democracies, including three permanent members of the UN Security Council—the United States, the United Kingdom, and France—as well as Australia, Canada, and Turkey.² Ultimately, the motion failed, with the final vote being 17 yeas, 19 nays, and 11 abstentions (Table 1). The Associated Press called the vote "a test of political and diplomatic clout between the West and Beijing,"³ with the West having emerged as the loser, having had to settle for a joint statement, rather than a UN resolution, condemning the abuses in the General Assembly.⁴

What role did China's expanding economic links—including loans, international trade linkages, participation in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and arms sales/transfers—play? To many observers, the answer is obvious. In the *East Asia Forum*, Anna Hayes argued that "through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Beijing has used economic coercion, inducement, harassment, and manipulation to undermine the international human rights framework."⁵ *Bloomberg* was less harsh but no less focused on economic motivations, observing that "The US has sought to rally European and other allies... Beijing rallies developing nations in need of financial support to vote alongside it at critical moments, particularly on sensitive issues such as human rights."⁶

These accounts center the explanation for the Xinjiang UNHRC vote on international factors, such as economic ties and security arrangements with the United States and China. However, domestic factors could have been at play as well. Liberal democracies and authoritarian regimes alike may have their own political-institutional reasons for voting in a particular way regarding international scrutiny of a country's domestic human rights affairs. Similarly, other largely domestic determinants, such as having a large Muslim population or the prevalence of national self-determination movements, might sway a country to be in favor or against debating the human rights situation in a Council member-state.

¹ Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights, "OHCHR Assessment of Human Rights Concerns in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, People's Republic of China," August 31, 2022, <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/countries/2022-08-31/22-08-31-final-assesment.pdf>.

² Many countries that requested the vote were not UNHRC members: Albania, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Estonia, Iceland, Ireland, Latvia, Liechtenstein, New Zealand, Norway, Slovakia, Sweden, and Turkey. <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/LTD/G22/505/63/PDF/G2250563.pdf?OpenElement>

³ Jamey Keaten, "UN Rights Body Rejects Western Bid to Debate Xinjiang Abuses," AP NEWS, October 6, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/voting-rights-religion-china-geneva-middle-east-64078b301797f08b7f32e147c185c77f>.

⁴ United States Mission to the United Nations (USUN), "Joint Statement on Behalf of 50 Countries in the UN General Assembly Third Committee on the Human Rights Situation in Xinjiang, China," October 31, 2022.

⁵ Hayes Anna, "Beijing's BRI Influence over the UN Human Rights Council," *East Asia Forum*, January 19, 2023, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2023/01/19/beijings-bri-influence-over-the-un-human-rights-council>.

⁶ Sarah Zheng, "China Shuts down US-Proposed Xinjiang Debate in Tight UN Vote," *Bloomberg.com*, October 7, 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-10-07/un-blocks-us-proposed-debate-on-xinjiang-showing-china-s-clout#xj4y7vzkg>.

TABLE 1. UN Human Rights Council Vote on Debate on the Situation of Human Rights in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, China

| YEA | ABSTAIN | NAY |
|----------------|-----------|----------------------|
| Czechia | Argentina | Bolivia |
| Finland | Armenia | Cameroon |
| France | Benin | China |
| Germany | Brazil | Cote D'Ivoire |
| Honduras | Gambia | Cuba |
| Japan | India | Eritrea |
| Korea, Rep. | Libya | Gabon |
| Lithuania | Malawi | Indonesia |
| Luxembourg | Malaysia | Kazakhstan |
| Marshall | Mexico | Mauritania |
| Montenegro | Ukraine | Namibia |
| Netherlands | | Nepal |
| Paraguay | | Pakistan |
| Poland | | Qatar |
| Somalia | | Senegal |
| United Kingdom | | Sudan |
| United States | | United Arab Emirates |
| | | Uzbekistan |
| | | Venezuela |

Source: United Nations.

This research note assesses several competing explanations for each country's UNHRC vote on Xinjiang. Using Bayesian model averaging, we identify three factors as robust covariates of the UNHRC vote: liberal democratic domestic institutions, NATO membership, and Chinese arms transfers. Further, we find that in addition to its direct effect, democracy exerts a significant indirect effect via its effect on Chinese arms transfers, with less democratic countries more likely to receive Chinese arms. Participation in BRI is not a robust correlate after controlling for Chinese arms transfers.

These findings have troubling implications for the UNHRC as a forum for addressing human rights conditions in an increasingly bipolar or multipolar international system. In the aftermath of the Cold War, voting in the UNHRC's predecessor, the UN Human Rights Commission, was less driven by members' political-economic ties with major powers and more by their actual human rights violations and treaty commitments.⁷ Relatedly, the Commission was much more active as major powers, i.e., the United States and the Soviet Union, blocking its agenda became rarer.⁸ The "measured optimism" about the practical impact of UN actions on human rights in the post-Cold War era⁹ may no longer be warranted.

