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Xinjiang: China’s Future West Bank?

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Amnesty International and the United States State Department have issued reports strongly condemning China for its harsh treatment of accused separatists in Xinjiang (the westernmost part of the country known in Chinese as “new region”). At the same time, China has openly joined the West in its war on terrorism and has received President George W. Bush’s public praise on his last visit to China for its support in the campaign. Yet China makes little distinction between separatists, terrorists, and civil rights activists—whether they are Uyghurs, Tibetans, Taiwanese, or Falun Gong Buddhists. Are the restive Uyghurs of Xinjiang terrorists or freedom fighters? And why should it matter to United States policy in the region?

AWAKENING FROM DENIAL

After denying the problem for decades and stressing instead China’s “national unity,” the government has recently issued reports detailing terrorist activities in the region known as “Eastern Turkestan” (officially known as the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region). In Xinjiang, the Foreign Ministry and the *People’s Daily* have documented an ongoing series of separatist and terrorist incidents since a large riot in the town of Yining in February 1997 (the riot was in response to a harsh

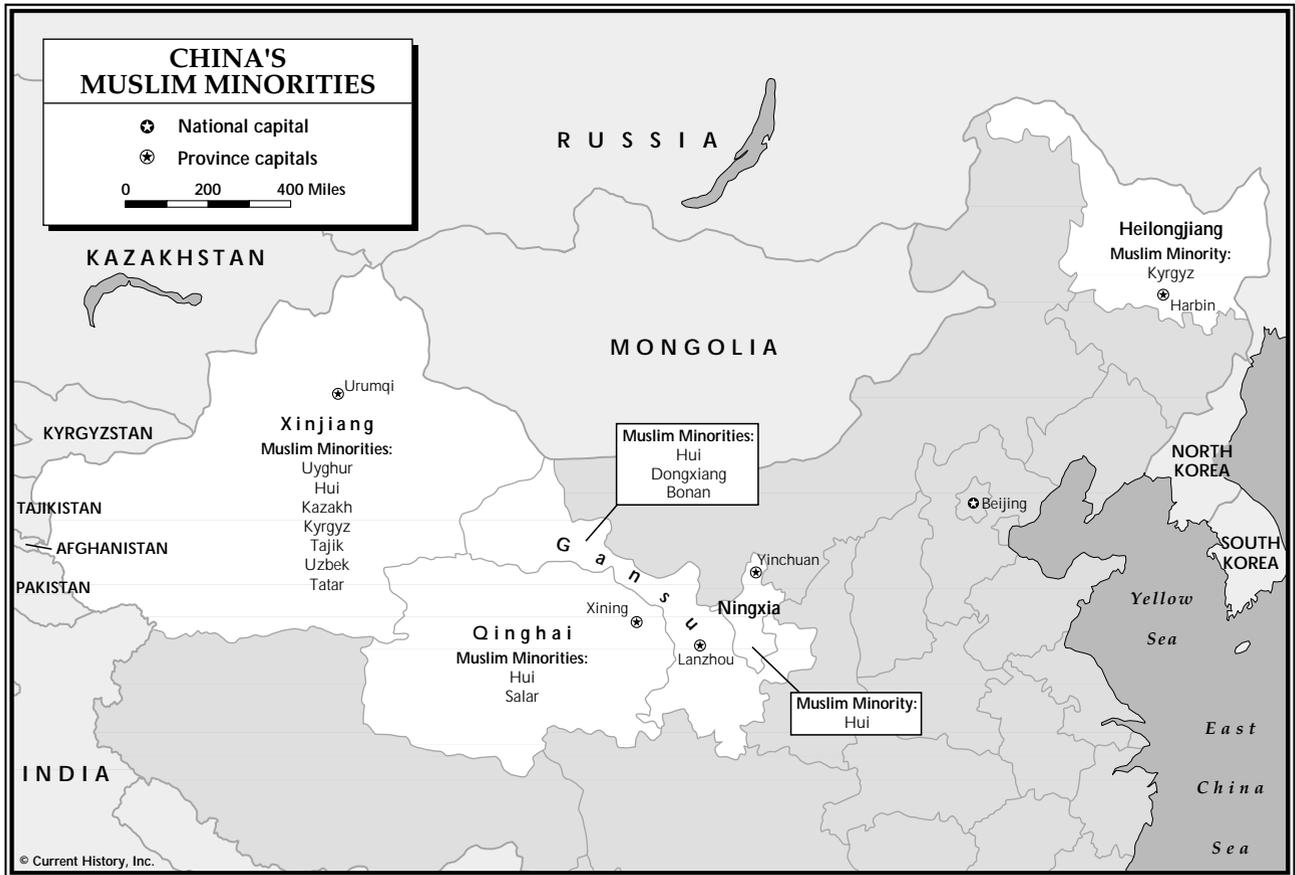
government crackdown on a youth religious meeting, known among Uyghur as a “*meshrep*,” that local officials regarded as seditious). The government has engaged in multiple crackdowns and arrests that have rounded up thousands of terrorist suspects, large weapons caches, and documents allegedly outlining future public acts of violence. Amnesty International claims that these roundups have led to hurried public trials and immediate summary executions of possibly thousands of locals. One Amnesty estimate suggested that in a country known for its frequent executions, Xinjiang had the highest number, averaging 1.8 per week, with most of the victims Uyghur.

