

China announces expansion of Sky Net and long-arm policing

Key points

- At National Congress, China announces **expansion of Sky Net** and long-arm policing
- China to **leverage Belt and Road Initiative** to expand fugitive hunting
- New data shows Sky Net has now forced the return of 10,105 people since its launch
- New cases of illegal operations to force the “voluntary” return exposed
- Chinese agents targeting dissidents in the US indicted
- UN and European courts ruled that extraditions to China endanger human rights

The People's Republic of China recently launched its [Sky Net 2022](#) campaign, marking the continuation of the CCP's increasing overseas policing operations. In February of this year, Chinese state media reported on the 2021 campaign results: notwithstanding heavy global COVID restrictions, [1,273 fugitives were sent back to China](#) from abroad under Sky Net operations, of which 22 were captured through INTERPOL Red Notices and 318 were suspects under current investigation. These numbers represent but the few ‘successful cases’ of returned “fugitives” through legal means, including extraditions. The actual numbers of targets forcefully returned to China may far exceed the official numbers.

Background

Since Xi Jinping took office in 2012, his signature ‘anti-corruption’ campaign has been used to consolidate his leadership and silence critics. On July 22nd, 2014, the Chinese Ministry of Public Security (MPS) launched Operation Fox Hunt (猎狐) with the purported aim of arresting officials who escaped abroad by means of bilateral extradition treaties and judicial cooperation agreements or through unofficial and often illicit operations conducted on foreign soil.

Following its initial success, the larger international “anti-corruption” campaign Sky Net (天网) was [established](#) in late March 2015. It began its operations in April 2015 under the leadership of the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI) of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), in cooperation with the Supreme Court, Supreme Prosecutor, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Justice, People's Bank of China, and the Ministry of Public Security in charge of Fox Hunt operations.

Following the inauguration of the National Supervisory Commission (NSC), for all intents and purposes a [State front for the Party body CCDI](#) - established by the [13th People's Congress](#) in 2018 to be the highest anti-corruption and supervisory organ independent of the State Council, Supreme Court, and Supreme Prosecutor -, Sky Net came under the NSC's direct command and has since overseen operations to capture anyone considered a “fugitive” by the CCP.

The [National Supervision Law \(NSL\)](#) that set up the NSC defines ‘anti-corruption international fugitive repatriation’ as an international operation leading to the arrest of ‘suspects’ who have fled China.

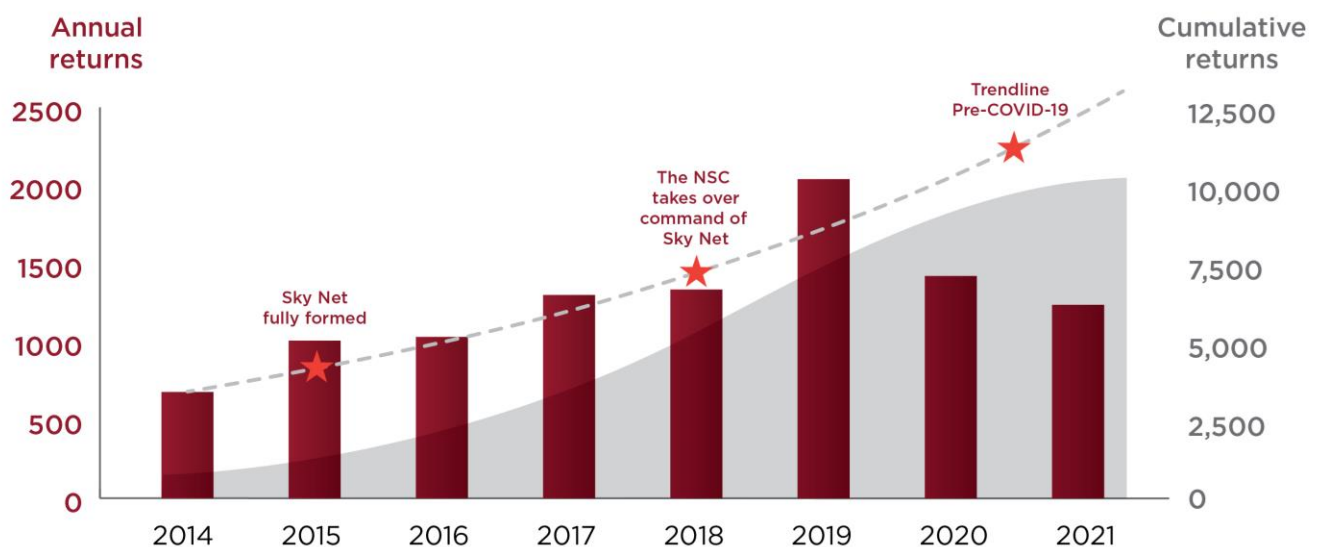
According to an [official legal interpretation](#) of that law by the CCDI, while **extradition** is the formal and ideal channel to bring targets back to China, officials can also consider using **repatriation, persuasion, remote prosecution, and 'irregular methods'**, such as kidnapping and entrapment, 'where the suspect is lured to the territory of the entrapping country, international high seas, international airspace or a third country with an extradition treaty, and then arrested or extradited'.