This research note proceeds as follows. The next section outlines various potential explanations for the votes of UNHRC members derived from both media accounts and the broader international relations literature on human rights and voting in multilateral institutions. Section 3 presents our model selection exercise, subsequent regression and causal mediation analysis results, and the counterfactual calculation. Finally, Section 4 discusses these results and provides a conclusion.

⁷ James H. Lebovic and Erik Voeten, "The Politics of Shame: The Condemnation of Country Human Rights Practices in the UNCHR," *International Studies Quarterly* 50, no. 4 (December 2006): 861–88, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2478.2006.00429.x>.

⁸ Lebovic and Voeten, "The Politics of Shame," 861–88.

⁹ Lebovic and Voeten, "The Politics of Shame," 861–88.

2. COMPETING EXPLANATIONS

Media discussions and the international relations literature on human rights and voting in multilateral institutions offer a variety of potential explanations for state performance on human rights generally and the Xinjiang UNHRC vote specifically. We group these into three broad categories: 1) democracy, development, and domestic human rights performance; 2) domestic demographic factors and 3) security and economic ties to major powers.

2.1. Democracy, Development, and Human Rights Performance

- **Democracy.** It is well established that liberal democracies perform best with respect to protecting and honoring human rights.¹⁰ The types of alleged abuses in Xinjiang, which range from arbitrary detention to forced labor, repression of religion, and even forced sterilizations and coerced abortions,¹¹ are precisely the types of abuses of government authority that liberal institutions are designed to limit. Moreover, liberal democratic institutions affect not just domestic human rights performance but voting behavior in the UNHRC, with more liberal democratic countries voting in ways that affirm human rights norms.¹² We proxy democracy using the Liberal Democracy Index produced by the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project.¹³
- **Development.** The effect of economic development would likely be both direct and indirect. Countries at higher levels of economic development are more likely to develop political cultures that value political freedom and participation, or “post-material” values, among which human rights have often been categorized.¹⁴ Indirectly, economic development should make a country less susceptible to economic pressure and, therefore, less likely to view participation in initiatives like the BRI—and diplomatic support (or at least lack of criticism) for its major funder—as essential. Countries at higher levels of development may perceive lower opportunity costs for voting against China than less-developed economies with greater need for external development finance.¹⁵ Based on data released by the World Bank in 2023, we used the natural log of GDP per capita in 2021 dollars to proxy level of development.
- **Human rights performance.** A country’s domestic human rights performance can be interpreted as a “revealed preference” regarding adherence to human rights norms. Governments with stronger domestic human rights records should be more likely to support adherence to international human rights norms in multilateral organizations.¹⁶ We again use data from the V-Dem project, this time their physical integrity rights index, which proxies the degree to which the population is free from government abuses like torture and extrajudicial killings.¹⁷

¹⁰ Christian Davenport, “State Repression and Political Order,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 10, no. 1 (June 2007): 1–23,

<https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.10.101405.143216>; Emilie M Hafner-Burton, “A Social Science of Human Rights,” *Journal of Peace Research* 51, no. 2 (March 2014): 273–86, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343313516822>.

¹¹ Cullen S Hendrix, and Marcus Noland, “Assessing Potential Economic Policy Responses to Genocide in Xinjiang” (PIIE Policy Briefs PB21-14. Peterson Institute for International Economics, 2021), <https://ideas.repec.org/p/iie/pbrief/pb21-14.html>.

¹² Simon Hug and Richard Lukács, “Preferences or Blocs? Voting in the United Nations Human Rights Council,” *The Review of International Organizations* 9, no. 1 (July 20, 2013): 83–106, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11558-013-9172-2>; Faradj Koliev, “Shaming and Democracy: Explaining Inter-State Shaming in International Organizations,” *International Political Science Review* 41, no. 4 (October 7, 2019): 019251211985866, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192512119858660>.

¹³ Michael Coppedge et al., “V-Dem Codebook V11,” *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3802627>; We chose the V-Dem index to proxy democracy due both to its strong construct validity, the greater conceptual coherence of its aggregation process for underlying components of democracy, and lessened dependence on idiosyncratic coding decisions relative to other common measures like the Polity scale or Freedom House index.

¹⁴ Inglehart, Ronald, and Christian Welzel. *Modernization, Cultural Change, and Democracy: The Human Development Sequence*. Cambridge University Press, 2005.

