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Transnational Repression in an Age of Upheaval: Global Policy Challenges for Canada

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Key Points

- Transnational repression is a growing global human rights problem with significant implications for the security and well-being of diaspora members in Canada.
- Powerful authoritarian states and new tools of surveillance are making transnational repression worse.
- The Canadian government's ability to respond to transnational repression is challenged by three factors: Ottawa's pursuit of warmer ties with autocracies; Ottawa's uncritical embrace of artificial intelligence (AI) innovation; and the United States' descent into authoritarian rule.
- To help protect those at risk of transnational repression, Ottawa can implement domestic and foreign policies that reflect a strong commitment to human rights.

Introduction

Authoritarian regimes are threatening overseas activists and exiles through harassment and violence. This is known as transnational repression: when states reach beyond their borders to intimidate and silence diaspora members. Its targets are those who speak out against autocratic leaders, or ethnic or religious minorities fleeing persecution. Perpetrating states have harassed, assaulted and even killed their critics; joined with other states to kidnap political exiles; and weaponized digital technologies to surveil people on- and offline.

At its core, transnational repression is an attack on human rights. In the words of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Volker Türk, transnational repression "[is an] insidious practice [used] to intimidate, threaten, silence, detain, forcibly disappear and even kill opponents and critics. It sends a clear message that no place is safe, and leaves people living in a constant state of fear" (Office of

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the High Commissioner for Human Rights [OHCHR] 2025). The impacts of transnational repression are far-reaching. Digital harassment, criminal charges and physical violence challenge diaspora members' ability to live freely and exercise their fundamental rights. Despite living far beyond the jurisdiction of repressive states, targets must weigh the cost of speaking out. The mere possibility of repression can encourage self-censorship, a silencing effect that can spread beyond activists to entire communities.

Amplifying the problem of transnational repression are geopolitical upheaval and rapid technological advancements. Authoritarian states and great powers are attacking human rights protections and imperilling the sovereignty of smaller states, while new digital tools are allowing states to monitor and harass their critics with unprecedented precision. This combination of unaccountable state power and expansive surveillance is making transnational repression more pervasive and, for middle-power democracies such as Canada, harder to combat.

Transnational Repression in Canada

For Canada, transnational repression is a pressing human rights issue. Canada is home to people from around the world, including many who have fled repression in the country of their birth. Despite the relative freedom of life in Canada, exiled activists continue to live in the shadow of distant autocrats. Countering transnational repression is vital to their security and welfare. It is also integral to Canada's pushback against twenty-first-century authoritarianism.

Many Canadians came to learn about transnational repression following the murder of Canadian citizen and Sikh activist Hardeep Singh Nijjar in Surrey, British Columbia, in 2023. Nijjar's brutal assassination by agents linked to the Indian government was not the first time repressive states had targeted people in Canada. Tibetans, Uyghurs, Falun Gong

practitioners and Chinese activists have for years reported harassment by the Chinese state (Canadian Coalition on Human Rights in China and Amnesty International Canada 2017, 2020). Researchers at the Citizen Lab, an interdisciplinary laboratory based at the University of Toronto, have for nearly two decades investigated digital attacks against activists from Tibet, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Rwanda and Iran, among other countries and regions (Al-Jizawi et al. 2022).

Canadian government committees have framed transnational repression as a form of foreign interference, alongside state-backed disinformation, covert influence networks and electoral interference. The National Security and Intelligence Committee of Parliamentarians (NSICOP) 2019 annual report discussed the national security implications of foreign interference, including its impacts on "ethnocultural communities" (NSICOP 2019). NSICOP's 2024 report on foreign interference identified transnational repression as a threat to democratic institutions (NSICOP 2024). Statements by Canada and its Group of Seven (G7) partners have linked transnational repression by the Iranian government to other "malign activities" designed to "divide societies" (G7 2025a). While the Foreign Interference Commission treated transnational repression as beyond its mandate, Commissioner Justice Marie-Josée Hogue's final report identified transnational repression as a "scourge" (Public Inquiry into Foreign Interference in Federal Electoral Processes and Democratic Institutions 2025).

Current Challenges Facing Ottawa

Public discussion on transnational repression in Canada has slowed since the release of the final report of the Foreign Interference Commission in early 2025. In its place, "global generational shifts" in the international order (Department of Finance Canada 2025, 8), and the United States' repeated threats against Canada, are front and centre in the minds of Canadian policy makers.

