

Neorealist and Neoliberal Views of an International Event

Posted on July 27, 2022

Neorealism and neoliberal institutionalism offer different but overlapping ways to interpret international events. The original essay applies these approaches to the Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act of 2020, signed into U.S. law on June 17, 2020, and to the sanctions imposed in connection with human-rights abuses in China's Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. The basic comparison should be preserved, but the theories require more precise explanation. Neorealism focuses on anarchy, security, power, relative gains, and the constraints created by the international system. Neoliberal institutionalism accepts anarchy but argues that cooperation can occur when institutions, information, repeated interaction, and mutual interests reduce uncertainty and transaction costs. Neither theory proves the true private motive of a government. The same sanctions can serve human-rights principles, domestic politics, alliance coordination, economic competition, and strategic pressure at once. Theories are analytical lenses that highlight different mechanisms; they should not be used to declare automatically that one interpretation is sincere and the other cynical.

The International Event

The Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act of 2020 established U.S. policy concerning reported mass detention, surveillance, restrictions on religious and cultural practice, and other abuses affecting Uyghurs, ethnic Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, and other Muslim minorities in Xinjiang. The law required reporting and supported sanctions against responsible officials. In July 2020, the U.S. Department of the Treasury imposed Global Magnitsky sanctions on a Chinese government entity and officials in connection with serious human-rights abuse (U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2020). The Chinese government rejected the accusations and characterized its policies as counterterrorism, vocational education, and social stability measures. The dispute therefore involved human rights, sovereignty, national security, economic interdependence, and great-power competition.

Evidence and Human-Rights Context

International analysis should not treat the existence of strategic rivalry as evidence that human-rights concerns are invented. In 2022, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights published an assessment identifying serious concerns regarding arbitrary and discriminatory detention and other violations in Xinjiang, stating that the extent of arbitrary and discriminatory detention may constitute international crimes, particularly crimes against humanity (OHCHR, 2022). China disputed the assessment. A theoretically informed essay should separate the evidence

concerning treatment of Uyghurs from the motives and likely effects of U.S. policy. States may respond strategically to a real abuse; humanitarian concern and power politics can coexist.

Neorealism

Neorealism, associated especially with Kenneth Waltz, begins with the structure of the international system. There is no central government above states capable of guaranteeing their security. States therefore operate under anarchy, rely primarily on self-help, and remain sensitive to the distribution of capabilities. The theory does not claim that every leader is personally aggressive or immoral. It argues that even states with different internal systems face incentives to preserve security and avoid dependence. Great powers pay attention not only to absolute benefit but to relative gains: whether another state gains more and can convert that advantage into future influence.

A Neorealist Interpretation of U.S. Policy

From a neorealist perspective, U.S. action toward Xinjiang can be interpreted within a wider strategic competition with China. By 2020, the two countries were disputing trade, technology, military influence, supply chains, regional order, and diplomatic leadership. Human-rights sanctions could impose reputational and economic costs on Chinese officials and institutions, strengthen U.S. claims to moral leadership, reassure partners concerned about China, and constrain a strategic competitor. The event may also help the United States frame China's domestic governance as an international security and legitimacy issue. Neorealism emphasizes these power effects regardless of whether policymakers also hold genuine moral concern.

Relative Gains and Economic Interdependence

China and the United States benefit from trade and investment, but neorealists argue that interdependence can create vulnerability. A state may worry that commercial ties finance a rival's military capacity, technological development, or diplomatic influence. Sanctions and export controls can be understood as attempts to reduce strategic dependence or deny benefits to entities associated with coercive policy. However, economic restrictions also impose costs on the sender and third parties. Neorealism predicts that states may accept economic loss when leaders believe long-term security or relative position is at stake.

Human Rights as an Instrument of Power

The original essay argues that Washington may use human rights to pressure and discredit China. Neorealism makes this interpretation plausible but does not establish it as the only motive. States often apply principles selectively. A government may criticize abuses by a rival more strongly than

similar conduct by an ally because alliance and security interests shape attention. Selectivity weakens claims of consistency, yet it does not make the criticized abuse unreal. Neorealist analysis asks how moral language functions within competition: Does it build coalitions, justify sanctions, affect reputation, or reduce the opponent's soft power?

