TRANSNATIONAL ADVOCACY NETWORKS AND UYGHUR RIGHTS IN THE REGIONAL CONTEXT OF TÜRKİYE

[Araştırma makalesi / Research Article]

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Abstract

Uyghurs are making extensive efforts to inform the international community in order to draw attention to the systematic human rights violations in East Turkestan. However, the Chinese government's oppressive control mechanisms, intense censorship policies, and diplomatic pressures applied at the global level greatly limit these efforts. In order to overcome these obstacles, Uyghur activists adopt a decentralized, flexible, and security-focused organizational model; thus, they try to avoid direct intervention by China. Transnational advocacy networks (TANs) constitute both the theoretical and practical basis of this process. Turkey, in particular, provides a strategic platform for Uyghurs to make their voices heard by international organizations and the public, with its position as a bridge between the East and the West. This article aims to analyze the structure of Uyghur rights advocacy, the persistent obstacles it faces, and the strategic adaptation mechanisms it has developed against oppressive environmental conditions, based on the TANs framework. In this context, the study aims to make an original contribution to both international relations theory and human rights advocacy.

Keywords: Transnational Advocacy Networks, Uyghur Advocacy, Human Rights Advocacy, Türkiye, China.

ULUSÖTESİ SAVUNUCULUK AĞLARI VE TÜRKİYE'NİN BÖLGESEL BAĞLAMINDA UYGUR HAKLARI

Öz

Uygurlar, Doğu Türkistan'da sistematik bir biçimde süregelen insan hakları ihlallerine dikkat çekmek amacıyla uluslararası kamuoyunu bilgilendirmeye yönelik kapsamlı bir çaba içerisindedir. Ancak Çin hükümetinin baskıcı kontrol mekanizmaları, yoğun sansür politikaları ve küresel düzeyde uyguladığı diplomatik baskılar, bu çabaları büyük ölçüde sınırlamaktadır. Uygur aktivistleri, bu engelleri aşmak için merkezi olmayan, esnek ve güvenlik odaklı bir örgütlenme modelini benimsemekte; böylece Çin'in doğrudan müdahalesinden kaçınmaya çalışmaktadırlar. Ulusötesi savunuculuk ağları (Transnational Advocacy Networks – TANs), bu sürecin hem teorik hem de pratik temelini oluşturmaktadır. Özellikle Türkiye, Doğu ile Batı arasındaki köprü konumuyla, Uygurların seslerini uluslararası kuruluşlara ve kamuoyuna duyurabilmeleri açısından stratejik bir platform sunmaktadır. Bu makale, TANs çerçevesinden hareketle Uygur hakları savunuculuğunun yapısını, karşılaştığı kalıcı engelleri ve baskıcı çevre koşullarına karşı geliştirdiği stratejik uyum mekanizmalarını analiz etmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Bu bağlamda çalışma, hem uluslararası ilişkiler teorisine hem de insan hakları savunuculuğuna özgün bir katkı sunmayı hedeflemektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Ulusötesi Savunuculuk Ağları, Uygur Savunuculuğu, İnsan Hakları Savunuculuğu, Türkiye, Çin.

Introduction

Transnational Advocacy Networks (TANs) are comprised of activists, academics, and organizations across borders. Activists from these networks collaborate to raise global

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issues related to social, political, and environmental sustainability (Smith 3). By bringing together people and organizations from all over the world to achieve a common goal, TANs have the potential to raise awareness among policymakers and turn this into a worldwide movement. Thanks to their ability to transcend national borders, they play an important role in advocacy in a wide range of areas, especially human rights violations and environmental issues.

Introduced by Keck and Sikkink (1-3), transnational advocacy networks theory explains how non-state actors organize to expose and prevent human rights violations. The aim of the theory is to examine the ways in which non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and diaspora groups use information, symbolic, leverage, and accountability politics to ensure that the voices of marginalized communities are heard around the world. However, advocacy organizations that carry out these efforts have to cope with several obstacles due to the power of states with global lobbying capabilities, such as China.

In terms of implementing these methods on the ground, key institutions such as the World Uyghur Congress (WUC), Amnesty International (AI), Human Rights Watch (HRW) and the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) have documented the mass detention, forced labor, cultural erasure, and religious oppression of Uyghurs. The human rights violations exposed by these organizations have contributed significantly to the TANs' advocacy of the Uyghur cause within the scope of their information policies (URL-3; URL-4; URL-12).

