Chapter 4
China and The OSCE's Security Identity Crisis

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Abstract This study attempts to explore how China as an external actor bordering the OSCE region facilitates and amplifies the norm contestation in the OSCE's wider region. We argue that China can use the OSCE's internal leadership and security crisis for its own strategic advantage by further weakening the OSCE participating States' commitments in the human dimension and their support for democratic institutions. We discuss the aforementioned through the case of the persecution of Muslims in Xinjiang. The research findings indicate that China uses its policy tools to accomplish its objectives: it seeks to expand and strengthen the network of supporting states in regard to Xinjiang; it uses its diplomats as outlets of propaganda and disinformation to deny the persecution of Muslims in Xinjiang and to present China as a benign actor; it uses multilateral institutions such as Shanghai Cooperation Organisation as a platform to build support for its alternative regional security governance model. We conclude that this policy posture undermines the work of the OSCE and trust in its values, norms, and practices.

Keywords Xinjiang policies · OSCE identity crisis · OSCE commitments · The BRI · Authoritarianism · Democratic norms contestation

4.1 Introduction

In a time of debates about revolving and changing national identities, it is worth looking at how geopolitics also change and impact the policies and identities of International Organizations, such as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). We look at how the OSCE's 54 participating States respond to the organizations' bordering states, namely to China's policies and human rights

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abuses in the western Chinese region of Xinjiang, all whilst upholding their OSCE commitments.

In July 2020, the OSCE was thrown into a crisis that was caused by three member states, Turkey, Tajikistan, and Azerbaijan, who objected to the reappointment of the organization's representative for freedom of the media and the head of the human rights office. In the ensuing infighting, all four senior OSCE officials and candidates for these positions failed to be reappointed, leaving the organization rudderless (Hall et al. 2020). This political impasse undermined the OSCE's vital work in seeking concerted solutions to alarming processes that have shaken the region: the COVID-19 pandemic's disruptive impact on all spheres of human activity, the re-explosion of the violent conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan in Nagorno-Karabakh in late September 2020, political turmoil in Kyrgyzstan in October 2020, and Belarus following the fraudulent elections in August 2020, which led to massive human rights violations and a breach of constitutional rights within these states. Though the organization continued to perform its important duties at a minimum level in the field of election observations and peace building, its overall responsive capacity was noticeably impaired.

This decline in trust in multilateralism and the political polarization among the member states in the OSCE is not completely novel, however. For over two decades now, the OSCE has been perturbed by the identity crisis caused by participating States' diverging attitudes toward the institution's core norms, values, and practices (Lehne 2015; De Waal 2017). The OSCE has a strong normative identity; it embraces a vision that consolidated democratic institutions, respect for human rights and rule of law are crucial prerequisites for genuine security and stability, both at the national and regional levels because they help resolve "political, economic, social, and environmental challenges at multiple levels of society" (Lewis 2012). Accordingly, the OSCE advances a holistic approach to security, placing both humans and the state at the core of its agenda. It seeks to facilitate the diffusion of these democratic values and practices through constructive dialogue with its participating States, aspiring to build a "security community" in its wider region—a community of states united by common goals and shared values (as is stated in 1990 Charter of Paris, 1999 Charter for European Security, 2010 Astana Commemorative Declaration). Rhetorically, all the participating States support this identity and vision; in reality, however, political elites in a number of the OSCE participating States have been persistently challenging it, refuting the promotion and upholding of the values they rhetorically support (Dunay 2017; Lehne 2015). This provides us the platform to discuss how external actors can use this "security gap" to pursue their strategic interests.

Much of the literature on the subject focuses on the dynamics of these processes as inner developments in the OSCE-wide region. In this chapter, we seek to explore how China, being an external actor bordering the OSCE region, and member states of Mongolia, Kazakhstan, Russia, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, all with diverging security vision and strategic interests, facilitates and amplifies the norm contestation in the OSCE's wider region. China and the OSCE converge in expressing certain threat concerns, such as extremism and terrorism. Given this, China welcomes the OSCE's efforts in contributing to the stability in regions, such as in Central Asia, that are

crucial for the success of its geostrategic projects, such as the Belt and Road Initiative, which cuts through most of the OSCE region.

