

Neorealist and Neoliberal Views of an International Event

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Introduction

Neorealism and neoliberal institutionalism provide different but overlapping ways to interpret the Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act of 2020 and related United States sanctions concerning Xinjiang. The Act became law on June 17, 2020 and established U.S. policy responding to reported abuses against Uyghurs and other predominantly Muslim ethnic minorities, including provisions for reporting and sanctions against responsible foreign persons (United States Congress, 2020). A neorealist analysis focuses on how the policy operates within strategic competition between the United States and China, especially through reputation, economic pressure, sovereignty, and relative power. Neoliberal institutionalism focuses instead on how law, information, international norms, coordinated sanctions, and repeated interaction can influence state behavior. Neither theory can establish the private motives of policymakers. Human-rights concern, domestic politics, alliance coordination, and strategic competition can all contribute to the same action. Theories are therefore most useful when they identify mechanisms and constraints rather than when they are used to declare one government's stated motive automatically sincere or automatically hypocritical.

The Human-Rights and Legal Context

The policy debate concerns documented allegations of mass detention, coercive surveillance, restrictions on religion and culture, family separation, and other abuses in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. In 2022, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights published an assessment concluding that serious human-rights violations had occurred and that the extent of arbitrary and discriminatory detention may constitute international crimes, particularly crimes against humanity (OHCHR, 2022). The Chinese government rejected the assessment and has described its policies in terms of counterterrorism, vocational education, poverty reduction, and social stability. A rigorous theoretical analysis should therefore separate two questions. The first concerns the evidentiary record regarding treatment of Uyghurs and other minorities. The second concerns why the United States selected particular policy instruments and what strategic effects those instruments may have. Strategic rivalry does not prove that human-rights concerns are invented, just as documented abuse does not prove that every sanction is motivated only by humanitarian considerations. Both evidence and state interests must be analyzed independently.

A Neorealist Interpretation

Neorealism begins from international anarchy, the absence of a central authority able to guarantee state security. Great powers therefore pay close attention to capabilities, dependence, sovereignty, and relative gains. From this perspective, U.S. sanctions connected with Xinjiang can be interpreted within a wider competition involving trade, advanced technology, military influence, supply chains, diplomatic leadership, and regional order. Human-rights measures can impose reputational and economic costs, strengthen coalition-building with partners, and constrain selected Chinese officials or entities even when they also express genuine moral concern. China's response can likewise be understood in structural terms. Beijing treats outside sanctions and criticism as interference in sovereignty and may resist concessions that could create vulnerability to future external pressure. Reciprocal sanctions, economic leverage, and efforts to develop alternative partnerships can therefore function as balancing behavior. Neorealism does not require assuming that human rights are irrelevant; it asks how the issue becomes embedded in competition over power and political autonomy between major states.

A Neoliberal Institutional Interpretation

Neoliberal institutionalism accepts that states operate under anarchy but argues that cooperation is possible when institutions reduce uncertainty, provide information, establish rules, and create repeated interactions. From this perspective, the Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act can be understood as part of an effort to formalize expectations and use reporting, targeted sanctions, and coordination to influence incentives. International institutions also matter because they create reference points that go beyond bilateral accusation. The OHCHR assessment, treaty bodies, special procedures, and other human-rights mechanisms collect information and apply legal or normative standards even though they lack the enforcement capacity of a domestic government. Targeted sanctions frameworks can similarly institutionalize procedures for restricting individuals or entities accused of serious abuses. Neoliberal institutionalism does not assume that participating states are altruistic. States create and use institutions because rules, information, and coordinated action can advance their interests. The theory therefore allows humanitarian objectives and strategic advantage to coexist, while focusing analytical attention on whether institutions actually improve monitoring, coordination, compliance, and bargaining.

Interdependence, Sanctions, and Unintended Effects

Economic interdependence complicates both theoretical perspectives. China and the United States remain connected through trade, finance, technology, and global supply chains even while competing strategically. Neorealists emphasize that dependence can become a vulnerability when one side

controls critical markets, technology, or financial channels. Neoliberal institutionalists emphasize that repeated economic interaction can create incentives for rules and negotiated restraint. Sanctions sit directly between these logics. They can communicate condemnation, restrict targeted actors, and encourage companies or allies to change behavior, but they can also produce adaptation, retaliatory measures, supply-chain costs, or reduced diplomatic contact. As of 2026, the Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act remained part of the U.S. legal framework for sanctions and reporting concerning Xinjiang, demonstrating the institutional persistence of the policy beyond one administration (OFAC, 2026). Effectiveness should therefore be measured rather than assumed. Important questions include whether targeted restrictions alter official behavior, improve access to information, change corporate sourcing, strengthen coordination, or instead produce symbolic condemnation with limited policy change.

Domestic Politics and the Limits of Structural Theories

Neither neorealism nor neoliberal institutionalism fully explains why Xinjiang became salient in U.S. domestic politics or why particular tools gained support. Congress, executive agencies, human-rights organizations, diaspora communities, religious-freedom advocates, labor concerns, business interests, and strategic competition with China all influence policy. The same legislation can attract support from actors who share an outcome but not a motive. Constructivist analysis adds another dimension because labels such as “counterterrorism,” “vocational education,” “repression,” and “crimes against humanity” shape how the issue is understood and which responses appear legitimate. These competing descriptions are not merely rhetorical accessories; they are attempts to define the meaning of the event. Structural theories remain valuable, but they can flatten governments into unitary actors and understate how norms, identities, lobbying, public opinion, and institutional procedures affect policy selection. A complete interpretation should therefore use neorealism and neoliberal institutionalism as complementary lenses while recognizing that domestic and ideational factors help explain the content and timing of state behavior.

Conclusion

The Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act and related sanctions can be interpreted through both neorealist and neoliberal institutional perspectives without reducing the event to one hidden motive. Neorealism highlights strategic rivalry, sovereignty, relative gains, economic leverage, and the use of reputational pressure within U.S.-China competition. Neoliberal institutionalism highlights reporting, international norms, information, legal frameworks, coordinated sanctions, and the possibility that institutions can alter incentives under anarchy. The documented human-rights evidence should remain analytically separate from speculation about policymaker motives. OHCHR’s 2022 assessment identified serious violations in Xinjiang, while China rejected those findings and defended its policies; the U.S. law

continues to provide a legal basis for sanctions and reporting in 2026 (OHCHR, 2022; OFAC, 2026). The most balanced theoretical conclusion is that moral concern and strategic competition are not mutually exclusive. International policy often reflects several causes at once, and theory is most useful when it clarifies how power, institutions, domestic politics, and norms interact rather than replacing evidence with a predetermined judgment.

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