Zenz (34) and the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ) view transnational advocacy networks as essential tools to counter China's propaganda and disinformation efforts. According to (Rolland), these networks are trying to refute the claims in the Chinese government's biased narratives and present various pieces of evidence to raise awareness of the issue around the world. To achieve this, they make public official documents obtained through satellite imagery, witness testimonies, and leaks. However, these efforts by TANs are subject to significant obstacles, such as censorship and economic pressures. In particular, states with strong economic ties to China often restrict these advocacy efforts because they are concerned about their diplomatic and commercial relations with Beijing. Through economic sanctions as well as trade dependencies alongside diplomatic influence the Chinese government effectively reduces the influence and reach of TANs through suppressing narratives it finds objectionable.

In this aspect, Türkiye also becomes a significant case study within TAN theory. While TAN majorly speaks about the importance of non-state actors, the engagement with diaspora populations and civil society organizations shows in Türkiye the effect of regional factors on global activism. Historical, cultural, and religious ties link the country to the Uyghur people, thus setting it in the position to hold a critical site for advocatory actions. The Uyghur diaspora in Türkiye has been involved in the organization of protests, conferences, and other initiatives concerning the raising of public awareness. First-generation leaders like İsa Yusuf Alptekin and Mehmet Emin Buğra prepared the ground for the activism of the diaspora community while modern organizations and digital technologies have consolidated the position of Türkiye as a node in transnational Uyghur advocacy (Kuşçu 144-147).

This article argues that TAN theory provides a robust framework for analyzing the global methods so far implemented for Uyghur advocacy while considering the complex regional dynamics in Türkiye. The core principles of TAN theory are applied in this study to investigate how non-state actors use resources and influence public discourse in their attempts to challenge authoritarian opposition. Moreover, the case of Türkiye is a relevant example of the role that the local context has on how transnational advocacy approaches are implemented and their effectiveness. In this respect, the article attempts to contribute

to adding to the literature on TANs by researching their potential for effectively addressing issues of human rights violations in the context of highly restricted contexts. Based on these grounds, the study assesses the applicability of TAN methods within the context of Türkiye using literature reviews and case study approaches.

1. Core Elements of TAN Theory

TANs deploy particular approaches to advance human rights throughout the globe. The networks addressing Uyghur concerns modify their methods through regional factors to sustain their work despite government opposition. According to Keck and Sikkink, TANs represent a helpful model for exploring worldwide collective action between civil society entities (24). TANs focus on four main methods: *information politics, symbolic politics, leverage politics, and accountability politics.* Acting through these approaches, advocacy networks can help communities get heard who normally do not gain attention. Advocacy networks conduct global work to develop human rights standards alongside enforcing responsibility on governments and large organizations.

Information politics focuses on gathering truthful measurements of human rights violations and distributing this authentic proof to show that government statements about the situation are untruthful. Uyghur advocacy groups provide evidence from several sources, including released government documents combined with survivor accounts alongside satellite imagery data. For example, the *China Cables* investigation presented proof through obtained secret documents from Chinese Communist Party (CCP) officials. The internal procedures of the detention facilities in East Turkestan emerged through papers obtained by investigators at ICIJ (URL-13). The findings have been corroborated with satellite imagery from the ASPI to serve as solid proof of the forced detentions, cultural repression, and systematic victimization of the Uyghur people (URL-4).

Moreover, by running digital campaigns, international conferences, and fostering collaboration with foreign media, diaspora groups like the WUC have significantly helped to spread this knowledge. While the digital space works to support Uyghur activism, it also promotes a united national identity that resists narratives of division and instead focuses on cultural resilience (Kuşçu 153). These activities serve two essential purposes. Firstly, they draw attention to the widespread human rights violations in East Turkestan. Secondly, they assist in discrediting China's tightly coordinated disinformation campaign. These types of actions are set to challenge the Chinese narrative on its re-education camps, which are indeed the network of detention camps where Uyghurs are compelled to undergo indoctrination and labor as part of the advertised counter-extremism campaign, as vocational training centers meant to prevent extremism (Zenz, 13).

The Uyghur advocacy networks use the evidence in the framework of universal standards of human rights to effectively articulate their cause as being of global concern, founded on largely accepted premises of freedom, justice, and human dignity. Such a strategy contrasts sharply with the portrayal espoused by China, setting what is occurring in East Turkestan as a domestic matter. Roberts (199-235) asserts that such use of universally recognized language of human rights not only serves to counter Beijing's struggles for discursive dominance but also to give greater credibility to Uyghur claims, grounding them in the very same principles established through international instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Through the application of this framework, advocacy networks turn out to effectively employ pressure, engage the international civil society, and receive support by demonstrating credible evidence regarding violations to different policymakers.