At the same time, the OSCE and China have fundamental divergences in how they conceptualize threats, how they signal their root causes and identify proper responses. China champions the state-led security discourse, seeking to protect the vital interests and preferences of its authoritarian ruling regime. Therefore, Chinese authorities clearly acknowledge that the OSCE's robust democratic identity can constrain their increasingly assertive efforts to circumvent and revise democratic rules and norms of the international order to better accommodate their interests.

Against this backdrop, we argue that China can use the OSCE's internal leadership and security crisis, as indicated above, for its own strategic advantage by further weakening the OSCE participating States' commitments in the human dimension and their support for democratic institutions. We looked into how Chinese authorities legitimize their repressive policies in Xinjiang internationally, specifically the persecution of Muslim minorities in western Chinese territories. One may wonder and ask why we selected this case, as China is not an OSCE participating State and hence, how do these developments relate to the OSCE and its work?

First of all, as the continuing fighting and the ensuing political crisis in Afghanistan demonstrate—another bordering state to the OSCE—the developments that occur at the doorstep of the OSCE do have implications on the OSCE participating States and the organization overall, causing unease due to the possibility of a spillover into the OSCE-wide area. Second, due to this reasoning, the OSCE has been strengthening dialogue and relations with Partners for Co-operation, a number of states in Asia and the Mediterranean region, seeking to promote its vision to ensure stability in the neighboring regions. The OSCE's and its participating States' reactions to the situation in Xinjiang send a strong signal to its partners about the organization's ability to stand for its ideals and to pursue its security vision that is based on liberal values.

We selected this issue as a case study because it provides a fertile ground to discuss the argument we put forward. The findings of our study indicate that China uses a number of policy tools to attain its objectives: it seeks to expand and strengthen the network of supporting states in regard to Xinjiang; it uses its diplomats as outlets of propaganda and disinformation, notably those diplomats who are engaged in "wolf-warrior diplomacy" to deny the persecution and to present China as a benign actor; it uses multilateral institutions, namely the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), as platforms to build support for its alternative regional security governance model.[1] We conclude that this policy posture undermines the work of the OSCE and trust in its values, norms, and practices.

[1] Though the authors attempted to discern key developments regarding the subject, this study has limitations that are derived from the scope and focus of the research. This study does not claim to provide a comprehensive and in-depth analysis of the motives behind each of the OSCE participating states' reaction on the issue (Xinjiang policies), particularly the possible multitude of underlying factors that influence the policy approach. Instead, the study focuses on the implications these reactions can have for the OSCE's institutional cohesion and its liberal normative agenda.

The academic literature on this issue is only recently emerging. The currently scarce literature is mainly devoted to discussing: the implications that Xinjiang policies have for Sino-West and Central Asia relations (Bitabarova 2018; Raza 2019; Hayes 2020); for bilateral relations with China, particularly given the shared ethnic identity and kin state relations, such as a study on implications for China-Kazakhstan relations (Bitabarova 2018; Liao 2019; Bohr et al. 2019); reactions of Muslim states, given the shared religious identity (Kelemen and Turcsányi 2020). At the time of writing, there are no studies that explore the issue in linkage to regional security architectures in-depth. Russo and Gawrich (2017), and Gawrich in this volume, explore it inter alia, examining the implications of "overlapping" and "nesting" membership of post-Soviet states in a number of security structures that have conceptual divergences.

We seek to contribute to this emerging literature and spur further discussion on China-OSCE relations in light of the latter's strong normative identity as outlined above. The findings of this study can contribute to discussions on how China's security interests relate to the OSCE, what policy instruments and narratives China uses to advance its position and how, whether it succeeds in its endeavors, and what course of action is required to effectively counterbalance them, to name but a few. In addition, we seek to contribute to larger discussions on Central Asia states and OSCE relations, and the role of external actors in these processes. In the proceeding parts of this chapter, we first recapture China's core security interests and China's policies in Xinjiang, followed by a discussion of the OSCE participating States diverging reactions to Xinjiang policies, and end with a conclusion that summarizes the key findings.

4.2 The Xinjiang Case and China's Core Security Interests

Xinjiang is China's northwestern province and home to predominantly Muslim ethnic communities, the largest of which are the Uighurs, officially recognized as one of the 55 national minorities in China. In recent years, members of Muslim communities have faced a massive crackdown by Chinese authorities, suffering arbitrary incarceration, forced labor, sterilization, and round-the-clock intrusive surveillance, as discussed below.

