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# NATIONALISM AS A MECHANISM: ANALYSIS OF XINJIANG COTTON BAN INCIDENT

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**Abstract:** *On March 22, 2021 the US, UK, Canada and the European Union imposed a coordinated series of sanctions on current and former Chinese officials, increasing pressure on China for alleged abuses in Xinjiang. China replied with its own sanctions on European officials. Indeed, very recently after this event, on June 10, 2021, China passed a new law to “counter foreign actions”. It has rejected the allegations of abuse, stating that the camps are “re-education” facilities utilised to combat terrorism. According to Xinhua Net netizens expressed support for local brands after H&M and Nike came under fire in China for refusing to use Xinjiang cotton. In addition to this, 11 topics connected to Xinjiang cotton were on the trending list in China’s Twitter-like social media platform Sina Weibo, each issue attracting tens of millions of views and discussions. The study tried to relate this phenomenon to the concept of nationalism by taking literature from nationalism and media/media censorship theories, which mainly serve as a source of legitimacy and instrumental strategy for the state. The study aims to analyse the highest government’s management of nationalism and public opinion, during the time it faces international pressure.*

**Keywords:** *Xinjiang Cotton Ban, Nationalism, Nationalistic Sentiment, Anti-foreign Protests, Media Censorship, Boycotts, the Chinese Government*

## **BİR MEKANİZMA OLARAK MİLLİYETÇİLİK: SİNCAN PAMUK YASAĞI OLAYININ ANALİZİ**

**Öz:** 22 Mart 2021 tarihinde Çin üzerindeki baskı; ABD, İngiltere, Kanada ve Avrupa Birliği tarafından, Sincan Uygur Özerk Bölgesi'ndeki iddia edilen suistimaller nedeniyle, mevcut ve eski Çinli yetkililere koordineli bir dizi yaptırım uygulanarak artırıldı. Çin, Avrupalı yetkililere kendi yaptırımlarıyla yanıt verdi. Nitekim bu olaydan çok kısa bir süre sonra, 10 Haziran 2021'de Çin, "yabancı eylemlere karşı" yeni bir yasa çıkardı. Kampların terörle mücadele için kullanılan "yeniden eğitim" tesisleri olduğunu belirterek taciz iddialarını reddetti. Xinhua Net'e göre, internet kullanıcıları H&M ve Nike'ın Sincan pamuğu kullanmayı reddetmesinin ardından yerel markalara desteklerini dile getirdiler. Bunun yanı sıra, Sincan pamuğuyla bağlantılı 11 konu, Çin'in Twitter benzeri sosyal medya platformu Sina Weibo'da trendler listesinde yer aldı ve her konu on milyonlarca görüş ve tartışmayı çekti. Bu çalışma, devlet için bir meşruiyet kaynağı ve araçsal strateji işlevi gören milliyetçilik ve medya/medya sansür teorilerini baz alarak bu olayı milliyetçilik kavramıyla ilişkilendirmeye çalışmış, en yüksek hükümetin uluslararası baskıyla karşı karşıya kaldığı süreçteki milliyetçilik yaklaşımını ve kamuoyu yönetimini analiz etmeyi amaçlamıştır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** *Sincan Pamuk Yasağı, Milliyetçilik, Milliyetçi Duyarlılık, Yabancı Karşıtı Protestolar, Medya Sansürü, Boykotlar, Çin Hükümeti*

## INTRODUCTION

Back in 2018 some of the famous Western new agencies have drawn attention to the Chinese action towards Uyghurs in the Xinjiang Autonomous Region. According to the articles since 2017 Chinese government officially declared the “Sinicization of All Religions and Beliefs” which in turn worsened the situation towards Uyghur Muslims. In one of the articles published by Euronews, the stories of some Uyghur people and families were covered who stated that they have been detained by the Chinese government to the internment camps in the Xinjiang region.<sup>1</sup> Apart from giving up their languages, religion, the detainees are also subject to forced labour in manufacturing and food industries under the “Xinjiang Aid”. For instance, the article titled “U.S sportswear traced to factory in China’s Muslim internment camps” has pointed out the recent track by Associated Press which shows the ongoing shipments from Xinjiang factory located inside an internment camp to Badger Sportswear, a leading supplier in Statesville, North Carolina. Although such imports are counted as illegal in the U.S., according to the article it is quite challenging to stop such products from getting into the supply chain.<sup>2</sup>

Of course, one also needs to listen to the Chinese side of the story. While Western media accusing China of the human rights abuses in the above-mentioned region, China puts on the table definition of three evil - terrorism, separatism and religious extremism and draws attention to the different understanding of human rights and sovereignty in the West and East. In many times Foreign Ministry Wang Yi and other people in charge pointed out that “China pursues a people-centred vision, regards the rights to subsistence and development as the primary, basic human rights, and works hard to promote the comprehensive and coordinated development of economic, social, cultural rights as well as civil political rights.” China’s stress on “economic” rights as taking priority over “political rights” is why Beijing consistently brings up economic

1 “Toplama kamplarına kapatılan Kazakların aileleri yardım bekliyor –Görüş”, *Euronews*, 20 Aralık 2018 [https://tr.euronews.com/2018/12/20/toplama-kamplarına-kapatılan-kazakların-aileleri-yardım-bekliyor-gorus?fbclid=IwAR2R0RBcVjhB8EbZ0h\\_5A6tladBtkVNliYc72gsVNqC84hwA8TRVcKJIUtQ](https://tr.euronews.com/2018/12/20/toplama-kamplarına-kapatılan-kazakların-aileleri-yardım-bekliyor-gorus?fbclid=IwAR2R0RBcVjhB8EbZ0h_5A6tladBtkVNliYc72gsVNqC84hwA8TRVcKJIUtQ) (Accessed October 7, 2021)