Between 2014 and February 2022, official CCDI data inform that 10,105 people - including foreign citizens - have been forcefully returned to China **from over 120 countries**, mostly via 'irregular methods'. While formal extradition cases only account for 1% among the returnees, around 250 individuals have been sent to China through formal extradition procedures in EU member states.

CHINA ANNOUNCES INTENTION OF EXPANDING SKY NET AND GLOBAL LONG-ARM POLICING

At the outset of the National People's Congress (March), the CCDI/NSC, which runs Sky Net, announced it had successfully returned 1,273 people, including 22 persons on which China had issued INTERPOL Red Notices on, during 2021, bringing the total of known 'returns' since its launch to 10,105.

During a speech to the congress, it was said that "the leverage created through the Belt and Road Initiative has enabled the PRC to build an integral mechanism for tracking fugitives", that Sky Net will expand its operation 2022, and that it will "seize the opportunity created by its chairmanship of the BRICS Anti-Corruption Working Group."



Read more: [Hide and Seek: China's Extradition Problem](#) and [Involuntary Returns](#).

Sky Net: a myriad of victims around the globe

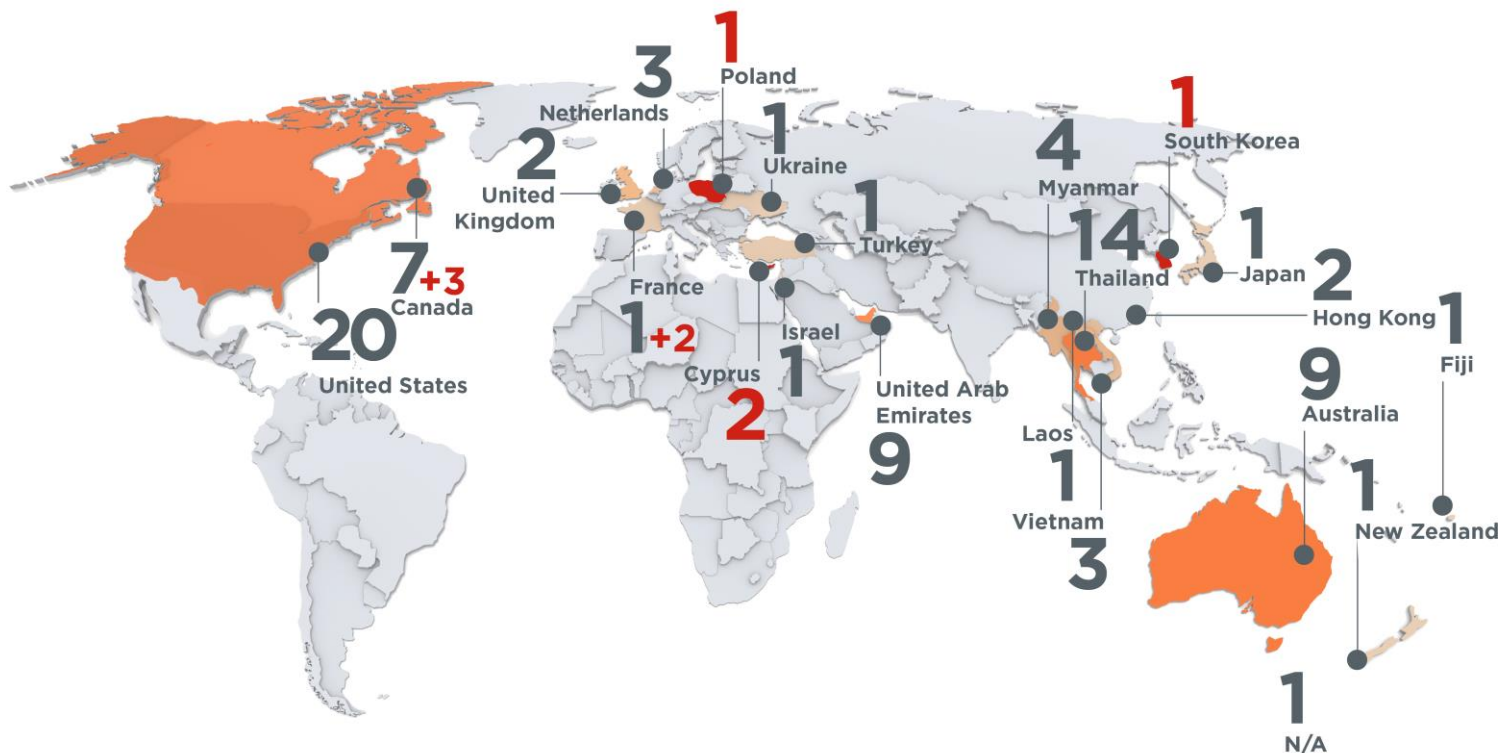
In **Cyprus**, a Falun Gong practitioner who left China was targeted by the Chinese authorities for extradition in 2020. While appealing the extradition request, his spouse was directly threatened by Chinese police and embassy personnel in front of the local Cypriot court house. The imparted message was clear: each testimony which might damages the image of 'the Party' would lead to the arrest of one of their family members in China. As her husband refused to give in to such threats and continues fighting his extradition, they followed up on their promise by detaining three family members since this January, including his father. A separate story on this case soon to be released.

In **Poland**, Yu Hao, a Chinese man who took his own life in 2020 after spending some two years waiting for his extradition hearing in Warsaw's detention centre, was yet another victim of Chinese police operations abroad. China managed to entrap him in Poland through an INTERPOL Red Notice. His spouse, after being subjected to similar methods of intimidation and threats by Chinese police, chose to return to China 'voluntarily'.

In **France**, Grace Meng, wife of former INTERPOL chairman Meng Hongwei, is currently living under police protection following two attempted kidnappings by Chinese agents. She received asylum in 2019 after her husband was disappeared in 2018 and later imprisoned in China. An anonymous journalist alerted that French security services has identified two similar cases, one of them from Hong Kong.

In **Canada**, Zhang Yan was warned by Chinese police to return as they had his father under arrest. Chen Yuzhen, now in the U.S., was reached by Chinese authorities in **South Korea** in 2021 after escaping from China and pressured to return... 'or else'.