Troop movements to the area, related to the nationwide “Strike Hard” campaign against crime that was launched in 1998—and which includes a call to erect a “great wall of steel” against separatists in Xinjiang—have reportedly been the largest since the suppression of the large Akto insurrection in April 1990 (the first major uprising in Xinjiang, which took place in the southern Tarim region and initiated a series of unrelated and sporadic protests). In response to alleged incursions of Taliban fighters through the Wakhan corridor into China (where Xinjiang shares a narrow border with Afghanistan), Chinese security forces have swamped the area and large military exercises have been carried out (beginning at least one month prior to the September 11 attacks, which suggests that the government was already concerned about the border region).¹

International campaigns for Uyghur rights and possible independence have become increasingly vocal and well organized, especially on the Internet. Repeated public appeals have been made to Abdulahat Abdurixit, the Uyghur people’s government chairman of Xinjiang in the regional capital of Urumqi. Supporting primarily an audience of approximately 1 million expatriate Uyghurs (although few Uyghurs in Central Asia and China

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¹Recently, under American and Chinese pressure, Pakistan returned one Uyghur activist to China, apprehended among hundreds of Taliban detainees, which follows a pattern of repatriations of suspected Uyghur separatists in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan.



have access to these Internet sites), at least 25 international organizations and web sites are dedicated to the independence of “Eastern Turkestan.” Based in Amsterdam, Munich, Istanbul, Melbourne, Washington, and New York, these organizations have, since September 11, disclaimed any support for violence or terrorism and call for a peaceful resolution to conflicts in the region. Nevertheless, the growing influence of “cyberseparatism” concerns Chinese authorities, who hope to convince the world that the Uyghurs pose a real domestic and international terrorist threat.

The Chinese government believes that growing international attention to the treatment of its minority and dissident peoples has put pressure on the region, with the United States and many other Western governments continuing to criticize China for not adhering to its commitments to human rights and signed international agreements. In 2001 China ratified the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights. Article 1 of the covenant states that “All peoples have the right of self-deter-

²The elected chair of the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization, based in The Hague, Erkin Alptekin, is a Uyghur. He is the son of the separatist leader Isa Yusuf Alptekin, who is buried in Istanbul, where a park is dedicated to his memory.

mination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social, and cultural development.” Article 2 notes that “All peoples may, for their own ends, freely dispose of their natural wealth and resources without prejudice to any obligations arising out of international economic cooperation, based upon the principle of mutual benefit, and international law. In no case may a people be deprived of its own means of subsistence.” Although China continues to quibble with the definition of “people,” the agreements clearly are pressuring China to answer criticisms by human rights advocates about its treatment of minority peoples.² Several organizations asked President Bush on his last visit to China to press for the release of Rebiya Kadir, a Uyghur businesswoman who was a prominent delegate to the 1995 Beijing women’s conference, now languishing in ill health in prison for passing state secrets (consisting of publicly available newspaper articles) to Westerners. In the spring of 2002, Kadir’s case was widely promoted by Amnesty International, who made Kadir its “detainee of the month.”

Clearly, with Xinjiang representing the last Muslim region under communism and with large trade contracts with Middle Eastern Muslim nations and five Muslim nations on its western borders, Chinese

authorities have more to be concerned about than just international support for human rights.

DEFINING THE UYGHUR QUESTION

The real question is why China is directing so much attention to separatist activities since September 11. Since these activities are not new, it is obvious that China is taking advantage of the international war on terrorism to attempt to eradicate a domestic problem. The Istanbul-based Uyghur groups have existed since the 1950s, and the Central Asian Uyghurs received tremendous support for their anti-China rhetoric regarding policies in Xinjiang. The Uyghurs have also been increasingly vocal since the independence of the Soviet Central Asian republics in 1991, which led many to hope that an independent Uyghuristan would follow on the heels of the other newly independent “stans.”

The Chinese government itself, in a landmark 1999 white paper, admitted serious economic shortfalls in the region despite 50 years of state investment in development there (“The Chinese government is well aware of the fact that . . . central and western China where most minority people live, lags far behind

the eastern coastal areas in development”). The 2000 census revealed that the resident Han Chinese population has risen to 38 percent, with the nearly 8.4 million Uyghur maintaining a bare majority in their own autonomous region (42 percent of the population). In terms of education, health, and mortality, the Uyghur lag far behind not only the Han but also most other Muslim groups in the region (seven other official Muslim minorities live in Xinjiang, including 1 million Kazakhs, 500,000 Hui, and smaller numbers of Kyrgyz, Uzbek, and Tajik).

Most important, separatist and violent incidents in Xinjiang have dropped off dramatically since the late 1990s. Philip Pan reported in the July 14, 2002 *Washington Post* that local Xinjiang security officials were able to cite only three relatively small occurrences recently. Few have noted that despite many incidents of ethnic and civil unrest in the region, not one significant terrorist attack against any strategic infrastructure target (oil refinery, pipeline, railroad, dam, or bridge) has been documented, nor have any local or international incidents been positively identified with any international Uyghur or Islamic organization.