2 “U.S. sportswear traced to factory in China’s Muslim internment camps”, *Star Advertiser*, December 17, 2018 [https://www.staradvertiser.com/2018/12/17/breaking-news/u-s-sportswear-traced-to-factory-in-chinas-muslim-internment-camps/?fbclid=IwAR2p2VoErVO4Pyh488QqdWyJmxMPuCFvsb9\\_xauatoAFaohzNA7hyDLMbFs](https://www.staradvertiser.com/2018/12/17/breaking-news/u-s-sportswear-traced-to-factory-in-chinas-muslim-internment-camps/?fbclid=IwAR2p2VoErVO4Pyh488QqdWyJmxMPuCFvsb9_xauatoAFaohzNA7hyDLMbFs) (Accessed October 7, 2021)

development statistics to justify its human rights record.<sup>3</sup> Chinese officials stated that the camps, which they call training centres, offer free vocational training to Uyghurs, Kazakhs and mostly Muslims, as part of a plan to bring minorities into a “modern civilized” world and eradicate poverty in Xinjiang. They claim that in order to receive vocational training people in the centres have signed agreements.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to Western news articles, in March 2020, the Australian Institute for Strategic Policy (ASPI) published a report claiming that 83 foreign and Chinese companies directly or indirectly benefited from the use of Uyghur workers outside the Xinjiang region through “labour transfer programs”. ASPI estimated that Uyghurs were relocated from Xinjiang and assigned to factories in many supply chains, including electronics, automobiles and textiles under a central government policy.<sup>5</sup>

On March 22, 2021 the US, UK, Canada and the European Union imposed a coordinated series of sanctions on current and former Chinese officials, increasing pressure on China for alleged abuses in Xinjiang. The action came weeks after the US government, and the Canadian and Dutch parliaments stated that China’s treatment of the Uighurs amounted to “genocide”, and Washington declared an import ban on all cotton and tomato products in the region.<sup>6</sup> The EU did not impose new sanctions on China over human rights abuses since the Tiananmen Square protest of 1989. The new sanctions include “travel bans” and “property freezing”, “targeting senior officials in Xinjiang” who indicted of severing human rights violations against Uyghur Muslims.<sup>7</sup>

Those targeted have been listed as 1) Chen Mingguo, the director of the Xinjiang Public Security Bureau, the local police force 2) Wang

3 “Can China Change the Definition of Human Rights?” *The Diplomat*, February 23, 2021 <https://thediplomat.com/2021/02/can-china-change-the-definition-of-human-rights/> (Accessed October 7, 2021)

4 “U.S. sportswear traced to factory in China’s Muslim internment camps”, *Star Advertiser*, December 17, 2018 [https://www.staradvertiser.com/2018/12/17/breaking-news/u-s-sportswear-traced-to-factory-in-chinas-muslim-internment-camps/?fbclid=IwAR2p2VoErVO4Pyh488QqDWyJmxMPuCFvsb9\\_xauatoAFaohzNA7hyDLMbFs](https://www.staradvertiser.com/2018/12/17/breaking-news/u-s-sportswear-traced-to-factory-in-chinas-muslim-internment-camps/?fbclid=IwAR2p2VoErVO4Pyh488QqDWyJmxMPuCFvsb9_xauatoAFaohzNA7hyDLMbFs) (Accessed October 7, 2021)

5 Vicky Xiuzhong Xu et al. “Uyghurs for sale”, *Australian Strategic Policy Institute*, 1 March, 2020 <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/uyghurs-sale> (Accessed September 23, 2021)

6 “China attacks Western nations, firms over Xinjiang cotton boycott”, *Aljazeera*, March 29, 2021 <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/3/29/china-slams-western-nations-firms-over-xinjiang-cotton-boycott> (Accessed June 10, 2021)

7 “Uighurs: Western countries sanction China over rights abuses”, *BBC*, March 22, 2021 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-56487162> (Accessed June 10, 2021)

Mingshan, a member of Xinjiang's Communist Party standing committee, who, according to the EU, "holds a key political position in charge of overseeing" Uighur detention 3) Wang Junzheng, party secretary of the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (XPCC), a state-owned economic and paramilitary organization 4) The former deputy Communist Party head in Xinjiang, Zhu Hailun, who is accused of having held a "key political position" in supervising the running of the camps 5) The Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps Public Security Bureau, which holds the responsibility of implementing XPCC policies on security matters, including the management of detention centers.<sup>8</sup>

Some major brands like Nike and H&M which are members of the Better Cotton Initiative (BCI) have shown concern over allegations that people from the mostly Muslim Uighur minority group are being used as forced labour. Last year H&M said that it is strongly concerned about statements from civil society organizations and media that cover accusations of "forced labour" and discrimination of ethno religious minorities in Xinjiang, and it rigidly forbids any type of forced labour in the supply chain, notwithstanding the country or region. Although the statement has been on the official website for a long time, it has garnered new attention as the EU has imposed sanctions on Xinjiang issues recently.<sup>9</sup>

China replied with its own sanctions on European officials. Indeed, very recently after this event, on June 10, 2021, China passed a new law to "counter foreign actions".<sup>10</sup> It has rejected the allegations of abuse, stating that the camps are "re-education" facilities utilised to combat terrorism. Later China announced that the sanctions - originally stated by the EU - were "based on nothing but lies and disinformation". It declared that it would sanction 10 people and four entities in Europe "that severely harm China's sovereignty and interests and maliciously spread lies and disinformation" in response. Those affected by China's sanctions are banned from entering the country or doing business with it.<sup>11</sup>

8 "Xinjiang cotton: Western clothes brands vanish as backlash grows", *BBC*, March 26, 2021 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-56533560> (Accessed June 10, 2021)

9 Ibid.

10 Shannon, Tiezzi. "China Passes New Law on Countering Foreign Sanctions", *The Diplomat*, June 11, 2021 <https://thediplomat.com/2021/06/china-passes-new-law-on-countering-foreign-sanctions/> (Accessed June 15, 2021)

11 "Chinese people – not govt – urge boycott of West brands over Xinjiang cotton", *Global Times*, March 26, 2021 <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202103/1219547.shtml> (Accessed June 10, 2021)

The Chinese Communist Party's Youth League launched a campaign on H&M and drew attention to a statement that the world's second-largest clothing retailer said it will stop licensing Xinjiang cotton due to difficulties in tracking how the material is produced. Party newspaper Global Times also criticized statements from Burberry, Adidas, Nike, New Balance and Zara about Xinjiang. Dozens of Chinese celebrities then cut their ties with brands.<sup>12</sup> According to Xinhua Net netizens expressed support for local brands after H&M and Nike came under fire in China for refusing to use Xinjiang cotton. As of press time, 11 topics connected to Xinjiang cotton have been on the trending list in China's Twitter-like social media platform Sina Weibo, each issue attracting tens of millions of views and discussions. There are 850 million views, under the hash tag "I support Xinjiang cotton" on Weibo.<sup>13</sup>

