

# Counterterrorism and Preventive Repression

China's Changing Strategy in Xinjiang

Sheena Chestnut  
Greitens,  
Myunghee Lee, and  
Emir Yazici

Over the course of 2017–18, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) crackdown on Uyghur and other Muslim minorities in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) generated increasing international scrutiny.<sup>1</sup> Reports of heightened repression in Xinjiang prompted a formal expression of concern by the United Nations (UN) Commission on Anti-Discrimination in August 2018 and several legislative hearings in the United States.<sup>2</sup> U.S. Assistant Secretary of Defense Randall Schriver criticized China's conduct as “unbecoming” a country of the stature of the People's Republic of China (PRC); a bipartisan group of legislators proposed the Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act; and in October 2019, the Donald Trump administration placed visa restrictions on PRC officials and put twenty-eight companies and public security bureaus on a trade blacklist over complicity in abuses in Xinjiang.<sup>3</sup> The issue has also polarized the international com-

---

*Sheena Chestnut Greitens is Assistant Professor of Political Science at the University of Missouri. Myunghee Lee is a Ph.D. candidate in political science at the University of Missouri. Emir Yazici is a post-doctoral fellow in the Department of Political Science at the University of Missouri.*

---

The authors thank Darren Byler, Alastair Iain Johnston, James Leibold, Bryce Reeder, and the anonymous reviewers for their helpful feedback.

---

1. Spelling and terminology in this field often carry political connotations; we wish to clarify that our choices here should not be interpreted to imply a particular political stance. We use the spelling “Uyghur,” which is the predominant transliteration among Uyghurs. We primarily use the formal names of the autonomous regions when we refer to developments in those polities, and “Tibet” or “Xinjiang” to refer to the ethnic areas, but, in some cases, we use these terms interchangeably to avoid linguistic contortion.

2. Congressional-Executive Commission on China, “Surveillance, Suppression, and Mass Detention: Xinjiang's Human Rights Crisis” (Washington, D.C.: Congressional-Executive Commission on China, July 26, 2018), <https://www.cecc.gov/events/hearings/surveillance-suppression-and-mass-detention-xinjiang%E2%80%99s-human-rights-crisis>; China's Repression and Internment of Uyghurs: U.S. Policy Responses: Hearing before the Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, 115 Cong., 2d sess., September 26, 2018, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-115hhr32303/pdf/CHRG-115hhr32303.pdf>; The China Challenge, Part 3: Democracy, Human Rights, and the Rule of Law, before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Subcommittee on East Asia, the Pacific, and International Cybersecurity Policy, 115th Cong., 2d sess., December 4, 2018 (statement of Gloria Steele, Acting Assistant Administrator, Bureau for Asia, United States Agency for International Development), [https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/120418\\_Steele\\_Testimony.pdf](https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/120418_Steele_Testimony.pdf); and UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, Concluding Observations on the Combined Fourteenth to Seventeenth Periodic Reports of China (including Hong Kong, China, and Macao, China), CERD/C/CHN/CO/14-17, August 30, 2018, [https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CERD/Shared%20Documents/CHN/CERD\\_C\\_CHN\\_CO\\_14-17\\_32237\\_E.pdf](https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CERD/Shared%20Documents/CHN/CERD_C_CHN_CO_14-17_32237_E.pdf).

3. Randall Schriver, keynote address at Asia Policy Assembly in Washington, D.C., June 26, 2019,

---

*International Security*, Vol. 44, No. 3 (Winter 2019/20), pp. 9–47, [https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC\\_a\\_00368](https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00368)  
© 2020 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

munity: in the summer of 2019, a group of twenty-two countries sent a letter to the UN Human Rights Council calling on China to end its use of arbitrary mass detention, surveillance, and restrictions on freedom of movement—a move countered by a letter from thirty-seven other countries in defense and support of the PRC’s “counter-terrorism, deradicalization and vocational training” policies.<sup>4</sup>

Reporting indicates that 1 to 3 million people—including Uyghur, Kazakh, and Kyrgyz minorities—have been detained in a network of nearly 1,200 recently constructed camps, where they are subject to forced re-education and political indoctrination. PRC authorities have also increasingly sought the involuntary repatriation of Uyghur migrants or asylum seekers in third countries, while placing diaspora networks under unprecedented pressure.<sup>5</sup> What explains recent changes to China’s domestic security strategy in Xinjiang?

Typical explanations in media and scholarly work highlight domestic factors: unrest among China’s Uyghur population that escalated in 2008–09; the CCP’s shift toward a more assimilationist minority policy; and the leadership of Chen Quanguo, who became XUAR party secretary in 2016.<sup>6</sup> These factors provide important context for understanding the CCP’s recent security buildup and repression in Xinjiang. The strategy shift described above, however, may also have been catalyzed by the CCP’s changing perceptions of its external security environment, a factor that is an important complement to domestically focused explanations.

We argue that an overlooked and significant factor that contributed to the CCP’s change in internal security strategy in Xinjiang was its desire to prevent terrorism from diffusing into China via radicalized transnational Uyghur networks, particularly those with links to terrorist groups in Southeast Asia,

---

National Bureau of Asian Research, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Og16mgkCNQk>; Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act of 2019, S. 178, 116th Cong., 1st sess., September 12, 2019, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/senate-bill/178/text?format=txt>; and Eric Beech and David Shepardson, “U.S. Imposes Visa Restrictions on Chinese Officials over Muslim Treatment,” *Reuters*, October 8, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-china-muslims/us-imposes-visa-restrictions-on-chinese-officials-over-muslim-treatment-idUSKBN1WN29H>.

4. Catherine Putz, “Which Countries Are For or Against China’s Xinjiang Policies?” *Diplomat*, July 15, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/07/which-countries-are-for-or-against-chinas-xinjiang-policies/>.

5. Bethany Allen-Ebrahimian, “Exposed: China’s Operating Manuals for Mass Internment and Arrest by Algorithm,” International Consortium of Investigative Journalists, November 24, 2019; and China’s Repression and Internment of Uyghurs hearing.

6. Adrian Zenz and James Leibold, “Chen Quanguo: The Strongman behind Beijing’s Securitization Strategy in Tibet and Xinjiang,” *China Brief*, Vol. 17, No. 12 (September 2017), <https://jamestown.org/program/chen-quanguo-the-strongman-behind-beijings-securitization-strategy-in-tibet-and-xinjiang/>.

Syria, and the broader Middle East. Until recently, studies of China's approach to counterterrorism have been relatively sparse within the literature on terrorism and political violence, as well as in scholarship on China's security behavior.<sup>7</sup> A focus on terrorist threat, however, is valuable for understanding PRC security policy in Xinjiang—now described as the “main battlefield” in China's fight against terrorism.<sup>8</sup> Over the course of 2014–16, the CCP appears to have concluded that China's Muslim population was broadly vulnerable to infiltration and “infection” from transnational jihadist networks, and that the primary vector for potential infection was the Uyghur diaspora's increasing contact with militant groups in Southeast Asia and the Middle East. This heightening threat perception sheds light on some of the most distinctive, consequential aspects of the CCP's approach: the shift from individual to collective detention and re-education; why authorities focused so much on re-education; why repressive policies were externalized to the diaspora; and why these changes occurred in early 2017, rather than earlier.

Before proceeding, we wish to address a concern raised in public discussion: that taking the counterterrorism narrative seriously as an explanatory factor somehow legitimates or concedes the morality of the CCP's treatment of its Uyghur population. One Human Rights Watch official, in objecting to a UN counterterrorism official's visit to Xinjiang in mid-2019, highlighted the “risks [of] confirming China's false narrative that this is a counterterrorism issue, not a question of massive human rights abuses.”<sup>9</sup> Scholars of political violence will recognize the concern that explanation can feel uncomfortably close to justification, and will also know that this can produce an aversion to discussing perpetrators' motivations at all—a dynamic that Holocaust scholars label a “moral sensitivity exclusion.”<sup>10</sup>

---

7. A notable exception to this characterization is Michael Clarke, ed., *Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism in China: Domestic and Foreign Policy Dimensions* (London: Hurst, 2018), p. 4. See also Joshua Tschantret, “Repression, Opportunity, and Innovation: The Evolution of Terrorism in Xinjiang, China,” *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol. 30, No. 4 (July–August 2018), pp. 569–588, doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2016.1182911; Guiping Xie and Tianyang Liu, “Navigating Securities: Rethinking (Counter-)Terrorism, Stability Maintenance, and Non-Violent Responses in the Chinese Province of Xinjiang,” *Terrorism and Political Violence*, published ahead of print, April 15, 2019, doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2019.1598386; and Murray Scot Tanner, “China's Response to Terrorism” (Arlington, Va.: CNA, June 2016), [https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Research/Chinas%20Response%20to%20Terrorism\\_CNA061616.pdf](https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Research/Chinas%20Response%20to%20Terrorism_CNA061616.pdf).

8. “Xinjiang weiwuer zizhiqiu dangwei nanjiang gongzuo huiyi jintian juxing” [Southern Xinjiang work forum convened], *Yangguangwang*, November 3, 2015, [http://m.cnr.cn/news/20151103/t20151103\\_520382089.html](http://m.cnr.cn/news/20151103/t20151103_520382089.html).

9. “United Nations' Counterterrorism Chief Vladimir Voronkov in China to Visit Xinjiang Internment Camps,” *South China Morning Post*, June 14, 2019, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3014508/united-nations-counterterrorism-chief-vladimir-voronkov-china>.

10. Inga Clendinnen, *Reading the Holocaust* (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 1998), p. 88.

Our analysis does not allow us to definitively identify the CCP's true underlying intentions in its policies toward Xinjiang. Moreover, there is significant debate over the severity of the Uyghur threat, and the PRC may be using a counterterrorism framework to deflect or reduce international pressure and criticism.<sup>11</sup> These are important empirical and ethical points. Invoking counterterrorism, however, does not provide the CCP with a moral "blank check" for human rights abuses—and critics of China's policies in Xinjiang are more likely to succeed in changing those policies if their arguments are based on a full understanding of the policies' causes. The recent publication of leaked internal documents on CCP actions in Xinjiang appears to confirm the importance of terrorism in the minds of senior party leaders, including Xi Jinping.<sup>12</sup> This article separates empirical explanation from moral justification.

Empirically, our findings parallel and contribute to existing scholarship on transnational networks, terrorism, and domestic repression. A significant body of literature argues that transborder ethnic ties increase the risk of conflict diffusion, especially if excluded or separatist ethnic groups are involved.<sup>13</sup> It also finds that transnational networks can mobilize or sustain terrorist activity and make terrorist groups more resilient to counterterrorism pressure.<sup>14</sup> Placing

---

11. Ana Bracic and Amanda Murdie, "Human Rights Abused? Terrorist Labeling and Individual Reactions to Call to Action," *Political Research Quarterly*, published ahead of print, July 17, 2019, doi.org/10.1177%2F1065912919861154.