China's Neorealist Response

China can also be analyzed through neorealism. It treats external criticism and sanctions as interference in sovereignty and a threat to regime authority. Leaders may fear that accepting foreign conditions on internal policy would create vulnerability and encourage further pressure. Reciprocal sanctions, diplomatic resistance, and efforts to build alternative partnerships can be understood as balancing behavior. China may also use economic leverage to discourage states or companies from supporting criticism. The interaction can create a security dilemma in which each side views its action as defensive and the other's response as aggressive.

Limits of the Neorealist Explanation

Neorealism can explain strategic competition but says less about why some human-rights issues become politically important, why domestic groups advocate sanctions, or why states create legal institutions that constrain their own choices. It may understate ideology, identity, law, public opinion, lobbying, congressional politics, and transnational activism. The Uyghur policy was not produced only by the international distribution of power. Diaspora organizations, human-rights groups, legislators, media reporting, and moral commitments also shaped the policy environment. A complete analysis needs additional levels of explanation.

Neoliberal Institutionalism

Neoliberal institutionalism shares with neorealism the assumption that states are important actors in an anarchic system. It differs in its expectation that cooperation is possible and often rational. International institutions can provide information, monitor commitments, establish rules, reduce bargaining costs, and create repeated interaction. States may pursue absolute gains when institutions reduce fear of cheating and when issues can be linked. The theory does not mean that states are morally benevolent or that markets alone solve conflict. It explains how self-interested states can cooperate under certain conditions.

A Neoliberal Institutional Interpretation

From a neoliberal institutional perspective, U.S. policy can be viewed as an attempt to reinforce international human-rights norms and use law, reporting, sanctions, and coordination to change

incentives. The United States may seek cooperation with allies, international organizations, companies, and civil society to obtain information and impose costs. Sanctions are more effective when several states coordinate and when financial institutions share enforcement standards. Institutions can reduce uncertainty by documenting abuses, establishing definitions, and identifying responsible actors. The goal would not necessarily be immediate regime change; it could be incremental compliance, access for monitors, release of detainees, or changes in policy.

International Human-Rights Institutions

The United Nations human-rights system, treaty bodies, special procedures, and international labor standards provide forums for evidence, criticism, and recommendations. They lack the centralized enforcement power of a domestic government, but they can shape reputation and create common language. OHCHR's Xinjiang assessment illustrates an institutional function: gathering and evaluating information according to international standards. States may dispute the findings, but the institution creates a reference point beyond bilateral accusation. Neoliberal institutionalism highlights how such information can support coordinated action and reduce the ability of states to portray every concern as isolated propaganda.

Sanctions as Institutionalized Policy

Targeted sanctions differ from broad economic embargoes by focusing on individuals, entities, assets, travel, or transactions. The Global Magnitsky framework institutionalizes a process for responding to serious human-rights abuse and corruption across countries. Supporters argue that targeted measures impose costs on responsible actors while limiting harm to ordinary people. Critics question due process, consistency, evidence, and effectiveness. Neoliberal institutional analysis examines whether rules are clear, whether allies coordinate, whether sanctions produce negotiation, and whether monitoring prevents evasion. A policy's humanitarian intention does not guarantee an effective design.

Interdependence and Cooperation

Economic interdependence creates both leverage and incentives for restraint. The United States and China have reasons to cooperate on trade, climate, public health, financial stability, and security, even while competing. Neoliberal institutionalism predicts that issue-specific institutions can preserve limited cooperation despite broader rivalry. Human-rights pressure may be linked with negotiations or separated to prevent total breakdown. The theory also recognizes that high interdependence can make sanctions costly and that companies may resist policies disrupting supply chains. Institutions help manage these conflicts, but they cannot eliminate power differences.

Limits of the Neoliberal Interpretation

The original essay presents neoliberalism as evidence that the United States genuinely seeks only humanitarian improvement and excludes military or economic benefit. That is too simple. Neoliberal institutionalism assumes self-interest, not moral purity. States cooperate and build institutions because doing so can advance their interests. Human-rights norms may be sincere and strategically useful. Institutions may reflect the preferences of powerful states and may be weak when major powers refuse compliance. The theory explains mechanisms of cooperation but does not prove that sanctions will improve conditions or that policymakers lack competitive motives.