In the next section, we will try to relate this phenomenon to the concept of nationalism by taking literature from nationalism and media/media censorship theories, which mainly serve as a source of legitimacy and instrumental strategy for the state. By doing so, we will introduce our research questions and our three hypotheses. Here we need to clarify that whether accusations on Xinjiang camps and forced labour are true or not, are not the topic of this study. The study aims to analyse the highest government's management of nationalism and public opinion, during the time it faces international pressure. Case study adopted as a research methodology for this study. In the case of the Xinjiang cotton ban incident, the CCP Youth League, which is run by the CCP, launched a boycott campaign against foreign sanctions. As we viewed literature there were cases in the past, where the CCP government organized or allowed protests to happen for gaining benefits. At the same time as literature on censorship suggest the higher government firmly censor the "call for collective action" comments as it can go out of hand. In the Xinjiang issue, we can see the government while fuelled the nationalistic sentiment, it also did not allow the boycotts to turn into real protests. Data drawn from 200 Weibo comments and examined with content analysis method relying on manual hand-coding. The conclusion and limitations of the study discussed in the last section.

12 "Chinese public voices support for Xinjiang cotton, turns to domestic brands over H&M, Nike", *Global Times*, May 25, 2021  
<https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202103/1219414.shtml> (Accessed June 10, 2021)

13 Ibid., Also see "Across China: Chinese consumers voice support for Xinjiang cotton to refute smears", *Xinhua Net*, March 20, 2021  
[http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-03/30/c\\_139847040.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-03/30/c_139847040.htm) (Accessed June 10, 2021)

## CONCEPTS

In this section, we will define the concepts as follows:

### Nationalism

*What is nationalism?*

Nationalism is an idea and movement which holds that the nation should be harmonious with the state.<sup>14</sup> Virtually, nationalism can be viewed as positive or negative depending on context and personal outlook. Critics of nationalism have debated that the idea is likely oppressive, as it fuses individual identity into a national whole and gives elites or political leaders possible opportunities to manipulate or dominate the masses.<sup>15</sup> In this paper we follow Haas's definition of nationalism – “An ideology that makes assertions about the nation's claim to historical uniqueness, to the territory that the nation-state ought to occupy, and to the kinds of relations that should prevail between one's nation and others.”<sup>16</sup>

### Anti-foreign protests

As our research questions touch upon to protest in the Xinjiang cotton ban campaign, we need to first define the concept itself and then look at some literature on protests in China. We will use Jessica Weiss definition of “anti-foreign protests”. In contrast to official rallies which is organised under the government or party and joined by a select group of “pre-screened participants” and state-organized demonstration<sup>17</sup> anti-foreign grassroots protests may have official permission yet are organized and participated by individual acting in either “a private capacity” or “as a part of the unofficial, independent organization”. It can include demonstrations, petitions, marches and strikes. The government can 1.Repress the protests by both engaging pre-emptive efforts to suppress grassroots mobilization; 2. It can also tolerate the protests by silently acquiescing it; 3. Lastly, it can also facilitate protests.<sup>18</sup>

14 Michael, Hechter. *Containing Nationalism* (Oxford University Press, 2000),52

15 Andrew, Heywood. *Political Theory: An Introduction*, (London: Macmillan Press, 1999), 97–98.

16 Ernst B. Haas, “What Is Nationalism and Why Should We Study It?” *International Organization*, 40, no. 3 (1986): 707–44. Doi:10.1017/S0020818300027326..

17 (see demonstrations during Mao Era)

18 Jessica C. Weiss, *Powerful Patriots: Nationalist Protest in China's Foreign Relations*, (Oxford Scholarship Online, 2014), 226.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

In this section, we will review the literature under the following order: A) Nationalism; B) Linking protests to Internet usage and Media Censorship.

### Nationalism

#### *Importance of Nationalism in Authoritarian Regime*

With the fading ideology of communism, the Chinese government has adopted the term coined by Samuel Huntington “performance” legitimacy in order to validate their position and avoid the demand for political reform. In addition to economic growth, other factors such as nationalism, media censorship play a key role in Chinese authoritarian resilience.<sup>19</sup> Leading sinologists like Michel Oksenberg<sup>20</sup> and Allen Whiting<sup>21</sup>, then other scholars including Peter Gries<sup>22</sup>, Suisheng Zhao<sup>23</sup> tend to agree that “new Chinese nationalistic narratives drew upon collective memories of China’s historical greatness during the dynastic period” and during the “century of humiliation” (???? ) China’s suffering from being under foreign aggression and its following rise is under the control of CCP leadership.<sup>24</sup> Yet there is division among earlier observers in terms of first, the degree of such stories has their resonance at the popular level, the extent to which Chinese people have internalized them and second, the spreading of them to inculcate loyalty and ensure state legitimacy. In simple words, division on whether nationalistic narratives are **belief-driven** or they are used as a **strategic instrument** by the state.<sup>25</sup> Some scholars say that the Chinese current vulnerable

19 Jessica C. Weiss, *Powerful Patriots: Nationalist Protest in China’s Foreign Relations*, (Oxford Scholarship Online, 2014), 226-227

20 Michel, Oksenberg. “China’s confident nationalism”, *Foreign Affairs*, 65, no.1 (1986): 511.

21 Allen S. Whiting, “Assertive nationalism in Chinese foreign policy”, *Asian Survey*, 23, no.8, (1983):917-922.

22 Peter, Gries. *China’s New Nationalism: Pride, Politics, and Diplomacy*. (University of California Press, 2004), 210-215. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt1pq06f> (Accessed June 10, 2021)

23 Suisheng, Zhao. *A Nation-state by Construction: Dynamics of Modern Chinese Nationalism*, (Redwood City, CA : Stanford University Press, 2004), 355

24 Christopher, Cairns and Allen, Carlson. “Real-world Islands in a Social Media Sea: Nationalism and Censorship on Weibo during the 2012 Diaoyu/Senkaku Crisis”, *The China Quarterly*, 225 (2016):23-27..