Since 2017, human rights groups, UN officials, foreign governments, policy experts, and scholars have been drawing international attention to the issue of the drastic expansion of the detention facilities network in Xinjiang, where local Muslims have been arbitrarily held and subjected to mistreatment (HRW 2018; Amnesty International 2018; Bitabarova 2018; Raza 2019; Hayes 2020). Former detainees, who fled China, shared their stories of inhumane conditions there, such as sleep deprivation, torture, interrogations, sexual abuse, and forceful renouncement of their cultural and religious identity. In addition, detainees were forced to demonstrate "loyalty to the Chinese Communist Party" by pledging, singing praises for communism, and

learning Mandarin (HRW 2019b). UN human rights experts reported that more than a million people were held in these facilities at the time (Soliev 2019).

Uighurs have also been subjected to forced labor; reports indicate that around 50,000 former detainees were relocated to other parts of China to work in low-tech or textile factories since 2017; many of these factories are linked to 83 global brands. These laborers reportedly experience similar living conditions as in detention camps: they are forbidden to observe religious practices, are subjected to ideological training, and are forced to live in segregated dormitories (Graham-Harrison 2020). China has also been eager to control the reproduction rates in the region. Chinese authorities have been administering injections, implanting intrauterine contraceptive devices, enforcing surgical sterilization, and "using internment as punishment for birth control violations"; as a result, natural population growth in the province has declined rapidly in recent years (Zenz 2020).

These repressive measures are aided further with an intrusive surveillance system. The 2019 Human Rights Watch report shed light on how authorities use the Integrated Joint Operations Platform, developed by major state-owned military contractor China Electronics Technology Group Corporation, and other applications to harness masses of data on local Muslims (HRW 2019a). Authorities use this data to arbitrarily detain persons or restrict them in their movement. The data interpretation algorithm is discriminatory; it marks local Muslims as *suspects* from the start, using dubious criteria for detecting "suspicious" behavior (HRW 2019b). In addition, authorities collect biometrics, including DNA samples, fingerprints, iris scans, voice samples, and blood types of all local residents aged 12 to 65; use GPS tracking, require installing mobile activity monitoring applications, and maintain a system of *virtual fences* (Leibold 2020; Godbole 2019).

The evidence suggests that authorities are expanding the detention facilities network; the 2020 report prepared by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, using satellite imagery analysis, shows that it now includes 380 facilities, expanded or newly built since 2017. Furthermore, 61 facilities were constructed or renovated in the last year alone, around 50% of which were high-security facilities (Ruser 2020). The available scarce data also suggests that public security spending in Xinjiang has been steadily ramped up, increasing tenfold in the past decade and outpacing other administrative units (Feng 2018).

China strongly defends its case, rebuking the outside criticism of its policies in Xinjiang. In the beginning, Chinese authorities denied the existence of detention camps in the province. Upon being confronted with the evidence that suggested otherwise, Beijing pivoted to presenting these facilities as "vocational education and training centers", which served two major purposes: to help largely backward local population develop marketable skills and better integrate, and to insulate them from being influenced by extremist ideas (Maizland 2020). Referring to the past "outbursts of violence" in the province, officials claim Xinjiang hosts radical extremists who threaten to destabilize the region (Bhattacharji 2012). The fact that the region has not experienced a terrorist attack since December 2016 is often reiterated by the officials as an indication of the success of its policy posture in Xinjiang.

The Xinjiang case transcends far beyond Xinjiang itself; it represents the qualitative shift in China's foreign policy in light of the reassessment of its role as a rising power in the international order. The 19th National Congress offered a glimpse on how China envisages its engagement with this order in the years to come; it aspires to expand its influence, seeking to "take an active part in reforming and developing the global governance system" (Mazarr et al. 2018) and offer "Chinese wisdom and a Chinese approach to solving the problems facing mankind" (Tao 2017). At the heart of this ambition is the urge to safeguard the unconditional rule of the Chinese Communist Party, the legitimacy of which depends on its ability to deliver economic growth, protect the sovereignty, and territorial and functional integrity of the state, and insulate itself and the country from democratic ideas (Mazarr et al. 2018). This aspiration to become a leading global power bears a considerable significance to the present and the future of the OSCE.

Nevertheless, China and the OSCE converge on certain security issues, particularly when it comes to Central Asia; both identify combating terrorism, drug trafficking, militant groups, and organized crime, and fostering development as important goals to deliver regional stability and security (Wuthnow 2018).