12. Austin Ramzy and Chris Buckley, "'Absolutely No Mercy': Leaked Files Expose How China Organized Mass Detentions of Muslims," *New York Times*, November 16, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/11/16/world/asia/china-xinjiang-documents.html>.

13. Nils W. Metternich, Shahryar Minhas, and Michael D. Ward, "Firewall? Or Wall on Fire? A Unified Framework of Conflict Contagion and the Role of Ethnic Exclusion," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 61, No. 6 (July 2017), pp. 1151–1173, doi.org/10.1177%2F0022002715603452; Lars-Erik Cederman et al., "Transborder Ethnic Kin and Civil War," *International Organization*, Vol. 67, No. 2 (April 2013), pp. 389–410, doi.org/10.1017/S0020818313000064; Nils B. Weidmann, "Communication Networks and the Transnational Spread of Ethnic Conflict," *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 52, No. 3 (May 2015), pp. 285–296, doi.org/10.1177%2F0022343314554670; Gary LaFree, Min Xie, and Aila M. Matanock, "The Contagious Diffusion of Worldwide Terrorism: Is It Less Common Than We Might Think?" *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol. 41, No. 4 (April 2018), pp. 261–280, doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2017.1290428; and Nathan Danneman and Emily Hencken Ritter, "Contagious Rebellion and Preemptive Repression," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 58, No. 2 (March 2014), pp. 254–279, doi.org/10.1177%2F0022002712468720. See also Kirstin J.H. Braithwaite, "Repression and the Spread of Ethnic Conflict in Kurdistan," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol. 37, No. 6 (2014), pp. 473–491, doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2014.903451; Jonathan Fox, "Is Ethnoreligious Conflict a Contagious Disease?" *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (2004), pp. 89–106, doi.org/10.1080/10576100490275085; Erika Forsberg, "Transnational Transmitters: Ethnic Kinship Ties and Conflict Contagion, 1946–2009," *International Interactions*, Vol. 40, No. 2 (2014), pp. 143–165, doi.org/10.1080/03050629.2014.880702; and Halvard Buhaug and Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, "Contagion or Confusion? Why Conflicts Cluster in Space," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 52, No. 2 (June 2008), pp. 215–233, doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2478.2008.00499.x.

14. Gabriel Sheffer, "Diasporas and Terrorism," in Louise Richardson, ed., *The Roots of Terrorism*

Xinjiang in the context of this scholarship suggests that the CCP's concern about diasporic involvement in terrorist or ethno-separatist mobilization is not particularly unique.

Situating Xinjiang in dialogue with broader comparative work on political violence also illuminates, though does not definitively predict, the possible results of the CCP's escalated strategy of repression in Xinjiang. One set of studies suggests that collective or indiscriminate repression can be effective, particularly when employed against small, geographically concentrated minority groups in authoritarian regimes.<sup>15</sup> Other studies, however, argue that the CCP has misperceived or inflated the security threat (a common problem in information-poor authoritarian regimes, including China<sup>16</sup>), and that it may, as a result, be applying a counterinsurgency approach to Xinjiang when such an approach is unwarranted and inappropriate.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, other scholarship on collective repression suggests that it creates a high risk of backlash;<sup>18</sup> schol-

---

(New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 117–132; James A. Piazza, "Transnational Ethnic Diasporas and the Survival of Terrorist Organizations," *Security Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 4 (2018), pp. 607–632, doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2018.1483615; Monica Duffy Toft and Yuri M. Zhukov, "Islamists and Nationalists: Rebel Motivation and Counterinsurgency in Russia's North Caucasus," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 109, No. 2 (May 2015), pp. 222–238, doi.org/10.1017/S000305541500012X; Ken Menkhaus, "African Diasporas, Diasporas in Africa, and Terrorist Threats," in Doron Zimmermann and William Rosenau, eds., *The Radicalization of Diasporas and Terrorism* (Zürich, Switzerland: Center for Security Studies, ETH Zürich, 2009), pp. 83–109; and Hamed el-Said and Richard Barrett, "Enhancing the Understanding of the Foreign Terrorist Fighters Phenomenon in Syria" (New York: United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism, July 2017), [http://www.un.org/en/counterterrorism/assets/img/Report\\_Final\\_20170727.pdf](http://www.un.org/en/counterterrorism/assets/img/Report_Final_20170727.pdf).

15. Alexander B. Downes, "Draining the Sea by Filling the Graves: Investigating the Effectiveness of Indiscriminate Violence as a Counterinsurgency Strategy," *Civil Wars*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (December 2007), pp. 420–444, doi.org/10.1080/13698240701699631; Jason Lyall, "Does Indiscriminate Violence Incite Insurgent Attacks? Evidence from Chechnya," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 53, No. 3 (June 2009), pp. 331–362, doi.org/10.1177%2F0022002708330881; Ursula E. Daxecker and Michael L. Hess, "Repression Hurts: Coercive Government Responses and the Demise of Terrorism Campaigns," *British Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 43, No. 3 (July 2013), pp. 559–577, doi.org/10.1017/S0007123412000452; and David H. Ucko, "The People are Revolting: Anatomy of Authoritarian Counterinsurgency," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 39, No. 1 (2016), pp. 29–61, doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2015.1094390.

16. For a theoretical overview, see Sheena Chestnut Greitens, *Dictators and Their Secret Police: Coercive Institutions and State Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016). For specifics on information problems in the Chinese political system, see Jeremy L. Wallace, "Juking the Stats? Authoritarian Information Problems in China," *British Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 46, No. 1 (January 2016), pp. 11–29, doi.org/10.1017/S0007123414000106.

17. We note that Beijing's current policy would be a costly one to pursue without any genuine belief in the presence of a security threat. Liselotte Odgaard and Thomas Galasz Nielsen, "China's Counterinsurgency Strategy in Tibet and Xinjiang," *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 23, No. 87 (2014), pp. 535–555, doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2013.843934.

18. James I. Walsh and James A. Piazza, "Why Respecting Physical Integrity Rights Reduces Terrorism," *Comparative Political Studies*, Vol. 43, No. 5 (May 2010), pp. 551–577, doi.org/10.1177%2F010414009356176; James A. Piazza, "Repression and Terrorism: A Cross-National Empirical Analysis," *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol. 29, No. 1 (2017), pp. 102–118, doi.org/10.1080/09546553

arship on Xinjiang itself generally characterizes previous CCP repression as counterproductive.<sup>19</sup> Arguing that counterterrorism threat perceptions play an important role in China's choice of strategy, therefore, does not imply that the strategy chosen will be successful. Nothing that follows should be read as moral approval of the policies described or prediction of their likely success.

The article proceeds as follows. In the first section, we review recent developments in Xinjiang, focusing particularly on three aspects of China's domestic security strategy and repressive approach that changed in 2017–18: initiation of mass detention; wide-scale use of re-education; and increased pressure on the Uyghur diaspora. The second section reviews common, domestically focused explanations. The third section documents increased contacts between Uyghur expatriates/migrants and Islamic militant organizations throughout 2014–16; the fifth section traces PRC officials' heightening concern, during the same period, that the Uyghur population had become susceptible to infiltration by these networks. We conclude by discussing the theoretical implications of our findings for the relationship between external threats and authoritarian repression, as well as policy implications for counterterrorism and security cooperation with the PRC.

### *China's Changing Repressive Strategy*

The CCP has long framed counterterrorism as a struggle against the “three evil forces” of terrorism, separatism, and extremism, which PRC officials say have mired Xinjiang in violence, instability, and poverty since the early 1990s.<sup>20</sup>

---

.2014.994061; Joseph H. Felter and Jacob N. Shapiro, “Limiting Civilian Casualties as Part of a Winning Strategy,” *Daedalus*, Vol. 146, No. 1 (Winter 2017), pp. 44–58, doi.org/10.1162/DAED\_a\_00421; Laura Dugan and Erica Chenoweth, “Moving Beyond Deterrence: The Effectiveness of Raising the Expected Utility of Abstaining from Terrorism in Israel,” *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 77, No. 4 (August 2012), pp. 597–624, doi.org/10.1177%2F0003122412450573; Witold Mucha, “Does Counterinsurgency Fuel Civil War? Peru and Syria Compared,” *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (2013), pp. 140–166, doi.org/10.1080/17539153.2013.765704; Michael Stohl, “Counterterrorism and Repression,” in Richardson, *The Roots of Terrorism*, pp. 69–82; and Luke N. Condra and Jacob N. Shapiro, “Who Takes the Blame? The Strategic Effects of Collateral Damage,” *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 56, No. 1 (January 2012), pp. 167–187, doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5907.2011.00542.x.

19. Tschantret, “Repression, Opportunity, and Innovation”; Sean Roberts, “The Narrative of Uyghur Terrorism and the Self-Fulfilling Prophecy of Uyghur Militancy,” in Clarke, *Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism in China*, pp. 99–128; Elena Pokalova, “Authoritarian Regimes against Terrorism: Lessons from China,” *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (2013), pp. 279–298, doi.org/10.1080/17539153.2012.753202; and Marie Trédaniel and Pak K. Lee, “Explaining the Chinese Framing of the ‘Terrorist’ Violence in Xinjiang: Insights from Securitization Theory,” *Nationalities Papers*, Vol. 46, No. 1 (January 2017), pp. 177–195, doi.org/10.1080/00905992.2017.1351427.

20. “Xinjiang to Crack Down on ‘Three Evil Forces,’” *Xinhua*, March 6, 2012, [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2012-03/06/content\\_14766900.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2012-03/06/content_14766900.htm).

Securitization has been under way in the XUAR for some time: previous regional leaders such as Song Hanlian and Wang Lequan emphasized the importance of social stability, and regional authorities mounted “Strike Hard” campaigns in the early 1990s that involved temporary or cyclical escalations of repression.<sup>21</sup> Chinese leader Xi Jinping’s vision of “social stability and enduring peace” in Xinjiang, outlined in 2014 and repeated again during his 2018 visit, stresses poverty alleviation and ethnic unity as preventive approaches that will contribute to peace and stability in an important borderland defense region.<sup>22</sup> In 2017–18, however, the CCP began to employ an internal security strategy that had three notable features: escalated use of collective detention, intensive ideological re-education, and the application of intensified coercion to the Uyghur diaspora.