25 Ibid.



leadership is hypersensitive to nationalist sentiment as they cannot risk themselves in the eyes of Chinese people being “soft against foreign aggression”, thus it requires them forcefully respond to any kind of “foreign slight”. Scholar Akio Takahara<sup>26</sup> points to the fragility of the Chinese government in regards to persuading its public while there is a growing sense of nationalism. Thus, in order to preserve their legitimacy leaders to large extent are dependent on nationalism.

Yet, other experts used different explanation and comment to feedback on the Chinese government’s usage of nationalism *as a strategic instrument*. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokespeople have many times claimed that foreign actions or requirements “hurt the feeling of the Chinese people” by pointing to the impossibility of compromise domestically because of public opinion.<sup>27</sup> However, some experts claim that the CCP has considerable autonomy in turning on and off this sentiment and in setting their foreign policy and constraints imposed by nationalism is often exaggerated. Alastair Iain Johnson<sup>28</sup> says public opinion in China is subject to the government’s “psychological engineering” and in the system where there is no electoral cost to ignore public opinion why would Chinese leaders care about people’s view. Having said that one also need to mention that Chinese leaders are well aware of threat can be posed by nationalist mobilisation as back in history in 1912 Qing dynasty and the Kuomintang government in 1949 “fell to popular movements” which blamed the government not being able to defend the nation from foreign “wolves”. We can see there is an obvious risk of nationalism getting out of hand and turn against the regime, then one can ask, why would the government even allow nationalism sentiment to grow? – Gains can be *domestically and internationally*. *Domestically*, usage of this sentiment could be linked to the fact that government leaders can distract the public from domestic grievances as it serves as a “relatively safe outlet for pent up anger”. As in the theory of diversionary foreign policy where war can be used to

26 “Genron Studio: Senkaku Issue and Future of Japan-China Relations”, *Japan Foreign Policy Forum*, April 2014, <http://www.japanpolicyforum.jp/en/archive/no12/000369.html#kiji> (Accessed June 10, 2021)

27 Sun, Yun. “Chinese Public Opinion: Shaping China’s Foreign Policy, or Shaped by It?” *Brooking*, December 13, 2011 <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/chinese-public-opinion-shaping-chinas-foreign-policy-or-shaped-by-it/> (Accessed June 10, 2021)

28 Alastair Iain Johnston and Daniela Stockmann, “6. Chinese Attitudes toward the United States and Americans” In *Anti-Americanisms in World Politics* edited by Peter J. Katzenstein and Robert O. Keohane, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011), 157-195. <https://doi.org/10.7591/9780801461651-008>

distract people from domestic problems, nationalism can be used for the same purposes. *Internationally* as said earlier, to gain bargaining power with other states and stand firm in international disputes. Thus, as pointed out by Wang Jisi to the Chinese philosopher Mencius quote “A state without an enemy... is absolutely doomed” the CCP uses nationalist propaganda to exaggerate external threats, congregating public around one flag and outlining its “success” in defending nation interest.<sup>29</sup> Here we should mention that it is still difficult to say to what extent the CCP are dependent on public opinion or public view in contrast is being controlled by the CCP itself.

### Linking protests to Internet usage and Media Censorship.

In the era of the internet, media add an important layer to state legitimacy especially in authoritarian regimes as it can be a tool for the party and censored for particular purposes. According to Susan Shirk, in the decade since China was first connected to the Internet in 1995, its use has exploded. Only 10 per cent of Chinese adults had even heard of the Internet in 1997.<sup>30</sup> The estimated number of Chinese internet users in 2020 was 904 million. This means that 70.4 per cent of the population uses the internet.<sup>31</sup> The Communist Party’s propaganda bureaucracy attempts to regulate news content in the market-oriented media and widely succeeds in the print and television domains. Only a few journalists have dared to resist. Nevertheless, Internet communication is quite too fast, too decentralized, and too internationalized for the censors to block breaking news before it enters the online public. The Chinese people have access to more information than ever before about what is happening inside and outside the country.<sup>32</sup> Besides, with the explosion of Weibo, QQ and some other social media platforms now-viral form of mobilization become easy as calls for protests are less centred on “long-standing activists based in Beijing, Shanghai and other first-tier cities”.<sup>33</sup>

29 Jessica C. Weiss, *Powerful Patriots: Nationalist Protest in China’s Foreign Relations*, (Oxford Scholarship Online, 2014), 226-228.

30 Susan, Shirk. *China: Fragile Superpower* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 81-83.

31 “Penetration rate of internet users in China 2008-2020”, *Statista*, February, 2021  
<https://www.statista.com/statistics/236963/penetration-rate-of-internet-users-in-china/>  
(Accessed May 6, 2021)

32 Shirk, *China: Fragile Superpower*, 81-83.

33 Christopher, Cairns and Allen, Carlson. “Real-world Islands in a Social Media Sea: Nationalism and Censorship on Weibo during the 2012 Diaoyu/Senkaku Crisis”, *The China Quarterly*, 225 (2016): 22.

According to the literature about Chinese protests and internet censorship in general the CCP firmly censors the internet if citizens criticise officials or policies or if they use the internet to organize collective actions. According to King, Pan and Roberts if the call for collective action contains real-world collective action (protests, demonstrations) online censorship will take place at high rates. In another article by those authors, the CCP in fact does not censor the internet if it only reflects individual grievance, censorship happens again if there is a call for collective action.<sup>34</sup> According to another article by Cairns and Carlson, in some cases, as it happened in Diaoyu/Senkaku Crisis the CCP can close its eyes to some comments during some period of time if it serves to the CCP tactics at that time, even if comments contain state's criticism.<sup>35</sup> From this, we also can say that protests against the central government (if any) are highly blocked. Again protests against local governments are also blocked (as could as possible) by the central government but on some occasions, the government can use angry citizens' grievance against local governments for measuring their accountability as shown in the Xinfang system (petitions).<sup>36</sup>

Besides, boycotts which we assume is an important step to the real protests are a widely famous and accepted method for people with anti-foreign, nationalistic sentiment as well as for the government.<sup>37</sup> It can either be concluded with protests or can stay as it is. For instance, in 2017 the Lotte Mart stores had been shut down in China and state media called for a boycott of South Korean goods and services. It was linked to South Korea's acceptance to install the U.S. THAAD in response to a missile threat from North Korea. In contrast, China said, it has radar that capable of penetrating its territory.<sup>38</sup> After that dozens of Chinese

34 See Gary King, Jennifer Pan, and Margaret E. Roberts, "How Censorship in China Allows Government Criticism but Silences Collective Expression", *American Political Science Review*, no. 107, 2 (2013): 1-18 and Gary King, Jennifer Pan, and Margaret E. Roberts, "Reverse-engineering censorship in China: Randomized experimentation and participant observation", *Science*, no. 345, 6199, (2014): 1-10.