Notwithstanding, today China and the OSCE diverge in their deeper normative foundations; simply put, they do not speak the same language when it comes to defining what the threats are and how to deal with them as is exemplified by the Xinjiang case. The OSCE's understanding of security proposes constraints on state sovereignty as the state itself can be a source of insecurity, exacerbating social inequality, marginalization, and exclusion as can be seen in the discussion above. China, on the other hand, advances an alternative set of norms and beliefs that prioritize state sovereignty and non-interference in domestic affairs. For the political regimes that rely on authoritarian practices akin to those of China, this set is a compelling alternative to legitimize their own repressive actions, both domestically and internationally. Given that a number of the OSCE participating states are still failing to commit to genuine democratic development, for the OSCE this means that the more attractive this Chinese model becomes in its region, especially if linked to tangible economic, financial, and political dividends, the greater are the prospects for norm contestation and for the proliferation of polarized positions. Consequently, the space for mutual understanding shrinks further, leading to lesser opportunities for finding effective and concerted solutions to common threats. Furthermore, the emphasis on the state-led security discourse that China endorses risks downplaying and silencing actors, such as civil society institutions, that have played critical roles in supporting and promoting the OSCE's democratic ideals and their benefits for the common good at the local levels. The ensuing part of our study discusses these points in more detail in the context of China's attempts to legitimize its actions in Xinjiang internationally and the reactions of the OSCE participating states to these attempts.

4.3 The Reactions of the OSCE Participating States to the Xinjiang Case: Support, "Neutrality", and Contestation

China is eager to form a "global partnership framework" and has been active in its efforts to expand its partnership network, establishing new ones and strengthening the existing ones, such as the SCO in 2003 and launching the BRI in 2013. By consolidating this "block" of states, China strives to attain several objectives as follows. It gains an invaluable means to secure the success of its grand project that has global outreach. It also gains important leverage in shaping the favorable international environment to advance its interests that resonate with like-minded states. China uses this partnership network to stifle the criticism of liberal states on sensitive issues, such as human rights violations and other dubious activities.

Furthermore, China seeks to gain a strategic advantage in the number of supporting states to circumvent and weaken those international norms and practices that constrain its actions or do not correspond to its internal practices (Mazarr et al. 2018, 19). As such, China intends to *"change the rules of the game"* to accommodate its needs. To exemplify this, China uses international human rights platforms, such as the UN Human Rights Council and its human rights mechanism and procedures. One of them is the Universal Periodic Review on Human Rights (UPR), to which China adheres and submits reports on its human rights compliance and performance. During the 2009 and 2013 UPR, China has successfully mobilized authoritarian states that have been receiving China's investments and aid to stifle the criticism for its poor human rights record. The "block" of sympathizing states defended the rhetoric that China made accomplishments in its efforts to protect human rights. In 2013, support was attained from Cuba, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Ukraine, Uganda, Venezuela, Uzbekistan, Yemen, and several African states, and hence also OSCE participating States. During the 2018 UPR, a similar strategy was employed by China to avoid negative responses to the concerns raised over Xinjiang re-education camps (Chen 2019).

Western states oppose Chinese narratives about the peaceful intentions of reeducation camps, expressing concern and condemnation instead. Notably, during the UN Human Rights Council's 41st session in Geneva in July 2019, twenty-two states prepared a collective document that urged China "to uphold the highest standards in the promotion and protection of human rights and fully cooperate with the Council", requesting the UN Human Rights Council to consider this document (Mills 2019; Liao 2019). Given the aforementioned, the increase in numbers of China's sympathizers can shift the balance in the former's favor. As a result, it can give China an additional leverage to better legitimize its stance or block unwanted decisions, appealing to the number of supporters. Overall, such a strategy can undermine trust in the role of existing formal institutions, their mechanisms, and the ideals they stand for. The expansion of the partnership network affects the involved states' behavior not only in formal institutions.