INVOLUNTARY RETURNS CASES MAPPED BY SAFEGUARD DEFENDERS



Numbers in red color represent new IR actions identified since release of Involuntary Returns report January 18

These are but a few of continuous ongoing examples around the world. Scare tactics are an integral part of a broad strategy to silence dissent and stifle an individual's defence from extradition or deportation. The Chinese Communist Party will stop at nothing to obtain the return of those it seeks. As [Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian](#) put it in response to our report [Involuntary Returns](#) on January 19, 2022: ***"The Chinese government will continue to combat corruption with zero tolerance, hold every corrupt fugitive accountable with firm resolve, and bring them to justice even if they have fled to the ends of the earth."***

Read more: [Safeguard Defenders. \(10 Aug 2021\) 'Wanted by China: Europe is failing as a safe haven for Chinese dissidents'](#)

China's MOFA and state media confirmed 'forced returns'

Earlier in January, Safeguard Defenders published its investigative report [Involuntary Returns](#) on operations Sky Net and Fox Hunt. Examinations of cases showed not only that a large number of individuals are targeted for their political activism or their belonging to a religious or ethnic minority, but also that the vast majority of returns are obtained through extra-judicial means.

Following publication, [Royal Canadian Mountain Police Commissioner Brenda Lucki](#) confirmed to The Globe and Mail that *"It is a growing problem, obviously, and something we want to work together with our international and domestic partners on. A lot of it is about awareness and education, because things happen and we want to make sure people who are affected by this feel safe – that they can report this without fear of reprisal."*

On January 31, 2022, [FBI Director Christopher Wray substantively acknowledged](#) that

"the Chinese government is increasingly targeting people inside the U.S. for personal and political retribution—undercutting the freedoms that our Constitution and laws promise. The kinds of people the Chinese Communist Party tends to go after are not those that a responsible government would make their enemies—refugees, dissidents, and Uyghurs—people with their own ideas, who speak or worship as their conscience dictates."

The [Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs \(MOFA\)](#) and state media [Global Times](#) were quick to deny using the operations to hunt political dissidents by disguising them as 'corrupt officials'.

"The accusation by "Safeguard Defenders" is an old-fashioned way of demonizing China by calling criminals fleeing overseas political dissidents." - Hu Xijin (胡锡进), former Editor-in-Chief and Party Secretary at Global Times (20 January 2022)

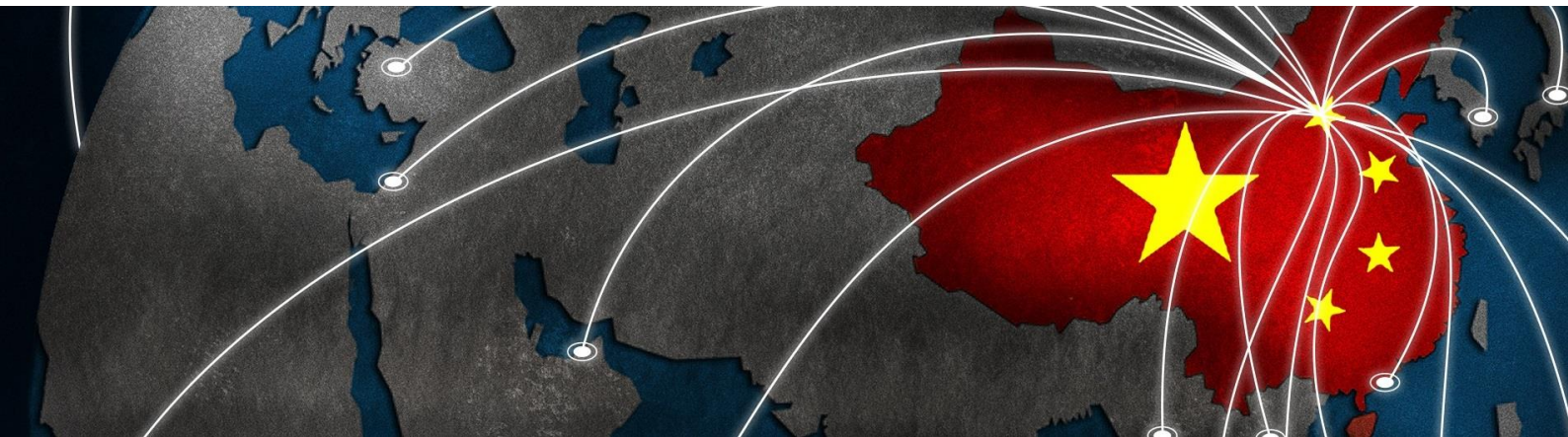
"[The report] glorifies the fugitives suspected of corruption as "victims" in the name of human rights ... " - Zhao Lijian (赵立坚), Spokesperson of MOFA (19 January 2022)

This obviously does not come as a surprise: as the operations are supervised by a political organ, "corrupt individuals" can simply be anyone the Government or Party wishes to bring back to China. More interestingly, their statements did not explain nor deny their use of 'irregular methods', such as the kidnapping and entrapment of targeted individuals.