35 Christopher, Cairns and Allen, Carlson. "Real-world Islands in a Social Media Sea: Nationalism and Censorship on Weibo during the 2012 Diaoyu/Senkaku Crisis", *The China Quarterly*, 225 (2016): 27

36 Carl F. Minzner, "Xinfang: An Alternative to Formal Chinese Legal Institutions", *Stanford Journal of International Law*, 42, no.1 (2006): 103-108

37 "Boycott", *Merriam-Webster*, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/boycott> (Accessed June 10, 2021)

38 Joyce Lee and Adam Jourdan. "South Korea's Lotte reports store closures in China amid political stand-off", *Reuters*, March 5, 2017 <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-southkorea-china-lotte-idUSKBN16D03U> (Accessed May 6, 2021)

people by holding Mao Zedong photo staged a protest to boycott Lotte in Jilin province on March 5, 2017. The slogans of the protesters were “No to THAAD! Boycott Korean goods!”, “Patriotism starts with me! Long live the Communist Party!”<sup>39</sup>

In regards to real-life anti-foreign protests, as we talked about earlier the highest government can utilise nationalism as a strategic tool for domestic (legitimacy) and international purposes (firm stance) yet nationalist protests are not that easy to allow. It can again both have *risks* and *benefits* that is why it is described as a “double-edged sword”. In terms of *risks*, first, although it can deliberately be fuelled by the government itself, as we defined anti-foreign protesters are not pre-screened individuals, they freely participate in the protests no matter who started and for what purposes started the protests - either government or public themselves. Thus, the public cannot simply (easily) be the puppets of the government. To some degree, they can of course affect the government. First, if the state wants to repress the protests in order to show that it compromises foreign action, in that case, there will an “audience cost”. State action can be seen by its citizens as betrayal, can create resentments and leave government vulnerable to charges of selling out the nation<sup>40</sup>. Secondly, it can go out of hand and cause harm to foreign citizens, diplomatic properties even turn against the government itself as it is being weak in its foreign policy performance or can cause broader opposition to the regime. Therefore even a small congregation can pose a risk for the highest government.

In terms of *benefits*, by letting protests take part, the government can actually gain legitimacy from its citizens as it addresses popular public demand, also can have bargaining power as it can show foreign counterparts how it is domestically difficult to accept foreign action (decision) and how it is difficult to manage/curb the protests. And even in the case where the protest is repressed by the government, it can signal its commitment to a more cooperative and flexible diplomatic stance by playing the role of “good cop”. Besides, many external actors ranging from governments, multinational enterprises to international investors, in fact, would rather favour the status quo to instability, thus the eruption

39 “Chinese protest against South Korea’s Lotte”, *The Strait Times*, March 17, 2017  
<https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/chinese-protest-against-south-koreas-lotte>  
(Accessed May 6, 2021)

40 Jessica C.Weiss, “Authoritarian signalling, mass audiences,and nationalist protest in China.” *International Organization*, 67, (2013):24.

of nationalist protests give foreigners incentives to avoid adopting the tougher policies and to make a concession to authoritarian leadership. Cases such as the 1999 bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade when anti-American protests allowed and it gave the CCP leaders determination to stand against U.S. “bullying” as well as the 2001 EP-3 collision where protests stifled to signal Bush administration that the Chinese government intend to maintain friendly relationship can be shown as an example.<sup>41</sup>

Considering above literature and the incident of the Xinjiang cotton ban our research questions and hypotheses will be as followed:

### Research Questions:

1. Whether/How did the Chinese state use/allow national sentiment to take place in the Xinjiang campaign to help Beijing to stand firm in international disputes?
  2. Whether the comments were monopolized by nationalistic sentiment or there were other comments too? In other words by looking at Weibo posts whether we can see comments against the Chinese government itself - Either in terms of being naïve towards western firms or accusing the Chinese government to use free labour? Or were there comments call to the real-life protests?
- H1.** The Chinese government carried out an instrumental strategy by using nationalistic sentiment as a tool to resist Western pressure;
- H2.** Most of Weibo comments have nationalistic motives which show the public’s support towards the government;
- H3.** Although the Chinese government created/encouraged nationalistic feelings deliberately, it did not let the “call to action” lead to organized real-life protests.

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41 Jessica C. Weiss, *Powerful Patriots: Nationalist Protest in China's Foreign Relations*, (Oxford Scholarship Online, 2014), 226.

### Theoretical significance:

First of all, most of the time nationalistic (except Lotte case), anti-foreign campaign/protests start arbitrarily against a particular foreign action (or described as it is government-free organized movement), in contrast, in the Xinjiang cotton ban incident we can see the open call for action by Chinese Communist Party's Youth League which is run by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) itself.<sup>42</sup> Thus, it will be interesting to analyse the incident where the government both has encouraged but at the same time acted cautiously in involving its citizens to stand against international pressure. Besides, as being a recent incident, this will definitely add some knowledge to the existing literature by examining how the state acts when it faces foreign sanctions and whether the involvement of nationalism sentiment is/was effective, citizens' reaction and incident reflection on social media and real-life. Lastly, our analysis is necessary especially due to the fact that very few scholars actually involve social-media analysis in their research when talking about the Chinese regime as most of them mainly look at websites and blogs. We think social media allows us access to the unprompted feelings and opinions of users, in people's own words that other researchers can miss. Xinjiang ban issue was for some days on the top trends of Weibo, therefore it is definitely significant to analyse and it will for sure widely open the spectrum of this kind of analysis.