Some elements of this approach began to appear on a comparatively small scale around 2013–14. Immediately after the July 2009 crisis in Urumqi, the XUAR capital, the CCP focused on aggressively recruiting security personnel and on embedding security officials and grassroots party personnel in local Uyghur communities.<sup>23</sup> At a December 2013 Politburo meeting, Xi discussed a new strategic plan (*zhanlue bushu*) for Xinjiang,<sup>24</sup> and in 2014, regional authorities announced the “Strike Hard against Violent Terrorist Activity” campaign. This campaign included a small re-education (or “transformation through education,” *jiaoyu zhuanhua*) component: it targeted only about 1 percent of various cities’ Uyghur populations, with totals in the low thousands.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, detentions were relatively short term, lasting from one to three weeks; one county termed it “drip-feed-style concentrated educational training.”<sup>26</sup>

21. Susan Trevaskes, *Policing Serious Crime in China: From “Strike Hard” to “Kill Fewer”* (London: Routledge, 2010), pp. 86–87.

22. Zhao Yingping, “Xi Jinping zhushu ‘zongmubiao’ xia de Xinjiang fazhan” [Xi Jinping reveals a “comprehensive agenda” for Xinjiang’s development], *Xinhua*, March 11, 2017, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2017-03/11/c\\_1120611290.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2017-03/11/c_1120611290.htm).

23. James Leibold, “Xinjiang Work Forum Marks New Policy of ‘Ethnic Mingling,’” *China Brief*, Vol. 14, No. 12 (June 2014), <https://jamestown.org/program/xinjiang-work-forum-marks-new-policy-of-ethnic-mingling/>; and Adrian Zenz and James Leibold, “Xinjiang’s Rapidly Evolving Security State,” *China Brief*, Vol. 17, No. 4 (March 2017), <https://jamestown.org/program/xinjiangs-rapidly-evolving-security-state/>.

24. Yang Jingjie, “Xinjiang to See ‘Major Strategy Shift,’” *Global Times*, January 9, 2014, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/836495.shtml#.UtS1ivaFZ0Q>.

25. Work reports noted, for example, the successful transformation-through-education of 3,087 “focal persons” (*zhongdianren*) in Turpan (out of a total of 3,152 or 0.7 percent of the city’s Uyghur population) and approximately 2,400 out of 2,435 in Yining later that year (1.23 percent of the Uyghur population). James Leibold, “The Spectre of Insecurity: The CCP’s Mass Internment Strategy in Xinjiang,” *China Leadership Monitor*, Vol. 59 (Spring 2019), <https://www.prcleader.org/leibold>.

26. “Xinjiang Yiningxian yingzao ‘qujiduanhua’ xuanchuan jiaoyu wei meng shengshi” [Yining County creates ‘deradicalization’ propaganda and education], *Yaxinwang*, January 14, 2015, <http://xj.people.com.cn/n/2015/0114/c188514-23545423.html>.

In December 2015, the PRC passed a new national counterterrorism law.<sup>27</sup> XUAR authorities subsequently announced regional implementation regulations that were substantially more stringent than the national legislation, and they significantly revised Xinjiang's Religious Affairs Regulations.<sup>28</sup> Chen Quanguo, who assumed leadership of the XUAR in mid-2016, called social stability the CCP's "primary objective" (*yige mubiao*).<sup>29</sup> Domestic security spending increased almost exponentially—from 5.45 billion renminbi in 2007 to 57.95 billion renminbi in 2017, two to three times the national average.<sup>30</sup> Police recruitment also rose sharply: in a yearlong period in 2016–17, Xinjiang advertised twelve times the number of security-related positions (90,000) available in 2009, and security-sector employment growth outpaced the private sector.<sup>31</sup> Authorities adopted grid-style social management, a technology-intensive approach to urban governance and "intelligence-led policing" employed in China's eastern cities since the mid-to-late 2000s, and established thousands of "convenience police stations" to embed police officers more deeply in local communities.<sup>32</sup> These tools formed the backbone of a surveillance state that journalists describe as formidable in its intensity.<sup>33</sup> Until late 2016, how-

27. Ben Blanchard, "China Passes Controversial Counter-Terrorism Law," Reuters, December 27, 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-security-idUSKBN0UA07220151228>. See an unofficial translation of the law at "Counter-Terrorism Law" (New Haven, Conn.: China Law Translate, December 27, 2015), <https://www.chinalawtranslate.com/en/%e5%8f%8d%e6%81%90%e6%80%96%e4%b8%bb%e4%b9%89%e6%b3%95-%ef%bc%882015%ef%bc%89/>.

28. See an unofficial translation at "Xinjiang Implementing Measures for the P.R.C. Counter-Terrorism Law" (New Haven, Conn.: China Law Translate, August 1, 2016), <https://www.chinalawtranslate.com/en/xjcounter-terror/>.

29. "Xinjiang zhaokai wending gongzuo dianshi dianhua huiyi jinjin weirao shehui wending he changzhijiu'an qianghua" [Xinjiang holds a televised conference on stability work: Tightly focus on social stability and strengthening long-term peace], *Zhongyang tongzhanbu*, September 2, 2016, <http://www.zyztzb.gov.cn/tzb2010/s1345/201609/0f55d4c3daa3412fb3c6c58843de5b65.shtml>.

30. Adrian Zenz, "China's Domestic Security Spending: An Analysis of Available Data," *China Brief*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (March 2018), <https://jamestown.org/program/chinas-domestic-security-spending-analysis-available-data/>; and Sheena Chestnut Greitens, "Rethinking China's Coercive Capacity: An Examination of PRC Domestic Security Spending, 1992–2012," *China Quarterly*, Vol. 232 (December 2017), pp. 1002–1025, doi.org/10.1017/S0305741017001023.

31. Most of the positions were contract based and outside the formal civil service, making them a cheaper, faster, more flexible way to augment the CCP's coercive capacity in the region. Zenz and Leibold, "Chen Quanguo."

32. Sheena Chestnut Greitens, "Domestic Security in China under Xi Jinping," *China Leadership Monitor*, Vol. 59 (Spring 2019), [www.prcleader.org/greitens](http://www.prcleader.org/greitens); and Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, "Guonei shequ wanggehua guanli yanjiu zongshu" [Summary of research on internal community grid management], October 28, 2013, [http://www.cssn.cn/sf/bwsf\\_gl/201312/t20131205\\_895684.shtml](http://www.cssn.cn/sf/bwsf_gl/201312/t20131205_895684.shtml).

33. Media coverage on the surveillance is extensive. See, for example, Chris Buckley, Paul Mozur, and Austin Ramzy, "How China Turned a City Into a Prison," *New York Times*, April 4, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/04/04/world/asia/xinjiang-china-surveillance-prison.html>.



ever, the CCP's policy focused on building coercive capacity through technological and human surveillance; detention and re-education remained targeted and selective.

In 2017–18, however, the CCP took steps that differentiated its internal security strategy in Xinjiang from both past approaches and other areas of the country (including Han-majority areas and minority regions such as the Tibetan Autonomous Region). The first characteristic of the new strategy that we seek to explain is a shift from individualized to collective repression. In February 2017, Chen Quanguo attended a Central National Security Commission symposium in Beijing; shortly after, XUAR officials held a series of massive security rallies throughout the region, and its Justice Department ordered the creation of “concentrated transformation-through-education” centers.<sup>34</sup> In March, new regional “Regulations on De-extremification” called for transformation-through-education via both individual and centralized measures.<sup>35</sup> Over the next few months, XUAR authorities began to apply involuntary detention and re-education on a mass scale; they also began to discuss a re-education-based five-year strategy designed to produce “comprehensive stability” (*quanmian wending*) in the region.<sup>36</sup>

These steps, in practice, meant the establishment of a wide-scale extrajudicial detention and internment system, aimed at mass indoctrination and political-ideological re-education. Human rights groups estimate that 30 percent of southern Xinjiang's Uyghur population has been detained for re-education, as have smaller numbers of the region's Kazakh and Kyrgyz minorities.<sup>37</sup> Although the exact scale of imprisonment is unknown, scholars Adrian Zenz and Rian Thum arrive at figures of around 1.5 million people, be-

---

34. Leibold, “Spectre of Insecurity”; “Xi Jinping zhuchi zaokai guojia anquan gongzuo zuotanhui” [Xi Jinping presides over a national security work symposium], *Xinhua*, February 17, 2017, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2017-02/17/c\\_1120486809.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2017-02/17/c_1120486809.htm); and “Xinjiang juxing fankong weiwu shishi dahui: Wang Ning, Chen Quanguo jianghua” [Xinjiang holds a counterterrorism and stability meeting: Wang Ning, Chen Quanguo speak], *Tianshanwang*, February 28, 2017, [https://www.guancha.cn/local/2017\\_02\\_28\\_396305.shtml](https://www.guancha.cn/local/2017_02_28_396305.shtml).

35. “Xinjiang Weiwu'er ziziqu qu jiduan hua tiaoli” [XUAR de-extremification regulations] (Xinjiang, China: Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region [XUAR] Government, March 30, 2017), <http://www.xinjiang.gov.cn/2017/03/30/128831.htm>. For an unofficial translation, see “Xinjiang Autonomous Region Regulations on De-Extremification” (New Haven, Conn.: China Law Translate, March 30, 2017).

36. Wang Mingshan, “Kaichuang weihu shehui wending he changzhijiu'an xin jumian” [Create a new situation of social stability maintenance and long-term peace and stability], *Renmin gong'an*, November 7, 2017, <http://www.mps.gov.cn/n2255079/n5590589/n5822616/n5822768/c5860294/content.html>.

37. This estimate includes nonresidential re-education: 20 percent are in “noncustodial” classes, and 10 percent are in a network of mass internment camps. See “China: Massive Numbers of Uyghurs and Other Ethnic Minorities Forced into Re-education Programs,” Chinese Human

tween 5 and 10 percent of China's Uyghur population; U.S. government estimates have ranged over time between 800,000 and 3 million.<sup>38</sup> Formal arrests in Xinjiang, which are separate from "transformation-through-education," also rose: in 2017, Xinjiang had 1.5 percent of the PRC's population, but 21 percent of its recorded arrests.<sup>39</sup> In a publicly released letter to U.S. Ambassador to China Terry Branstad in early 2018, the bipartisan chairs of the U.S. Congressional-Executive Commission on China referred to events in Xinjiang as "the largest mass incarceration of an ethnic minority in the world today."<sup>40</sup> This broadening of repression shifted the CCP from selective repression (targeting individuals because of what they do) toward collective repression (targeting people because of "who they are, where they live, and to which identity group they belong").<sup>41</sup>

The second notable feature of the CCP's approach to domestic security in Xinjiang in 2017–18 is its emphasis on ideological and political re-education. Consistent with revised regulations, re-education programs in Xinjiang are heavily aimed at curtailing religious practice and bringing it under the party-state's discipline.<sup>42</sup> Much of the curriculum in detention facilities is patriotic education aimed at instilling ethnic unity and nationalist loyalty to the CCP, accomplished by replacing Uyghur language with Mandarin Chinese (which officials call "the country's common language") and substituting secular cultural habits for Muslim religious practice. Re-education also places a strong emphasis on indoctrination against the "three evils," since Chinese thinking

---

Rights Defenders, August 3, 2018, <https://www.nchr.org/2018/08/china-massive-numbers-of-uyghurs-other-ethnic-minorities-forced-into-re-education-programs/>.