These global shifts, which have upended trade networks and security alliances, also ensure that the problem of transnational repression will not go away. A "world without rules" (Hathaway and Shapiro 2026), where powerful countries such as the United States openly flout international law, is a breeding ground for attacks against political exiles. Today is a "golden age of transnational repression" characterized by powerful autocrats, weakened norms against extraterritorial violence, new surveillance tools and weak support for migrants (Schenkkan 2025).

The Canadian government's capacity to respond to the threat of transnational repression, however, is challenged by three things: Ottawa's recent pursuit of warmer ties with leading autocracies; Ottawa's uncritical enthusiasm for AI innovation; and the United States' descent into authoritarian rule.

Ottawa's Warming Ties with Autocracies

The global order is increasingly marked by the power of autocratic rulers and repressive states. Data sets produced by the Economist Intelligence Unit,[1] Freedom House (Gorokhovskaia and Grothe 2025) and the Varieties of Democracy project[2] all point to continuing deterioration in the strength of global democracy. Autocrats are degrading an already weak international order, attacking liberal institutions and undermining human rights. Amid this tumult, middle powers are trying to secure their narrow national interests, often through bilateral cooperation.

For the Canadian government, this has meant pursuing new economic partnerships while moving away from a bellicose United States. Pummelled by Washington's tariffs and facing President Donald Trump's calls to turn Canada into the "51st state" (Tasker 2025), Ottawa is trying to reduce Canada's dependence on US markets by diversifying its trading relations. As part of this shift from "reliance to resilience" (Department of Finance Canada 2025, chapter 2), Ottawa is seeking economic opportunities not only with fellow democracies, but also with autocracies actively engaged in transnational repression such as China and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Prime Minister Mark Carney has called his government's approach to navigating a new international order "values-based realism," combining a "principled" commitment to sovereignty, the UN Charter and human rights with the "pragmatic" recognition that "not every partner will share all of our values" (Prime Minister of Canada 2026a).

Balancing "principles" and "pragmatism" when dealing with China is easier said than done. Despite Canada's 2022 Indo-Pacific Strategy

1 See https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/democracy-index-eiu.

2 See www.v-dem.net/.

labelling China as an "increasingly disruptive global power" (Global Affairs Canada 2022, 7), Ottawa is now pursuing a "strategic partnership" with Beijing in areas such as energy, agriculture and trade (Prime Minister of Canada 2026b). This partnership is built on shaky ground. Prime Minister Carney claims that China shares Canada's "commitment to multilateralism and strengthening global governance" (Prime Minister of Canada 2026c). Yet, how these two states understand multilateralism and global governance sharply diverge. While Chinese President Xi Jinping has extolled the principles of the UN Charter (Xinhua 2025), China's single-party autocracy opposes the idea of "universal values" (ChinaFile 2013), seeks to undermine the international human rights system (Chen 2019) and claims ownership over Taiwan and nearly the entire South China Sea.

Prime Minister Carney has acknowledged that "differences in each other's systems" will require bilateral cooperation to be "more focused and more limited" (CPAC 2026). It is therefore concerning that Ottawa, rather than limiting engagement with China's security services, has instead signed a memorandum of understanding with Beijing on "combating crimes" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2026). While details of this agreement are not public, bilateral cooperation between the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and the Ministry of Public Security will reportedly focus on "strengthening law enforcement cooperation to combat corruption and transnational crimes" (Prime Minister of Canada 2026d). Such a deal would mean partnering with a police force with a record of transnational repression (Alecci and the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists 2025), which it has often justified in the name of combatting corruption (Rotella and Berg 2021). Chinese police have digitally harassed activists in Canada (Chiu 2021), and Public Safety Canada has noted that China's global anti-corruption campaign has doubled as a way to "instil fear of foreign state reach on Canadian soil" (Public Safety Canada 2023).

Ottawa may believe law enforcement cooperation will be limited to addressing "telecommunication and cyber fraud and illegal synthetic drugs" (Prime Minister of Canada 2026d). For China, however, agreements like these are central to the Global Security Initiative, a major effort by President Xi to build a "new global architecture for security cooperation" in which "regime security and global security are deeply entwined" (Greitens, Kardon and Waltz 2025). By deepening ties with the Ministry of Public Security, Canada risks legitimizing the global security ambitions of a major authoritarian state.

Ottawa's Uncritical Embrace of AI

In addition to the growing power of repressive states, technological advances in the field of AI are likely to supercharge transnational repression. AI platforms are responsible for a flood of online misinformation (Pearson 2024), non-consensual sexualized deepfakes (D'Anastasio 2026) and psychological distress (Jutla 2025). As if this damage was not enough, states are now using AI to empower targeted harassment operations.