¹⁵ Zhao, Suisheng. “China’s Belt-Road Initiative as the Signature of President Xi Jinping Diplomacy: Easier Said than Done.” *Journal of Contemporary China* 29, no. 123 (July 26, 2019): 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2019.1645483>.

¹⁶ Hug and Lukacs, “Preferences or Blocs?,” 83–106.

¹⁷ Coppedge et al, V-Dem Codebook V11,”

2.2. Demographic Factors

- *Large Muslim populations.* The program of alleged human rights abuses in Xinjiang has targeted not just the Uyghur ethnic group but also members of other Turkic ethnic groups like Kazakhs and Kyrgyz, with the common denominator being their predominately Muslim faith.¹⁸ Previous studies have found evidence of “Muslim solidarity” in UN voting, with majority-Muslim member-states typically voting in favor of other majority-Muslim states.¹⁹ States with large Muslim populations may be more likely to vote in ways that enhance scrutiny of state infringements on the practice of Islam,²⁰ as voting to debate China’s actions in Xinjiang would have. We include an indicator variable for those countries that are either majority Muslim or members of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (many are both).
- *Domestic treatment of minority ethnic groups.* Supposing the allegations of human rights abuses are true, China is certainly not unique among UN members for persecuting and/or denying rights and equal political participation to certain ethnic minorities. The crackdown in Xinjiang ostensibly occurred in response to the Kunming railway station attack, a violent terrorist assault during which 31 people were killed by Islamist extremists linked to the Uyghur separatist movement. Because separatist or autonomy-seeking movements directly challenge state sovereignty, they are often harshly repressed. Several UNHRC members face their own domestic violent autonomy-seeking movements: Balochs in Pakistan; India’s Naxalite movement, which draws support from India’s marginalized tribal groups; and Ukraine’s Russian ethnic minority that, prior to the Russian invasion in 2022, had been fighting a secessionist war against Kyiv since 2014.²¹ For these regimes, China’s framing of its actions in Xinjiang as a matter of domestic security and core regime interest may be more persuasive than for Western audiences.²² We expect countries with their own marginalized and persecuted minority populations to have been less likely to vote to debate conditions in Xinjiang, lest doing so invite scrutiny of their own treatment of minority populations. We proxy these dynamics with an indicator variable that captures a) the presence of ethnic groups classified as “discriminated against” by the Ethnic Power Relations data project²³ and/or b) the state having been involved in an armed conflict against a separatist/autonomy movement as of 2021 per the Uppsala Conflict Data program.²⁴

¹⁸ Human Rights Watch, “Break Their Lineage, Break Their Roots”: China’s Crimes against Humanity Targeting Uyghurs and Other Turkic Muslims,” April 19, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2021/04/19/break-their-lineage-break-their-roots/chinas-crimes-against-humanity-targeting>.

¹⁹ Ali Balci and Talha İsmail Duman, “Muslim Solidarity in the UN General Assembly,” *Global Governance: A Review of Multilateralism and International Organizations* 28, no. 3 (September 19, 2022): 330–54, <https://doi.org/10.1163/19426720-02803001>.

²⁰ István Lakatos, “Human Rights Diplomacy of Muslim States at Multilateral Forums,” in *Comparative Human Rights Diplomacy* (Palgrave Macmillan Cham, n.d.), https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-030-97095-6_7.

²¹ Kathleen Gallagher Cunningham, “Divide and Conquer or Divide and Concede: How Do States Respond to Internally Divided Separatists?,” *American Political Science Review* 105, no. 02 (April 28, 2011): 275–97, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0003055411000013>; Frances Stewart, *Horizontal Inequalities and Conflict: Understanding Group Violence in Multiethnic Societies* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), <https://link.springer.com/book/10.1057/9780230582729>.

²² Jessica Chen Weiss and Jeremy L. Wallace, “Domestic Politics, China’s Rise, and the Future of the Liberal International Order,” *International Organization* 75, no. 2 (February 9, 2021): 1–30, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s002081832000048x>.

²³ Manuel Vogt et al., “Integrating Data on Ethnicity, Geography, and Conflict,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 59, no. 7 (June 18, 2015): 1327–42, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002715591215>; Lars-Erik Cederman, Andreas Wimmer, and Brian Min, “The Ethnic Power Relations Dataset: Coding Rules,” *Harvard Dataverse V1* (2010), <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/NDJUM/IXCL1Y>; Discriminated groups are those whose members are “subjected to active, intentional, and targeted discrimination with the intent of excluding them from both regional and national power. Examples include African Americans until the civil rights movement and Guatemalan indigenous peoples until the end of that country’s civil war” (Cederman, Wimmer, and Min 2010), 4). Self-exclusion pertains to groups that have excluded themselves from state power and have claimed independence and sovereignty over their ethnic homeland, such as Russians in eastern Ukraine since 2014 (Vogt et al 2015, 1327–42).

