

Transnational Repression on American College Campuses

Foreign Governments, Student Activism, Academic Freedom, and the Growing Challenge of Campus Safety

American colleges and universities are places where students and scholars are expected to be able to learn, research, debate political ideas, and participate in peaceful civic activity. Yet a growing body of research has documented situations in which foreign governments attempt to extend their influence beyond their borders and pressure people living or studying in the United States.

This phenomenon is commonly referred to as **transnational repression**. It involves governments or their agents using surveillance, intimidation, harassment, threats, coercion, or other forms of pressure against people outside their country in an effort to silence criticism or political activity.

Freedom House has documented transnational repression affecting international students, visiting scholars, faculty members, and members of diaspora communities in the United States. According to its 2024 special report on American campuses, the governments of China, Egypt, India, Rwanda, and Saudi Arabia have all been identified as perpetrators of transnational repression in the United States, while Freedom House has identified 38 governments worldwide that employ such tactics.

What Does Transnational Repression Look Like on Campus?

Transnational repression does not necessarily involve a physical attack. In many cases, the pressure is digital, social, psychological, or indirect.

Students may fear that their political activities are being monitored by authorities in their home countries. Classroom discussions can potentially be reported to foreign officials. Students may receive threats online, while relatives who remain in their home countries may face pressure from authorities.

Foreign governments or their supporters may also attempt to disrupt campus events, intimidate speakers, interfere with student organizations, or discourage students from participating in demonstrations.

Freedom House documented examples involving digital surveillance, online harassment, hacking, threats, physical intimidation, and pressure directed toward family members abroad.

The consequences can extend beyond a single incident. When students believe that their political views could place themselves or their families at risk, they may begin to avoid certain discussions, organizations, classes, or public events. This creates an atmosphere of self-censorship and can affect the fundamental principle of academic freedom.

Chinese Students and the White Paper Protests

China has received particular attention because of the scale of concerns surrounding Chinese government influence and repression abroad.

In 2022, protests erupted across China against restrictive COVID-19 policies and broader restrictions on freedom of expression and assembly. Demonstrators famously held blank sheets of paper, giving rise to what became known as the **White Paper protests**.

The demonstrations also inspired solidarity events among Chinese students and members of the Chinese diaspora studying in the United States.

At George Washington University, students subsequently formed the GW Independent Chinese Student Union, also known as the Torch on the Potomac. At Columbia University, students formed the White Paper Society.

According to Freedom House, some students involved in these activities faced harassment and concerns about surveillance. Some also worried that activism undertaken while studying in the United States could create consequences for themselves or family members if they later returned to China.

Digital communication presents another challenge. Chinese students commonly use WeChat to communicate with family, friends, and members of the Chinese diaspora. Concerns about surveillance can make the platform difficult to use for political organizing.

The problem is not limited to Chinese-language platforms. Social media activity on platforms commonly used in the United States can also expose activists to threats or surveillance.

Other Governments Have Also Been Identified

Although China receives substantial attention in discussions about transnational repression on American campuses, it is not the only government identified in research on the issue.

Freedom House reports that Egyptian and Saudi authorities have been involved in surveillance and pressure directed toward students and scholars abroad. Researchers have also raised concerns involving governments including India, Turkey, Kazakhstan, Rwanda, Iran, and others.

One example described by Freedom House involved a Kashmiri academic and US citizen who reported disruptive behavior at events where she spoke about politically sensitive subjects. She also reported threatening phone calls and police visits involving family members in Indian Kashmir.

Another example involved an online university event featuring Uyghur activist and lawyer Rayhan Asat. Hackers disrupted the presentation and took over her screen.

These incidents demonstrate why transnational repression is broader than a single country's relationship with American universities. Different governments may employ different methods, but the underlying objective can be similar: discouraging criticism, political participation, or academic work that challenges a foreign government's preferred narrative.

The Effect on Academic Freedom

Academic freedom depends upon the ability of students and faculty to discuss difficult subjects without intimidation.

When international students fear that classroom conversations may be monitored, they may avoid participating in discussions involving politics, religion, human rights, democracy, or the policies of their home governments.

Faculty members can face similar pressures. Researchers whose work challenges foreign governments may experience harassment or threats. Some may become reluctant to conduct field research, accept speaking invitations, or continue particular areas of study.

Universities have consequently begun developing guidance for faculty teaching politically sensitive subjects. Some recommendations include allowing anonymous assignments, avoiding unnecessary recording of classroom discussions, informing students about potential risks, and creating alternatives for students who may be uncomfortable participating publicly.

These measures are intended to protect students without preventing universities from teaching controversial subjects.

The Role of Chinese Students and Scholars Associations

Another area of concern involves Chinese Students and Scholars Associations, commonly known as CSSAs.

CSSAs can serve legitimate social and cultural purposes for Chinese students studying abroad. However, US officials and researchers have also raised concerns about relationships between some CSSAs and Chinese government organizations.

Freedom House cites the US Department of State's characterization of the Chinese Communist Party's United Front Work Department as a worldwide network intended to influence communities and elites.

Concerns have arisen when student associations are accused of monitoring other Chinese students, opposing speakers critical of the Chinese government, or mobilizing students in response to campus events.