38. Zenz argues that this total exceeds the size of the "reeducation through labor" system that China formally abolished in 2013. Adrian Zenz, "Thoroughly Reforming Them To a Healthy Heart Attitude: China's Political Re-education Campaign in Xinjiang," *Central Asian Survey*, Vol. 38, No. 1 (2019), pp. 102–128, doi.org/10.1080/02634937.2018.1507997; Testimony of Deputy Assistant Secretary Scott Busby, Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Subcommittee on East Asia, the Pacific, and International Cybersecurity Policy, 115th Cong. 2d sess., December 4, 2018, [https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/120418\\_Busby\\_Testimony.pdf](https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/120418_Busby_Testimony.pdf).

39. Josh Rudolph, "Xinjiang Arrests Account for 21% of Total in China in 2017," *China Digital Times*, July 25, 2018, <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/2018/07/xinjiang-arrests-account-for-21-of-total-in-china-in-2017/>.

40. "[CECC] Chairs Urge Ambassador Branstad to Prioritize Mass Detention of Uighurs, Including Family Members of Radio Free Asia Employees" (Washington, D.C.: Congressional-Executive Commission on China, April 3, 2018), <https://www.cecc.gov/media-center/press-releases/chairs-urge-ambassador-branstad-to-prioritize-mass-detention-of-uyghurs>.

41. Some authors call this "indiscriminate" repression. Evgeny Finkel, "The Phoenix Effect of State Repression: Jewish Resistance during the Holocaust," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 109, No. 2 (May 2015), pp. 339–353, doi.org/10.1017/S000305541500009X; and Matthew Adam Kocher, Thomas B. Pepinsky, and Stathis N. Kalyvas, "Aerial Bombing and Counterinsurgency in Vietnam," *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 55, No. 2 (April 2011), pp. 201–218, doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5907.2010.00498.x.

42. On the CCP's approach to religion generally, see Karrie J. Koesel, *Religion and Authoritarianism: Cooperation, Conflict, and the Consequences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

generally treats them as interrelated: religious extremism is the root cause of both separatist inclinations and terrorist tactics.<sup>43</sup> One CCP official in Ili, a Kazakh autonomous prefecture in Xinjiang, characterized re-education's purpose as "eliminat[ing] the hidden dangers affecting stability in society [to] put people whom we do not trust into a trusted place . . . to make them into people who are politically qualified."<sup>44</sup>

The third element of the CCP's strategic shift is a campaign to clamp down on the movement of China's Uyghur citizens, both domestically and internationally, and to pressure the Uyghur diaspora and its transnational social and mobilizational networks.<sup>45</sup> In 2016, XUAR authorities required residents to turn in their passports to the police and apply to get them back.<sup>46</sup> Religious regulations require citizens to conduct pilgrimages through the state-organized China Islamic Association; in 2018, travellers to Mecca began carrying smart cards embedded with their personal data and a GPS locator.<sup>47</sup> Foreign connections are increasingly scrutinized; individuals who "maintain ties" with any of twenty-six countries (such as visiting, having family, or communicating frequently with individuals abroad) are flagged for scrutiny; interviews with former detainees suggest that simply having friends or neighbors who go abroad was enough to target someone for detention and re-education, especially in places where quotas were imposed on local authorities.<sup>48</sup>

CCP officials have also placed pressure on Uyghurs studying or working abroad to return to China—and on various governments to return them, involuntarily if necessary<sup>49</sup>—and have required Uyghur expatriates to provide de-

---

43. See transcript of an interview with XUAR Governor Shohrat Zakir, "Full Transcript: Interview with Xinjiang Government Chief on Counterterrorism, Vocational Education, and Training in Xinjiang," *Xinhua*, October 16, 2018, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-10/16/c\\_137535821.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-10/16/c_137535821.htm); Zunyou Zhou, "Fighting Terrorism According to Law": China's Legal Efforts against Terrorism," in Clarke, *Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism in China*, p. 75; and Fu Hualing, "Responses to Terrorism in China," in Victor V. Ramraj et al., eds., *Global Anti-Terrorism Law and Policy*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 344–345.

44. Maya Wang, "'Eradicating Ideological Viruses': China's Campaign of Repression against Xinjiang's Muslims" (New York: Human Rights Watch [HRW], September 9, 2018), p. 35.

45. The PRC has always applied controls to internal and international travel, but these controls have intensified in both number and usage.

46. Edward Wong, "Police Confiscate Passports in Parts of Xinjiang, in Western China," *New York Times*, December 1, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/01/world/asia/passports-confiscated-xinjiang-china-uyghur.html>.

47. Eva Dou, "Chinese Surveillance Expands to Muslims Making Mecca Pilgrimage," *Wall Street Journal*, July 31, 2018, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/chinese-surveillance-expands-to-muslims-making-mecca-pilgrimage-1533045703>; and Rian Thum, "The Ethnicization of Discontent in Xinjiang," *China Beat*, October 2, 2009.

48. Wang, "'Eradicating Ideological Viruses,'" p. 32.

49. Martin de Bourmont, "China's Campaign against the Uighur Diaspora Ramps Up," *Foreign Policy*, April 3, 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/04/03/chinas-campaign-against-uyghur-diaspora-ramps-up/>; and Shohret Hoshur, Gulchehra Hoja, and Eset Sulaiman, "Uyghurs

tailed personal information on those who remain abroad.<sup>50</sup> A 2017 report by the Uyghur Human Rights Project describes attempted recruitment of informants among the diaspora by threatening family members who remain in China; efforts to monitor email/phone communications; and efforts to exert pressure via student organizations.<sup>51</sup> The objectives appear to be multipurpose: to persuade citizens to return to China for re-education; to create mistrust among diaspora members and thereby limit collective mobilization; and to discourage Uyghurs from making appeals for host-country support or engaging in public advocacy.<sup>52</sup> The PRC has also convinced officials in the Middle East and Southeast Asia to repatriate Uyghurs who sought asylum or were transiting (most often to Turkey); for example, the repatriation of more than 100 Uyghurs from Thailand in 2015 drew attention among activists and media outlets and caused protests in Turkey after photos surfaced of detainees on a plane with black hoods over their heads.<sup>53</sup>

CCP officials are sometimes described as replicating their treatment of Tibet in Xinjiang, but close analysis of the two regions shows significant differences. Both underwent a clear tightening of political control and overall securitization following unrest in 2008–09, and both saw major increases in security spending and police recruitment, with central authorities' financial support.<sup>54</sup> Tibet did lead Xinjiang in some areas of domestic security innovation: its public security expenditure began to rise before 2008–09, while Xinjiang's lagged behind by several years.<sup>55</sup> The Tibetan Autonomous Region implemented convenience police stations and grid management in 2011, several years before

---

Studying Abroad Ordered Back to Xinjiang Under Threat to Families," *Radio Free Asia*, May 9, 2019, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/ordered-05092017155554.html>.

50. Bethany Allen-Ebrahimian, "Chinese Cops Now Spying on American Soil," *Daily Beast*, August 18, 2018, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/chinese-police-are-spying-on-uyghurson-american-soil>.

51. Uyghur Human Rights Project (UHRP), "The Fifth Poison: The Harassment of Uyghurs Overseas" (Washington, D.C.: UHRP, 2017), <https://uhrp.org/docs/The-Fifth-Poison-The-Harrassment-of-Uyghurs-Overseas.pdf>. See also Wang, "Eradicating Ideological Viruses," pp. 83–93.

52. This also suggests that not all diaspora members are targeted, because they themselves are seen as potential terrorists. Megha Rajagopalan, "They Thought They'd Left the Surveillance State Behind. They Were Wrong," *Buzzfeed*, July 9, 2018, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/meghara/china-uyghur-spies-surveillance>.

53. "Turkish Police Hit Pro-Uighur Protestors with Pepper Spray," *BBC News*, July 9, 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-33457401>; and "China Is Trying to Prevent the Formation of a Vocal Uighur Diaspora," *Economist*, March 28, 2018, <https://www.economist.com/china/2018/03/28/china-is-trying-to-prevent-the-formation-of-a-vocal-uyghur-diaspora>.

54. Greitens, "Rethinking China's Coercive Capacity."

55. Police recruitment in the Tibetan Autonomous Region increased from 260 advertised positions in 2007 (the year before the unrest) to an average of 866 in 2008–09, to almost 2,500 positions per year in the 2011–16 period. Zenz and Leibold, "Chen Quanguo."

Xinjiang. Other policy changes, such as the embedding of party cadres in local communities and small-scale re-education, appear to have been implemented in both regions around the same time.<sup>56</sup> Tibetan areas, however, do not seem to have experienced the dramatic expansion of detention and re-education that marked the 2017–18 policy turn in Xinjiang.

We therefore characterize the shift in China's repressive strategy since early 2017 as one that moved from selective to collective repression and targeted an increasingly broad swath of Xinjiang's Muslim population for detention; invested heavily not just in punitive detention, but in mass ideological and political re-education; and increased surveillance and coercion toward Uyghur diaspora networks. Although elements of these policies were present in limited fashion previously, early 2017 marks a qualitative shift in the scale and intensity of their application to Xinjiang's population.

Several aspects of China's shift in Xinjiang are puzzling given contemporary theories on political violence. Indiscriminate violence is often thought to occur because the information needed to engage in discriminate violence is costly;<sup>57</sup> yet the CCP is pursuing collective repression after implementing a resource-intensive, surveillance-based system that should provide the regime with high informational capacity. Visible, broad-scale repression is often thought to be more costly and less preferable, because it risks domestic and international backlash,<sup>58</sup> yet, as we show below, the CCP escalated precisely when public security authorities were saying that the existing strategy had been relatively successful. What, then, explains this shift in repressive strategy by the PRC?

