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# Who Made Uyghurs Visible in the International Arena?: A Hyperlink Analysis

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## Who Made Uyghurs Visible in the International Arena?:

### A Hyperlink Analysis

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**Abstract:** *Hyperlink analysis reveals that most of the organizations prominent in spreading Uyghur news and issues are geographically concentrated in Western Europe and North America. The Washington DC-based Uyghur American Association (UAA), for instance, is active in providing and disseminating information about the Uyghur cause to major news agencies, to international non-governmental human rights organizations, and on popular social networking platforms. This analysis further illustrates that governments do not play significant roles in Uyghur diasporic politics or networks. Hyperlink analysis, however, cannot detect Uyghur connections, which do not have a virtual presence, such as Uyghurs communities in Central Asia and Turkey. The online maps of Uyghur networks also omit Uyghur links to the Taiwanese independence movement, Tibetan self-determination movement, Chinese dissident networks, as well as worldwide Muslim communities.*

**Keywords:** *Uyghurs; hyperlink analysis; Uyghur American Association (UAA)*

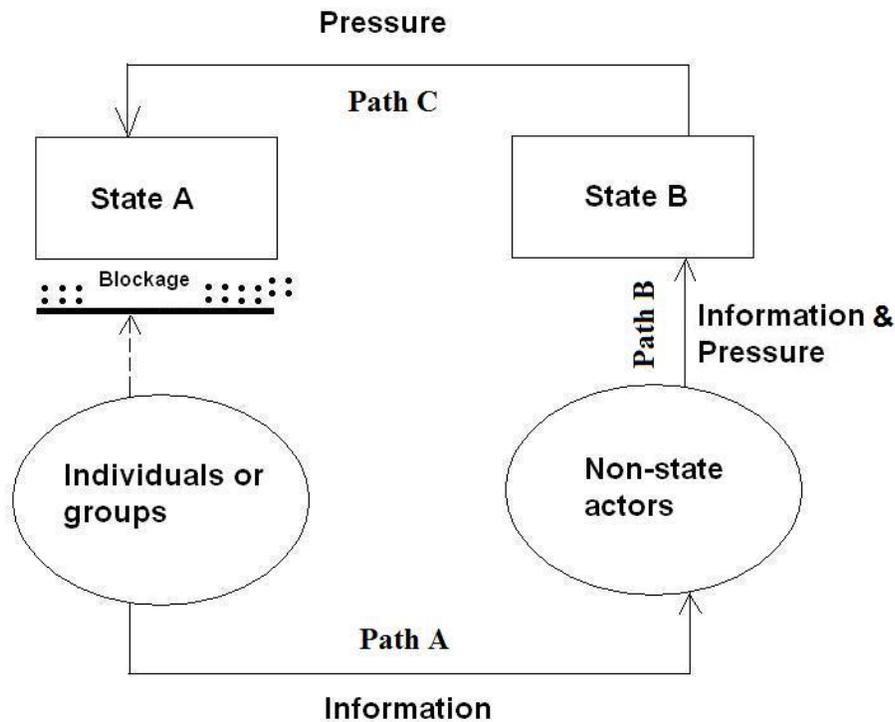
## INTRODUCTION

Uyghurs are of Turkic origin, and most perceive themselves to be Sunni Muslims. They are the fifth-largest minority in the People's Republic of China (PRC), and the largest nationality in the northwestern region of Xinjiang, composing nearly fifty percent of the region's population. Some Xinjiang Uyghurs aspire to create a separate state, which they call East Turkestan or East Turkistan, to preserve Uyghur identity. The Chinese government considers such inclinations to be subversive and separatist and has endeavored to curtail any movement in this direction.

This paper builds on research and interviews conducted from December 2009 to March 2010, including a state of the art hyperlink analysis of the Uyghur diasporic activism. Hyperlink analysis is an analytical tool that spawned from social network analysis (SNA) to identify the online actors and the movement of information in the virtual world. Although there is always a gap between offline and online realities, hyperlink analysis provides a way to gauge and comprehend the complexity of transnational or international networks that are cited in academic papers about Uyghur diasporic activism.