Due to the fact that China's partnership network is mainly strengthened by the financial stimulus the country gives to many states along the BRI; states that significantly benefit from them willingly refrain from engaging in actions that can repel their major lender. This also relates to a number of the OSCE participating States as well, primarily the bordering states. For instance, Turkey initially criticized Xinjiang policies at the beginning of 2019 as part of broadcasting its "leader of the Muslim world" narrative. This posture changed following Erdogan's visit to China later that year, where he stated that "the peoples of China's Xinjiang region live happily in China's development and prosperity" (Reuters 2019). Given that China is Turkey's second largest trade partner (Alemdaroglu and Tepe 2020), the criticism would have likely undermined this beneficiary trade relationship for the latter. Similarly, Serbia under Vucic's leadership has become vocal in supporting China on several sensitive issues because of China's investments; Vucic expressed support for China's policy stance on Hong Kong and Taiwan and promoted a positive image of China in Serbia during the COVID-19 pandemic (Conley et al. 2020a). As can be seen, China conveniently uses its economic might as leverage to ensure their partners' "self-censorship", which also helps it to avoid an "imposing actor" image. In addition to the "self-censorship", some states feel compelled to align their foreign policy posture with China's interests.

China's financial stimulus packages, particularly under the BRI project, elevate the risk of a "debt trap"; de facto forming dependencies. This allows Beijing to take a higher-status partner role, influencing how partners set their political, security and economic agenda. Consequently, the economic dependence becomes politicized and transforms into a "dominant and subordinate" interrelation (O'Neill 2014). China conveniently exploits such interrelations to expand its strategic presence and influence the regional processes as was the case in Sri Lanka. The latter's inability to repay its loans to China forced it to relinquish the country's port in exchange for a 99-year-long lease. Through this move, China got the opportunity to establish a strategic foothold, both in commercial and military terms (Ferchen and Perrera 2019). Relinquishment can take other forms as well, common being permitting access to natural resources: Angolan oilfields, cocoa fields in Ghana, and goldmines in Tajikistan (Mattlin and Nojonen 2015, 713; Eurasianet 2018).

In total, twenty-five states that are part of the BRI project are classified as being susceptible to the debt trap, including some of the OSCE participating States, namely Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan (Hurley et al. 2018). In regard to the latter two, the "debt trap" places an additional burden on the political elite, which already has to support China's policies in the international arena. It has a distressing effect domestically, pressing state institutions to deal with escalating tensions that result from growing inequality, increasing unemployment, and frustration with government's handling of resources (Nurgozhayeva 2020). In themselves, these manifestations showcase the failure of these states to pursue their OSCE commitments in the human dimension.

China does not discuss political conditionality beforehand (Tian 2018, 21; Umarov 2020); partners have to adapt to them as they go, such as adhering to the "One-China" principle or supporting China's narratives on global issues, including on Xinjiang, which often leads to deportation of Uighur asylum seekers (Mattlin and Nojonen 2015). These discussions are hidden from the public eye, and China has been continuously criticized for attaining its objectives through opaque means, such as "behind the closed door" negotiations (Hayes 2020, 44). Thereby, this policy approach presents another fundamental challenge to the OSCE; China's engagement has a deleterious effect on the rule of law and governance in its participating States. This effect is most pronounced in Central Asia and Western Balkans, where democratic institutions and practices are either non-existent, weak, or are strongly undermined.

Chinese investments attract authoritarian governments because they do not require political and/or economic conditionality (O'Neill 2014). As was pointedly stated by the now former President of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev, in his interview to Chinese journalists: "China has never dictated [its] own conditions and China has never told [us] how to live as the West did", adding that "China does not provide help under the condition to become as China, which is attractive and appealing" (Radio Azattyk 2019). China does not require transparency or public accountability; moreover, Chinese authorities are often themselves involved in compounding the corruption and poor governance to secure their interests (Tian 2018; Nurgozhayeva 2020). In 2016, the Chinese Consulate General provided a mayor of the Kyrgyz city of Osh with a Toyota Land Cruiser as a gift, causing disapproval in Kyrgyz society, which interpreted it as a bribe (Toktomushev 2018). Likewise, in 2016, Kazakhstani leadership attempted to benefit from land rent initiatives that would allow the leasing of land to foreigners for up to 25 years. This initiative was perceived by the public as one that would benefit Chinese companies seeking to make further inroads in the country; following mass protests the leadership dropped the initial proposal (Kassenova 2017; Toktomushev 2018). Similar developments are occurring in the Balkans as well, where a number of high-profile corruption cases involving Chinese investments have been put under the spotlight, such as the Kicevo-Orhid highway project in North Macedonia (Conley et al. 2020b). The implications of such practices for the OSCE are immense; they further strengthen local patronage networks and political opportunists who directly benefit from the lack of transparency and accountability that Chinese investments are associated with. Furthermore, the lack of conditionality significantly speeds up the lending process for showcase projects, which can be used to boost local political figures' public image, particularly during election campaigns. These practices, hence, erode trust in consolidated democratic institutions and practices, and undermine their responsiveness to citizens' needs. China is also keen to accuse "the West" of politicizing human rights. China holds the strong conviction that the liberal normative agenda reinforces Western hegemony and that liberal values are inapplicable to the developing world (Mazarr et al. 2018). This view strongly resonates among the states that have political systems akin to China's. As Roza Nurgozhayeva, Vice President-General Counsel at Nazarbayev University in Kazakhstan (2020) argues, China's political model serves as "a robust reference

