Statement Before the
U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom

Hearing on
"Technological Surveillance of Religion in China"

22 July 2020

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Distinguished Commissioners, fellow panelists, and guests, thank you for inviting me today to speak about the issue of technological surveillance of religion in China.

In recent years, China under Xi Jinping has accelerated the construction of a high-tech surveillance state. As you have already heard this morning, that system has been used to monitor and suppress the freedoms of millions of Chinese citizens -- most notably (but far from exclusively) in Xinjiang, where the U.S. government estimates that well over a million Turkic Muslims and other religious and ethnic minorities have been detained for involuntary re-education and labor.[1] Those not detained are subject to intensive surveillance, in and outside China, as Uyghur diaspora networks and Chinese Muslims on pilgrimage to Mecca are also being brought under CCP monitoring and control.[2]

It is important to understand the internal strategic objectives of the Chinese party-state in constructing such a system. One of the key terms used by leaders of China's Politics & Law system -- its coercive apparatus -- is *fangkong* (防控), which translates to "prevention and control."[3] This is a departure, at least somewhat, from previous Chinese approaches to policing and political security. While Xi's predecessors preferred what they called "stability maintenance," the current leadership has embraced a more preventive vision of social control, encapsulated by the rhetorical and doctrinal focus on *fangkong*. Xi has spent years overhauling the country's domestic security apparatus to pursue this ambition, focusing on intensified surveillance, tracking, and control of citizens' movements; organizational and legal reforms that consolidate party and personal power; and harsh, often pre-emptive punishment for anyone who the party thinks intends to violate the rules.[4]

In 2019, Xi Jinping's remarks to both the Central Politics & Law Commission Work Conference and the Central Party School exhorted cadres to accelerate construction of a "three-dimensional, information-based system of prevention and control for public security."[5] Technology

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[1] U.S. Department of State, *2019 Report on International Religious Freedom* [Xinjiang], https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-report-on-international-religious-freedom/china/xinjiang/; see also Sheena Chestnut Greitens, Myunghee Lee, and Emir Yazici, "Counterterrorism and Preventive Repression: China's Changing Strategy in Xinjiang," *International Security,* Winter 2019-20, pp. 9-47.

[2] Chris Buckley, Paul Mozur, and Austin Ramzy, "How China Turned a City Into a Prison," *New York Times,* 4 April 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/04/04/world/asia/xinjiang-china-surveillanceprison; Eva Dou, "Chinese Surveillance Expands to Muslims Making Mecca Pilgrimage," *Wall Street Journal,*31 July 2018, https://www.wsj.com/articles/chinese-surveillance-expands-to-muslimsmaking- mecca-pilgrimage-1533045703; Uyghur Human Rights Project (UHRP), "The Fifth Poison: The Harassment of Uyghurs Overseas" (Washington, D.C.: UHRP, 2017), https://uhrp.org/docs/The-Fifth-Poison-The-Harrassmentof-Uyghurs-Overseas.pdf.

[3] Parts of this testimony are based on Sheena Chestnut Greitens and Julian Gewirtz, "China's Troubling Vision for the Future of Public Health," *Foreign Affairs* (July 2020), https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2020-07-10/chinas-troubling-vision-future-public-health

[4] Sheena Chestnut Greitens, "Domestic Security in China under Xi Jinping," *China Leadership Monitor*, 1 March 2019, https://www.prcleader.org/greitens

[5] Xi Jinping, "习近平：提高防控能力, 着力防范化解重大风险 保持经济持续健康发展社会大局稳定 [Xi Jinping: Improve Prevention and Control Capabilities; Try to Prevent and Resolve Major Risks; Maintain

plays a central role in this vision. As numerous researchers and human rights advocacy groups have now documented, new technology has been developed and deployed to capture numerous forms of data: millions of facial-recognition-enabled cameras enabled with facial recognition, CCTV systems to capture license plate numbers, fingerprint scanners, wifi sniffers, electricity usage monitors, phone apps that transmit information on user activity, message content, and location, etc.