Symbolic politics relies on powerful imagery, stories, and cultural symbols to create emotional resonance and the development of common international bonds. The testimony

of survivors and the theme of cultural destruction have been some of the most powerful representations of resistance by the Uyghur advocacy networks. This is well evidenced in the HRW report, where mosques are systematically destroyed—representing erasure of Uyghur religious identity— which has a powerful impact on audiences in both Islamic and secular societies (URL-9).

The symbolic narratives of the Uyghur people are also expanded through cultural events, protests, and exhibitions of Uyghur art and traditions arranged by diaspora groups. Such types of measures help in preserving the cultural heritage and at the same time put the crisis in a proper perspective to make it more understandable to a wide range of international audiences. However, symbolic politics often succeeds or fails based on specific regional contexts. For example, while reports of cultural genocide carry immense power in the western democracies, they might have to be rewritten in a way that takes their context into consideration, in order for them to resound with the Muslim-majority countries because of shared religious values which immediately create a connection between people (Maizland).

Leverage politics focuses on the mobilization of the influential actors in governments, international organizations, and multinational corporations that put pressure on the states violating human rights. The Uyghur advocacy networks have leveraged this avenue to impress certain sanctions and legislative initiatives in recent years. The enactment of the *Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act of 2020* by the United States marked a milestone (URL-5). It allowed for the imposition of sanctions against Chinese officials responsible for human rights violations in East Turkestan. Moreover, the *Uyghurs for Sale* report showed how there is forced labor involved in global supply chains, while pressuring brands to disassociate themselves with firms responsible for such violations. Examples like these indicate how similar initiatives lead to campaigns on corporate accountability (Xu et al.).

In this context, diaspora groups become important players through lobbying of policymakers, working together with international organizations, and organizing demonstrations to raise awareness of human rights violations in East Turkestan. Such initiatives are particularly visible in locations where Uyghur diaspora organizations interact with international advocacy networks to increase their visibility and to push for particular measures such as sanctions or import restrictions. On the other hand, investments from China into the infrastructure and development under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) bear great financial weights of burden; economic dependencies do exist, and quite often, this economic lever pulled by China turns the recipient states toward never speaking loudly about internal Chinese policies just for not worsening bilateral relationships with a prospect of losing financially aiding a great partner like China (Schuman). Such situations highlight this as an obstacle in making use of Uyghur advocacy networks within those effective politics, signifying a set of broader structural problems because of China's preeminence on the globe economically. That being so, advocacy networks actually must initiate seeking other ways, considering the geopolitical and economic reality established by new international relationships across the world.

The *accountability politics* is the theory of legal instruments and the role of multilateral advocacy in keeping the states accountable for their human rights violations. The Uyghur advocacy networks have submitted to the International Criminal Court (ICC) and the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) substantial amounts of evidence of genocide and crimes against humanity. In spite of such challenges—considering that China does not engage with the ICC, and given its influence in various multilateral forums—these efforts are very important to sustain international attention and keep the Uyghur crisis in the public domain. Therefore, the initiatives are critical to keep the global spotlight on the Uyghur crisis (URL-16). Their efforts are significant in keeping the Uyghur cause visible in international relations, as it points to human rights violations in China.

2. Global Analysis of TANs and Uyghur Rights Advocacy

The serious human rights violations occurring in East Turkestan receive attention in the academic world. In his most prominent work, (Byler) examines China's high-tech camp system in East Turkestan. Based on ten years of field research and thousands of document reviews, the study reveals how technologies such as facial recognition, voice recognition, and smartphone tracking systems are profiling Uyghurs on the grounds of *preliminary crimes* and depriving them of their freedom. The author tells the stories of real people in the camps, such as Vera (a Uyghur student from the US), Qelbinur (a camp teacher), and Adilbek (a Kazakh farmer), and provides striking examples of how surveillance technologies have encroached on the lives of individuals. This work reveals how the Chinese state carries out *social engineering* through digital infrastructure and private companies.

To make the world aware of China's such assimilation policies, Uyghur rights advocacy networks have achieved substantial development through information sharing combined with widespread allied support platforms and grassroots connectivity efforts. China undermines advocacy progress by employing diplomatic counteractions along with spreading misleading information combined with threats of economic pressure. The East Turkestan independence movement originates significantly from Uyghur communities who live outside China, particularly in the United States and Europe. The groups actively maintain worldwide recognition about the situation and continually pressure policymakers beyond numerous barriers. Through meetings with policymakers and protests, they help build support for the Uyghur cause. They force governments and international bodies to respond to the crisis with their ongoing advocacy.