This creates a difficult challenge for universities. Student organizations have rights to organize and express political views, but universities also have an obligation to protect students from coercion and intimidation.

The appropriate response therefore requires distinguishing ordinary political participation from activities involving coercion, surveillance, threats, or direction from a foreign government.

Universities Have Sometimes Fallen Short

Some American universities have taken steps to recognize transnational repression.

For example, the University of Wisconsin–Madison has established an information guide addressing transnational repression and directing affected individuals toward university resources. Yale has incorporated discussion of the issue into some faculty onboarding activities.

Other universities have publicly supported students who were targeted because of political activity.

But Freedom House also identified cases in which universities responded inadequately or even inadvertently discouraged students from exercising their rights.

In one example, George Washington University initially removed posters criticizing China's hosting of the Olympic Games after complaints that they constituted racial hatred. The university's president later acknowledged that the posters represented political expression rather than racism and apologized for their removal.

In another case, two Chinese students at Yale reportedly wanted to write anonymously about a campus vigil but were unable to do so because of publication rules requiring public bylines.

Such incidents demonstrate the difficulty universities face when attempting to balance campus policies, free expression, student safety, and concerns about foreign intimidation.

The Need for Clear Reporting Mechanisms

One of the major problems identified by Freedom House is the absence of clear and accessible mechanisms for reporting transnational repression.

Without an established process, students and faculty may be forced to approach individual departments, professors, administrators, or campus security personnel who may have little experience with the issue.

This can lead to inconsistent responses.

A student who believes they are being monitored or threatened should not have to determine on their own whether an incident constitutes a national-security issue, a university disciplinary matter, harassment, or a criminal offense.

Universities can instead establish clearly identified reporting systems, explain what happens after a report is submitted, protect the privacy of individuals when appropriate, and provide access to qualified personnel who understand both campus rights and the potential risks associated with foreign-government pressure.

The Role of the Federal Government

The federal government has also begun addressing transnational repression.

The FBI, Department of Homeland Security, Department of Justice, Department of State, and Government Accountability Office have all undertaken initiatives related to foreign interference, transnational repression, or threats from foreign governments.

However, Freedom House notes that government responses have often focused heavily on national security, particularly concerns involving China.

There is an important distinction between addressing foreign-government interference and treating individuals from a particular country as inherently suspicious.

The report specifically warns that policies directed at foreign influence can unintentionally contribute to racism or xenophobia if they cause students or scholars to be viewed primarily as security threats rather than as individuals who may themselves be victims of repression.

The discontinued Department of Justice China Initiative illustrates this tension. The initiative was created to address economic espionage, intellectual-property theft, and unauthorized technology transfers, but critics argued that it contributed to suspicion surrounding Asian American researchers and academics with legitimate connections to China. The initiative was terminated in 2022.

Protecting American Campuses Without Closing Them Off

American universities operate in an international environment. Students, researchers, and faculty members from around the world contribute to American higher education, scientific research, and cultural life.

The challenge is therefore not simply whether universities should have international students or maintain international academic relationships. The more specific question is how universities can remain open and internationally connected while protecting individuals from coercion and intimidation by foreign governments.

Foreign influence and foreign interference are not necessarily the same thing.

A foreign government openly participating in ordinary diplomatic, cultural, or educational exchanges is fundamentally different from a government secretly monitoring students, threatening relatives, intimidating researchers, or attempting to suppress political expression.

Universities need policies capable of recognizing that distinction.

A Responsibility Shared by Universities, Government, and Civil Society

Freedom House recommends that universities create accessible reporting mechanisms, establish clear procedures for handling complaints, protect academic freedom, and provide support to individuals experiencing transnational repression.

Organizations such as Scholars at Risk have also developed programs to protect scholars fleeing repression in their home countries. These programs can include relocation assistance, security guidance, privacy protections, and other measures designed to reduce vulnerability.

Civil society organizations can contribute by documenting incidents, educating universities, training faculty and students, and providing resources to people who face threats.

Government agencies have a role as well, particularly when conduct may constitute a crime or a threat to public safety.

But the responsibility should not fall entirely on the individual being targeted.

A Free Campus Requires Freedom From Coercion

American colleges and universities are intended to be places where people can ask difficult questions, challenge powerful institutions, study controversial subjects, and express political opinions.

That freedom can be undermined not only by domestic censorship but also by foreign governments attempting to reach across international borders.

A student should not have to choose between participating in a university discussion and protecting relatives overseas. A scholar should not have to abandon legitimate research because of threats from a foreign authority. And a university should not have to choose between maintaining international relationships and protecting academic freedom.

The answer is not to isolate American universities from the world.

Instead, universities can establish clearer boundaries: international cooperation can remain welcome, while coercion, surveillance, intimidation, threats, and foreign-government interference in academic life are treated seriously.

Protecting academic freedom ultimately requires protecting the people who exercise it.

Transnational repression presents a complicated challenge because it crosses borders, institutions, technologies, and jurisdictions. But recognizing the problem is an important first step toward ensuring that American campuses remain places where students and scholars can learn, research, organize, and speak freely without fear of retaliation from governments abroad.

<https://freedomhouse.org/report/transnational-repression/2024/addressing-transnational-repression-campus-united-states>