More important, however, is the *information integration* capacity that this technology provides. China's surveillance platforms combine incoming, real-time streams of technology-generated data with other government-held information on citizens: their workplaces, families, educational and employment background, medical and biometric data, history of access to welfare benefits, previous involvement petitioning or protesting, and more. While different parts of the party-state may have collected such information in the past, China's locally fragmented governance made it hard to amalgamate and use in a timely fashion. Today, technology platforms can quickly integrate these layers of information so that local authorities can assess citizens' risk profiles and direct the security apparatus toward the course of action best able to demobilize that individual -- whether those actions involves offering compensation, exerting pressure on someone's family or friends, or detaining them in advance of an event so they're unable to protest or lodge a petition for redress.

The outbreak of the novel coronavirus in Wuhan in late 2019 put some of the features of this system on display. The party-state intensified its already formidable surveillance apparatus, expanding both technological and human data collection efforts to include health-related indicators, and placing citizens' movements under even closer scrutiny.[6] Local public security authorities helped companies develop new health monitoring apps, which gathered data on individuals' body temperatures, their movements, and their social contacts. App developers, in turn, shared that data with police and other authorities, who merged it with existing databases to facilitate lockdown enforcement.[7] Although these measures emerged initially as a crisis-coping mechanism, many look likely to become permanent.[8]

This system is not as omniscient or seamless as it's sometimes portrayed. Implementation is hampered by problems with bureaucracy and human capital, and journalists should be careful not to

Sustainable and Healthy Economic Development and Overall Social Stability]," 21 January 2019, http://www.qstheory.cn/yaowen/2019-01/21/c_1124021825.htm

[6] Raymond Zhong and Paul Mozur, "To Tame Coronavirus, Mao-Style Social Controls Blanket China," *The New York Times*, 15 February 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/15/business/china-coronavirus-lockdown.html.

[7] Paul Mozur, Raymond Zhong, and Aaron Krolik, "In Coronavirus Fight, China Gives Citizens a Color Code, with Red Flags," *The New York Times*, 1 March March 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/01/business/china-coronavirus-surveillance.html; see also (in Chinese) https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1659147516916399925&wfr=spider&for=pc

[8] Liza Lin, "China's Plan to Make Permanent Tracking on Smartphones Stirs Concern," *Wall Street Journal,* 25 May 2020, https://www.wsj.com/articles/chinas-plan-to-make-permanent-health-tracking-on-smartphones-stirs-concern-11590422497

augment the CCP's deterrent power by portraying these systems as infallible. But building these tech platforms and training people to use them is a high priority for Xi Jinping and the Chinese leadership, and the CCP is actively working to detect and remedy known defects. Future improvement is likely, even if the extent and pace of that improvement are as-yet unknown.

Some of the most serious challenges for religious freedom, however, arise not just from the CCP's treatment of health as a public security issue, but from the medicalization of policing. Official rhetoric consistently describes dissidence as a "political virus," and the CCP's preventive objectives lead it to the metaphor of immunization to describe how the security apparatus should approach politically unreliable individuals. While coercive leaders began using the metaphor generally around 2015,[9] it has been applied most intensively in Xinjiang, where party documents speak of eradicating "ideological viruses" from the population and work teams describe identifying targets for forced re-education as excising "tumors," presumably before they are able to metastasize and grow.[10]

The virus analogy has significant implications. First, the logic of "immunization" suggests to the CCP that regime security depends on targeting and "treating" citizens long *before* they show any symptoms of politically-problematic behavior. It is this logic, therefore, that underpins the mass incarceration and forced re-education of massive numbers of innocent citizens in Xinjiang: what U.S. government officials have described as the largest mass incarceration of an ethnic and religious minority group today and an increasing number of scholars characterize as an attempt to fundamentally overwrite and destroy Uyghur culture and religious practice in the name of "immunizing" against politically risky thought.[11] Moreover, although the party-state frames repressive actions like detention as having the protective, curative intent of a doctor, it is the CCP, not citizens, that decides who is at risk of infection; those alleged to be susceptible have no say in whether they wish to be "treated." The beliefs and interests of the regime supersede individual beliefs and rights.