²⁴ Shawn Davies, Therése Pettersson, and Magnus Öberg, “Organized Violence 1989–2021 and Drone Warfare,” *Journal of Peace Research* 59, no. 4 (June 27, 2022): 002234332211084, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00223433221108428>.

2.3. Security and Economic Ties to Major Powers

Rather than focusing on domestic factors, this grouping of explanations emphasizes the effect of security and economic ties with the major powers—the United States and China—on a country’s vote choice. Recall Bloomberg’s assessment of the vote-influencing strategies of the United States and China: “The US has sought to rally European and other allies ... Beijing rallies developing nations in need of financial support to vote alongside it at critical moments, particularly on sensitive issues such as human rights.”²⁵ According to this view, votes in the UNHRC are a specific instance of a wider emerging conflict between the United States and key military allies—the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) members and US allies in Asia—and China and a large group of developing and middle-income countries eager to benefit from Chinese investment and lending.²⁶ Rather than build a network of explicit security partners, China has approached coalition-building largely through economic statecraft. China has emerged as the largest official creditor in the world, with extensive lending to developing and middle-income countries as part of BRI, a large network of related infrastructure projects extending across Asia, Europe, the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America. In addition to its purely economic dimensions, this lending and the additional promise of future investment is argued to confer diplomatic leverage on China over debtor countries that has been used to secure support for Chinese positions, including the non-recognition of Taiwan.²⁷

- *Trade*. Previous research suggests countries are less likely to criticize “friends and allies,” with trade relationships being a significant and obvious component of friendly relationships).²⁸ As the world’s two largest economies, the United States and China have extensive trade relationships with many members of the UNHRC, accounting for, on average, 8.1 and 12.8 percent of member exports, respectively. We use export shares for 2021 from the Observatory of Economic Complexity to proxy trade dependence on the United States and China, with the expectation that large dependence on these markets would make countries more (United States) and less (China) likely to vote in favor of debate (Hidalgo 2021).
- *Debt leverage*. One prominent narrative holds that China is using “debt trap diplomacy,” via which its loans to foreign governments can be used to make those governments subservient to Chinese interests. While scholars have called this narrative into question, arguing that Chinese lending has been too uncoordinated to be driven principally by strategic motives,²⁹ there is evidence that lending makes recipient countries more likely to vote with lenders in the UN General Assembly³⁰ and that recipient country voting in the UN Security Council affects subsequent access to IMF and World Bank loans. We use outstanding levels of debt to China as a share of GDP for 2017, the most recent year for which comprehensive data are available,³¹ to proxy potential Chinese debt leverage. Using 2023 data from the World Bank, we also include the country’s current account balance as a percentage of GDP in October 2022 to proxy that

²⁵ Sarah Zheng, “China Shuts down US-Proposed Xinjiang Debate in Tight UN Vote,” *Bloomberg.com*, October 7, 2022,

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-10-07/un-blocks-us-proposed-debate-on-xinjiang-showing-china-s-clout#xi4y7vzkg>.

²⁶ Earlier research on voting in the UNHRC found some evidence for the existence of voting blocs, or groupings of countries that tend to vote together on issues (Hug and Lukács 2014). While they found weak evidence for the existing of voting blocs, they ultimately concluded that preference-based explanations focused on domestic human rights performance and democracy were better predictors of voting behavior.

²⁷ Kevin Ponniah, “Taiwan: How China Is Poaching the Island’s Diplomatic Allies,” *BBC*, June 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-40263581>.

²⁸ Rochelle Terman and Erik Voeten, “The Relational Politics of Shame: Evidence from the Universal Periodic Review,” *The Review of International Organizations* 13, no. 1 (January 4, 2017): 1–23, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11558-016-9264-x>.

²⁹ Deborah Brautigam, “A Critical Look at Chinese ‘Debt-Trap Diplomacy’: The Rise of a Meme,” *Area Development and Policy* 5, no. 1 (December 6, 2019): 1–14.;

Lee Jones and Shahar Hameiri, “Debunking the Myth of ‘Debt-Trap Diplomacy,’” no. 19 (August 25, 2020), <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-08-25-debunking-myth-debt-trap-diplomacy-jones-hameiri.pdf>.

³⁰ Axel Dreher, Peter Nunnenkamp, and Rainer Thiele, “Does US Aid Buy UN General Assembly Votes? A Disaggregated Analysis,” *Public Choice* 136, no. 1-2 (February 19, 2008): 139–64, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11127-008-9286-x>.