TANs have been very effective at speaking out for the Uyghur community. One example of this is how they were able to bring to light the widespread violations going on in East Turkestan. These efforts have successfully revealed the forced labor practices that come with detaining Uyghurs, which has caused global companies to rethink their supply chain strategies. As an example, human rights groups that are part of the *End Uyghur Forced Labor* initiative effectively got the public and even corporations to take action for remarkable results (URL-8). They did this by naming and shaming more than 80 well-known international brands that were linked to East Turkestan's forced labor practices. The U.S. has passed the *Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act*, which bans goods that are linked to forced labor in the East Turkestan. This is one of the policies that came out of the campaign. The United Kingdom has proposed legislation that could fine companies that do not try to prevent forced labor in their supply chains. The European Parliament also issued a non-binding resolution in 2022, which urged all EU member states to prohibit imports manufactured using forced labor (Maizland). Those examples demonstrate the effect of TAN leverage in political contexts.

By utilizing digital platforms, the Uyghur crisis has received increased attention as advocacy networks have used these platforms to bypass the constraints of traditional media. Social media, webinars, and online petitions have been utilized by Uyghur activists living beyond their homeland to reach out to global audiences and maintain a consistent narrative related to human rights violations. Organizations like the WUC and Uyghur Human Rights Project (UHRP) have utilized the networks to coordinate their efforts and make international partnerships with NGOs that advocate for human rights, labor unions, and faith-based organizations (URL-13; URL-21). For instance, Franken (12) notes that these digital methods are important in keeping the oppression of the Uyghurs in the public eye, considering the increasing attempts by the Chinese government to suppress any form of dissent and control information.

Diaspora groups have pursued a systematic symbolic politics to raise the prominence of the

Uyghur issue in international debate. One important vector of comprehension is given by the testimony of survivors. Evidence given before international human rights bodies has described personal and communal unease stemming from the oppression conducted by China. This, in turn, serves to foster claims of legitimacy for cross-border advocacy (URL-17). Furthermore, diaspora groups also work with other marginalized groups and human rights organizations to generate intersectional coalition groups, thus enhancing their influence and resource availability. The UHRP has collaborated with numerous human rights organizations to strengthen their advocacy efforts and draw attention to the effects of repression on the Uyghur population around the world (URL-20).

In Europe, Uyghur diaspora organizations have collaborated with allies to persuade countries to speak out against China's actions, including some sanctions from the European Union. But the attempt to build up advocacy in Europe is difficult due to the region's economic reliance on China. Germany and other countries that have strong trade relations with China have been slow to take strong steps to call out China over human rights violations. This is a clear example of the limitations of leverage politics in areas with high economic dependencies (Rolland 133).

3. Türkiye's Role in TAN and Regional Dynamics

Although transnational advocacy networks operate to bring solutions to or mitigate systemic human rights violations, methods often significantly differ with reference to at least some special regional contexts. Türkiye represents an important illustration for examining the integration of international TAN frameworks within unique cultural, political, and economic environments, offering opportunities for advocacy related to the Uyghur community. While Türkiye does not operate as a TAN actor within the traditional framework, the policies implemented by the state exert a considerable indirect impact on the functioning of TANs located within its territory.

Türkiye affords a relatively stable environment for Uyghur diaspora organizations, facilitating the execution of TAN methods, especially in the domains of information and symbolic politics. In parallel, the Turkish government has enacted measures to enhance advocacy initiatives for the Uyghur population. Turkish officials openly criticized China's treatment of the Uyghurs several times, positioning the issue in terms of shared culture and religion. For instance, the Turkish Foreign Ministry in February 2019 described detention camps as *a great shame for humanity* and called on China to close them (URL-7). Also, in March 2021, Turkish officials told Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi during discussions that Türkiye was sensitive about the Uyghur issue. This really placed Türkiye into an ongoing interaction with human rights issues in East Turkestan (URL-1). This relationship between the Uyghur diaspora organizations and Turkish civil society also reflects the potential of localized support to reinforce international advocacy campaigns.

In consequence, it will not be wrong to argue that Türkiye functions as a hub for the mobilization of Uyghur organizations, bolstered by the efforts of Turkish non-governmental organizations and grassroots initiatives. Türkiye has long been seen as the natural ally because of its shared language and cultural heritage. Uyghur diaspora organizations are able to emotionally connect with the predominantly Muslim population of Türkiye by framing their issue as one of cultural and religious cohesion in addition to human rights. The organization of public demonstrations and the community support in Türkiye, especially during notable Islamic occasions like Ramadan, have created a strong foundation for Uyghur advocacy (G.K. Ercilasun and K. Ercilasun 159, 161).