It's also important to note that recent official rhetoric has extended the "political virus" analogy beyond purely internal politics. China's Hong Kong and Macao Affairs Office has called the Hong Kong protest movement a "malignant virus" and an "infection," which the new National

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[9] "Meng Jianzhu: Qieshi tigao zhengfa jiguan fuwu daju de nengli he shuiping" [Effectively improve the ability and level of political and legal organs to serve the overall situation], *Renmin fayuan bao*, 18 March 2015, at http://www.court.gov.cn/fabu-xiangqing-13840.html

[10] Chris Buckley, "China is Detaining Muslims in Vast Numbers. The Goal: Transformation," New York Times, 8 September 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/08/world/asia/china-uighur-muslim-detention-camp.html; see also (in Chinese)"Dao jiaoyu zhuanhua ban xuexi shi dui sixiang shang huan bing qunzhong de yici mianfei zhuyuan ziliao [Education-through-transformation study is like free hospitalization for the masses who are ideologically ill]," *Hotan Ling Juli,* 10 April 2017, https://read01.com/BL28Bk.html#.XxXCSvK1vOR

[11] "[CECC] Chairs Urge Ambassador Branstad to Prioritize Mass Detention of Uighurs, Including Family Members of Radio Free Asia Employees" (Washington, D.C.: Congressional-Executive Commission on China, 3 April 2018), https://www.cecc.gov/media-center/press-releases/chairsurge-ambassador-branstad-to-prioritize-mass-detention-of-uyghurs

Security Law evidently aims to eradicate.[12] This Commission should take seriously the risk that Beijing will approach Hong Kong, and perhaps even its broader foreign policy, with the same kind of prevention and control approach applied internally, to similarly repressive effect.

China's development of intensive surveillance technology is, in fact, already a global issue. My recent research has shown that China has exported surveillance technology platforms to over 80 countries worldwide (see Figures 1-2 on p. 6), particularly countries that are strategic priorities to China and those that suffer from serious problems with violent crime--leaving them with an unmet demand for public safety solutions that Chinese companies have stepped in to fill.[13] And as the pandemic has spread globally, the CCP has started to actively promote its "prevention and control" approach to health surveillance -- in which public health is tightly linked through technology to policing and coercive power.[14]

The use and export of surveillance technology is subject to very few global regulations,[15] and where international standards exist, they have been written largely by Chinese tech companies.[16] If Chinese firms, bolstered by aid and propaganda from Beijing, can convince enough people that their approach to health surveillance is best-in-class for coping with infectious disease, then COVID -19 will further accelerate existing global reliance on Chinese technology, as well as further global acceptance of its associated model of "prevention and control." Regimes with varying inclinations toward freedom may not have the forethought -- or desire -- to build in protections for data security, privacy, or the protection of civil liberties.

You have already heard from other participants today about a number of policy responses that address the development and use of technological surveillance inside China and in the US-China relationship. These measures are important, and I'd be happy to discuss them. I would also add one other recommendation that I see as central to the struggle for religious freedom and civil liberty worldwide: **The United States urgently needs a comprehensive strategy to address the risks and threats that come from the proliferation of surveillance technology around the world.**

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[12] Helen Davidson, "China Calls Hong Kong Protestors a 'Political Virus,'" *The Guardian,* 6 May 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/06/china-calls-hong-kong-protesters-a-political-virus

[13] Sheena Chestnut Greitens, "Dealing with Demand for China's Global Surveillance Exports," *Brookings Global China Project*, April 2020.

[14] People's Republic of China, "Fighting COVID-19: China in Action," State Council Information Office White Paper, June 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-06/07/c_139120424.htm

[15] "Moratorium call on surveillance technology to end 'free-for-all' abuses: UN Expert," United Nations, 25 June 2019, https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/06/1041231.