point that helps States to protect the regime's legitimacy". The table below illustrates this point; thirty-five states supported China during the 41st UN Human Rights Council's session as discussed above, refuting claims that China violates human rights in Xinjiang province. Instead, these states emphasized China's *remarkable success* in human rights observation (Mills 2019). Notwithstanding, the majority of OSCE participating States condemn China's policies in the Xinjiang province as illustrated in Table 4.1.

China being a "robust reference point" for some of the participating States amplifies this "politicizing human rights" message that has already been often employed by a number of the OSCE participating States in regard to the organization's norms and practices. The OSCE participating States that condemn China's policies in Xinjiang are the ones that strongly support the OSCE's democratic identity and put the organization's human dimension issues on equal footing with politico-military ones. Not all the OSCE participating States share the same vision; since the early 2000s, a

Table 4.1 'States response to China's policies in Xinjiang'

	States that support China's policies in Xinjiang	States that condemn China's policies in Xinjiang
2019	Algeria, Angola, Bahrain, **Belarus**, Bolivia, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cambodia, Cameroon, Comoros, Congo, Cuba, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Egypt, Eritrea, Gabon, Kuwait, Laos, Myanmar, Nigeria, North Korea, Oman, Pakistan, Philippines, Qatar, **Russia**, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Syria, **Tajikistan,** Togo, **Turkmenistan**, United Arab Emirates, Venezuela, and Zimbabwe	Australia, **Austria**, **Belgium, Canada**, **Denmark**, **Estonia, Finland**, **France, Germany, Iceland, Ireland,** Japan, **Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands**, New Zealand, **Norway**, **Spain, Sweden, Switzerland**, and **the UK**
2020	Angola, Bahrain, **Belarus,** Burundi, Cambodia, Cameroon, the Central African Republic, China, Comoros, Congo, Cuba, Dominica, Egypt, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Gabon, Grenada, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Iran, Iraq, Kiribati, Laos, Madagascar, Morocco, Mozambique, Myanmar, Nepal, Nicaragua, Pakistan, Palestine, **Russia,** Saudi Arabia, South Sudan, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Syria, Tanzania, Togo, Uganda, the UAE, Venezuela, Yemen, Zimbabwe	**Albania**, Australia, **Austria, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Canada, Croatia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany,** Haiti, Honduras, **Iceland, Ireland, Italy,** Japan, **Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg,** the Marshall Islands, **Monaco,** Nauru, **the Netherlands,** New Zealand, **North Macedonia, Norway,** Palau, **Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and the United States**

Table 4.1 States that have explicitly expressed their position on China's policies in the Xinjiang province, specifically in regard to the persecution of Muslim minorities by Chinese authorities. States highlighted in bold are OSCE participating states. Sources Catherine Putz "2019 Edition: Which countries are for or against China's Xinjiang policies" in the Diplomat, accessed November 25, 2020, https://thediplomat.com/2020/10/2020-edition-which-countries-are-for-or-against-chinas-xinjiang-policies and Catherine Putz "2020 Edition: Which countries are for or against China's Xinjiang policies" in the Diplomat, accessed November 25, 2020, https://thediplomat.com/2019/07/which-countries-are-for-or-against-chinas-xinjiang-policies/

number of post-Soviet states led by Russia intensified their criticism of the OSCE, accusing it of "double standards" and political bias, and using its human rights rhetoric to meddle in what they regarded as their internal affairs. In reality, unwilling to engage in genuine democratic transformation, they became simply "irritated" with the OSCE's "capacity to put a spotlight on their more dubious activities" (De Waal 2017; Dunay 2017). These states, though, often expressed their discontent with the organization's emphasis on human rights in a rather reactive and defensive manner. Having a strong reference point now embodied by China, they can make their stances more pronounced and use the organization's consensus-based decision-making to undermine the institution. For instance, Tajikistan was repeatedly criticized by the OSCE officials for human rights violations, such as restrictions of fundamental political freedoms and poor conduct of elections.