In this paper, I echo Lyons and Mandaville’s (2008) view that Keck and Sikkink’s interpretative framework of transnational advocacy networks (TANs) is a useful paradigm for understanding the influences of global migration on transnational politics but I conclude that it is ultimately not applicable to the Uyghur case. As Keck and Sikkink (1998) outline, and as illustrated below (Figure 1), TANs engage in a boomerang pattern in which access to the articulation of interests is usually first blocked in one country, prompting political entrepreneurs to bypass domestic channels and seek international allies in order to push forward transformation at home. International allies can range from individuals, international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), governmental agencies, to international governmental organizations.

Figure 1: The Boomerang Pattern



Source: A redraft from Keck and Sikkink (1998: 13)

At first glance, Keck and Sikkink’s boomerang concept depicts the Uyghur case well: beginning with the blockage of activism from China, leading to growth in the number and tone of Uyghur seminars, conferences and meetings in Western Europe and North America to an increase in the hopes of Uyghur leaders of international leverage against China in support of Uyghur self-

determination.<sup>1</sup> However, as I will show throughout this paper, the boomerang effect does not accurately describe the Uyghur case.

## TRANSNATIONAL LINKAGES

To assess the boomerang effect, it is important to track “information politics” or the flows of information between some domestic actors (constrained from expressing their interests at home) and external sympathizers who are willing to convey the blocked messages (Path A in Figure 1). Being noticed by the general public and policy-makers in other countries is a first step for Uyghur activists who wish to get external actors to side with them (Path B) and put pressure on the PRC government (Path C). The playing out of information politics is particularly vital for nascent political mobilization because it helps raise awareness of the salience of political demands for national self-determination with international audiences. The Uyghurs’ transnational advocacy is still at a very nascent stage and the main task currently facing Uyghur-issue activists is spreading Uyghur news and making their issues known outside of China.

Uyghur organizations have employed information politics on the Internet as well as in offline forums, such as U.S. Congressional hearings. In these formats, activists usually focus on the discrimination against and oppression of Uyghurs in China, as well as on the need for a homeland, framing their issues in terms of human rights and the right to self-determination. (In contrast, the PRC government frames this issue in terms of terrorism).

What is harder for researchers to verify is whether the voices of these Uyghur organizations abroad echo the aspirations and views of Uyghurs residing in China. Although for the most part Uyghurs are able to call and email their families and friends in China,<sup>2</sup> the PRC government’s continuous monitoring of phone and email exchanges constrains conversations between those residing in China and in the diaspora, resulting in dialogues that remain largely non-political according to Dolkun Isa, the Secretary General of the World Uyghur Congress. If this is the case, one wonders how Uyghur diasporic organizations obtain accurate updates of developments in China – information that they then transmit to the media and other interested actors. As a result, scholars such as Petersen (2006) have cautioned readers about the portrayal of a monolithic Uyghur identity and one-sided perspectives on Uyghur issues.

Before the late 1970s, Uyghurs were constrained by a lack of media access. The growth of the Internet substantially boosted Uyghur diasporic advocacy efforts by acting as a forum and venue for easier and cheaper communication between Uyghur diasporic groups and like-minded activists. Digital communication has reinforced the strength of the rhetoric and shared images that support the continuation of Uyghur nationalist struggles. The formation and growth of Uyghur diasporic websites has acted as a key component in transforming Uyghur diasporic activism.

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<sup>1</sup> As noted by Dolkun Isa, Secretary General of the World Uyghur Congress (WUC), (Interview by the author and research assistant Delia A. Pop, 9 March 2010 in Munich, Germany).

<sup>2</sup> Only in exceptional situations, such as after the Xinjiang uprising in summer 2009, has telecommunication and Internet communication to the outside world been temporarily shut down by the Chinese government.

English, the contemporary lingua franca, is one of the main languages used on these websites. In my opinion, this does not pose a question of sample bias for this analysis. What it does indicate is that these websites were not set up for Uyghurs in China<sup>3</sup> The choice of language reflects that the target audience is English-speakers - individuals, policy-makers and Uyghur émigrés in liberal western societies whom the Uyghur diasporic organizations believe will be more receptive and sympathetic to their cause.