[16] Anna Gross and Madhumita Murgia, "China Shows its Dominance in Surveillance Technology," *Financial Times*, 26 December 2019, https://www.ft.com/content/b34d8ff8-21b4-11ea-92da-f0c92e957a96.

This is especially important as countries grapple with COVID-19 and search for global leadership to resolve an ongoing international health crisis.[17] Fortunately, we do not need to reinvent the wheel in figuring out how to make health technology compatible with religious freedom and civil liberties. We have proof-of-concept for an alternative to the PRC's approach in the experiences of the United States' democratic allies and partners in Asia. South Korea and Taiwan, among others, have demonstrated that it is possible to effectively combat a global health crisis without giving up on privacy, civil liberties, and democratic freedoms. Their approaches have still involved some use of surveillance technology, but legislation has carefully circumscribed these measures as limited in scope, temporary, and subject to democratic review (via local government transparency, legislative oversight, judicial review, or some combination of all three). These countries should not have to promote their vision alone; their chances of success will be much greater if they have the support of other democracies, especially the United States.

To do that, the United States needs first to articulate and implement a strategy compatible with American values and American interests. What would first steps in designing such a strategy look like? The Bureau of Commerce, the State Department's International Communications and Information Policy Team, and other relevant agencies should craft a strategy that clearly outlines which forums should set standards for which technologies; what those standards and safeguards should be; how interagency efforts should be organized; and how the US should work with allies, partners, and international organizations to collaboratively but assertively shape a global regulatory environment compatible with liberal democracy. Given widespread apparent demand for Chinese surveillance technology, the strategy should consider how to address U.S. concerns over data privacy, democracy, and technological competition while also addressing the legitimate interests of potential recipient countries. Finally, it should discuss how to handle cases where messaging on surveillance technology may run up against competing policy priorities, such as decreasing crime in Latin America to lower migration pressure on the United States' southern borders. These are complicated questions, which will require careful thinking from a wide range of American policymakers and stakeholders.

I urge the Commission to work with partners in the U.S. government, in the technology sector, in civil society, and around the world, to develop a comprehensive and long-term strategy to address the risks and challenges posed by the proliferation of surveillance technology, in China and worldwide. The potential challenges are serious, and we should not miss this opportunity to identify how American leadership can be deployed most effectively to shape a global equilibrium that favors freedom, now and in the future.

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[17] Carrie Cordero and Richard Fontaine, "Health Surveillance Is Here To Stay," *The Wall Street Journal*, 27 March 2020, https://www.wsj.com/articles/health-surveillance-is-here-to-stay-11585339451; Nicholas Wright, "Coronavirus and the Future of Surveillance," *Foreign Affairs*, 6 April 2020, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2020-04-06/coronavirus-and-future-surveillance.