As a result, in 2020, Tajikistan and Turkey blocked the reappointment of Ingibjorg Solrun Gisladottir as the head of the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR). And in the same year, as mentioned earlier, Tajikistan and Azerbaijan similarly blocked the reappointment of Harlem Desir as the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media (Pannier 2020). Such actions impair the proper functioning of the OSCE and its institutions and put the organization into an identity crisis, especially its tasks in vital areas, such as in conflict zones, which require strong leadership and common positions. Furthermore, these actions intend to pressure the organization to dial down its harsh rhetoric against human rights violators in return for their support in passing through crucial decisions.

The "nesting" or "overlapping" membership of some of the OSCE participating States in the structures, where China is able to exert strong influence, can similarly contribute to the norm contestation as outlined above. China uses its membership in regional organizations, particularly the SCO, to make its narratives more appealing and legitimize its actions through multilateral means, as is the case with Xinjiang policies. China is keen to use this multi-track strategy to secure its interests: by actively participating in such formats, it projects an image of a reliable partner to ease fears of its growing assertiveness. At the same time, it uses regional organizations to strengthen its position as a regional hegemon (Mazarr et al. 2018; Lewis 2012).

As mentioned earlier, the SCO and the OSCE share some of the key security concerns (Russo and Gawrich 2017), but overall have diverging perceptions on the relevance of human rights, including minorities' rights when defining security. The OSCE views minorities' struggle for autonomy (in some cases separatism) as a fundamental human right and legitimate action, while the SCO is against such conceptualization, labeling it as a security threat (Lewis 2012). As such, the SCO states can use vague definitions of such a "security threat" to support and legitimize their repressive responsive measures. In regard to Xinjiang, China defends its case by referring to combating the "three evils", namely separatism, extremism, and terrorism and its corresponding narratives. In a similar vein, this discursive construct is used by other SCO members to pursue oppressive measures to intimidate activists and other groups disfavored by the ruling regime, to limit personal freedoms and rights, and to expand security services' oversight. This course of action has implications for the OSCE as five out of six SCO member states are also OSCE participating States. These

states are also authoritarian political systems that have long voiced criticism over the OSCE's democratic identity. Using the SCO and its rules as a reference point, they appealed to the need to reshape the norms to better reflect the consideration of each state's domestic legislation and individual political context, thereby avoiding criticism (Ambrosio 2008; Russo and Gawrich 2017).

In addition to actions in the offline space as discussed above, China is similarly proactive in contesting democratic norms and institutions online. China fully realizes the benefits of shaping the online "discourse power", taking advantage of the Internet's reach, and its decentralized and democratic nature. China strives to formulate and disseminate the narratives that align with the interests of the ruling regime and suppress dissent. In this regard, the "wolf-warrior diplomacy" is a development worthy of note. This is the approach that is increasingly being used by China's diplomatic corps to defend China, even aggressively. More than 170 Chinese diplomats are online now, using social media as a "bully pulpit" (Brandt and Schafer 2020). China's Foreign Ministry spokesperson, for instance, mocked American concerns over the Xinjiang case, pointing to examples of racism in the United States, denoting that it was in fact the US that had issues with human rights (Zhu 2020). Chinese diplomats have used these platforms to deflect the criticism over Xinjiang and to spread the content that promotes the positive image of its human rights practices, and to spread conspiracy theories over the coronavirus pandemic and its outbreak (Brandt and Schafer 2020). In addition, Chinese diplomats follow the same strategies during interviews when responding to questions on Xinjiang. For instance, on May 28, 2019, Zhang Xiao, Chinese ambassador to Kazakhstan, was asked about the detentions of Kazakhs in re-education camps and he angrily denied this, labeling it as disinformation (RFERL 2019). Chinese officials reverse the criticism over Xinjiang policy as an anti-Chinese element as it happened in the case of China's ambassador to the UK, who denied the abuses of the rights of the Muslim minority in Xinjiang (The Guardian 2020). The implications of such actions are evident; upon necessity, Chinese diplomats can similarly shape and promote content that will sow frustration and amplify false messages to erode citizens' trust in democratic institutions or erode trust in multilateralism and cooperation between actors to the strategic benefit of their home country.