Domestic Politics

Both structural theories benefit from attention to domestic politics. The 2020 law received broad support in Congress, reflecting concern that extended beyond one executive administration. Religious freedom advocates, human-rights organizations, diaspora communities, labor concerns, and anti-China strategic views could converge on the same legislation for different reasons. Domestic audiences may reward leaders for appearing firm toward a rival. Business groups may support human-rights goals while opposing measures that disrupt commerce. These pressures influence which tools are selected and how consistently principles are applied.

Constructivist Insight

Although the assignment compares neorealism and neoliberalism, constructivism adds a useful insight. State interests are shaped by identities, norms, and shared meanings, not only material power. The labeling of detention as vocational training, counterterrorism, repression, or crimes against humanity changes the political meaning of the event. International campaigns seek to redefine legitimate conduct. U.S. identity as a defender of religious freedom influences policy claims, while China's emphasis on sovereignty and stability shapes its response. This does not replace the two main theories; it shows what they may overlook.

Evaluating Effectiveness

Theories should generate questions about outcomes. Did the law improve access to information? Did sanctions alter behavior, increase repression, or produce symbolic condemnation without policy change? Did coordination with allies strengthen pressure? Did restrictions affect supply chains or ordinary workers? Did the measures reduce cooperation on unrelated issues? A policy can be morally justified yet strategically ineffective, or strategically useful without improving human rights. Evaluation requires clear objectives and evidence over time.

Sanctions and Unintended Consequences

Sanctions may stigmatize officials, restrict resources, and communicate support to victims. They may also encourage nationalist resistance, reduce dialogue, shift transactions through other channels, or affect people not responsible for policy. Targeted design and humanitarian exemptions reduce but do not eliminate these risks. Neorealists expect the target to adapt and balance; neoliberals focus on coordination, monitoring, and negotiation. Both perspectives warn against assuming that a legal act automatically changes behavior.

Comparison of the Two Approaches

Neorealism asks how the event affects power, security, and relative position. It interprets sanctions as part of strategic competition and expects selective application of moral principles. Neoliberal institutionalism asks whether law, institutions, information, and coordinated incentives can support cooperation and norm enforcement. It sees economic ties as potential foundations for mutual benefit but recognizes problems of cheating and enforcement. Both begin from state interests under anarchy. Their disagreement concerns how much cooperation is possible and how strongly institutions modify power politics.

A Combined Interpretation

The strongest analysis does not require choosing one motive. The United States could act because officials and legislators believed serious abuses were occurring, because domestic groups demanded action, because international norms supported a response, and because pressure served strategic competition with China. China could pursue its Xinjiang policies from stated security concerns, ideological objectives, assimilationist governance, and regime-control interests, while resisting external monitoring because of sovereignty and power concerns. International events are often overdetermined: several causes produce the same action.

Conclusion

The Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act and related sanctions can be interpreted differently through neorealism and neoliberal institutionalism. Neorealism highlights U.S.-China rivalry, relative gains, sovereignty, balancing, and the strategic use of human-rights pressure. Neoliberal institutionalism highlights international law, information, coordinated sanctions, repeated interaction, and the possibility of cooperation to enforce norms. The original essay is correct that the two theories lead attention in different directions, but it is incorrect to equate neoliberalism with purely humanitarian motive or neorealism with proof of hypocrisy. Both approaches analyze interests. A balanced conclusion recognizes credible evidence of serious human-rights concerns while examining how moral

policy operates within great-power competition. Theories improve understanding when they expose mechanisms and assumptions rather than replacing evidence with a predetermined verdict.

References

Keohane, R. O. (1984). *After hegemony: Cooperation and discord in the world political economy*. Princeton University Press.

Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. (2022). *Assessment of human rights concerns in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, People's Republic of China*.

United States Congress. (2020). *Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act of 2020*, Public Law 116-145.

U.S. Department of the Treasury. (2020). *Treasury sanctions Chinese entity and officials pursuant to Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act*.

Waltz, K. N. (1979). *Theory of international politics*. Addison-Wesley.