

Congressional-Executive Commission on China

Hearing

on

Techno-Authoritarianism:
Platform for Repression in China and Abroad

Wednesday, November 17, 2021 – 10:30am
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Statement of Senator Jeff Merkley
Chair
Congressional-Executive Commission on China

- Good morning. Today’s hearing of the Congressional-Executive Commission on China on “Techno-Authoritarianism: Platform for Repression in China and Abroad” will come to order.
- This hearing will explore China’s role in embracing technology-enhanced authoritarianism and promoting its spread around the world. In China and around the globe, we are seeing that the same technology that drives the global economy, facilitates communication, enables financial flows, and provides the conveniences of modern life can also be used for repression. Without proper guardrails to protect privacy and basic human rights, technology can control populations, trample freedom of expression, and undermine institutions of democratic governance.
- For the Chinese government and Chinese Communist Party, it starts at home. Over many years, the Commission has documented the development of what has become the most pervasive surveillance state the world has ever seen. Authorities embrace technologies such as artificial intelligence, blockchain, and cloud computing – the building blocks of the modern economy – to impose political and social control of targeted populations. These technologies offer the government an unprecedented degree of control, enabled by the collection of massive amounts of data from cell phones, personal computers, DNA, security cameras, and more.
- Nowhere do we see this more tragically than in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. Today we will hear testimony outlining the extent of the surveillance in Xinjiang, as well as the heart-wrenching toll on individuals and their communities. We will also hear from expert witnesses who will shed light on the use of technology in mainland China and abroad, both for legitimate purposes of government efficiency and digital connectivity but also to spread the web of repressive control to cities across China, regions across China, the developing world, and even the Chinese diaspora community in the United States.
- This adds up to a complex picture. The technologies we will hear about have dual-use potential to be used for good or for ill. Many countries to which China exports

surveillance systems and elements of the so-called “safe cities” model embrace these technologies out of a desire to combat crime or reduce traffic or provide municipal services. Yet these technologies, this high-tech authoritarianism, can be used to strip rights and dignity from millions of people across the planet.

- Acting to defend freedom and to defend democracy will require the establishment of norms for the proper use and boundaries of this technology, but we can’t stop there. We have to work with defenders of freedom across the globe to develop attractive and affordable alternatives.
- This won’t be easy. That’s why Cochairman McGovern and I have convened this hearing. We need to hear from experts on how Congress, the United States government, the international community can address these difficult challenges. Just as the United States confronts limitations in its ability to shape the behavior of the Chinese government, so too will we face limitations in shaping the rest of the world, especially when it comes to technology that empowers everyday life. That’s why we need smart action in concert with a coalition of partners.
- I look forward to the testimony today to help us work to identify the approaches that can harness technology in a way that respects rather than endangers fundamental human rights.