Through observing Uyghur websites, such as that of the Washington DC-based Uyghur American Association (UAA) over the past three years one can see that their websites have become increasingly sophisticated. Today, the websites contain more than press releases and position statements - through hyperlinks, one can easily find online forums where like-minded supporters share the Uyghur organizations' views. The UAA, for instance, has an online forum, which allows Uyghur émigrés to use English in addition to the Uyghur language to share and discuss their concerns. This interconnectivity reaches beyond national borders and its impact is both technological and psychological. Perhaps as a testament to the effectiveness of Uyghur diasporic online outreach, the Chinese government has reportedly tightened measures to block Xinjiang inhabitants' Internet access.

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<sup>3</sup> As Gladney (2004) has rightly mentioned, many Uyghurs in Central Asia and even in China were not fully aware of the existence of Uyghur-minded websites abroad.

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## HYPERLINK ANALYSIS

For this hyperlink analysis of Uyghur diasporic online activism, I began with the organizations listed on the website of the German-based World Uyghur Congress (WUC; [www.urghurcongress.org](http://www.urghurcongress.org)), the acknowledged Uyghur umbrella organization. In late 2008 there were approximately twenty member organizations on the WUC website and fifteen working weblinks. This list provided the URLs of organizations that were known, *a priori*, to be in the Uyghur diasporic network.

These URLs and two extra WUC “link pages”<sup>4</sup> were pasted into the web-based hyperlink analysis software, IssueCrawler ([www.issuecrawler.net](http://www.issuecrawler.net)). IssueCrawler harvests the URLs, capturing the starting points’ outlinks and returning embedded co-linked sites. The net result is the generation of a binary matrix of the site relationships.<sup>5</sup> As differing linkages between sites results in constantly changing configurations, Figure 2 (below) is a graphic visualization of the Uyghur online networks on January 3, 2010, with some additional retrieved relationships.

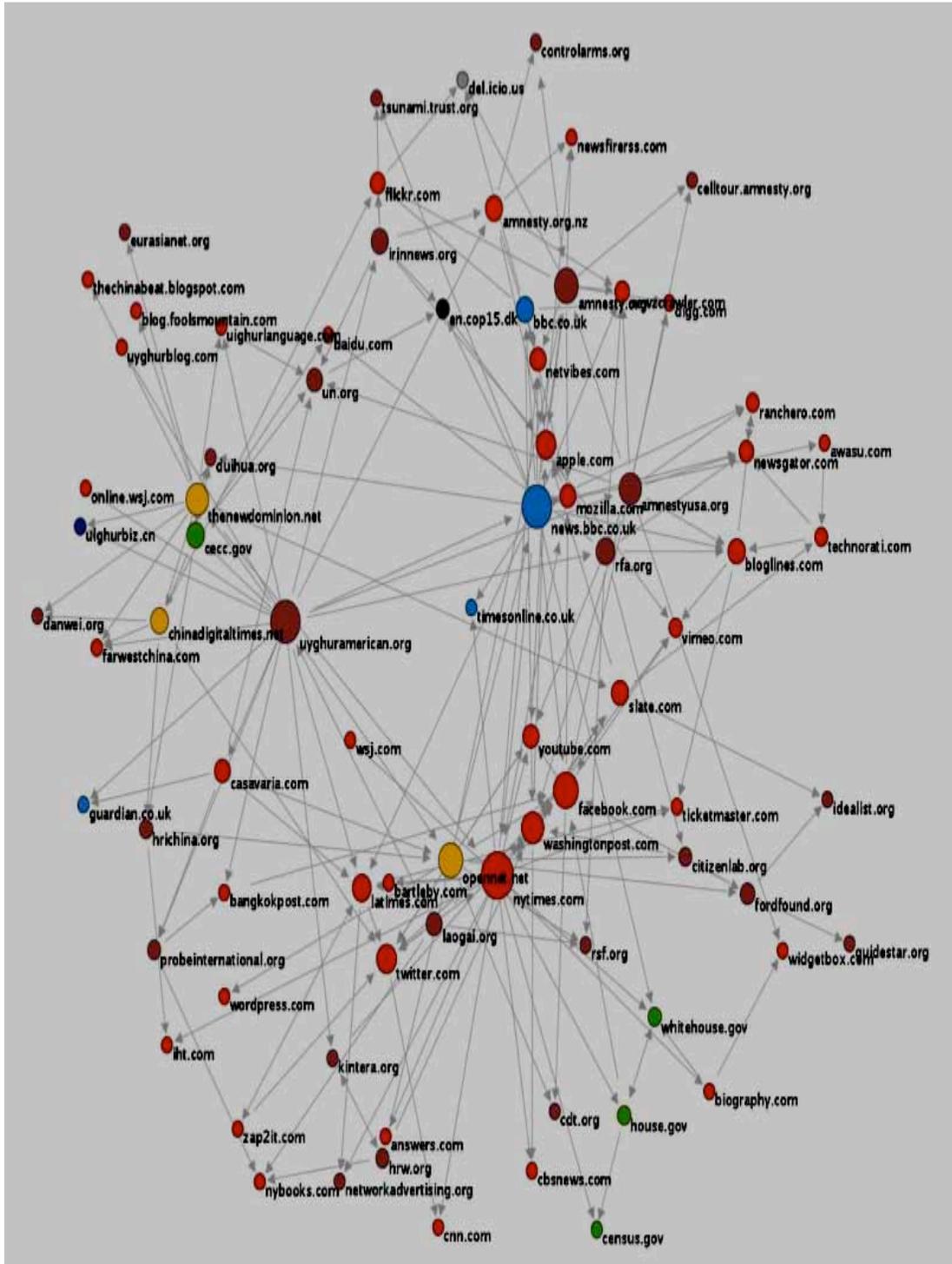
There are two basic elements in Figure 2: nodes and arrows. The nodes represent the actors’ URLs, distinguished by the “.com”, “.org”, “.gov” and other colored labels. The arrows indicate the directions and connections linking these actors. Actors with more arrows are therefore more active in spreading information and were considered more useful information-providers.

