



United States Congress  
House Committee on Foreign Affairs  
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Hearing on “Transnational Repression: Trends and Policy Approaches”  
June 24, 2025

Opening Remarks by  
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Co-chairs McGovern and Smith, Members, and all staff of the Commission, thank you for having me testify on transnational repression in the context of Hong Kong and China today.

In Hong Kong, I experienced the erosion of our rights to freedoms of expression, press, assembly, and association. I fought back and became a target, forcing me to flee in 2020. However, upon returning to the United States (U.S.), a place where I thought my safety would be guaranteed, I realized I was still not free from the reach of the Chinese and Hong Kong governments.

On December 13, 2023, I woke up to the news that I had become the first and, by far, only U.S. citizen wanted by the Hong Kong authorities for allegedly violating the “National Security Law” by “colluding with foreign or external forces to endanger national security.” They issued a one-million-Hong Kong-dollar bounty for my arrest, leading to countless threats against my life. In January, I received a concerning number of suspicious emails offering life insurance for “accidental events” and funeral and burial coverage in the event of my death.

My experience is just the tip of the iceberg.

Today, I will discuss trends of transnational repression by the Hong Kong government and its parallels with the Chinese government’s repression of the Uyghur, Tibetan, and Chinese diasporas. I will conclude with policy recommendations for the U.S. government.



In recent years, the Chinese and Hong Kong governments have been acting in lockstep to escalate their toolkit of transnational repression in both scope and sophistication:

First, the use of bounties and international warrants against exiled activists has intensified, with nineteen of us currently under threat. These threats are not merely symbolic; they are calculated acts designed to discredit opposition and make collaboration with public-facing advocates dangerous. The aim is to intimidate us and isolate us from the broader diaspora, those on the ground, and international allies. This mirrors the Chinese government's long-standing efforts to sever ties between Tibetans in exile and those inside Tibet by making any form of communication dangerous and "illegal,"<sup>1</sup> creating a disconnect that weakens pro-democracy movements abroad and eliminates momentum that fuels resistance inside.

Second, the implementation of the "Safeguarding National Security Ordinance" (Article 23) has led to new forms of coercion, including passport cancellation and professional licenses revocation, alongside vague and expanded extraterritorial charges such as "external interference" and "theft of state secrets." The colonial-era sedition law continued to be weaponized by the government and the court to punish speech and organizing from abroad.<sup>2</sup> These actions intensify the disconnect and isolation, marking a shift in focus from targeting only outspoken, high-profile activists to also stifling dissent, creating a chilling effect.

Third, the targeting and punishment of our loved ones back home. The Hong Kong police have summoned family members and friends of wanted activists for interrogation about our activities. They have been surveilled and threatened, and most recently, charged under Article 23. This is hostage-taking, plain and simple. It seeks to hold our families hostage to punish and silence us through guilt and the ever-present threat of retaliation. This represents an escalation of transnational repression against Hongkongers, echoing past tactics used by the Chinese

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<sup>1</sup> *Chinese Transnational Repression of Tibetan Diaspora Communities*. Tibetan Centre for Human Rights and Democracy. (2024, February 6). <https://tchrd.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Chinese-Transnational-Repression-of-Tibetan-Diaspora-Communities.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Pang, J. (2023, November 3). *Hong Kong student jailed for 2 months under sedition over social media posts in Japan* | reuters. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/hong-kong-student-jailed-2-months-under-sedition-over-social-media-posts-japan-2023-11-03/>



government. With this tactic of repression and coercion by proxy, their intention is clear: to control us not through law but through fear, and to politically deactivate our communities.

The Chinese government's repression doesn't stop at borders—it follows you, and it follows those you love. They are creating a chilling effect so profound that speaking out, even from abroad, feels impossible. It erodes civil society and normalizes their authoritarian practices abroad by exploiting the democracies we have fled to.

The U.S. government and civil society must do more, faster, to respond to the Chinese government's escalations:

1. Prioritize transnational repression across government agencies as a key human rights and national security issue, with a coordinated interagency response.
2. Tighten enforcement of the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA) against entities acting on behalf of foreign governments in surveilling or silencing dissidents, including Chinese state actors and their proxies in business, media, or diaspora.
3. Pass the "Hong Kong Economic and Trade Office Certification Act" (H.R. 2261) to shut down HKETOs, which serve as unchecked political operatives and espionage tools of the Chinese government under diplomatic guise.
4. Maintain and increase federal funding for organizations that document, investigate, expose, and disrupt transnational repression, including the National Endowment for Democracy, Radio Free Asia, and Voice of America, among others.
5. Expand humanitarian protection pathways. Fear of deportation to Hong Kong or China leads community members to disengage from reporting transnational repression, silencing crucial voices that could inform U.S. policy.

Today, I bear an uncertain risk by testifying before this Commission, but this cause has always been bigger than myself. As long as I have a platform, I will not be silenced. I will continue to speak up for my friends who are now behind bars and for those who are still resisting in Hong Kong.

Thank you again for shedding light on this important issue; I look forward to working with you to address it.