These activities are closely aligned with TAN's methods in information and symbolic political engagement. Diaspora groups in Türkiye coordinated protests to draw attention to the human rights violations in East Turkestan. For example, at a rally in Istanbul on October

1, 2023, Uyghur demonstrators demanded that the international community address China's human rights violations and called for a protest against Chinese rule (URL-6). Similarly, Uyghur groups held a protest outside the Chinese consulate in Istanbul on July 26, 2023, to mark the eighth anniversary of the Elishku massacre. Uyghur activists in Istanbul staged a protest when Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi visited Türkiye (URL-18). This perfect timing has brought the voice of the Uyghur community to the attention of the global media. Türkiye's unique position as a bridge between East and West gives Uyghurs a platform to spread their message to a wider audience.

In the context of the TAN theory, civil society in Türkiye has made significant contributions to the world in terms of making the Uyghur cause known. For example, the Humanitarian Relief Foundation (IHH) has prepared and published a report, including the testimonies of those who witnessed the Chinese oppression and human rights violations such as forced labor, cultural oppression, and mass detentions in East Turkestan (URL-14). This document, together with additional advocacy initiatives, is intended to increase global awareness and stimulate action concerning China's policies in the region. By framing the Uyghur cause as one of moral and religious importance, İHH effectively mobilizes Türkiye's predominantly Muslim population while forging partnerships with a variety of international human rights organizations.

Besides these, Turkish NGOs prepared various cultural activities in order to support and promote the history of the Uyghurs for countering the Chinese cultural assimilation policies against the Uyghurs. A very important event in this respect was the Week of Uyghur Culture in Istanbul in 2019, which consisted of traditional Uyghur music and art exhibitions with cultural panels depicting the richness of the Uyghur tradition and current challenges to their cultural identity (URL-24). The symbolic actions highlighted here point out the significance of cultural protection while simultaneously enhancing the emotional resonance of Uyghur advocacy, thus gaining public support both domestically in Türkiye and on an international scale. Organizations including the East Turkistan National Awakening Movement (ETNAM) and the East Turkistan Education and Solidarity Association (ETESA) have utilized Türkiye as a venue for organizing protests, cultural initiatives, and media engagement, thus raising global awareness of the Uyghur crisis and advancing their narrative on the international stage (URL-22).

The activities of Uyghur diaspora organizations in Türkiye conform to the methods employed by TANs, including information politics, symbolic politics, leverage politics, and accountability politics. In relation to information politics, the organizations representing the Uyghur community in Türkiye closely work with international networks in the systematic documentation and dissemination of evidence of human rights violations in East Turkestan. Extensive reports, testimonies, and other credible evidence have been presented to bodies like the United Nations, thereby effectively countering China's campaign of disinformation and reflecting the ongoing crisis.

Equally, symbolic politics forms the basis for the role of Türkiye as an advocacy center, through which Uyghur organizations organize cultural events in the country, protests, public demonstrations, and rallies for the preservation of the Uyghur heritage together with the humanitarian dimensions of the crisis. These events inspire solidarity among foreign observers by reflecting the continuous character of Uyghur identity. The symbolic portrayal of Uyghur history and culture stimulates an emotional involvement that strengthens the effect of advocacy campaigns (Kuşçu 144).

Türkiye also serves as a notable arena for leverage politics, where widespread protests and media campaigns impact international actors to respond to the Uyghur situation with increased immediacy. The initiatives increase the prominence of Uyghur advocates, which

maintains attention on human rights violations in East Turkestan in the international discourse. The creation of a secure and supportive environment for Uyghur diaspora organizations in Türkiye enables their participation in various advocacy mechanisms designed to promote accountability regarding China's policies. Uyghur organizations in Türkiye support international investigations into China by collecting evidence of human rights violations. For example, advocacy networks, including organizations like ETAES, collaborate to present evidence from reports and witness testimonies to relevant institutions to implement international legal sanctions against China.

Despite those achievements, Türkiye's economic dependence on China has considerably increased, especially in recent years. This dependency can be explained by the serious deficits in its foreign trade balance, investments and infrastructure projects originating from China. While Türkiye's imports from China reached approximately $45 billion in 2023, its exports to China remained at $3.3 billion, which caused a serious trade deficit for the country (Uluyol). In addition, within the scope of the BRI, Türkiye has become a critical hub for China's transportation networks between Europe and Asia, and the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway project was supported by Chinese financing (Çolakoğlu). In financial terms, the $6 billion swap agreement between Türkiye's Central Bank and the Central Bank of China in 2021 provided support for foreign exchange reserves in the short term, but it increased Türkiye's economic dependence on China (URL-19).