## METHOD AND DATA

### Methodology – Qualitative

We will use case study method in this research. A case study of the Xinjiang ban has been chosen first, because it is a recent incident and data, compare to other old anti-foreign protest cases could be derived easily. The issue gained popularity among the public and social media reactions to the sanctions were at a high rate. Besides as mentioned in the theoretical significance part, we see government supported /called for the action by itself and analysis of this case is perfectly suited to our aim of the study. In the first step, we will gather the data for analysis, and then we will examine the collected data. The stages of the data collection and analysis have been explained in the following section.

<sup>42</sup> "Communist Youth League of China", *Wikipedia*, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Communist\\_Youth\\_League\\_of\\_China](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Communist_Youth_League_of_China) (Accessed June 10, 2021)

**Data – Primary and secondary**

In the first step, random sampled 100 comments written under H&M statement posts<sup>43</sup> about the issue and 100 comments under the Chinese Communist Party's Youth League call for campaign posts<sup>44</sup> (24<sup>th</sup> March) on Weibo have been taken as data for analysis in this study. It gives us 200 comments in total. The data files did not include multimedia such as images or videos. We relied only on the comments' text. Time – comments have taken randomly from 22 March (the day of sanctions imposed by several western countries – including the UK, US, Canada and European Union members) to 29 March time period which we assume as the “hot week” of the issue.

After that, we compared data related to call for protests-demonstration (if any) to real street protests/demonstration in other words whether protests/demonstration happened in real life. For this, Chinese (Xinhua News Agency, Global Times)<sup>45</sup> and Western news (BBC)<sup>46</sup> articles have been analysed. Besides in order to look at how the government described the public's view, we also compared our gained data regarding the public's support for government with the Chinese official newspaper's description of public opinion during the ban campaign. The CCP official news agencies' articles have been analyzed (Xinhua News Agency, Global Times) for this purpose (English versions of these news articles have been chosen deliberately to see how the Chinese government projects the issue to the international world).

**Data analysis method** – In this article, we used qualitative content analysis. It is described as a research method for the subjective

43 “Comments”, *Weibo*, [https://weibo.com/2049875433/K7HX70cl7?filter=hot&root\\_comment\\_id=0&type=comment](https://weibo.com/2049875433/K7HX70cl7?filter=hot&root_comment_id=0&type=comment) (Accessed June 10, 2021)

44 “Comments”, *Weibo*, [https://weibo.com/3937348351/K7E7iAC8x?type=comment#\\_rnd1623318020021](https://weibo.com/3937348351/K7E7iAC8x?type=comment#_rnd1623318020021) (Accessed June 10, 2021)

45 See “Chinese people – not govt – urge boycott of West brands over Xinjiang cotton”, *Global Times*, March 26, 2021 <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202103/1219547.shtml> (Accessed June 10, 2021) and

“Xinhua Commentary: Stop tainting Xinjiang's pure cotton with dirt politics”, *Xinhua Net*, March 26, 2021 [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-03/26/c\\_139838036.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-03/26/c_139838036.htm) (Accessed June 10, 2021)

46 “Uighurs: Western countries sanction China over rights abuses”, *BBC*, March 22, 2021 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-56487162> (Accessed June 10, 2021) and

“Xinjiang cotton: Western clothes brands vanish as backlash grows”, *BBC*, March 26, 2021 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-56533560> (Accessed June 10, 2021)

interpretation of the text data content with the process of coding and a systematic classification of identifying themes or patterns.

To find out the motive/nationalistic sentiment in the comments we looked mainly for the following keywords:

Keywords : “Local products (???)”; “national products(??)”; “Our local products(?????)”; “Chinese money(???)”; “our Money (????)”; “make money in China(?????)”; U.S(??); Europe(??); “Xinjiang cotton(????)”; “forced labour (????)”; “human rights (??)”; “Better Cotton Initiative (BCI) report (BCI ??)”; “boycott (??)”; “protest(??)”; “demonstration(??)” or the general meaning of the text related to these keywords

We divided comments into three categories:

1. Comments related shows support for the government. This category has also been divided into two categories:
  - (A). “General” comments - just shows their opposition to west sanctions (firm)
  - (B). “Call for action” comments. Again call for action comments have divided into
    - (A). Boycotting foreign goods;
    - (B). Protests-demonstration related.
2. Comments against the Chinese government in a sense that the government acting spineless towards foreign firms - posts blaming the Chinese government for being naive.
3. Comments against Xinjiang cotton usage - against government actions in Xinjiang, mentions forced labour action of government (even slight opposite comments will go into this category).

We assumed the chances of the existence of these oppositional comments are very low. Yet it helped us to count whether 1. Were there also comments against Chinese state action or mention/criticize Chinese state action in Xinjiang province. 2. By doing so we concluded that if those comments exist then they are not censored.



The content analysis method was used for the analysis. Coding has been done manually. Finally, as posts were written in Chinese, in addition to Weibo automatic translation, we asked native Chinese to help us in manual coding and extracting the data.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### *Findings from the comments:*

According to the data collected from both the CCP Youth League post and H&M post, most of the comments consist of “general” support to China and boycotting the foreign products (H&M, Nike, Uniqlo, Adidas, Gap so on.) that part of BCI. Comments like “????????? (to do bad things and to want to get good reputation, get out of China)” “? (get out/get lost)”, “????? (Please leave China)”, “????? (resolutely resisting/boycotting)”, “????????????? (eating Chinese food and making false rumours about China)” were at a high rate. Besides, there were comments that complain about the quality of the foreign products and want foreign firms to leave China for this reason, not because of political purposes (new sanctions). Yet, we haven’t come across any comment that calls for real protests or demonstrations in our sample. Thus, here we see that collected data is largely consistent with the theory in a way that the CCP being cautious to allow protests erupt because it could get out of control and create risks for the current regime (both diplomatically or domestically). Indeed, only calling its people to boycott but at the same time censoring protests may have been the CCP’s own intention as it did not need a large scale of protests in this very issue (Xinjiang cotton ban). Yet, there is a limitation in the argument of censorship because we do not know whether the comments that call for the real protests were censored or they in fact were not written by people themselves in the first place. Besides, we also do not know whether the Chinese people wanted to write “protest” comments but they have self-censored themselves to not to do, or they did not have any interest to stage a real protest.<sup>47</sup>

Secondly, call for action campaign has been started by the CCP Youth League (new sanctions have been put on 22 March, the post has been written on 24 March) and it openly encouraged the public to adopt patriotic/nationalistic sentiment by saying “?????????????”