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<sup>4</sup> These URLs were (1) [www.uyghurcongress.org](http://www.uyghurcongress.org) (2) [www.uyghurcongress.org/en/?p=425](http://www.uyghurcongress.org/en/?p=425) (3) [www.uygur.org](http://www.uygur.org) (4) [www.uyghuramerican.org](http://www.uyghuramerican.org) (5) [www.uyghuramerican.org/pages/Quick-Links](http://www.uyghuramerican.org/pages/Quick-Links) (6) [www.uhrp.org](http://www.uhrp.org) (7) [www.uyghurcanadian.org](http://www.uyghurcanadian.org) (8) [www.uygurie.com](http://www.uygurie.com) (9) [www.uighur.org.uk/](http://www.uighur.org.uk/) (10) [www.oost-turkestan.nl](http://www.oost-turkestan.nl) (11) [www.gokbayrak.com](http://www.gokbayrak.com) (12) [www.rfa.org/uyghur](http://www.rfa.org/uyghur) (13) [www.unpo.org](http://www.unpo.org) (14) [www.hrwf.net](http://www.hrwf.net) (15) [www.amnesty.org](http://www.amnesty.org) (16) [www.ned.org](http://www.ned.org) (17) [www.gfbv.de/](http://www.gfbv.de/). Note that these links might have been changed or removed by their own webmasters after my research period (December 2009–March 2010). For instance, the website of the Uyghur Canadian Society changed from [www.uyghurcanadian.org](http://www.uyghurcanadian.org) to [www.uyghurcanadiansociety.org](http://www.uyghurcanadiansociety.org) in May 2010.

<sup>5</sup> This data matrix has been stored in the format which can be analyzed by UCINET, a social network analysis software. Readers can download this data at <http://www.yuwenjuliechen.com/uyghur.html>.

Figure 2: Online Uyghur Issue Networks



Source: Map generated by [www.issuecrawler.net](http://www.issuecrawler.net).