All these economic relations have caused Türkiye to soften its stance against China, especially on the Uyghur issue, and have shown that economic interests are becoming increasingly decisive in foreign policy decisions. Türkiye's economic dependence on China has also seriously limited Ankara's capacity to implement TAN strategies. In 2018, China implicitly offered economic support to Türkiye in exchange for silence on East Turkestan, while Germany linked its aid to human rights improvements, leaving Türkiye caught between conflicting pressures (URL-25). Such examples show that economic interests play a critical role in determining Türkiye's political stance towards China, that steps that would damage economic relations are avoided, and that as a result, Türkiye's traditional sensitivity on the Uyghur issue is gradually weakening.

In summary, although its recently increased economic dependence, it can be argued that Türkiye is a notable example of the TANs' effectiveness in the international arena. Its long-standing national, religious and cultural ties with the Uyghurs make it a center for advocacy work for Uyghur rights. This ideal environment allows Turkish advocacy organizations such as ETNAM and ETESA to reach people all over the world. The protests, cultural events and media campaigns organized by these organizations help to raise awareness of the Uyghur issue on a global scale and create a common awareness on the issue. Thanks to the opportunities offered by Türkiye, which is a bridge between the East and the West, advocacy networks have the advantage of developing their work in different cultural and political contexts.

These achievements of Uyghur advocacy networks demonstrate that obstacles to advocacy activities, such as the political system, level of economic development, and even cultural context, can be overcome by exploring new paths. TANs now focus on multinational corporations, use digital tools, and decentralize to combat censorship and political restrictions. As observed in the Turkish example, it can be said that TAN actors have a high capacity to affect change, are resilient to pressure, and are able to effectively defend human rights even under difficult conditions.

4. China's Counter-Strategies

Although TANs actively campaign for the Uyghur community on international platforms, they face great challenges due to China's methods of disinformation, censorship, economic pressure and diplomatic retaliation against these efforts. China uses its influence around the world to discredit activists, silence critical voices and deter international actions that defend Uyghur human rights.

In fact, by implementing these strategies, China is also trying to instill in the world the perception that Uyghurs are not being oppressed as is thought, but rather are being educated to integrate them into society. In this context, it uses state-controlled media and related organizations to shape public opinion in Western societies and influence global discourse by exploiting the values of democracy. These initiatives are aimed at silencing criticism and creating perceptions aligned with Beijing's interests. (URL-15).

In the same context, while China bans platforms such as Twitter and Facebook, it ironically continues its propaganda through these platforms and sends global messages (URL-23). While the world brings up the human rights violations in East Turkestan, China emphasizes that this is an internal matter and explains the reasons for its practices against the Uyghurs as combating extremism and ensuring social stability. So, the government tries to convince the world that the Uyghur advocacy groups are politically driven or biased.

Another critical instrument in China's arsenal is economic coercion. Thanks to its position as a prominent trade partner, Chinese government influences state and non-state actors to avoid supporting Uyghur advocacy. For example, nations dependent on Chinese investments via the BRI frequently refrain from condemning human rights violations in East Turkestan. This stance creates a negative impact on collective advocacy endeavors. Additionally, multinational corporations with large investments in the Chinese market are hesitant to get involved with campaigns that defend the Uyghur rights. This shows how limited the power of transnational advocacy networks is in areas where economies are linked (Rolland 96).

The diplomatic responses from China introduce additional complexities to the advocacy efforts concerning the Uyghur population. Governments advocating for the rights of the Uyghur population frequently encounter economic sanctions or limitations on their bilateral relations. For instance, following the imposition of sanctions by the European Union on Chinese officials involved in the situation in East Turkestan, China responded by sanctioning European parliamentarians and academics, leading to conveying a distinct message to other potential supporters of Uyghur advocacy (Bachulska 4).

China makes extensive use of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), a diplomatic instrument that helps it to assert its demands on neighboring governments. Through influencing multilateral institutions, China can control narratives and suppress global criticism on its policies in East Turkestan. In other words, the SCO portrays the manner in which China utilizes its influence, especially in framing the Uyghur population within the context of terrorism. For instance, as a prominent scholar on this issue, Malik (72, 80) describes SCO as being in *a category of its own*. The complex relationship that China maintains with its Uyghur Muslim minority is a significant factor in the country's approach to the security of the region. The SCO strives to combat three global evils: extremism, separatism, and terrorism. According to the author, China has made use of the organization in order to legitimize its practice of persecuting separatist movements. The SCO can also support China in ensuring its internal security is by fostering the idea that it can function as a regional mechanism by establishing an anti-terrorism center. Gladney (1-2) also analyzes the Chinese government's perspective regarding the Uyghur situation and its approaches for addressing the issue through the SCO. The author asserts that the Chinese government

perceives the Uyghur situation predominantly as a matter of security and has endeavored to address it by means of the SCO. According to the author, other member states stand behind China to support its efforts in delegitimizing the Uyghur separatist movement. He also highlights China's actions to list organizations like the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) in international platforms as terrorist structures to legitimize its actions against Uyghurs.