47 To see both the Tables of the findings refer to Appendix A.

???????????????? (spreading rumours to boycott Xinjiang cotton, while also wanting to make money in China? Wishful thinking)”<sup>48</sup> However, we did not see comments under the post that question the Chinese government in a sense that why Western companies can make money in China instead of local brands, why does the government allow or act “naïve”, “weak” towards the West and so on. Here we should mention that there were many comments that showed support to local brands and encourage them to seize the opportunity to grow but those comments were not written for criticizing the highest government. In addition to this, there were comments such as “it is our Chinese people fault to let this happen”, “we are forgetful” and so on. Moreover, comments like “our boycott would not be enough”, “the government should check offline stores fire system” (referencing to closing Lotte stores) have also been seen in the sample. Besides, in our sample, we didn’t see words like “?? (U.S.A)”, “?? (Europe)”, they were all referred to as “?????? (these foreign brands)”, but comments that boycotting the brand specifically Uniqlo and have anti-Japanese sentiment were notable. Uniqlo also part of BCI and boycotting it understandable, yet, we assume anti-Japanese comments, to some degree describe the level of nationalism among Chinese people. In short, again as we can see even a low level of criticism that characterize the Chinese government as naïve or spineless has not been made or allowed.

Thirdly, there were no comments against the Chinese government usage of forced labour or violating human rights. In contrast, comments like “do not cross our bottom line or we will boycott you”, “respect our sovereignty”, “do not interfere our domestic issue”, “respect our country”, “we have a different understanding of being respectful”, “let’s unite against human rights teacher” and calling the H&M “arrogant”, “ignorant” types of comments were at a high rate. Other comments also were explaining there is no forced labour in Xinjiang, the labour there is mechanised, “My family are there, they live a happy life”, asking the company “have you ever been to Xinjiang?”

#### *Findings from the articles:*

According to Global Times,<sup>49</sup> there were irrational cases of individuals that destroy those brands products (cut H&M clothes or burn Nike

48 To see both the CCP Youth League and H&M posts refer to Appendix B.

49 “Chinese people – not govt – urge boycott of West brands over Xinjiang cotton”, *Global Times*, March 26, 2021 <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202103/1219547.shtml> (Accessed June 10, 2021)

shoes) or verbally abuse the staffers, however, those radical remarks and behaviours, which account for only a small amount of all public responses have been disapproved by Chinese netizens. Many invited them to the “rational patriotism”.

Lastly, in two articles by state newspapers Xinhua Net and Global Times apart from explaining how Xinjiang cotton fields use machinery instead of manual labour to pick cotton in harvesting seasons, how boycotting Xinjiang products “robs” people’s rights to a job with decent payment and a better life and how those accusations are fake, lie and politicised, both articles heavily mention the “angry” Chinese citizens boycotting some foreign brands on social media. None of the articles touches upon the CCP’s Youth League call for the campaign post. Besides, an article by the Global Times titled “Chinese people-not govt-urge boycott off West brands over Xinjiang cotton” talks about how the CCP tries its best to have a balanced strategy in both being careful with nationalistic sentiment and not allowing foreigners to “hurt national sovereignty and country’s core interests” which equals to hurt the affections of the Chinese people.

As the theory suggests, in this incident we can see the higher government in order to stand against Western pressure has utilized public opinion. Although the sanctions against usage of Xinjiang cotton have not been cancelled, yet boycotts by Chinese people signals other foreign companies to be careful with “choosing their sides” as it can cause them to lose customers.

## CONCLUSION AND LIMITATIONS

To conclude, the Chinese government action in the Xinjiang cotton ban incident is highly consistent with the theory examined by Jessica Weiss and other scholars mentioned in the literature review. Nationalism can be belief-driven or created for strategic purposes, in other words, the driving agent of it can either be state or public. Although it is difficult to find out for sure which agent outweighs the other, yet what is already proven is that a state can benefit or risk itself by allowing (or fueling) nationalism to grow. The theory claims that the CCP leadership can benefit from nationalism and nationalistic protests domestically and also can gain bargaining power or resist foreign pressure in a challenging situation which will increase the regime resilience. In our analysis, by drawing data from news articles and 200 comments written under two posts, first, we came to the conclusion that in the Xinjiang cotton ban

issue the government was the driving power in increasing nationalism among the Chinese people as the CCP Youth League which is run by the CCP called for the campaign after the sanctions. Besides in the analysis of the news agencies articles we saw usage of public opinion “card” to signal other foreign companies to be careful with China. Thus, we answered our first question and proved our first hypothesis. Secondly, in terms of allowing comments other than supporting the government to spread on Weibo, in our sample we did not see any comments: 1. Criticising the Chinese government as it acts “spineless” or “naïve”; 2. Criticising the Chinese government in any of its action in Xinjiang. In this way, we concluded that although the Chinese government was the driving force of the social media boycotts, yet it acted cautiously to not allow nationalism to get out of hand and cause large scale protests. In this way, we contributed to the theory that not always state-driven nationalism sentiment is allowed to turn into real protests. In the case of Lotte stores the government, through media called for the action and protests were also erupted in Jilin province. However, in the Xinjiang case, the CCP Youth League called for action via Weibo and protests did not take place.

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If we take time and ask why these two cases started almost the same but showed different results, we probably can speculate that in the Lotte Mart case, first, the “threat” to the Chinese national principles in general and to the Chinese government, in particular, was rather materially “close”. What does that mean? – if we remember that South Korea’s installation of the U.S.’s THAAD system in response to the missile threat from North Korea was the main reason for the Chinese boycotts (subsequently real-life protests) and if we consider that South Korea is China’s regional neighbour, the threat to the Chinese regional position was rather direct and close. Of course South Korea is an independent country and can choose its foreign policy action by itself, and China cannot intervene this. Yet, what China in fact can do is to show its strong opposition to the THAAD deployment decision. For doing this, therefore, the government called for the action and allowed the protests to emerge. However, since western countries are geographically far away from China, the sanctions have not caused the Chinese authority to let the online boycotts get out of hand.