Sky Net 2022: what to expect next?

During the [People's Congress](#), Zhao Leji (赵乐际), Head of the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI) [recognised the results achieved in 2021](#) and [stated](#) that the leverage created through the *Belt and Road Initiative* has enabled the PRC to build an integral mechanism for tracking fugitives. Therefore, he added, in 2022 the CCDI will continue and expand Sky Net operations and "build a clean Belt and Road", as well as strengthen the construction of laws governing foreigners in countering corruption. The PRC will also seize the opportunity created by its chairmanship of the BRICS Anti-Corruption Working Group.

Yang Xiaodu (杨晓渡), Head of the National Supervision Commission (NSC), later [endorsed](#) Zhao's statement, while in March the NSC's Office of International Fugitive Recovery and Cross-border Corruption Control [officially announced the continuation of Sky Net operations](#). The NSC will continue to lead special operations for the international pursuit of fugitives, the Ministry of Public Security (MPS) will direct Fox Hunt operations, the Supreme Court and the Supreme Procuratorate will launch a special operation to chase criminal suspects and defendants who have fled or died, and the Central Organization Department will launch a special campaign to combat irregularities in the handling and possession of documents with the MPS and other agencies.



Considering the exponentially deteriorating situation for the rule of law and minimal judicial safeguards in China, as well as the intensifying crackdowns in Hong Kong, the Uyghur and Tibetan regions, court rulings around the world have expressed concerns over extradition to China, including in [Sweden \(2019\)](#), [France \(2019\)](#), the [Czech Republic \(2020\)](#), [Poland \(2021\)](#) and [Turkey \(ongoing\)](#). In Morocco, the Court's approval to extradite Uyghur activist Idris Hasan to China, has received strong and repeated condemnation from [UN human rights mechanisms](#). While he remains in custody, his case is currently pending before the UN Committee Against Torture, which issued interim measures on his behalf.

This month, the U.S. Justice Department (DOJ) [charged five men with acting as illegal agents](#) to spy and intimidate citizens on its soil, after issuing [similar charges against nine individuals](#) last year for Sky Net operations aimed at forcing individuals to return to China through threats, surveillance and the arrests of relatives in China.

On March 21, 2022, the [U.S. State Department](#) announced visa restrictions on PRC officials for their involvement in repressive acts against members of ethnic and religious minority groups and religious and spiritual practitioners inside and outside of China's borders, including within the United States.

Other Governments have yet to follow suit.

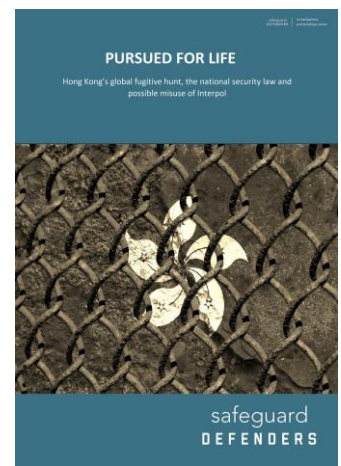
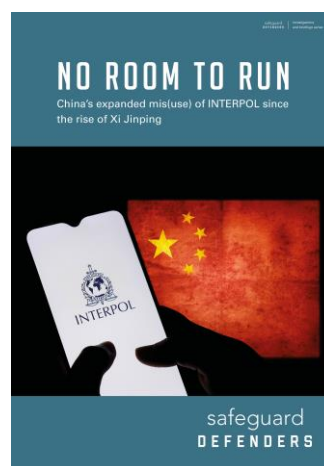
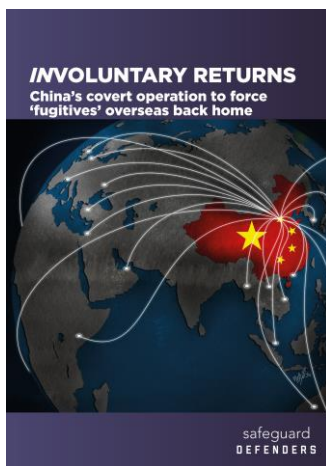
While there are legitimate reasons for Governments around the world to engage in international judicial cooperation with Beijing to counter cross-borders crimes, the PRC's repeated and brazen violations of human rights, judicial and territorial sovereignty, international treaties and diplomatic assurances undermine the trust required for entering into or continuing such cooperation.