China's Uyghur separatists are small in number, poorly equipped, loosely linked, and vastly outgunned by the People's Liberation Army and People's Police. Local support for separatist activities, particularly in Xinjiang and other border regions, is ambivalent and ambiguous at best, given the economic disparity between these regions and their foreign neighbors, including Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, and especially Afghanistan (although sometimes disgruntled about rights and mistreatment, China's nine other official Muslim minorities do not in general support Uyghur separatism). Memories in the region of mass starvation and widespread destruction during the Sino-Japanese and civil wars in the first half of this century, including bloody intra-Muslim and Muslim-Chinese conflicts, not to mention the chaotic horrors of the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s, remain strong. Many local activists are not calling for complete separatism or independence, but generally express concerns over environmental degradation, antinuclear testing, religious freedom, overtaxation, and recently imposed limits

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on childbearing. And most ethnic leaders would like to see “real” autonomy according to Chinese

law for the five autonomous regions, which are each led by first party secretaries who are all Han Chinese controlled by Beijing. Freedom of religion, protected by China's constitution, does not seem to be a key issue, since mosques are full in the region and pilgrimages to Mecca are often allowed for Uyghur and other Muslims (although recent visitors to the region report an increase in restrictions on mosque attendance by youth, students, and government officials). In addition, Islamic extremism does not as yet appear to have widespread appeal, especially among urban educated Uyghur. The government has, however, consistently rounded up any Uyghur suspected of being “too religious,” especially those identified as Sufis or the so-called Wahabbis (a euphemism in the region for adherence to a strict code of Islamic conduct, not an organized Islamic school).

The “Uyghur question” is thus problematic for a government that wants to encourage integration and development in a region where the majority population is not only ethnically different, but also devoutly Muslim. How does a government integrate a strongly religious minority (be it Muslim, Tibetan, Christian, or Buddhist) into a Marxist-capitalist system?

ROADS TO RESOLUTION?

China needs a new approach to resolve tensions in Xinjiang; purely Marxist and Keynesian economic development strategies are not enough. In the July–August 2002 issue of *Foreign Affairs*, Chien-Peng Chung of the Singaporean Institute of Defense and Strategic Studies called for immediate political changes in the region to avoid further deterioration in ethnic relations. To further this discussion, I would like to suggest the following models for Xinjiang's peaceful development, something that all Uyghurs and Chinese, as well as the other 24 ethnic groups in the region, seem to want.

- *The Alaska model:* Under this model, residents of Xinjiang would be awarded direct dividends for returns on wealth derived from regional natural resources, in accord with Article 2 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights. By according benefits to all second- or third-generation residents of Xinjiang, China can perhaps obviate interethnic tensions in the region and deflect criticisms that recent nonlocal migrants “lured to the region” by a government interested in integration through immigration are the real beneficiaries of China's increased regional investment.

- *The Scotland model:* Although China would never consider granting full independence to Xinjiang (lest it lose its authority over Tibet and Taiwan as well), an approach that grants the region more control over its own resources and governance, while maintaining central control over national defense and international trade, not only would seem to make sense in the modern era, but would parallel traditional models of Chinese imperial control of the region under the last dynasty.

- *The Hawaii model:* China must find a way to allow its local peoples to legally, democratically, and officially express their concerns about the development process in Xinjiang, the future directions of tourism and trade, and the prospects for greater autonomy and sovereignty. State and federal funding would support elected representatives of indigenous peoples who have real input into the

legislative process (such as the elected Office of Hawaiian Affairs attempts to accomplish).

- *The Australia model:* Peoples regarded by themselves and international organizations as aboriginal and indigenous must have the right to address land and environmental rights issues, despite government disagreements about historical migration to the region. As yet, China's extremely beneficial special entitlement laws for the official minority nationalities, including nationwide bilingual education, educational advancement opportunities, and exemption from many taxes and birth-planning restrictions, apply only to those regarded by the state as designated official minorities, and not to those considered indigenous to a region or district (Korean migrants to Xinjiang have as many rights as Uyghur). China has no laws pertaining to indigenous rights, and the government often regards international treaties relating to “peoples” as affecting all the peoples of China, including the Han majority, when their original intent was to alleviate suffering of underprivileged indigenes.

- *The West Bank model?* International observers and frequent visitors to the region are concerned that if China does not explore other options besides repression, restriction, and investment, millions of Uyghur Muslims might become increasingly marginalized and disenfranchised, encouraging some to look to the intifada, the Taliban, or Al Qaeda for inspiration. This would not be in China's or the West's interests in the region.

China is a sovereign state and, like all modern nations in the era of globalization, faces tremendous challenges from migration, economic imbalance, ethnic unrest, and cyberseparatism. Clearly, the Xinjiang model must be as unique to the region as the region is to China itself. Not unlike Hong Kong (which under the one-country, two-systems formula continues to fly its own flag), the unique situation in Xinjiang calls for dramatic and creative solutions. The future of this region, which the American sinologist Owen Lattimore once called the “pivot of Asia,” depends on it. ■