

Senator Robert Menendez
U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee Report Rollout:
“The New Big Brother – China and Digital Authoritarianism”
July 21, 2020

Thank you, Jodi. Thank you for moderating, thank you for your service. I want to thank in advance all of our distinguished panelists we have assembled who are going to add dimensions to what we are rolling out today.

I want to welcome everyone joining for the Senate Foreign Relations Committee’s virtual rollout of our latest report: “The New Big Brother – China and Digital Authoritarianism.”

Over the past several years, the People’s Republic of China has undertaken a concerted campaign to expand its political, economic, and military influence around the world. Some of this is to be expected: The China of 2020 is not Nixon’s China of 1972. The outcomes we wished nearly fifty years of open minds and proactive economic and diplomatic engagement would lead to have not exactly come to fruition.

Indeed, the “rise of China” continues to present new and troubling challenges for the Chinese people themselves, the United States and many of our partners and allies, and the international community as a whole.

Rather than embrace the international order the United States helped build and into which the rest of the world welcomed China, the CCP has instead sought to develop and dominate its own vision of a global order through economics, through military antagonism, through predatory financial practices, and through exporting its governing style.

One of the increasingly prominent and troubling ways that China is seeking to expand its influence is our topic of discussion today: raising prospects of a global dystopian future dominated by a high-tech totalitarian state through China’s exploitation of the digital domain and its basic products and services.

Over the past decade, we have witnessed China challenge core democratic governing principles by developing and implementing a new suite of technologies and practices that challenge the very nature of an open, secure, and interoperable cyberspace, and by extension the very fundamentals of a free society.

Its leaders seek to create a new model of governance for the digital domain — one that stifles free speech, curtails privacy, and infringes on the basic human rights that spills over into the analogue world of our homes, places of work, and worship, that threatens the very notion of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. One that threatens the ability of people to have any modicum of privacy, to travel freely, or express themselves in a way that runs counter to the official party line.

I call this new governance model — the use of new and emergent technologies in chilling and repressive ways to control the rights, freedoms, and actions of its citizens — digital authoritarianism.

And if the United States fails to rally and lead the international community around our core founding principles to respond to the Chinese Communist Party's efforts to create a new "big brother" — as this administration has so far failed to do — I am deeply concerned about what the future may hold.

China's concerted effort to develop, expand, export, and institutionalize digital authoritarianism as the future governance model of the digital domain represents a fundamental political, economic, and security concern for the United States, our allies and partners, and the international community at large.

As this report lays out, China is cultivating digital authoritarianism along multiple paths and utilizing its entire policy toolkit, including political, economic, diplomatic, and coercive means, to shape the digital domain in its desired image. If successful, China —

and not the United States and other like-minded nations — will be writing the future rules of cyberspace.

And in a world where peoples' lives are increasingly dominated by cyber interactions, this threat is growing.

Before diving into these various efforts by China to expand its authoritarian governance model beyond China and impose it globally, it is first critically important to parse out what digital authoritarianism is exactly. At the most fundamental level, this report describes digital authoritarianism as the use of information and communications technologies, also known as ICT, products and services to surveil, repress, and manipulate domestic and foreign populations.

While the Chinese Communist Party has always relied on surveillance and repressive measures such as limiting free speech, curtailing movement, or spreading false propaganda to ensure its survival, the rapid growth of the Internet and other digitally enabled products has, unfortunately, also brought about a new set of potent tools for the regime to exploit.

At home, China uses these digitally enabled products and services to create a unique, omnipresent, and intrusive system of surveillance.

China accomplishes this by using cutting edge technologies, including facial recognition technology and big data analytics, to track its citizens more quickly and more accurately.

Furthermore, China has developed and continues to perfect a vast censorship apparatus that not only limits the types of news and information its citizens can access, but also stifles free expression and political dissent. More recently, China has made a concerted effort to place a legal sheen over its authoritarian practices in cyberspace by passing laws, like the 2017 Cybersecurity Law, in an effort to legitimize its practices to its citizens.

Furthermore, although Chinese tech companies claim independence, many enjoy vast backing from the government, allowing them to continue to develop new technologies predicated on authoritarian principles, from artificial intelligence or 5G telecommunications.