In February of last year, OpenAI disclosed that China-linked actors had attempted to use the company's large language model, ChatGPT, to "debug code" and "generate detailed descriptions, consistent with sales pitches, of a social media listening tool that they claimed to have used to feed real-time reports about protests in the West to the Chinese security services" (OpenAI 2025, 7). According to OpenAI, operators prompted the model to analyze screenshots of text, including "announcements of Uyghur rights protests in a range of Western cities" (ibid., 8). Canada's Rapid Response Mechanism has also uncovered how six AI chatbots amplified sensitive personal information on five journalists, including one in Canada, who were targeted by an Iran-linked "hack and leak" operation (Global Affairs Canada 2025). As governments and companies continue to pour billions into AI research, the scale of abuse will only grow.

Ottawa's current industrial policy risks intensifying these abuses. In September, Ottawa announced its commitment to transforming Canada into a leader in AI innovation and "to position Canada at the forefront of this [AI] revolution" (Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada 2025a). The Canadian government's AI strategy is premised on a belief that AI development will increase economic growth and labour productivity in Canada. Ottawa, however, seems allergic to confronting the monumental impact that unchecked AI development will have on human rights. In an open letter to the minister of AI and digital innovation, Evan Solomon, more than 160 civil society organizations and experts warned that Ottawa is failing to grapple with AI-associated harms, including the use of AI to

expand state and private surveillance (British Columbia Civil Liberties Association 2025).

Ottawa's enthusiasm for AI is already leading to partnerships with perpetrators of transnational repression. In October, Ottawa signed a memorandum of understanding with the UAE "to strengthen collaboration between the two countries in the areas of artificial intelligence and emerging technologies" (Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada 2025b). This is worrying. The autocratic government of the UAE has a deep interest in surveillance technologies, including AI-enabled policing tools (Mozur and Satariano 2023), and a record of using spyware to monitor its critics abroad (Marczak and Scott-Railton 2016). Bilateral collaboration risks, in the words of Citizen Lab's director Ron Deibert, privileging "short-term gains" at the expense of "the values that [Canada] should be carrying" (quoted in Lau 2025).

This danger is not purely speculative. For example, major Western corporations sold to China the technical infrastructure and material that was later used to build China's surveillance state (Kang and Grauer 2025), leading to public backlash that has compelled companies to withdraw from Chinese markets (Hawkins 2024). Pursuing commercial agreements with other repressive states carries similar dangers. Law enforcement agencies around the world are deploying powerful forms of AI-enabled surveillance, often with little independent oversight (Levinson-Waldman and Dyson 2025). In partnering with human rights-abusing states on AI innovation, Ottawa may help develop technologies that will power new tools of political control.

The United States' Descent into Authoritarian Rule

The United States' severe democratic decline and repeated threats against Canadian sovereignty have made the fight against transnational repression more difficult than ever. While Washington signed on to last year's G7 Leaders' Statement on Transnational Repression (G7 2025b), Canada's once-close ally has shown little concern for the problem. Instead, President Trump has pardoned a former New York City police officer convicted of helping Chinese agents harass a Chinese resident in the United States (Associated Press 2025) and defended the Saudi government's killing of exiled Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in Turkey in 2018 (Debusmann 2025).

Compounding President Trump's disinterest in transnational repression is his administration's enthusiastic embrace of cruel anti-migrant policies. One of the central objectives of the Trump administration has been bringing an end to "the era of mass migration" (The White House 2025, 11). To enforce its anti-migrant crackdown, Washington has relied on Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), a "violent, shadowy federal police force" (McSwane and Allam 2025) armed with powerful surveillance technologies (Cox 2026), whose agents have killed anti-ICE protesters (Lum and Willis 2026). The people ICE has targeted for detention and expulsion include those fleeing state repression. ICE deported roughly 80 Russians to Russia in 2025 (Sauer 2025), forcibly returned dozens of Iranians following Tehran's vicious crackdown on anti-government protests earlier this year (Hansler 2026) and is now seeking to deport a Chinese asylum seeker who secretly documented the Chinese government's re-education camps in Xinjiang (Fang 2026).

Some of those impacted by the Trump administration's actions have turned to Canada for help. Last September, *The Globe and Mail* published an open letter written by three exiled Russian dissidents and addressed to Prime Minister Carney, calling on Ottawa to grant asylum to Russians in the United States at risk of deportation (Navalnaya, Kara-Murza and Yashin 2025). Canadian authorities refrained from commenting on the cases and instead noted that all asylum seekers are subject to the Canada-US Safe Third Country Agreement, which prevents asylum seekers in the United States from claiming asylum in Canada (Chase and MacKinnon 2025).