56. Beginning in 2011, the CCP sent an estimated 22,000 "village-resident cadre teams" (*zhucun gongzuodui*) to reside in Tibetan villages, and 7,000 temple-resident cadres (*zhusi*) were stationed in monasteries throughout the TAR and Tibetan areas of Sichuan. Reports emerged in 2012 of a chain of unmarked detention centers aimed at the estimated 6,000 to 7,000 Tibetans who had attended teachings by the Dalai Lama. "China: New Controls on Tibetan Monastery" (New York: HRW, January 24, 2018), <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/01/24/china-new-controls-tibetan-monastery>; "22,000 Chinese Cadres to Breathe Down on Rural Tibetans' Necks in Sixth Year of Surveillance Campaign," *Tibetan Review*, December 3, 2016, <http://www.tibetanreview.net/22000-chinese-cadres-to-breathe-down-on-rural-tibetans-necks-in-sixth-year-of-surveillance-campaign/>; and "China: No End to Tibet Surveillance Program" (New York: HRW, January 18, 2016), <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/01/18/china-no-end-tibet-surveillance-program>.

57. Stathis N. Kalyvas, "The Paradox of Terrorism in Civil War," *Journal of Ethics*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (March 2004), pp. 97–137, doi.org/10.1023/B:JOET.0000012254.69088.41; Stathis N. Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); and Eli Berman, Joseph H. Felter, and Jacob N. Shapiro, *Small Wars, Big Data: The Information Revolution in Modern Conflict* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2018).

58. Minxin Pei, "China and East Asian Democracy: Is CCP Rule Fragile or Resilient?" *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (January 2012), pp. 27–41, doi.org/10.1353/jod.2012.0008; Kocher, Pepinsky, and Kalyvas, "Aerial Bombing and Counterinsurgency in Vietnam," p. 426; and Greitens, *Dictators and Their Secret Police*, pp. 42–45. See also, by way of comparison, Lyall, "Does Indiscriminate Violence Incite Insurgent Attacks?"

### *Assessing Common Explanations for Repression in Xinjiang*

Three common explanations for increased repression in Xinjiang appear in scholarly literature and policy analysis: (1) increased levels of contention in Xinjiang beginning around 2009; (2) resulting shifts in the CCP's ethnic minority policies; and (3) the individual leadership of Xinjiang Party Secretary Chen Quanguo. These domestic factors are important but incomplete complements to our international, security-focused argument.

#### INCREASED CONTENTION IN XINJIANG

It seems intuitive that increased dissent can result in increased state repression. Indeed, the idea that as observable threats from society rise, repression rises to subdue them has been termed the "law of coercive responsiveness" or "threat-response theory."<sup>59</sup> It suggests a positive correlation between contention/threat and repression; applied to China and Xinjiang, it implies that increased repression has occurred in response to the increased contention in the region that began in 2008–09.<sup>60</sup>

In the spring of 2008, PRC authorities announced that they had prevented a suicide bombing by a Uyghur woman; attacks on police in Kashgar, a city in the XUAR, followed later that year. In July 2009, violent clashes between Uyghurs and Han and an ensuing police crackdown in Urumqi killed an estimated 200 people and injured 1,700. Other terrorist incidents or clashes between police and protestors, each resulting in fatalities, occurred in Xinjiang throughout 2010–14. In later incidents, contention and violence spread beyond XUAR borders, and violence targeted Han civilians as well as security forces. In October 2013, a car driven by a Uyghur man ploughed into a stone pedestal in Beijing's Tiananmen Square, killing two tourists and the four people in the car, and injuring another twenty bystanders. In March 2014, eight people at-

---

59. Christian Davenport, "State Repression and Political Order," *Annual Review of Political Science*, Vol. 10 (2007), pp. 1–23, doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.10.101405.143216; Jennifer Earl, Sarah A. Soule, and John D. McCarthy, "Protest Under Fire? Explaining the Policing of Protest," *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 68, No. 4 (August 2003), pp. 581–606, doi.org/10.2307/1519740; Sabine C. Carey, "The Use of Repression as a Response to Domestic Dissent," *Political Studies*, Vol. 58, No. 1 (February 2010), pp. 167–186, doi.org/10.1111%2Fj.1467-9248.2008.00771.x; Will H. Moore, "The Repression of Dissent: A Substitution Model of Government Coercion," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 44, No. 1 (February 2000), pp. 107–127, doi.org/10.1177%2F0022002700044001006; and Christian Davenport, "Multi-Dimensional Threat Perception and State Repression: An Inquiry into Why States Apply Negative Sanctions," *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 39, No. 3 (August 1995), pp. 683–713, doi.org/10.2307/2111650.

60. Ben Hillman and Gray Tuttle, eds., *Ethnic Conflict and Protest in Tibet and Xinjiang: Unrest in China's West* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), pp. 1–17. Much of the following paragraph draws on their account.

tacked the railway station in Kunming, the capital of Yunnan Province, with knives and machetes, killing 29 and injuring 143. Media accounts commonly situate stories about CCP repression in the context of Uyghur-related contention since 2009.

Patterns of contention do appear to explain Xinjiang's overall securitization since 2009. If coercive capacity is defined as a regime's ability to handle whatever security challenges are present on the ground,<sup>61</sup> then the XUAR authorities in 2009 fell short. That year, Xinjiang's level of domestic security expenditure was around the national average, but only because of higher-than-average assistance from the central government. Police presence per capita was also comparatively low. When unrest broke out, approximately 14,000 paramilitary personnel (People's Armed Police and Special Police Units) had to be flown in from thirty-one provinces to assist Xinjiang-based forces with stabilization operations.<sup>62</sup> Subsequently, regional leaders focused on building up coercive capacity—but did so primarily by applying tools that had already been implemented in other, wealthier (Han-majority) provinces. In addition to grid management, for example, officials began in 2012 to apply the “one village one policeman” standard used in eastern China from the early 2000s; it assigned one trained policeman, assisted by several staff, to their home village, to take advantage of their familiarity with local social networks and issues.<sup>63</sup> The CCP's response to contention in Xinjiang, in other words, was undeniably to build police presence and coercive capacity, but this was done in an attempt both to catch up with the challenges in Xinjiang and to bring Xinjiang up to a level comparable to much of the rest of China.

Rising contention is, however, an incomplete explanation for the specific changes in CCP strategy that occurred in early 2017. First, the timing of the change in repressive strategy is somewhat puzzling. Contention in Xinjiang was high throughout 2009–14, but by 2015–16, the CCP judged that its coercive buildup had been relatively successful in quelling terrorist attacks.<sup>64</sup> At a 2015 work conference on terrorism, for example, the head of the Central Political-Legal Affairs Commission (China's top domestic security body),

---

61. Greitens, “Rethinking China's Coercive Capacity.”

62. Xiao Qiang, “Map of People's Armed Police Troops Dispatched to Xinjiang,” *China Digital Times*, July 10, 2009, <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/2009/07/map-of-peoples-armed-police-troops-dispatched-to-xinjiang/>.

63. Zi Yang, “Rural China's Public Security Vacuum,” *China Brief*, Vol. 15, No. 17 (September 2015), <https://jamestown.org/program/rural-chinas-public-security-vacuum/>.

64. Cai Changchun, “Meng Jianzhu: Ba fan kongbu gongzuo fang zai gengjia tuchu weizhi” [Meng Jianzhu: Focus on counterterrorism activities], *China News*, December 11, 2015, <http://www.chinanews.com/gn/2015/12-11/7667800.shtml>.

Meng Jianzhu, said that authorities had prevented 98 percent of terrorist attacks.<sup>65</sup> The pattern of publicly documented violence also suggests that the CCP's approach had reduced (though not eradicated) Uyghur-related violence by 2016–17.<sup>66</sup> This gap in timing, then, suggests a need for additional explanatory factors.

The data also present three other puzzles. First, both Tibet and Xinjiang experienced unusually high levels of unrest and mobilization in 2008–09.<sup>67</sup> Both also subsequently experienced securitization (increased security spending and police presence). Only Xinjiang, however, experienced a dramatic escalation in the scope and intensity of detention and re-education.<sup>68</sup> Second, contention does not explain why the CCP decided to pursue mass re-education, a resource-intensive strategy (in terms of both physical infrastructure and personnel) compared to simple detention. Third, domestic contention alone does not shed much light on why Uyghur diaspora networks have been so heavily pressured, especially relative to the diasporas of other minority groups in China.

#### ASSIMILATIONIST MINORITY POLICIES

A second explanation for the CCP's increasing repression in Xinjiang situates its approach in the context of China's broader ethnic-minority policies. These arguments suggest that the 2007–14 period of unrest and violence in Tibet and Xinjiang emboldened assimilationist voices and prompted a shift in the PRC's approach to minority issues, reducing space for ethnic autonomy and pushing for assimilation and Sinicization. These efforts aligned with Xi's broader ideological reorientation toward CCP-led nationalism, which has reduced space for

---

65. Yao Tong and Sui Yunyan, "Xinjiang fankong biao Zhang ji dong'yuan bushu hui'yi zhokai Zhang Chunxian, Meng Jianzhu chuxi bing jianghua" [Zhang Chunxian and Meng Jianzhu speak at the XUAR counterterrorism meeting], *CPC News*, December 13, 2015, <http://cpc.people.com.cn/n1/2015/1213/c64094-27922213.html>.

66. Hillman and Tuttle, *Ethnic Conflict and Protest in Tibet and Xinjiang*, pp. 1–17.

67. Protests erupted across the Tibetan plateau in March 2008, consuming not just the Tibetan Autonomous Region but also Tibetan areas of Sichuan, Qinghai, and Gansu Provinces. That violence resulted in the deaths of an estimated 200 Tibetans, ten times as many arrests, and a string of subsequent suicides by self-immolation that led to more than 150 deaths by March 2018. "Self-Immolations by Tibetans" (Washington, D.C.: International Campaign for Tibet, last updated December 27, 2017), <https://www.savetibet.org/resources/fact-sheets/self-immolations-by-tibetans/map-tibetan-self-immolations-from-2009-2013/>; and Antonio Terrone, "Suicide Protesters in Eastern Tibet: The Shifting Story of a People's Tragedy," Asia-Pacific Memo No. 302 (Vancouver, Canada: Institute of Asian Research, June 6, 2014), <https://apm.iar.ubc.ca/suicide-protesters-eastern-tibet/>.