Similarly, Finley (22) contends that China's political and economic power has considerable impact on how the rest of the world responds to human rights violations in East Turkestan. He argues how China uses its economic and political power to get other countries to keep silent or even support its actions in the area. Even though human rights violations in East Turkestan are severe, China has been able to get many countries to either stay quiet or support it. Notably, a lot of Muslim-majority countries have been reluctant to confront China because their governments want to keep their economic and political ties strong with Beijing. He notes that some countries, such as Egypt and Pakistan, have done what China wants and sent Uyghurs back to East Turkestan. For example, in 2019, some Muslim-majority states opposed the UN's proposal to send independent monitors to East Turkestan. According to Finley, these states are reluctant to join campaigns against China's human rights violations because they have a dependent economic relationship with China. China manages to avoid criticism from the international community, including from countries that are economically dependent on it, by investing and providing loans to various countries, especially through the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the BRI.

The Chinese government has recently continued and deepened its oppressive policies in various areas in East Turkestan. Although the Chinese government officially claims that *education centers* have been closed, independent research has shown that arbitrary detention and imprisonment continue in the region. According to a report published in February 2025, China still holds more than 500,000 Uyghurs in prisons or detention centers in East Turkestan (Uyghar and Seytoff). In 2024 and 2025, China's digital surveillance mechanisms continued unabated and were even expanded with new methods. The practice of constantly monitoring everyone in the region with cameras, facial recognition systems, and phone scanning software continues. The HRW documented that police scanned Uyghurs' phones with a digital archive of 50,000 files defined as *terrorist content* and arbitrarily detained them, considering any religious/linguistic content as a crime (URL-10). The *Sinicization of religions* strategy, which gained momentum under Xi Jinping's rule, was further institutionalized in East Turkestan with new legal regulations in 2024. The changes to local religious regulations that came into effect in February 2024 required mosques and masjids to conform to Han Chinese culture in every aspect, from their architecture to their statements. For example, the law required the construction/repair of places of worship to use an architectural style with Chinese characteristics and required religious officials to implement the core values of socialism (URL-11). HRW stated that these regulations were the latest move to fundamentally transform Uyghur culture and belief.

5. Challenges and Adaptations in TAN Methods for Uyghur Advocacy

TAN theory provides a comprehensive framework for studying the methods of transnational networks. The extent to which these methods can be successful against authoritarian regimes like China can be examined within this framework. However, from the perspective of Uyghur rights, the conditions are challenging due to various factors, including economic dependency, authoritarian oppression, and various cultural and geopolitical conditions. As a result, Uyghur advocacy networks have managed to expand their spheres of influence by developing themselves both regionally and globally in a way that adapts to the current conditions.

How states respond to human rights advocacy campaigns is largely related to their *economic dependence* on the abusive state. TAN theory has not addressed this point and not examined how economic dependence affects advocacy activities. Finley (22) notes that countries with strong economic ties to China often refrain from officially supporting Uyghur rights. To address this problem, advocacy networks have turned their attention to non-state actors such as multinational corporations and adopted methods like consumer boycotts, shareholder activism, and ethical trading initiatives. These networks make companies accountable for forced labor and human rights violations in East Turkestan by letting the public know about them. This creates an economic reason for transparency and accountability. (URL-2).

A further major issue is the *authoritarian suppression* that comes from China's widespread use of censorship, surveillance, and disinformation campaigns to control narratives and silence dissent. To struggle against oppression, TANs need to make better use of digital tools. Some of these are encrypted messaging applications, decentralized data-sharing networks, and satellite images that are used to demonstrate in great detail how the Uyghur people's rights are being violated. These online tools help get factual information to the right audience and make it easier to fight campaigns that spread false information.

Another significant challenge is China's *diplomatic clout.* Many human rights organizations meet annually at the UN Human Rights Council headquarters in Geneva to draw attention to violations against the world's most vulnerable communities, such as war victims, the starving, or tortured. However, in recent years, it has become clear that a large number of ostensibly independent but in reality closely linked to the Chinese government are conducting extensive activities to undermine the work of the UN Human Rights Council. According to a joint investigation by the Washington Post and ICIJ, approximately 60 Chinese-based NGOs operating in Geneva are de facto extensions of the Chinese government or the CCP. These organizations are organizing to suppress and counter-propagandize testimonies at UN Human Rights Council sessions about the mass detention of Uyghurs in East Turkestan, the separation of Tibetan children from their families, and the crackdown on democracy activists in Hong Kong (Miller, Ćosić, and Lee-Smith).