The resulting effect of China's domestic expansion of digital authoritarianism is an ever-more politically repressed society, particularly for political dissidents and ethnic minorities.

Most tragically, we see the impact of China's digital authoritarianism in places such as the Xinjiang autonomous region, which is home to approximately 11 million ethnic Uyghur Muslims, where the CCP has utilized digitally enabled technologies to effectively turn major metropolitan areas into veritable prison cities in attempts to force Uyghurs and other ethnic minorities to become "more Chinese."

The CCP's repugnant actions against Uyghurs in Xinjiang can only be described as cultural genocide. The United States and our allies have stood up against genocide before, and we must again, using all the levers at our disposal, adapting to confront these new tools.

But China's authoritarianism doesn't stop at the water's edge.

China has been exporting its digital authoritarianism and its tools and tactics across the world in a number of ways. The most high profile, of course, has been supporting developing countries' buildouts of their own digital infrastructure; offering new technologies — training and support included — that enable digital authoritarianism. As we more broadly lament democratic backsliding across the world, leaders around the globe are becoming increasingly attracted to China's model of "effective authoritarian governance," whether because of the short-term Chinese monetary benefits or more fundamentally authoritarian-leaning leaders see potential benefits of social and political control of imitating China's digital governance model.

China's reach is much further than any one country or region; the CCP is even leveraging the international fora, the United States, and like-minded democratic countries helped build to its advantage in the digital space.

While the Trump administration continues to denigrate international institutions and exhibit an astounding lack of leadership on the international stage, China is surging to fill the gap at critical intergovernmental bodies including United Nations, the World Trade Organization, and other entities that set international standards.

Without a concerted effort to stop it, China's digital authoritarianism will shape the future of the digital domain.

It is therefore essential that the United States — given our deeply held and cherished commitment to a free society, freedom of expression, freedom of movement and thought — rise to meet the challenge of this new, alternative, and deeply dangerous governance model for the digital domain. While time is running short, we still have a unique opportunity to help the international community shape the digital domain in ways that support democratic values such as openness, freedom, and the rule of law, including the promotion of human rights.

Unfortunately, President Trump has so far squandered this opportunity. At a time when the United States should be reaching out to allies, he is destroying relationships. At a time when the State Department should be leading on global digital governance issues diplomatically, the agency does not have structures or policies in place necessary to counter China. And at a time that we need a clear, streamlined vision for the future of digital domain, the administration puts forth contradictory and self-defeating agendas.

If the United States continues to forego its position as a leader on digital issues, we will forfeit our ability to shape the digital domain and with it our ability to help secure the future for fundamental democratic freedoms.

Consequently, I commissioned my staff on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to conduct this examination of China and digital authoritarianism, and to provide recommendations that I believe span the political spectrum, combat the spread of digital authoritarianism, and are vital to the future of a free digital domain.

I want to thank Michael Schiffer and others who were involved in the very essence of helping to create this report.

I will not go into all of the report recommendations here, but here are a few of key highlights: the creation of a U.S. industry consortium on 5G technologies to compete with Chinese companies; the establishment of a digital rights promotion fund which will provide grants and investments directly to entities that support the promotion of a free, secure, stable, and open digital domain and fight against the authoritarian use of information and communications technologies; boosting funding for STEM programs; and building a coalition of like-minded allies on critical technology issues.

It is imperative that the United States reassert its leadership on digital issues, corral like-minded countries, and ensure the proliferation digital authoritarianism is curtailed.

In authoring this report, it is my hope that it will act as both an informative and propelling document, which will push both Democrats and Republicans to collectively engage to address this issue.

Now, more than ever, the international community needs the United States to lead on digital issues. Otherwise, the United States, and the international community at large, may see a far different, a far more sinister, digital domain down the road.

Let me turn the floor over to Jodi Herman to moderate a panel of experts and we thank these incredible individuals with their expertise and insights that have been assembled

today to discuss the report as well as their own thoughts and ideas about the nature of the challenge we face from China's digital authoritarianism.

Thank you very much.

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