68. The explanation may be, in part, that Xinjiang's contention was more violent; we address this point in our explanation on how China frames terrorism threats.



religious life and civil-society activity across China.<sup>69</sup> Although these arguments are specific to China, they parallel broader scholarly work that finds a correlation between increased ethnonationalism and minority repression, heightening their plausibility.<sup>70</sup>

Like securitization, China's shifts in minority policy had roots in the 2008–09 unrest. Inspection teams sent to Tibet after 2008 produced a work report that, in 2011, offered a revised interpretation of China's ethnic challenges. It proposed that fundamental contradictions ("vestiges of feudalism") remained in Tibetan mentality; re-education was necessary to resolve these contradictions.<sup>71</sup> Official speeches and party documents on Xinjiang ran in close parallel with this interpretation; in 2011, CCP rhetoric began to emphasize "new conditions" that called for revised approaches to ethnic unrest and conflict.<sup>72</sup>

Around that time, scholars with strong official ties (and sometimes formal party or government positions)—such as Ma Rong, Hu Angang, and Hu Lianhe—began to call for a "second-generation minority policy" that would weaken recognition and acceptance of distinctive ethnic identity in favor of a stronger national identity developed through party-led patriotism and inter-ethnic "contact, exchange, and fusion."<sup>73</sup> Because they de-emphasized tradi-

---

69. Anna Fifield, "With Wider Crackdowns on Religion, Xi's China Seeks to Put State Stamp on Faith," *Washington Post*, September 16, 2018; Leibold, "The Spectre of Insecurity"; Mark Elliott, "The Case of the Missing Indigene: Debate over a 'Second-Generation' Ethnic Policy," *China Journal*, Vol. 73 (January 2015), pp. 186–213; and James A. Millward, "Introduction: Does the 2009 Urumchi Violence Mark a Turning Point?" *Central Asian Survey*, Vol. 28, No. 4 (December 2009), pp. 347–360, doi.org/10.1080/02634930903577128.

70. Emir Yazici, "Nationalism and Human Rights," *Political Research Quarterly*, Vol. 72, No. 1 (March 2019), pp. 147–161, doi.org/10.1177%2F1065912918781187; Oktay Tanrisever, "Russian Nationalism and Moscow's Violations of Human Rights in the Second Chechen War," *Human Rights Review*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (April 2001), pp. 117–127, doi.org/10.1007/BF02912020; and Thomas W. Smith, "Civic Nationalism and Ethnocultural Justice in Turkey," *Human Rights Quarterly*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (May 2005), pp. 436–470, doi.org/10.1353/hrq.2005.0027.

71. See comments made online by Tibet scholar Robert Barnett (@RobbieBarnett), Twitter, August 6, 2018, 2:57 p.m., <https://twitter.com/RobbieBarnett/status/1026588170056622080>.

72. Documents continued to state that "the Party's strategy on Xinjiang has been proven correct," but the introduction of "new conditions" was an important shift. See the discussion of XUAR Party Secretary Zhang Chunxian's 2011 speech in Antonio Terrone, "Propaganda in the Public Square: Communicating State Directives on Religion and Ethnicity to Uyghurs and Tibetans in Western China," in Hillman and Tuttle, *Ethnic Conflict and Protest in Tibet and Xinjiang*, p. 49; and Leibold, "Xinjiang Work Forum Marks New Policy of 'Ethnic Mingling.'"

73. James Leibold, "Toward a Second Generation of Ethnic Policies?" *China Brief*, Vol. 12, No. 3 (July 2014), <https://jamestown.org/program/toward-a-second-generation-of-ethnic-policies/>; Ma Rong, "21 shiji de Zhongguo shifou cunzai guojia fenlie de fengxian?" [Is there a risk that China could fracture in the 21st century?], *Aishixiang*, March 26, 2013, <http://www.aishixiang.com/data/62466.html>; Hu Angang and Hu Lianhe, "Dierdai Minzu zhengce: Cuijin Minzu jiaorong yiti he fanrong" [Second-generation Minzu policies: Promoting organic ethnic blending and prosperity], *Xinjiang Shifan Daxue Xuebao (Zhexue Shehui Kexue Bao)*, Vol. 32, No. 5 (2011), pp. 1–13.

tional notions of ethnic autonomy, these proposals received pushback from within China's ethnic establishment.<sup>74</sup> However, a 2012 speech by Zhu Weiqun, director of the party's United Front Work Department (UFWD) and a leading voice on ethnic policy, adopted parts of the proposed wording.<sup>75</sup> The 2014 Central Work Forum on Xinjiang called for "inter-ethnic mingling" (among other things) to combat the "three evil forces," signaling approval of this policy line by Xi and the CCP leadership.<sup>76</sup> In August 2018, Hu Lianhe, one of the concept's intellectual pioneers, appeared in his UFWD capacity at the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination to answer questions about discrimination, indicating the extent to which this new thinking had been integrated into the party-state's ethnic affairs apparatus.<sup>77</sup>

Changes to the CCP's thinking about minority policy have clearly shaped its behavior in both Tibet and Xinjiang.<sup>78</sup> In particular, unless the CCP had (informally) revised the commitment to autonomy that has long governed its management of ethnic difference, it is hard to imagine large-scale adoption of re-education programs that seek to overwrite ethnic and cultural autonomy (in this case, Uyghur/Turkic language and culture) with Mandarin Chinese and pro-CCP patriotism. Shifting minority policy, then, appears to be an underlying permissive condition that helps explain some facets of China's approach.

Again, however, important specific aspects of the strategy shift in Xinjiang bear further explanation. Ethnic assimilationist policies have been in ascen-

74. Liu Ling, "Jianchi jiben zhengzhi zhidu—zai fazhan zhong jieyue minzu wenti" [Persist with the fundamental political system; resolve ethnic issues via development] (Beijing: Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, 2012).

75. Zhu Weiqun, "Dui dangqian minzu lingyu wenti de jidian sikao" [Some thoughts on issues of contemporary ethnic problems], *Xuexi Shibao*, February 13, 2012.

76. Leibold, "Xinjiang Work Forum Marks New Policy of 'Ethnic Mingling.'"

77. James Leibold, "Hu the Uniter: Hu Lianhe and the Radical Turn in China's Xinjiang Policy," *China Brief*, Vol. 18, No. 16 (October 2018), <https://jamestown.org/program/hu-the-uniter-hu-lianhe-and-the-radical-turn-in-chinas-xinjiang-policy>. For Hu's prepared statement, see James Leibold (@jleibold), "Hu Lianhe's Statement before CERB, Aug 2018," Twitter, August 29, 2018, <https://twitter.com/i/moments/1034983653267230720>.

78. This is also not new; the CCP's framing of minorities in Xinjiang as "backwards" led to particular developmental approaches to ethnic policy in the past, whereas Uyghurs have been associated with violence and instability since at least the early 2000s. Li Dezhu, "Vigorously Developing Ethnic Minority Culture—Actively Promoting the Building of a Harmonious Society," *Seeking Truth*, Vol. 446 (January 2007), [http://www.qstheory.cn/zxdk/2007/200701/200907/t20090707\\_6289.htm](http://www.qstheory.cn/zxdk/2007/200701/200907/t20090707_6289.htm); V. Elena Barabantseva, "Development as Localization: Ethnic Minorities in China's Official Discourse on the Western Development Project," *Critical Asian Studies*, Vol. 41, No. 2 (2009), pp. 225–254, [doi.org/10.1080/14672710902809393](https://doi.org/10.1080/14672710902809393); Sean R. Roberts, "The Biopolitics of China's 'War on Terror' and the Exclusion of the Uyghurs," *Critical Asian Studies*, Vol. 50, No. 2 (2018), pp. 232–258, [doi.org/10.1080/14672715.2018.1454111](https://doi.org/10.1080/14672715.2018.1454111); and David Brophy, "Good and Bad Muslims in Xinjiang," *Made in China*, April/June 2019, <https://madeinchinajournal.com/2019/07/09/good-and-bad-muslims-in-xinjiang/>.

dance since 2009 and were publicly approved by CCP leaders for Xinjiang in 2014; yet detention and re-education did not expand until almost three years later. Moreover, this underlying shift applies to all fifty-five of China's ethnic minorities; yet only Muslim minorities in Xinjiang (mostly Uyghurs, but also Kazakh and Kyrgyz) have been subjected to mass detention, intensive indoctrination, and diasporic coercion.<sup>79</sup> The timing of the strategy change and relatively unique treatment of Xinjiang's Muslims, therefore, suggest a role for other explanations.

#### THE LEADERSHIP EXPLANATION: CHEN QUANGUO

The third factor in CCP policy toward Xinjiang emphasized by scholars is the role of Chen Quanguo, who became party secretary in Tibet in mid-2011 and party secretary in Xinjiang in 2016 (the only official to have held that title in both regions). Chen replaced Zhang Chunxian, a protégé of purged internal security chief Zhou Yongkang (Meng Jianzhu's predecessor) who was Xinjiang's party secretary from 2010–16.<sup>80</sup> Chen's work in Tibet was praised as a national model in 2015 by Meng Jianzhu; in the fall of 2017, Chen was promoted to the twenty-five-person Politburo.<sup>81</sup> He has been characterized as a "rising [political] star" with "a reputation as an ethnic policy innovator" and "a pioneer of aggressive policing techniques."<sup>82</sup> His role is, according to James Leibold, "the leading theory at present" for China's crackdown,<sup>83</sup> and his assumption of leadership in 2016 coincides with the early 2017 shift in strategy.

Adjudicating the importance of Chen's personal leadership to CCP policy in Xinjiang confronts a fundamental empirical challenge: ultimately, we do not have the information necessary to pinpoint the locus of decisionmaking, the set of policy options considered, the process by which the decision was made, or the underlying motivations of the actors whose preferences were decisive. We cannot know for sure whether Chen is a policy entrepreneur, an imple-

79. Enze Han, "From Domestic to International: The Politics of Ethnic Identity in Xinjiang and Inner Mongolia," *Nationalities Papers*, Vol. 39, No. 6 (November 2011), pp. 941–962, doi.org/10.1080/00905992.2011.614226.

80. Before Zhang, Wang Lequan served as party secretary for fifteen years, from 1994 to 2010.

81. "Xizang shehui wending gongzuo zou zai quanguo qianlie" [Tibet's social stability work is at the forefront of the whole country], *Xizang Ribao* [Tibet Daily], July 25, 2015, <http://theory.people.com.cn/n/2015/0725/c49150-27360149.html>.

82. Zenz and Leibold, "Chen Quanguo"; Chun Han Wong, "China's Hard Edge: The Leader of Beijing's Muslim Crackdown Gains Influence," *Wall Street Journal*, April 7, 2019; and Peter Martin, "The Architect of China's Muslim Camps Is a Rising Star under Xi," *Bloomberg News*, September 27, 2018, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-09-27/the-architect-of-china-s-muslim-camps-is-a-rising-star-under-xi>.