Through hyperlink analysis I discerned five types of actors, categorized according to my understanding of their functions (and not according to their colors in the IssueCrawler map). The first of the types of actors are advocacy organizations, which focus on Uyghur self-determination. Although the WUC website lists twenty organizations, the Uyghur American Association (UAA, [www.uyghuramerican.org](http://www.uyghuramerican.org)) is the most active organization, as indicated by a large node with many connecting arrows in Figure 2. By observing the directions of the arrows, we can see that the UAA has been vital in offering Uyghur news and information to other actors in the network, such as major Western news agencies (for example the BBC), international non-governmental human rights organizations (like Amnesty International), as well as popular social networking platforms such as Twitter and Facebook. The number of outbound arrows from the UAA indicates that many organizations have linked to and garnered information from the UAA website, making it a key information provider in the Uyghur online network.

In contrast, the WUC does not appear to be an active online provider or receiver of information. While the URL of the WUC was included as a starting point in IssueCrawler, the absence of the WUC in Figure 2 may be due to its website not functioning properly throughout my research period. In an interview, the WUC secretary general, Dolkun Isa, reported that the organization's URL had been attacked by hackers (possibly from the PRC) at the time. Although the WUC's web domain was originally located in Canada, after being attacked the domain was relocated to Germany. It is likely that this change and the unstable presence of the WUC's URL prevented IssueCrawler from identifying the WUC's online presence and linkages. Of course, hyperlink analysis does not factor in the offline activities that are outlined in the WUC's 2006 and 2009 activity reports.<sup>6</sup> Future studies that construct another dataset based on offline activities are a necessary complement to build a more comprehensive and fuller understanding of Uyghur networks.

Hyperlink analysis also identified a second type of actors - INGOs that generally have a human rights focus. From the direction of the arrows, we can see that Amnesty International branches in New Zealand and the U.S. received information from the first category of actors, namely the UAA, and spread information further to press and media outlets -- the third type of actors. Mostly based in North America and Western Europe, this media has played a prominent role in making Uyghur issues more visible and widespread.

Social networking and information-sharing websites are informal and unconventional sites for political analysis, but they constitute a fourth group of actors in this online analysis. Uyghur organizations, activists and supporters have clearly used Internet channels such as Facebook and YouTube to attract individuals to the websites of Uyghur diasporic organizations, as the direction of the arrows in Figure 2 demonstrate. However, these information-sharing websites include posts and discussions from the many sides of Uyghur issues, including opinions not shared by the diasporic organizations. Indeed, the informality and accessibility of these

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<sup>6</sup> Some examples of the WUC's offline engagements are with the Italian-based Transnational Radical Party, European politicians (particularly the Green Party parliamentarian, Margarete Bause of Germany) and the U.S.-based National Endowment for Democracy, which provides financial support for WUC's operations.

channels has also given a voice to pro-China supporters and/or individuals who do not trust the one-sided discourses of Uyghur activists.

The last type of actor – governmental agencies (noted in green) – are present but not prominent in Figure 2. The website of the White House ([whitehouse.gov](http://whitehouse.gov)), for instance is in a relatively marginal location in the network, tending to be a receiver rather than a provider of information. Although Uyghur organizations may have also used offline contacts with governmental representatives and legislators to spread information, which cannot be detected through hyperlink analysis, the lack of .gov nodes implies that advocating the Uyghur cause remains the business of non-state actors, while governmental actors remain receivers/observers rather than active issue generators.

It is obvious that these five types of actors have unequally contributed to the networks that make Uyghurs an online issue. In comparison with other like-minded organizations in North America and Western Europe, the UAA has been the most active in linking sites and disseminating information on Uyghur issues, perhaps being over-reliant on Western media and social-networking/information-sharing platforms. What is less apparent from the map but important to note is that the retrieved URLs are highly concentrated in the U.S. and Western Europe. In the U.S. and Europe, Uyghur activism can be relatively more open and public- a necessary condition for online forums. Western liberal democracies also provide domestic structures that allow for activism and a public that is more sympathetic toward human rights causes.

### OFFLINE ANALYSIS

Although hyperlink analysis gives us a preliminary understanding of online Uyghur networks, not all Uyghur organizations have a virtual presence. There is currently no dataset on offline events, leaving a research gap on diasporic activism. In this section, I would like to address this gap by reviewing the current literature on Uyghurs. Some scholars have noted the growing activism of the Uyghur diaspora in the transnational arena (Christoffersen 1993; Finley 2007; Shichor 2009), as well as the role of the Internet (Gladney 2004; Petersen 2006). I would also like to identify the missing organizations and actors, accompanied with conjectures as to why these organizations or networks are not visible in hyperlink analysis.