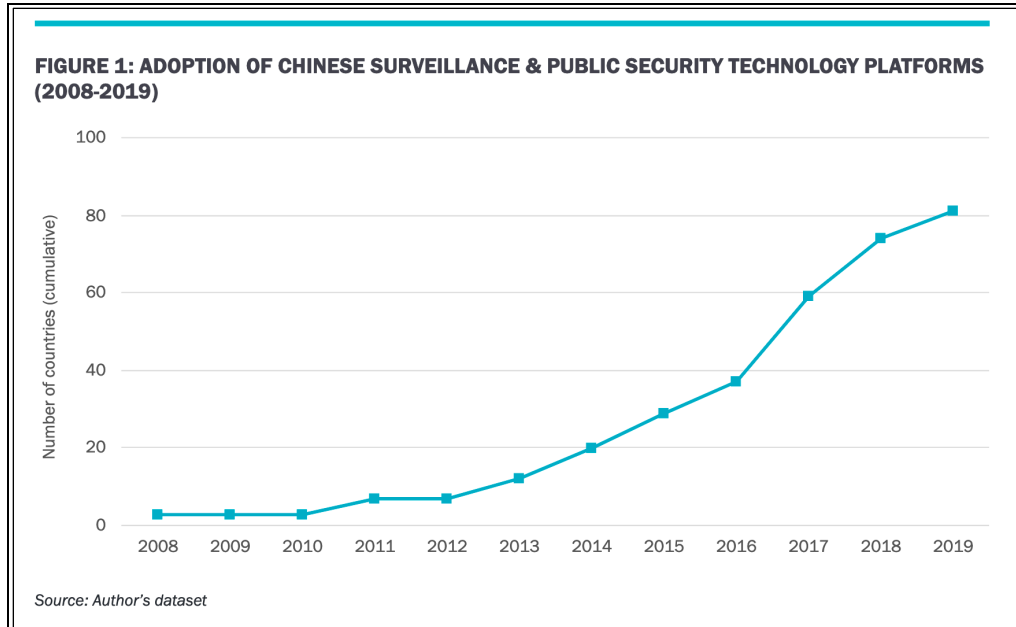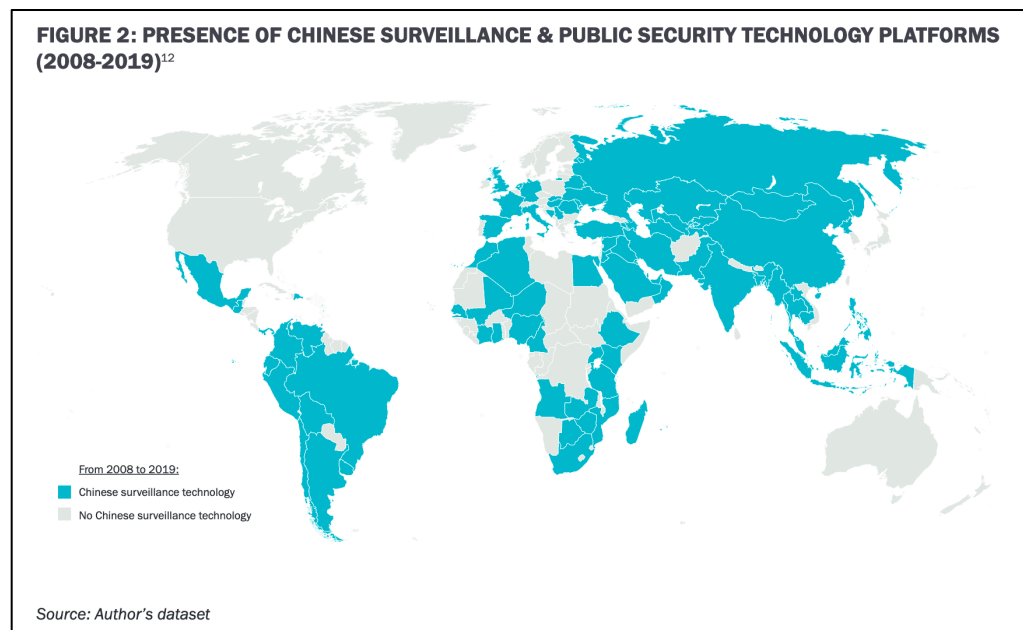**Figure 1: Chinese Public Security Technology Platform Adoptions (2008-18)[18]**

FIGURE 1: ADOPTION OF CHINESE SURVEILLANCE & PUBLIC SECURITY TECHNOLOGY PLATFORMS (2008-2019)

Source: Author's dataset

Figure 2: Locations of Chinese Public Security Technology Platform Adoptions (2008-2019)

FIGURE 2: PRESENCE OF CHINESE SURVEILLANCE & PUBLIC SECURITY TECHNOLOGY PLATFORMS (2008-2019)[12]

From 2008 to 2019:
- Chinese surveillance technology
- No Chinese surveillance technology

Source: Author's dataset

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[18] Both figures reprinted from Sheena Chestnut Greitens, "Dealing with Demand for China's Global Surveillance Exports," *Brookings Global China Project*, April 2020, https://www.brookings.edu/research/dealing-with-demand-for-chinas-global-surveillance-exports/