Problems with the US immigration system predate President Trump's second term in office. ICE detained asylum seekers fleeing state repression during the presidency of Joe Biden, including many of the Russian citizens the Trump administration later deported. The Biden administration, however, did attempt to rally multilateral support to counter transnational repression, including through a Declaration of Principles to Combat Transnational Repression (Freedom House 2023) and a joint statement on "the urgent and growing threat of transnational repression" made on behalf of more than 45 countries at the UN Human Rights Council (U.S. Mission to International Organizations in Geneva 2024).

Instead of building on the work of his predecessor, President Trump has deliberately undermined human rights at home and abroad. The United States is now a "competitive authoritarian" state, one in which elections occur but leaders trample on democratic norms and punish their critics (Levitsky, Way and Ziblatt 2026). This authoritarian turn has had grave international repercussions, with the United States threatening the sovereignty of Canada and Greenland and abducting Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro. Transnational repression was already a major concern before President Trump took office. An American administration openly contemptuous of human rights and international law is making the problem even worse.

Recommendations

Powerful autocratic states, armed with advanced surveillance tools, will continue to menace diaspora members. The Canadian government needs to protect those in Canada who are most at risk. At the same time, Ottawa must reckon with the impact of competing policy goals on its efforts to counter transnational repression. To that end, the Canadian government should take steps in the following four areas.

First, the Canadian government should continue to engage with diaspora members and civil society on the issue of transnational repression. Ottawa's understanding of transnational repression depends on the insights of those impacted by state coercion, as well as those with relevant expertise. Government offices, including the proposed foreign interference watchdog and public servants with relevant language and cultural competencies, should continue to organize private and public fora in which to engage individuals and groups.

Second, the Canadian government should avoid any new agreements on AI innovation, or law enforcement cooperation, with state perpetrators of transnational repression. The persistent threat of transnational repression means that any cooperation with authoritarian states in sensitive areas such as cutting-edge technologies should be off-limits. Where Ottawa is already pursuing such agreements, they must provide information that will give Canadians transparency to assess what, if any, human rights safeguards are in place.

Third, given the risks AI-enabled tools and platforms pose to human rights, the Canadian government must respond to written submissions shared with the federal government by the People's Consultation on AI, an independent civil society initiative intended to provide Canadians with "a meaningful opportunity to have their say on whether — and how — AI should be adopted and governed in Canada" (British Columbia Civil Liberties Association 2026).

Fourth, given the authoritarianism of the Trump administration, Canada must review the Canada-US Safe Third Country Agreement, which is intended to prevent individuals coming from the United States from seeking refugee status in Canada. Under this agreement, Canada has designated the United States as a safe third country because its "refugee status determination system offers a high degree of protection to refugee protection claimants" and because the country "meets a high standard with respect to the protection of human rights" (Government of Canada 2023). President Trump's increasingly lethal crackdown on migrants demonstrates that the United States no longer meets these conditions.

Canadian civil society organizations have noted the Canadian government's obligations under international human rights and refugee law to protect the human rights of people within its borders, including asylum seekers arriving via the United States (Canadian Civil Liberties Association 2025). These obligations include the principle of non-refoulement, which "prohibits States from transferring or removing individuals" and returning them to places where they "would be at risk of irreparable harm" (OHCHR, n.d.). Ottawa cannot return vulnerable migrants and refugee claimants to the United States, where President Trump's brutal expulsion policies will place them at further risk of transnational repression.

Conclusion

At the World Economic Forum Annual Meeting in Davos in January, Prime Minister Carney promised that Canada will "actively take on the world as it is, not wait for the world as we wish it to be" (Prime Minister of Canada 2026a). Ottawa sees the world as hostile to middle powers such as Canada. What is less clear is what steps Ottawa is willing to take "to build a new order that integrates our values" (ibid.).

Canada may not have the luxury of engaging only with fellow democracies, nor the ability to single-handedly shape world affairs. Ottawa can, however, make choices that reflect liberal democratic principles. It can decide not to enter into security and technology partnerships with autocracies that menace their critics in Canada. It can treat AI not merely as a driver of economic growth but also as a potential threat to the well-being of Canadians and people around the world. Canada can, and must, manage the threat of transnational repression through a renewed commitment to championing human rights at home and abroad.

The more that Ottawa avoids centring human rights in its international dealings and domestic policies, the more it signals to allies and adversaries alike that human rights are negotiable commodities in a new global order. A world where human rights are debatable is one where transnational repression will flourish. For victims and their allies, such a world is unacceptable.

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