

China's Transnational Repression: Three Communities, Three Phases, One Evolving System

Ahead of Xi Jinping's D.C. visit in September 2026, Radio Free Asia (RFA) convened a closed, bipartisan roundtable on Capitol Hill called "China's Transnational Repression (TNR): Three Communities, Three Phases, One Evolving System," focused on China's interrelated strategies leveraged against the Uyghur, Tibetan, and Hong Kong diasporas on U.S. soil and around the world. The chief goals of China's multipronged campaign are to silence overseas critics and dissent, inhibit transparency, and manipulate media, while promoting its own global and domestic narratives.

RFA, a private, nonprofit media corporation funded by the U.S. Congress, is uniquely qualified to host this conversation as it documents TNR's rise and development while being its frequent target. RFA's exclusive reporting in Tibet and the Uyghur Region exposes abuses, forced labor, and crackdowns on religious freedom. In Hong Kong, RFA has endured despite a multitude of pressures as authorities have shuttered independent media and jailed journalists, such as Apple Daily founder Jimmy Lai. These successes have helped RFA build a loyal and growing audience. They have also put RFA and its journalists in Beijing's crosshairs.

Participants of RFA's roundtable included bipartisan Congressional staff, policy experts, technology researchers, civil society representatives, journalists, freedom defenders, and academics, as well as RFA leadership. China's evolving tactics to muzzle individuals on U.S. soil and inhibit transparency, institutional and knowledge gaps, and how artificial intelligence and new technologies factor into suppression were among the chief areas of discussion. *Ideas and recommendations from the session, with several themes emerging, are as follows:*

TNR normalized as niche threat

- TNR is often normalized as a niche threat, mainly affecting select individuals within diaspora groups. However, its damage is much more extensive, as it also targets wider networks such as allies in the community, entire family groups, and fellow activists. It silences Americans, distorts universities and workplaces, constrains independent journalism, and shapes the information and propaganda consumed in the United States and globally.
- Better data to capture TNR's scope and severity is essential, but reporting will remain limited until institutions earn trust with affected expatriate and immigrant communities. Sustained partnerships with community leaders, journalists, and civil society groups are essential to identifying cases and connecting those targeted with protection. Universities are also potential partners with resources and expertise to conduct further research and collect data.
- Engagement with secure, private partners and grantees is another possible solution. These companies can responsibly share actionable threats and select data with appropriate law enforcement and U.S. government agencies.

Effects lasting and difficult to prove—by design

- People targeted by TNR may face years of surveillance, sabotage, intelligence gathering, travel restrictions, and threats or detention directed at relatives and associates. Pressure on family members can force people to self-censor or consider returning home.
- Many incidents are designed to look implausible or inconclusive.

- TNR also uses inducements, such as payment offers, issued passports, permitted family visits, or restored access conditioned on silence or inaction. These incidents go largely unreported as recipients fear being viewed as compromised or suspected of being an informant.
- Many affected communities come from countries where police are instruments of repression. Outreach must therefore take place through trusted community organizations and personal networks. Word of mouth is difficult to measure, but participants viewed it as one of the few credible ways to encourage reporting.

AI and technology accelerating, expanding TNR's scope

- AI lowers the cost while increasing the scale of surveillance, impersonation, harassment, and information operations. Commercial spyware and other intrusive tools can compromise devices and infrastructure used by diaspora communities and dissidents.
- Claims that these capabilities fundamentally transform or displace traditional security threats are often asserted more readily than demonstrated. What is clearer is that, without adequate regulation and oversight, they intensify privacy risks and expand the scope for abuse.
- Participants called for stronger AI governance and tighter controls over the personal data used to train models; export licensing and procurement restrictions on commercial spyware vendors; greater cyber resilience; and programs that provide activists with access to secure tools and trusted networks.
- Participants also noted that such programs generate dependency risks of their own: who supplies the tools, under what terms, who can withdraw access, and what happens when provision lapses or the provider's jurisdiction, ownership, or legal obligations change.

Institutional gaps enable TNR

- China invests heavily in controlling narratives beyond its borders and has used commercial pressure against transnational companies, activists, and diaspora organizations. Law enforcement agencies often lack the training to recognize coercion that crosses jurisdictions or relies on family pressure abroad.
- Participants identified Interpol reform as a priority. Red notices and supporting allegations require stronger screening when submitted by governments with documented patterns of transnational repression.

Legal definitions and accountability remain inadequate

- The lack of a clear and consistently applied legal definition makes TNR difficult to identify, investigate, and prosecute. Traditional national security frameworks often divide conduct among unrelated criminal, cyber, immigration, and foreign-influence authorities.
- Participants argued that U.S. law should define TNR (and possibly establish criminal liability, particularly when coercive acts target U.S. citizens, residents, or people exercising protected rights in the United States).