³¹ Sebastian Horn, Carmen M. Reinhart, and Christoph Trebesch, “China’s Overseas Lending,” *Journal of International Economics* 133 (November 2021): 103539, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jinteco.2021.103539>.

country's susceptibility to balance-of-payments crises, under the assumption that current account deficits would make a country more vulnerable to debt-trap diplomacy and potential external leverage.

- *Arms sales and transfers.* Previous research posits that arms transfers allow the powerful, arms-exporting states to shape the foreign policy choices of weaker recipient states in line with the exporting state's interests.³² Most countries cannot sustain large military-industrial complexes and thus depend on transfers and sales from major industrial economies. We include the log-transformed volume of arms transfers from both the United States and China from 2012 to 2022³³ to assess whether arms exports from these major producers and exporters shaped vote behavior.
- *Collective security arrangements.* The United States has a network of collective security arrangements with countries across Europe, Asia, and Latin America. We include an indicator for NATO membership, as well as an indicator for non-NATO countries with whom the United States has defense pacts,³⁴ to proxy US ally status. China does not have a similar network of explicit cooperative security arrangements.³⁵
- *Belt and Road Participation.* We include an indicator for BRI participation based on whether the country has a memorandum of understanding with the Chinese government regarding formal participation as of 2022.³⁶

Descriptive statistics for these variables are available in the appendix.

³² Patricia L. Sullivan, Brock F. Tessman, and Xiaojun Li, "US Military Aid and Recipient State Cooperation," *Foreign Policy Analysis* 7, no. 3 (July 2011): 275–94, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1743-8594.2011.00138.x>.

³³ The longer time window is used to account for the clumpy nature of arms transfers, which for many smaller economies are highly variable on a year-to-year basis.

³⁴ Like Japan and the Republic of Korea, as well as a host of Latin American countries under the Rio Treaty of 1947.

³⁵ China's only mutual defense pact is with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

³⁶ Green Finance and Development Center (GFDC), "Countries of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) – Green Finance & Development Center," 2022, <https://greenfdc.org/countries-of-the-belt-and-road-initiative-bri>.

2. MODEL SELECTION AND RESULTS

We use Bayesian model averaging (BMA) to guide model specification (Table 2).³⁷ BMA estimates 2^k models, where k is the number of potential covariates. The posterior inclusion probability (PIP) is the mean of all posterior probabilities for all specifications, including the particular variable. As a first approximation, it can be interpreted as the probability that the variable offers significant explanatory power and is robust across potential model specifications.

TABLE 2. Bayesian Model Averaging Estimates, Potential Covariates of UNHRC Xinjiang Vote

| <i>Variable</i> | <i>Coefficient</i> | <i>Std. Error</i> | <i>t-score</i> | <i>PIP</i> |
|---|--------------------|-------------------|----------------|------------|
| In Chinese Arms Transfers, 2012-2022 | -0.152 | 0.041 | -3.73 | 0.99 |
| Liberal Democracy Score, 2021 | 1.303 | 0.601 | 2.17 | 0.91 |
| NATO Member | 0.337 | 0.358 | 0.94 | 0.56 |
| Exports to China as % of Total Exports, 2021 | -0.005 | 0.007 | -0.65 | 0.37 |
| Belt and Road Participant | -0.115 | 0.218 | -0.53 | 0.29 |
| US Collective Security Arrangements (~NATO) | 0.060 | 0.161 | 0.37 | 0.18 |
| Exports to US as % of Total Exports, 2021 | 0.001 | 0.003 | 0.26 | 0.12 |
| Physical Integrity Rights, 2021 | -0.007 | 0.159 | -0.04 | 0.09 |
| Majority Muslim Country/OIC Member | -0.011 | 0.081 | -0.14 | 0.09 |
| In GDP per capita, 2021 | 0.000 | 0.021 | 0.00 | 0.08 |
| EPR Discriminated and Self-Isolating Groups/ UCDP Territorial Armed Conflict | -0.012 | 0.079 | -0.15 | 0.08 |
| Current Account Surplus/Deficit, 2022 | -0.000 | 0.003 | -0.11 | 0.08 |
| Outstanding Chinese Debt as % of GDP, 2017 | 0.012 | 0.165 | 0.07 | 0.08 |
| In US Arms Transfers, 2012-2022 | 0.001 | 0.008 | 0.10 | 0.08 |

Note: The 14 variables yield 16,384 unique combinations of covariates. Including the debt, trade, and arms transfer variables resulted in dropping China and the United States from the BMA analysis.

Source: Authors' calculations.