Conclusion

Examining the Uyghur advocacy movement in the context of TAN theory, this article explains the importance of local factors in encouraging individuals and organizations to join global advocacy efforts, while also showing how cultural, political, and economic factors can influence how TAN methods are implemented. It analyzes the excellent opportunities that Türkiye creates for transnational lobbying by emphasizing its position as a regional hub. It also adds regional perspectives to global TAN theory, examining in detail how this approach enables advocacy networks to adapt to challenging geopolitical situations.

This study also contributes to the existing literature by examining how regional dynamics affect the work of transnational advocacy networks. Türkiye, with its historical ties to the Uyghurs, is a strategic supporter of Uyghur activism and provides a contextual basis for both symbolic and information policies. Türkiye assists Uyghur advocacy efforts by providing suitable venues for protests, cultural events, and media outreach programs. Through these activities, Uyghur advocacy networks are able to reach broader audiences and strengthen international partnerships with other groups, NGOs, and government institutions.

The interactions between TANs in different countries and regions prove that they can perform exceptionally well in difficult political situations. Türkiye's regional role between East and West greatly expands the reach and impact of TAN methods worldwide. Thus, Uyghur advocacy networks have the ability to strategically position themselves in Türkiye and adapt their messages to suit different cultural and political environments.

In addition, this study contributes to the literature by revealing the shortcomings of the TAN theory by addressing the economic dependencies of states. Thus, an important but understudied part of how transnational advocacy works has been pointed out. China, which can manipulate the formation of the BRI for its own interests, can influence the advocacy efforts of both state and non-state actors. Since significant trade, investment or infrastructure projects force countries with high-level economic relations with China to remain silent, it becomes challenging for TANs to achieve their goals. This additional economic leverage dimension to the TAN theory emphasizes the necessity of examining economic connections and human rights together. This broader focus contributes to the development of TAN theory by diversifying the approaches for academics to address advocacy in today's globalized economy.

Finally, this study suggests that TAN theory can be developed to address issues specific to contemporary authoritarian regimes, such as censorship, deception, and geopolitical pushback. Faced with these obstacles, Uyghurs have developed advocacy networks in Türkiye and elsewhere around the world, demonstrating the importance of resilience to oppression through their struggles. When advocacy efforts are decentralized, the impact of authoritarian oppression is diminished. Thus, even under oppression, TAN actors can combat censorship and provide accurate information to the world through encrypted communication channels, secure data sharing, and digital campaigning.

To achieve more effective results in their advocacy efforts, TAN actors can strengthen economic diversification, enhance cooperation with states, and work to further mobilize legal mechanisms. They can promote measures such as ethical supply chain initiatives and import restrictions on products linked to forced labor to counter China's economic pressure. At the same time, as in the case of Türkiye, Uyghur diaspora groups can strengthen partnerships with civil society organizations in Central Asia, Europe, and the Middle East. In this way, they can lobby more effectively at international platforms such as the UN, the European Parliament, and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). Moreover, they can ensure that legal mechanisms are more active by increasing their capacity to gather evidence to bring human rights violations to the ICC and by establishing monitoring systems to ensure the implementation of sanctions. By integrating economic, diplomatic, and legal tools, they can advance accountability policies and expand the scope and impact of advocacy initiatives globally. In terms of regional and global influence, TAN actors can strengthen their advocacy for universal human rights by implementing flexible methods using local and global dynamics, as in the case of the advocacy of the Uyghur community in Türkiye.

Abbreviations

AI   Amnesty International

AIIB   Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank

ASPI   Australian Strategic Policy Institute

BRI   Belt and Road Initiative

CCP   Chinese Communist Party

ETESA   East Turkistan Education and Solidarity Association

ETIM   East Turkestan Islamic Movement

ETNAM East Turkistan National Awakening Movement

HRW   Human Rights Watch

ICC   International Criminal Court

ICIJ   International Consortium of Investigative Journalists

IHH   Humanitarian Relief Foundation

NGO   Non-Governmental Organization

OIC   Organization of Islamic Cooperation

SCO   Shanghai Cooperation Organization

TAN   Transnational Advocacy Network

UHRP   Uyghur Human Rights Project

UNHRC   United Nations Human Rights Council

WUC   World Uyghur Congress

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