If Governments do not stay vigilant and take immediate actions to tackle this, the official launch of the 2022 Sky Net campaign and the reopening of borders around the world may well mark a new and increasingly frightening beginning for China's global hunt of fugitives.

Together with other dedicated civil society organizations, we will therefore continue our efforts to ensure adequate actions are undertaken around the world to **impose sanctions on PRC officials** who are believed to be responsible for - or complicit in - these practices, as well as to **increase protection** to vulnerable communities and activists targeted by this indiscriminate political terror, starting from the **suspension of bilateral extradition treaties** which pose a direct threat to the freedom of expression and movement of those most at risk.

Safeguard Defenders has documented activities of China's international long-arm policing under the Sky Net campaigns in our recent reports [Hide and Seek: China's Extradition Problem](#) and [Involuntary Returns](#). [Pursued For Life](#) takes a look at Hong Kong's hunt for fugitives using the National Security Law and threatening abusive use of Interpol Red Notices, while ["No Room To Run"](#) exposes China's changing use of INTERPOL since Xi Jinping came over, and how it relates to Sky Net.

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INVOLUNTARY RETURNS

A new report from Safeguard Defenders exposes China's massive, growing and global covert Sky Net operation to force 'fugitives' overseas back home, often via illegal means and in violation of national sovereignty of target countries.

After Xi Jinping came to power, the CCP claimed some 18,000 officials had fled the country. Since then, Chinese asylum seekers has gone up by some 700%. **Sky Net** and sub-operation **Fox Hunt** were launched with the aim of 'repatriating and returning' Chinese overseas to face trial, and plays a key role in Xi Jinping's signature "anti-corruption" campaign. Today, Chinese government data shows that the number of successful *returns* surpassed 10,000 by end of 2021, from over 120 countries.

China uses numerous methods to secure targets' return. Formal judicial proceedings such as extraditions are rare. Instead, they rely primarily on three methods: 1) going after family members of the target still in China; 2) sending police and agents **overseas on illegal missions** to intimidate the target to return; and 3) use of direct **kidnappings**. This report maps 80 cases of attempted *involuntary* return actions of the three types across four continents, about half of which were successful.

- ⊗ The report exposes an **official legal interpretation** that outlines the use of such return methods – including **direct references to the use of entrapment and kidnappings overseas**.
- ⊗ Operational command of Sky Net was taken over by China's new **National Supervision Commission** (NSC) in 2018 – despite it not being a judicial organ.
- ⊗ Covert operations, including kidnappings, take place even in countries that have signed extradition treaties with China.
- ⊗ Sky Net and Fox Hunt continues despite the pandemic and is set to greatly increase in scope.

Take action

- ⊗ **Raise Parliamentary questions** to understand if and to what extent foreign governments are aware of the practice and monitor its use within their jurisdiction.
- ⊗ **Suspend existing extradition treaties** in response to such clear violation of international norms and national sovereignty of target countries.
- ⊗ Evaluate and **terminate any official judicial cooperation with the NSC**, a body credibly accused of crimes against humanity for its mass-use of arbitrary detention and disappearances.
- ⊗ **Institute adequate reporting mechanisms** for the exiled community to monitor illegal practices.



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