Three variables emerge as more likely than not ($PIP > 0.5$) to be robust covariates of the Xinjiang UNHRC vote. Chinese arms transfers, liberal democracy, and NATO membership³⁸ all have PIP scores greater than 0.5. Variables intended to proxy vulnerability to trade dependence on China and the United States, BRI participation, balance-of-payments crises, debt exposure to China, the country's domestic human rights performance and treatment of minority ethnic groups, majority Muslim status, and level of development are not robust covariates of UNHRC members' vote on the Xinjiang discussion. Neither are arms transfers from the United States.

We then model each country's UNHRC vote as a function of its NATO membership, liberal democracy score, and arms transfers from China (Table 3). We use three estimators: ordinary least squares

³⁷ Adrian E. Raftery, David Madigan, and Jennifer A. Hoeting, "Bayesian Model Averaging for Linear Regression Models," *Journal of the American Statistical Association* 92, no. 437 (March 1997): 179–91, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01621459.1997.10473615>.

³⁸ Non-NATO collective security arrangements with the United States returned a PIP score of 0.18, indicating these arrangements are not likely to be robustly associated with UNHRC vote.

regression, ordered logistic regression, and ordered probit regression.³⁹ The results are consistent across estimators, with all variables having statistically and substantively significant effects on the UNHRC Xinjiang vote.

TABLE 3. Regression Analysis of Xinjiang Vote in UNHRC, 2022

| VARIABLES | (1) OLS | (2) Ordered Logit | (3) Ordered Probit |
|---------------------------|----------------------|------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| NATO Member | 0.502*** (0.164) | 17.696*** (0.828) | 5.675*** (0.388) |
| Liberal Democracy Score | 1.429*** (0.392) | 6.910*** (2.440) | 3.759*** (1.214) |
| In Chinese Arms Transfers | -0.156*** (0.041) | -0.893*** (0.337) | -0.493*** (0.165) |
| Constant | 0.500** (0.232) | | |
| Cutpoint 1 | | 0.880 (0.844) | 0.402 (0.491) |
| Cutpoint 2 | | 3.822** (1.527) | 2.021*** (0.735) |
| Observations | 46 | 46 | 46 |
| R-squared | 0.702 | | |

Robust standard errors in parentheses

*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$

NATO membership perfectly predicts casting a yea vote: all ten NATO members cast yea votes. Liberal democracy scores are associated positively with the probability of voting yea. A one standard deviation increase in the liberal democracy score is associated with a 62% increase in the likelihood of voting yea from baseline (estimations based on Table 3, Model 2). Chinese arms transfers also perfectly predict a nay vote or an abstention, as no country receiving any arms from China cast a yea vote. At zero Chinese arms transfers, the baseline probability of casting a nay vote is 0.21; at the 75th percentile value (3.25, Bolivia's transfers over the previous decade), the probability rises to 0.57. We find no effect for US arms transfers. Of the 16 countries receiving Chinese arms between 2012-2022, none voted yea, with three abstaining (Benin, Malawi, and Malaysia) and the remainder voting nay. The clear vote outlier is Somalia, whose non-NATO membership, zero arms transfers from China, and low level of democracy (liberal democracy = 0.093) result in a predicted probability of voting yea of only 0.03.

Chinese arms transfers appear to affect the UNHRC Xinjiang vote at the extensive margin. Substituting a dummy variable for whether the country received any Chinese arms (Table 4) improves model fit slightly, and the same substantively and statistically significant relationships are recovered.

³⁹ Ordered logistic and probit models are the superior choice for the nature of the outcome variable (ordered discrete choices from a set of universal and mutually exclusive options). We use OLS regression as well because it facilitates causal mediation analysis, as maximum likelihood-based mediation models have not been developed for ordered choice outcomes.

TABLE 4. Regression Analysis of Xinjiang Vote in the UNHRC, 2022, Dummy Indicator for Arms Transfers

| VARIABLES | (1) OLS | (2) Ordered Logit | (3) Ordered Probit |
|----------------------------|----------------------|------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| NATO Member | 0.429*** (0.158) | 17.811*** (0.812) | 5.859*** (0.392) |
| Liberal Democracy Score | 1.463*** (0.380) | 6.654*** (2.194) | 3.724*** (1.146) |
| Any Chinese Arms Transfers | -0.790*** (0.191) | -2.942*** (0.812) | -1.759*** (0.428) |
| Constant | 0.549** (0.244) | | |
| Cutpoint 1 | | 0.838 (0.837) | 0.385 (0.491) |
| Cutpoint 2 | | 3.683** (1.431) | 1.977*** (0.717) |
| Observations | 46 | 46 | 46 |
| R-squared | 0.718 | | |

Robust standard errors in parentheses

*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$

Chinese arms transfers may partially mediate the effect of democracy because Chinese arms transfers tend to flow to less democratic countries (mean $\text{libdem}_{\text{AnyChineseArms}} = 0.29$, $\text{libdem}_{\sim\text{AnyChineseArms}} = 0.48$, $t = 2.48$). To assess this possibility, we conduct a causal mediation analysis.⁴⁰ The analysis (see appendix) indicates the effect of democracy is 25% larger (relative to Table 4, Model 1) when its indirect effect mediated by Chinese arms transfers is accounted for, indicating democracy affected UNHRC vote choice not just directly but also indirectly via Chinese arms transfers flowing disproportionately to less democratic countries.