Firstly, Central Asia and Turkey harbor a number of Uyghur diasporic communities. The existing literature indicates their importance in sustaining the Uyghur cause beyond China but localized Uyghur organizations do not rely heavily on information technology to spread their cause. Petersen (2006) indicated that there was a conscious attempt by Central Asian states, in cooperation with China, to block and ban websites that discuss Uyghur issues.

Secondly, Uyghurs have exchanged views and resources with the Tibetan and Taiwanese independence movements as well as overseas Chinese dissident networks (Shichor 2009). Although each of these movements has different political objectives and historical connections with China, activists have met and shared information in offline settings. Since they have not

established online discourses or a single-issue online network, it leaves the impression that Uyghurs have their own distinct network in hyperlink analysis.

Thirdly, the Uyghurs' international presence is not just about an allegedly oppressed minority struggle. The majority of Uyghurs today perceive themselves as Muslims. Finley (2007) documents how the Uyghurs are involved in global Islamic solidarity networks both symbolically and materially based on the belief that Uyghurs and their Muslim brethren are suffering from oppression by "foreign" powers. For Middle Eastern Muslims, such threats appear to be linked to Western "imperialist" powers, while for Uyghurs the threats are perceived to be from the domination of the Chinese state controlled by the Han majority (Gladney 1991). It is likely that Uyghurs are a part of a broader online network focused on Islamic causes, but empirical evidence indicates that Muslim linkages are absent in current online networks.

Finally, although some human rights organizations have attempted to de-link Uyghurs from the rubric of Islamic terrorism, the U.S. and Chinese governments have identified some terrorist elements, such as the Eastern Turkestan Islamic Movement, in Uyghur communities (Sheives 2006). This adds new dynamics to international Uyghur networks and complicates China's reactions to the Uyghur separatist movement. Linkages to terrorist groups, however, are not shown in Figure 2, perhaps because potential terrorist elements have not created searchable links to Uyghur diasporic organizations.

## CONCLUSION

The Uyghur diasporic network has tactfully attempted to attract the attention of their émigrés as well as the public and policy-makers in liberal democracies, mostly in Western Europe and North America through the use of websites. The Uyghur diaspora has also tried to speak out in other non-Western societies, such as in Central Asia and Turkey. However, my hyperlink analysis indicates that actors in Central Asia and elsewhere beyond Western Europe and North America do not rely too much on the Internet to promote their cause, or are constrained by the conditions in their countries, such as a lack of telecommunication facilities or obstruction from the regime. Therefore some important Uyghur activities existing in offline realities are not captured in my hyperlink analysis

At this early stage, Uyghur activists have not created significant leverage to force the Chinese government to concede to their demands, or created a broad internationalization of the Uyghur issue or consolidated Uyghur unity within China. In other words, little pressure from above or from below has been generated - two of the requirements of the boomerang pattern. Instead of conforming to Keck and Sikkink's boomerang pattern, the Chinese regime has countered Uyghur mobilization by exerting pressure on Germany since 2001.<sup>7</sup> The German government has not agreed to cooperate with PRC demands to close the WUC and deport its staff to China but this counter-mobilization has created a competitive dynamic that makes individuals feel more compelled to contribute to the Uyghur diasporic efforts. Such counter-mobilization impulses therefore act to justify Uyghur diasporic efforts, sustaining their work

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<sup>7</sup> Interview with Dolkun Isa and Margarete Bause.

against the PRC regime. At the same time, the Chinese government also benefits as it legitimates its crack down on Uyghur “separatists and terrorists.” Ironically the Uyghur rebels and the state claim to resolve the conflict according to their own logic, but both are in fact caught in a potential escalation of conflict. It is for this reason that scholars and policy-makers should continue to observe the nascent Uyghurs diasporic mobilization, monitoring how it transforms an originally China-born domestic conflict to politics in various countries and in the international arena.

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