83. See comments made online by James Leibold (@jleibold), Twitter, September 9, 2018, 5:36 p.m., <https://twitter.com/jleibold/status/1038949240695750656>.

menter of central policy, or something in between. Placing too heavy an emphasis on Chen's personal influence, however, is inconsistent with the (limited) data available about the PRC's policy process. First, although coverage of Xinjiang commonly characterizes Chen as "replicating" his Tibet strategy in Xinjiang, the CCP has treated the two regions differently: the scale of detention in Xinjiang, intensity of re-education, and clampdown on the Uyghur diaspora appear to be qualitatively more than what occurred in Tibet, under Chen or afterward. Second, explanations emphasizing Chen's entrepreneurship often overlook the fact that he observed certain governance techniques in eastern China before he brought them to Tibet and Xinjiang. Third, both historical evidence about the importance of party unity in enabling major changes to CCP strategy and the high level of consistency between Chen's policies and those supported by Xi and other CCP leaders in the recently leaked documents suggest that the CCP is likely unified in its implementation of Xinjiang's new domestic security strategy, and that the motivating force of the shift lies beyond Chen's individual preferences or leadership.<sup>84</sup>

### *The Changing Threat: Uyghurs and Transnational Terrorism*

The above explanations, all grounded in domestic political developments in China, are important contributing factors to CCP policy toward Xinjiang. As we show below, however, full understanding of the CCP's changing strategy in Xinjiang requires attention to international developments that affected China's perceptions of its own security. A factor that has received comparatively little attention—China's perceptions of the evolving internal-external security environment and counterterrorism threat—can explain important aspects of the CCP's domestic security strategy in Xinjiang since 2017.

This section provides evidence that the CCP's shift in repressive strategy in Xinjiang was motivated by fear of emerging contacts between Uyghurs and Islamic militant organizations in Southeast Asia and the Middle East. In contrast to domestic contention, which peaked in 2009–11, the threat of Uyghur alignment with external jihadist groups coalesced in 2014–16, making it a likely factor in precipitating policy shifts in early 2017. This increase in external terror threat also applies primarily to Xinjiang—less to Tibet or any other

---

84. Ramzy and Buckley, "Absolutely No Mercy." Although it is accurate that different levels of the party-state system may have different motivations or priorities, our view on strategy in Xinjiang is consistent with that of M. Taylor Fravel, who finds that shifts in external military strategy occur only when the party is united. Fravel, *Active Defense: China's Military Strategy since 1949* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2019).

ethnic minority population—which helps explain why China’s response to Xinjiang has differed from other minority regions.

The argument that follows does not suggest that the developments described pose a serious threat to the CCP at present. Even the most generous estimates of Uyghur militant capability, discussed below, do not imply that insurgency is either present or imminent. Rather, in the last several years, the threat shifted from theoretical to operational, and precipitated action by the CCP to ensure that it would not escalate beyond a low level—hence the term “preventive repression.”

The CCP has always blamed ethnic unrest in China’s western regions at least partly on foreign infiltration, typically a handful of “separatists” or “splittists” who were usually upper-class intelligentsia with Western connections.<sup>85</sup> This framing was especially notable in the 1990s, as newly independent Central Asian states prompted heightened CCP vigilance against ethnic separatism.<sup>86</sup> The separatism narrative exists today: when Uyghur scholar Ilham Tohti was sentenced to life imprisonment on grounds of separatism for questioning CCP policy toward the Uyghurs, state media described his “close links” to the West, then suggested that he had promoted ethnic violence and provided a “moral excuse” for and the “brains behind” terrorism.<sup>87</sup> In the main, however, China’s concerns since the end of the Cold War have typically been focused on Uyghur diasporas in Central Asia, especially Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, and their potential contribution to separatist sentiment in Xinjiang. PRC authorities attributed intermittent violence in the XUAR in the 1990s to “pan-Turkic splittists” in Central Asia, but these groups’ operational links to events in China were murky at best. Diasporic activism was generally nonviolent, and the PRC found it relatively easy to pursue counterterrorism security cooperation with its neighbors in the region, who were usually secular and somewhat authoritarian.<sup>88</sup>

---

85. David Shambaugh, *China’s Communist Party: Atrophy and Adaptation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008); Zhou Minglang, “The Fate of the Soviet Model of Multinational State-Building in the People’s Republic of China,” in Thomas P. Bernstein and Hua-yu Li, eds., *China Learns from the Soviet Union, 1949–Present* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington, 2010), pp. 477–504.

86. Nicolas Becquelin, “Staged Development in Xinjiang,” *China Quarterly*, Vol. 178 (June 2004), doi.org/10.1017/S0305741004000219.

87. “Leave No Chance for Malicious Preaching,” *Global Times*, January 18, 2014, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/838112.shtml>; originally cited in Michael Clarke, “Ilham Tohti’s Arrest Demonstrates China’s Renewed Hard Line on Xinjiang,” *Interpreter*, January 24, 2014, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/ilham-tohtis-arrest-demonstrates-chinas-renewed-hard-line-xinjiang>. For similar rhetoric about Tibet, see Yeshe Dorje, “The Self-Immolation Plot: The Dalai Clique Is Doomed to Failure,” *China’s Tibet*, Vol. 24, pp. 22–25.

88. Michael Clarke and Colin Mackerras, eds., *China, Xinjiang, and Central Asia: History, Transition, and Cross-Border Interaction into the 20th Century* (London: Routledge, 2009), especially pp. 117–121;

China's rhetoric about Central Asia's Uyghur diaspora began to shift during the "war on terror" that followed the attacks of September 11, 2001. Instead of emphasizing pan-Turkic separatism, the CCP drew connections between Uyghur organizations and jihadist groups, especially those in Afghanistan and Pakistan. In 2002, the PRC attributed responsibility for past attacks in Xinjiang to the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), a previously unknown organization that it claimed was funded and supported by al-Qaida.<sup>89</sup> In 2003, the PRC Ministry of Public Security issued a list of terrorist organizations; all were Uyghur diaspora organizations, and many were Europe-based nongovernmental advocacy organizations that prominent terrorism experts said were incorrectly labeled.<sup>90</sup> ETIM and its successor organization, the Turkestan Islamic Party (TIP), which emerged sometime between 2006 and 2008, operated first in Afghanistan and then in the Afghanistan-Pakistan tribal areas.

The capabilities of both groups, and their actual connection to terrorist incidents in Xinjiang, are debated; Western scholars are largely skeptical. Sean Roberts, for example, argues that before 2001, "ETIM was not an active militant organization which had the capacity to carry out attacks. Rather, it was at least initially created as a training organization that could give aspiring Uyghur militants experience with weapons . . . mostly informal, highly disorganized, and deprived of both weapons and financial resources." He describes being told by interviewees that a "training camp" in Jalalabad, Afghanistan, had access to a single automatic rifle; one of the group's leaders admitted that none of the Uyghurs who had come to the camp had carried out attacks in China.<sup>91</sup> Similarly, despite glossy recruitment videos that attempt to portray a well-organized militant organization, Roberts finds little evidence that TIP in Pakistan post-2003 "was capable of carrying out either militant or terrorist attacks" or that any significant number of Uyghurs from China joined the organization. Only in 2014 did TIP videos surface showing Uyghurs who had recently arrived in Afghanistan.<sup>92</sup> Thus, until 2014, CCP perceptions and

---

and Stephen Aris, "The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation: 'Tackling the Three Evils.' A Regional Response to Non-traditional Security Challenges or an Anti-Western Bloc?" *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 61, No. 3 (May 2009), pp. 4457-4482, doi.org/10.1080/09668130902753309.

89. PRC State Council Information Office, "'East Turkistan' Terrorist Forces Cannot Get Away with Impunity" (Beijing: China Internet Information Center, January 21, 2002), <http://www.china.org.cn/english/2002/Jan/25582.htm>.

90. Clarke, *Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism in China*, p. 25 n. 42.

91. Roberts, "The Narrative of Uyghur Terrorism and the Self-Fulfilling Prophecy of Uyghur Militancy," pp. 113-115; and David S. Cloud and Ian Johnson, "In Post-9/11 World, Chinese Dissidents Pose U.S. Dilemma," *Wall Street Journal*, August 3, 2004, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB109149176842581209>.

92. See Roberts, "The Narrative of Uyghur Terrorism and the Self-Fulfilling Prophecy of Uyghur

fears of the links among Uyghurs in China, the Uyghur diaspora, and jihadist militant groups remained a theoretical possibility rather than an operational reality.<sup>93</sup>

In 2014, however, developments in Southeast Asia and the Middle East began to change these perceptions. Uyghurs had sought to enter or transit Southeast Asia from 2009 onward, but mid-2014 marked the first reports of actual contact between Uyghurs and jihadist militant groups in the region. In June 2014, five Uyghurs were arrested in the Philippines after meeting with members of the Abu Sayyaf Group and the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters;<sup>94</sup> in September, four were arrested in Indonesia attempting to train with Islamic State-affiliated militant group the Mujahideen Indonesia Timur.<sup>95</sup> PRC authorities saw these contacts in light of the recent expansion of Uyghur-involved attacks beyond the XUAR: the Tiananmen car attack, violence at Urumqi's rail station, and the March 2014 knife attack in Kunming (which China blamed on militants attempting to flee to Southeast Asia).<sup>96</sup> Moreover, Xi's new "comprehensive national security" framework, proposed in 2014, explicitly warned of the need to be on guard for these types of interlocking (external-internal) security threats.<sup>97</sup> On the heels of these domestic developments, the CCP now observed the first known cases of Uyghur militants connecting with jihadist groups in Southeast Asia.

These linkages accumulated in 2015 and 2016. In August 2015, an attack on Thailand's Erawan Shrine, thought to be in retaliation for Bangkok repatriating Uyghurs to China, resulted in twenty deaths.<sup>98</sup> Uyghurs were shot and arrested in Indonesia in November and December 2015; the December incident involved someone training to be a suicide bomber.<sup>99</sup> Some Uyghurs were

Militancy," pp. 117–118. See also a video online at the Internet Archive, [https://archive.org/details/jennet\\_ashikliri\\_10](https://archive.org/details/jennet_ashikliri_10).

93. Raffaello Pantucci, "Uyghur Terrorism in a Fractured Middle East," in Clarke, *Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism in China*, p. 162.

94. Rommel C. Banlaoi, "Uyghur Militants in Southeast Asia: Should PH Be Worried?" *Rappler*, January 7, 2016, <https://www.rappler.com/thought-leaders/118137-uyghur-militants-southeast-asia-philippines>.

95. Richard C. Paddock and Ben Otto, "Indonesia: Detainees Likely Uighurs Who Planned to Meet with Militant," *Wall Street Journal*, September 15, 2014, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/indonesia-says-detainees-are-likely-uighurs-who-sought-meeting-with-militant-1410810096>.

96. Jeremy Page and Emre Peker, "As Muslim Uighurs Flee, China Sees Jihad Risk," *Wall Street Journal*, February 1, 2015, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/as-muslim-uighurs-flee-china-sees-jihad-risk-1422666280>.

