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*SHORT COMMENTS*

*EU’s Position in Xinjiang Re-education Camps*

*The Future of China - EU Trade Relations and Security Affairs*

*By Alessia Bossi*

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## **EU's position in Xinjiang re-education camps**

### **The future of China-EU trade relations and security affairs**

**By Alessia Bossi**

Over the last few years, the Chinese Government has put the Uighur population through harsh repression. The members of a Muslim Turkic ethnic group have been accused by the Government of Beijing, of separatist ambitions and terrorist attacks.

The Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) has identified 380 suspected detention facilities in the Xinjiang region, where more than one million Uighurs and other Muslim Turkic-speaking residents have been detained. The researchers used satellite images and witness reports classifying the detention facilities, built or expanded since 2017. After denying the existence of the camps, China conveyed saying they were training centers focused on a re-education program, in which no human rights were violated, necessary to alleviate poverty, and fight the threat of extremism. However, due to evidence in chief, it is indisputable that unalienable rights were infringed. On the contrary, the few people who managed to escape the camps have explained they were forced to coercive birth control and subject to continuous threats.

Crucial is the position of the European Union in this matter, due to the political influence conferred from the Belt and Road Initiative and other significant economic relations, many wonder how they will react. With the repression of Tiananmen Square protests in 1989, the EU issued an arms embargo on China that is still in place today. Since then, no other sanctions were given to stop human rights abuses.

During the meeting of the EU - China leaders held on the 14<sup>th</sup> of September, chaired by the President of the European Council Charles Michel, the concerns over China's treatment of minorities in Xinjiang and Tibet were renewed, along with the treatment of human rights defenders and journalists. The EU asked for the presence of independent observers in the re-

gion of Xinjiang and the release of two Canadian citizens as well as a detained Swedish citizen.

On the other hand, China's target was to avoid seeing the EU sided with the United States in an emerging great power contest. Accordingly, President Xi proposed to introduce the four new principles to guide EU - China relations, among them he included peaceful coexistence and openness.

Regarding Xinjiang, Xi counterattacked at EU criticism of human rights in China and eventually offered diplomatic visits to foreign Ambassadors to advance dialogue. Nonetheless, other visits for journalists were arranged in the past, these were condemned as staged and compared with the media trips Germany organized to labor camps at Sonnenburg and Theresienstadt, so as to demonstrate how humane they were.

The summit was concluded with the common agreement of leaders to further discuss these issues at the annual Human Rights Dialogue in Beijing later this year.

On another note, the U.S. Customs and Border Protection officials have prepared orders to block the import of cotton and tomato products from the region of Xinjiang as an accusation of forced labor. Still, the Trump administration has delayed the announcement; undoubtedly this move could create tension between the world's two largest economies. The current Deputy Director of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Zhao Lijian, acted in response by saying "*I think the U.S. cares nothing about human rights.*"

The EU seems to have taken a reactive approach for the sake of an investment agreement and on hold to follow the next move from China. Despite everything, the debate remains open to future decisions for the EU to implement severe measures as a means to safeguard human rights.



Alessia Bossi has graduated from Chinese studies and is now pursuing a MA in International Studies in Rome. She has focused for years on studying languages, such as English, Chinese, German, and Japanese; besides, she is bilingual in Italian and Spanish. Alessia has experience in think tank research in different fields, like nuclear disarmament, EU Policy, Cybersecurity, and Terrorism. In 2020, Alessia specialized in EU - Asia relations in the ChinaMed Business Program concerning business, marketing, and finance. In the same year, she took part in the 9<sup>th</sup> EU Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Consortium conference. She currently works as an EU Policy researcher for Vocal Europe and as a Coordinator for the International Exchanges in the Non-profit organization United Planet, promoting the importance of women's education and youth empowerment.