⁴⁰ Kosuke Imai et al., "Unpacking the Black Box of Causality: Learning about Causal Mechanisms from Experimental and Observational Studies," *American Political Science Review* 105, no. 04 (November 2011): 765–89, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0003055411000414>.

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this note, we assess a variety of potential explanations for UN Human Rights Council member states' October 6, 2022, vote on whether to debate human rights conditions in China's Xinjiang Autonomous Region. Having assessed fourteen different and potentially competing explanations, we found robust evidence linking three factors to vote choice: democracy, Chinese arms transfers, and NATO membership. The effect of democracy is both direct and indirect, via its effect on Chinese arms transfers, with less democratic countries more likely to receive Chinese arms.⁴¹ This is consistent with previous research highlighting the effects of democracy on voting in the UNHRC.⁴² Contrary to previous research,⁴³ however, we find no evidence that human rights performance proxied by either physical integrity rights or state-led discrimination against minority ethnic groups conditioned this specific vote.

Media depictions of the vote often focused on the impact of China's trade and investment-based approach to coalition building via the BRI, foreign lending, and trade relationships. We find no evidence that these factors robustly predict UNHRC votes. Rather, our findings point to a more security-focused mechanism—arms transfers—around which China was able to build its UNHRC coalition.

Thus, our analysis also lends support to interpreting the vote as a reflection of wider competition between the United States and China. However, our findings only align with half the conventional wisdom concerning Chinese and US coalition building and mobilization in international institutions. Apart from democracy, the most reliable predictors of voting behavior were US military alliances and Chinese arms transfers. That said, US security relationships appear to matter in a tiered way. Stronger relationships built around sustained military cooperation with European partners (NATO) had a consequential effect on vote choice. In contrast, other types of security arrangements—a heterogeneous grouping including Japan and the Republic of Korea that have bilateral mutual defense treaties with the United States, and many Latin American countries with less sustained records of cooperation with the United States—were not associated with vote choice.

In essence, our results offer qualified support for the conventional wisdom regarding the UNHRC vote: the vote indeed broke down along (anti)democratic lines, and the effect of democracy was both direct and indirect. However, BRI participation and Chinese debt leverage did not appear to bolster China's ability to build an anti-debate coalition in the UNHRC. Rather, it appears that China's arms exports helped shield its human rights performance from scrutiny at the UN, though we are unaware of any explicit *quid pro quo* smoking guns in the public domain. These findings should caution scholars against emphasizing China's economic diplomacy at the expense of its security relationships in explanations of its foreign policy successes and failures. Whether this pattern is generalizable to other issues and fora⁴⁴ is a topic for future research.

⁴¹ NATO members are also much more democratic on average than their non-NATO counterparts (mean $\text{libdem}_{\text{NATO}} = 0.70$, $\text{libdem}_{\text{non-NATO}} = 0.33$, $t = 4.68$), so it is plausible that some of the effect of democracy is operating also through NATO membership. However, given that many UNHRC member-states have been democracies for decades (and whose democratization was overseen by US occupying forces in several instances), it may be more problematic to assume NATO membership is a function of democracy and not vice versa; mediation analysis using seemingly unrelated regression indicates that the indirect effect of democracy may be 55.6% of the total effect when both the NATO and Chinese arms transfers channels are modeled (see appendix).

⁴² Hug and Lukacs, "Preferences or Blocs?" 83–106.

⁴³ Hug and Lukacs, "Preferences or Blocs?" 83–106.

⁴⁴ see James Raymond Vreeland and Axel Dreher, *The Political Economy of the United Nations Security Council: Money and Influence* (New York, Ny: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