Here we can remember Stephen Walt’s balance of threat theory<sup>50</sup> which states that the “alliance behaviour of states is determined by the threat

50 Stephen M. Walt. *The Origins of Alliance*, (Cornell University Press, 1987)  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctt32b5fc>.

that they perceive from other states”. Walt distinguishes four measures states use to assess the threat posed by another state: its aggregate power or strength (population, size, latent power, and economic capabilities), its offensive capabilities, its geographic proximity, and its hostile or offensive intentions. Among the above-mentioned criteria, we can see geographic proximity. To be particular, together with other categories if the country is closed to another country it is likely that one country will perceive another as a threat.

Secondly, we know that in the Xinjiang case although the sanctions were put on China, however, China answered with its own sanctions and law. And although China lost some profits, yet the main “loser” side of the issue was the west as many BCI firms after the incident lost quite a deal of consumers, so profits. Besides, Chinese local brands gained advantages from the ban, which again, benefited the Chinese economy. Thus, we can assume that compare to the “close material threat” of the Lotte Mart case, the Xinjiang case posed only a “verbal threat” to the Chinese national principles and the government authority. Therefore, the Chinese government did not see the need to risk itself with real-life protests as it already gained the desired result from the Chinese people’s online boycotts.

Finally, with collected data and its analysis, we also answered our second and third questions.

*Limitations* –Lastly, we want to touch on some possible concerns and limitations of our study. Because of the time limit, the data drawn from the sample can lead to a generalisability problem as we do not have a large number of comments in our sample. To lower the risk, especially to find the comments related to call for protests/ oppositional comments about government in terms of labelling the government naive or spineless, we also additionally searched for those keywords mentioned earlier (for example “?? (protest)”; “?? (demonstration)”) in the Weibo search engine. As far as we concerned, we did not come across such comments. Yet we acknowledge the limitation and suggest further research to increase the reliability of the findings.

Another thing is the argument of censorship. As we explained earlier we do not know whether the comments that call for the real protests were censored or they in fact were not written by people themselves in the first place. Besides, we also do not know whether the Chinese people wanted to write “protest” comments but they have self-censored

themselves to not to do, or they did not have any interest to stage a real protest. So further research, possibly interview with the Chinese people is needed.

*Recommendations for further research* – In our opinion, a few cases in which we can ask similar research questions but see different results can be considered as a point of comparison to identify the larger implications of this research. To do so, researchers can use/refer to some abovementioned cases – “Lotte Mart”; “Diaoyu/Senkaku Crisis”.

APPENDIX

A)

*Table 1: “The Chinese Communist Party’s Youth League call for campaign post” comments*

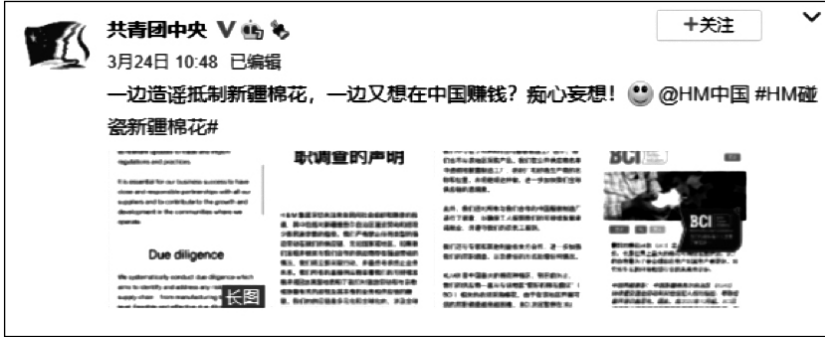
<b>1. Support for the government</b>	
(A)“General”	57
(B) “Call for action”	
(B1)Boycotting foreign goods	40
(B2)Protests /Demonstration related	
<b>2. The “naivety” of the government</b>	3
<b>3. Against forced labour action</b>	

*Table 2: “H&M post” comments*

<b>1. Support for the government</b>	
(A)“General”	82
(B) “Call for action”	
(B1)Boycotting foreign goods	7
(B2)Protests /Demonstration related	-
<b>2. The “naivety” of the government</b>	1
<b>3. Against forced labour action</b>	-

B)

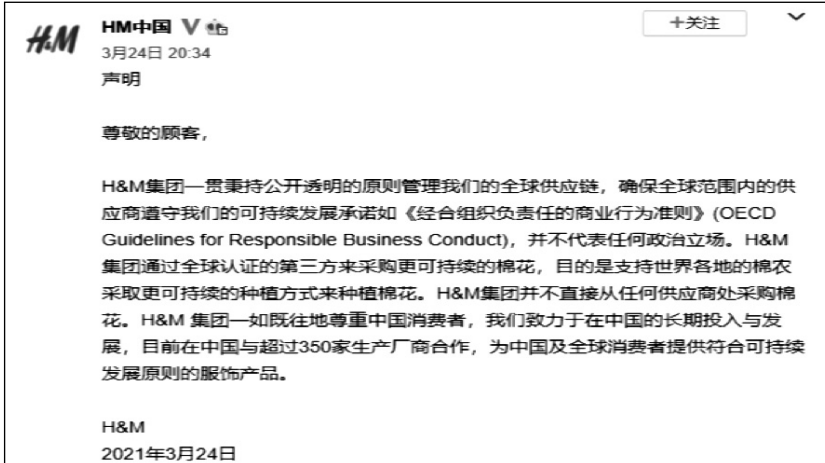
Picture 1:



Source:

[https://weibo.com/3937348351/K7E7iAC8x?type=comment#\\_rnd1623318020021](https://weibo.com/3937348351/K7E7iAC8x?type=comment#_rnd1623318020021)

Picture 2:



Source:

[https://weibo.com/2049875433/K7HX70cl7?filter=hot&root\\_comment\\_id=0&type=comment](https://weibo.com/2049875433/K7HX70cl7?filter=hot&root_comment_id=0&type=comment)



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[http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-03/26/c\\_139838036.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-03/26/c_139838036.htm)(Accessed June 10, 2021)
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