China's online assertiveness manifests itself in another crucial way. China is one of the leading powers in terms of digital development, making a significant leap in recent years. Given the growing importance of the information space for geopolitical contestation, China is eager to shape the global information architecture according to its preferences. It tries to lead in several strands. First, it expands the market for its surveillance technology that is being actively used in Xinjiang. A study published by the Open Technology Fund documented sales of these types of technology to over 73 states, including to democracies (Dirks and Cook 2020). The OSCE region is no exception; Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan are installing Chinese surveillance systems as part of their "safe city" initiatives (Yau 2019a, b), Turkmenistan is also considering such cooperation. The import of these technologies raises two major concerns: first is its potential use by the authoritarian regimes of the region to curb

dissent or intimidate human rights activists, following the similar use of these technologies in Xinjiang; the second point is directly related to China, as by exporting their products into new areas, China can spy on governments and gain access to sensitive data as was the case with the African Union scandal (Gramer et al. 2020). In addition, the export of such technologies allows China to enhance algorithms of their own AI-enabled technologies, which can be used to intimidate activists and regime critics at home and abroad (Jardine 2019; Yau 2019a, b).

Second, China is also interested in shaping the international norms that govern the information space; along with Russia, it endorses a vision that places significant authority in the hands of the government, which would enable it to "pull the plug" and disrupt the Internet if it is used to challenge the regime, as has been recently demonstrated in Belarus during mass protests against Lukashenka's regime. China's actions and strategies in the online domain are equally deleterious to the OSCE's normative agenda as its offline actions and strategies.

Despite these alarming developments, several OSCE participating States are already emulating the Chinese model of Internet governance, among them Russia, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan; many other states are debating of following suit. As digital development is the defining reality of our times, the ability of the OSCE to counterbalance China's efforts in this strand will mean much for security, protection of fundamental human rights, and inclusive and sustainable development in the OSCE-wide area in the foreseeable future.

4.4 OSCE Security Identity Crisis

As was stated in this study, we attempted to demonstrate that the case of Xinjiang is not limited to China alone; it needs to be viewed as part of the larger agenda that China is pursuing regionally and globally, namely how it penetrates OSCE security and human rights policies. The Chinese Communist Party has long sought to establish an unchallenged control over China's restive regions, such as Xinjiang, Tibet, and Hong Kong, and is currently pursuing these goals. Furthermore, the Chinese ruling regime continues to undermine the stability in South Asia region, projecting its hard power and intimidating the neighboring states. As China's foreign policy and BRI is actively making inroads in the OSCE-wide area, mainly in the form of investment projects, the aforementioned developments along with policies in Xinjiang demonstrate that if required, China will not shy away from securing its interests by all means possible. Thereby, we aimed to illustrate how China can undermine the vision of security that is promoted by the OSCE and how this will affect the organization and its participating States. Whereas the OSCE and overall ODIHR aims to reconcile security measures with human rights norms and democratic standards, for example in terms of human security and the concept of securitization, China uses security policies to combat its internal and external political enemies.

We conclude that China's security approach challenges the OSCE by undermining its participating States' commitments in the human dimension, particularly

in Western Balkans and Central Asia where democratic institutions are either non-existent or are not strongly consolidated. China advances an alternative set of norms and beliefs, including through multilateral means, which is regarded as compelling to the states that similarly have poor records of human rights protection and are ruled by authoritarian elites. China's actions have a deleterious effect on good governance and rule of law, contribute to endemic corruption and poor transparency and accountability, which aggravate further the living conditions of the general public in a number of the OSCE participating States. The public's growing discontent, hence, can lead to instability and even conflict, particularly in those states that have not developed adequate institutions of civic engagement and resolution of societal concerns. Altogether, these actions amplify the already existing identity crisis in the OSCE, contributing to the value-based division and undermining the OSCE's responsive capacity to pressing security challenges and threats. It is highly likely that the OSCE will continue to be perturbed by the ongoing security identity crisis in the foreseeable future, causing unease to its democratic majority as it makes the OSCE region vulnerable as a whole. The future relevance of the organization depends on how this democratic majority of states can revitalize the dialogue so as not to alienate the states that are failing to fulfill their commitments and push them toward China's orbit of interests, while not compromising the democratic values that underpin the organization.

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