APPENDIX

*1. Descriptive statistics for variables used in the analysis***Table A1**

| <i>Variable</i> | <i>Observations</i> | <i>Mean</i> | <i>Std. Dev.</i> | <i>Minimum</i> | <i>Maximum</i> |
|--|---------------------|-------------|------------------|----------------|----------------|
| Vote | 47 | 0.96 | 0.88 | 0.00 | 2.00 |
| Belt and Road Participation | 47 | 0.72 | 0.45 | 0.00 | 1.00 |
| Current Account Surplus/Deficit (%) | 47 | -0.91 | 7.66 | -14.10 | 24.50 |
| Direct Chinese Loans/Aid (Proportion of GDP, 2000-2017) | 46 | 0.06 | 0.18 | 0.00 | 1.19 |
| Liberal Democracy Index, 2021 | 47 | 0.41 | 0.27 | 0.01 | 0.83 |
| In GDP per capita, 2021 | 47 | 8.77 | 1.47 | 5.96 | 11.59 |
| NATO Membership | 47 | 0.21 | 0.41 | 0.00 | 1.00 |
| Non-NATO US Security Arrangements | 47 | 0.17 | 0.38 | 0.00 | 1.00 |
| Organization for Islamic Cooperation/Majority Muslim Status | 47 | 0.38 | 0.49 | 0.00 | 1.00 |
| Physical Integrity Rights Index, 2021 | 47 | 0.73 | 0.26 | 0.14 | 0.99 |
| State-led Discrimination/Separatist Conflict Incidence, 2020/2021 | 47 | 0.19 | 0.40 | 0.00 | 1.00 |
| Exports to China % of Total Exports, 2021 | 46 | 12.77 | 13.23 | 0.19 | 56.8 |
| Exports to US % of Total Exports, 2021 | 46 | 8.10 | 13.25 | 0.71 | 76.2 |
| In Chinese Arms Transfers, 2012- 2022 | 46 | 1.46 | 2.29 | 0 | 8.94 |
| In US Arms Transfers, 2012-2022 | 46 | 3.49 | 3.16 | 0 | 8.83 |

2. Causal Mediation Analysis

The causal mediation analysis was conducted using the methods described in Hicks and Tingley (2011). We assess the indirect effect of democracy operating through Chinese arms transfers, which flow disproportionately to less democratic states.

Table A2

First Stage: OLS Estimate of Effect of Liberal Democracy Index Score on Chinese Arms Transfers

| VARIABLES | (1) Chinese Arms Transfers Dummy |
|-------------------------|---|
| Liberal Democracy Score | -0.641*** (0.221) |
| Constant | 0.616*** 0.141 |
| Observations | 46 |
| R-squared | 0.12 |

Robust standard errors in parentheses

*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$

Second Stage: Full OLS Model

| VARIABLES | (1) OLS |
|------------------------------|--------------------------|
| NATO Member | 0.429*** (0.158) |
| Liberal Democracy Score | 1.463*** (0.380) |
| Chinese Arms Transfers Dummy | -0.790*** (0.191) |
| Constant | 0.549** (0.244) |
| Observations | 46 |
| R-squared | 0.718 |

Robust standard errors in parentheses

*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$

Mediation Analysis

| Effect | Mean | 95% Confidence Interval | |
|---------------------|-------------|--------------------------------|-------|
| ACME | 0.497 | 0.128 | 0.985 |
| Direct Effect | 1.480 | 0.792 | 2.197 |
| Total Effect | 1.977 | 1.230 | 2.678 |
| Proportion Mediated | 0.250 | 0.185 | 0.403 |

3. Supplemental Mediation Analysis

We conduct supplementary causal mediation analysis using seemingly unrelated regression (SUR) techniques as described in Preacher and Hayes (2008) to assess the potential for liberal democracy being mediated by both Chinese arms transfers and NATO membership. Note that the estimated coefficients in model 3 match those reported in Table 4 (model 1), though the standard errors are smaller as robust errors cannot be estimated in the SUR framework. The very low/zero correlations between the residuals of the models indicate that SUR does not significantly outperform OLS estimates.

Table A3

| <i>VARIABLES</i> | <i>(1)</i> <i>NATO Membership</i> | <i>(2)</i> <i>Any Chinese Arms Transfers</i> | <i>(3)</i> <i>UNHRC Vote</i> |
|----------------------------|--------------------------------------|---|---------------------------------|
| Liberal Democracy Score | 0.905*** (0.192) | -0.641** (0.253) | 1.463*** (0.325) |
| NATO Membership | | | 0.429** (0.208) |
| Any Chinese Arms Transfers | | | -0.790*** (0.158) |
| Constant | -0.160* (0.095) | 0.616*** (0.124) | 0.549*** (0.160) |
| Observations | 46 | 46 | 46 |
| R-squared | 0.325 | 0.122 | 0.718 |

Standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Calculation of Mediated Effect:

$$\text{Absolute value}([\text{nato}]_b[.905]*[\text{vote}]_b[1.463]+[\text{any chinese}]_b[-0.641]*[\text{vote}]_b[-0.790]) = 1.830$$

Percent of Effect Mediated (Mediated Effect/Total Effect (Mediated + Liberal Democracy Direct Effect))

$$1.830/(1.830+1.227)= 0.556$$