97. See "Safeguard National Security and Social Stability," in Xi Jinping, *The Governance of China* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2014), p. 234.

98. "Bangkok Bomb: Thai Court Charges Two over Erawan Blast," *BBC News*, November 24, 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-34907670>.

99. Wahyudi Soeriaatmadja, "Nabbed Indonesian Militants 'Groomed Suicide Bombers,'" *Straits*

killed fighting with the Mujahideen Indonesia Timur in March/April 2016, and others were arrested elsewhere in Indonesia in February 2017.<sup>100</sup> In short, over the course of 2014–16, the CCP observed growing involvement by Uyghurs in radical Islamist militant groups in Southeast Asia, as well as expressions of sympathy for the Uyghur cause from some of those groups.<sup>101</sup> At the foreign policy level, the Chinese government responded by pressing for extradition of arrestees and other Uyghur asylum seekers, and by increasing intelligence-sharing and law enforcement cooperation in the region.<sup>102</sup> Internally, Meng Jianzhu warned the domestic security apparatus that global terrorist activity was intensifying, implying a corresponding need for domestic vigilance.<sup>103</sup>

During a similar period, mounting evidence of Uyghur participation in militant groups in Syria heightened China's concern. The CCP saw developments in Southeast Asia and the Middle East as connected; a PRC vice minister of public security told Malaysia's foreign minister in 2015 that PRC citizens fighting with Islamic State had transited through Malaysia.<sup>104</sup> In 2015, TIP began to post videos of Uyghurs fighting in northern Syria; by mid-2016, media outlets reported that a group formerly composed of a few hundred people had swelled to thousands of fighters operating in cooperation with al-Qaida-affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra (Jabhat Fatah al-Sham).<sup>105</sup> As a result,

---

*Times*, December 25, 2015, <https://www.straitstimes.com/world/nabbed-indonesian-militants-groomed-suicide-bombers>; and Yenni Kwok, "Is There a Uighur Terrorist Buildup Taking Place in Southeast Asia?" *Time*, December 28, 2015, <http://time.com/4161906/uighur-terrorism-indonesia-thailand-islam-isis/>.

100. Ruslan Sangadji, "Uighur Militants Infiltrating Indonesia," *Jakarta Post*, March 18, 2016, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2016/03/18/uighur-militants-infiltrating-indonesia.html>; and Zachary Abuza, "The Uighurs and China's Regional Counter-Terrorism Efforts," *China Brief*, Vol. 15, No. 16 (August 2017), <https://jamestown.org/program/the-uighurs-and-chinas-regional-counter-terrorism-efforts/>.

101. Stephanie Kam Li Yee, "Uyghur Cross-Border Movement into Southeast Asia," in Clarke, *Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism in China*, pp. 173–185; and Banlaoi, "Uyghur Militants in Southeast Asia."

102. Abuza, "The Uighurs and China's Regional Counter-Terrorism Efforts"; and Mathieu Duchâtel, "China's Foreign Fighters Problem," *War on the Rocks* blog, January 25, 2019, <https://warontherocks.com/2019/01/chinas-foreign-fighters-problem/>.

103. Around the same period, the CCP was emphasizing its success in limiting attacks within the XUAR. Cai, "Meng Jianzhu."

104. Page and Peker, "As Muslim Uighurs Flee, China Sees Jihad Risk"

105. Mohanad Hage Ali, "China's Proxy War in Syria: Revealing the Role of Uighur Fighters," *Al-Arabiya*, March 2, 2016, <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/perspective/analysis/2016/03/02/China-s-proxy-war-in-Syria-Revealing-the-role-of-Uighur-fighters-.html>; Jacob Zenn, "Al-Qaeda-Aligned Central Asian Militants in Syria Separate from Islamic State-Aligned IMU in Afghanistan," *Terrorism Monitor*, Vol. 13, No. 11 (May 2015), <https://jamestown.org/program/al-qaeda-aligned-central-asian-militants-in-syria-separate-from-islamic-state-aligned-imu-in-afghanistan/>; and Caleb Weiss, "Turkistan Islamic Party Had Significant Role in Recent Idlib Offensive," *Long*



Roberts notes, the Syria-based "TIP today reflects an active Uyghur militant movement, the likes of which has not existed since the establishment of the PRC."<sup>106</sup>

Moreover, members of that movement have emphasized a long-term plan to fight in Xinjiang. While some Uyghur militants have indicated that they might settle in Syria, others have explicitly said that they seek to take their combat experience back to China. One stated, "My goal was to return to China with knowledge of how to wage war; I came not to stay in Istanbul, not to stay in Syria, but to learn weaponry and return to fight for Eastern Turkistan."<sup>107</sup> TIP videos praised the attacks in Beijing in October 2013 and Urumqi in April 2014 as a sign of Uyghur willingness to take up arms against the CCP (though it is unclear that the group actually bears responsibility for executing the incidents).<sup>108</sup> TIP leader Abdul Haq al-Turkistani said in 2016, "The soldiers of Islam must be willing to return to China to emancipate the Western province of Xinjiang from the communist invaders."<sup>109</sup> Developments in Syria, therefore, represented not just a newly active Uyghur militant movement, but one that encouraged and praised attacks in the Chinese homeland, one that expressed an intent to return and fight there, and one for which global jihadist networks, previously unconcerned with China, expressed increasing support.<sup>110</sup>

TIP's affiliation with al-Qaida is also not the only concern that the CCP has about Uyghur involvement in jihadist militancy in the Middle East. In the summer of 2017, reports surfaced of a new group, Katibat al Ghuraba al Turkistan, operating in northern Syria alongside other al-Qaida-affiliated

*War Journal*, April 30, 2015, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/04/turkistan-islamic-party-had-significant-role-recent-idlib-offensive.php>.

106. Roberts, "The Narrative of Uyghur Terrorism and the Self-Fulfilling Prophecy of Uyghur Militancy," p. 124.

107. Xinjiang is also known as East Turkestan, particularly among those who want it to exist as an independent state. Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 122. See also similar comments by Turkestan Islamic Party official Ibrahim Mansour that the group fights in Syria both to help Syrian brethren and to gain experience to fight in Xinjiang. Weiss, "Turkistan Islamic Party Had Significant Role in Recent Idlib Offensive."

108. Raffaello Pantucci, "Tiananmen Attack: Islamist Terror or Chinese Protest?" *China Brief*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (January 2014), <https://jamestown.org/program/tiananmen-attack-islamist-terror-or-chinese-protest/>; and "Militant Islamist Group Says Deadly Xinjiang Bomb Attack 'Good News,'" *Radio Free Asia*, May 15, 2014, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/attack-05152014171933.html>.

109. Uran Botobekov, "China's Nightmare: Xinjiang's Jihadists Go Global," *Diplomat*, August 17, 2016, <https://thediplomat.com/2016/08/chinas-nightmare-xinjiang-jihadists-go-global/>.

110. Brian Fishman, "Al-Qaeda and the Rise of China: Jihadi Geopolitics in a Post-Hegemonic World," *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 34, No. 3 (Summer 2011), pp. 47–62, doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2011.588091.

groups; its relationship to TIP is unclear, but it claims to be made up primarily of Uyghurs, and has focused some messaging on China and Xinjiang.<sup>111</sup> Smaller numbers of Uyghurs are also said to be fighting alongside Islamic State, which has been less hesitant than al-Qaida about its desire to target China, and which has incorporated Xinjiang into its transnational jihadist ideology. In July 2014, Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi listed China first in his litany of places where “Muslims’ rights are forcibly seized,” and exhorted his followers to take up arms on behalf of their brethren around the world and “take revenge.”<sup>112</sup> In late 2015, Islamic State killed Chinese hostage Fan Jinghui, sparking strong statements from officials and netizens in China.<sup>113</sup> In early 2017, a purported Islamic State video referred to “evil Chinese communist lackeys” and promised, “in retaliation for the tears that flow from the eyes of the oppressed, we will make your blood flow in rivers.”<sup>114</sup> Officials have expressed concern that the number of PRC nationals joining Islamic State could increase, as the organization has shown an ability to recruit non-Uyghur Muslims from China; analyst Mordechai Chaziza deems China “one of the top recruitment pools for [both Islamic State] and al-Qaeda.”<sup>115</sup>

Estimates on how many Uyghurs have traveled to the Middle East to fight vary. A Chinese-language journal article by public security researchers referred to 300 East Turkestan separatists fighting with Islamic State specifically; similar figures have appeared in Chinese media.<sup>116</sup> Western analysts have expressed skepticism at these numbers, but a 2016 analysis of Islamic State files found a record of 114 Chinese Uyghurs joining the organization between mid-

---

111. Caleb Weiss, “New Uighur Jihadist Group Emerges in Syria,” *Long War Journal*, January 18, 2018, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2018/01/new-uighur-jihadist-group-emerges-in-syria.php>.

112. Alexa Olesen, “China Sees Islamic State Inching Closer to Home,” *Foreign Policy*, August 11, 2014, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/08/11/china-sees-islamic-state-inching-closer-to-home/>. For a copy of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi’s comments, see <https://scholarship.tricolib.brynmawr.edu/bitstream/handle/10066/14241/ABB20140701.pdf>.

113. These included one from Xi Jinping. See Yuwen Wu, “IS Killing of Chinese Hostage: A Game Changer?” *BBC News*, November 19, 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-china-blog-34865696>.

114. Michael Martina and Ben Blanchard, “Uighur IS Fighters Vow Blood Will ‘Flow in Rivers’ in China,” *Reuters*, March 1, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-china/uighur-is-fighters-vow-blood-will-flow-in-rivers-in-china-idUSKBN16848H>.

115. Mordechai Chaziza, “China’s Counter-Terrorism Policy in the Middle East,” in Clarke, *Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism in China*, p. 141.

116. Li Benxian, Mei Jianming and Ling Yunxiang, “The Establishment of the National Security Council-Led China Anti-Terrorism Mechanism,” *Guoji Zhanwan* [Global Review], Autumn 2015, pp. 70–84; and Michael Martina, “About 300 Chinese Said Fighting Alongside Islamic State in Middle East,” *Reuters*, December 15, 2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-china-idUSKBN0JT0UX20141215>.

2013 and mid-2014.<sup>117</sup> Moreover, the majority of Uyghurs, including those with TIP, fight not with Islamic State but as part of the al-Nusra front.<sup>118</sup> In March 2017, Israeli intelligence estimated that there were 3,000 Uyghur fighters,<sup>119</sup> in May, Syria's ambassador to China, Imad Moustapha, placed this figure at 5,000—not including accompanying family members, who could bring the total to three or four times that many.<sup>120</sup> The Chinese special envoy for Syria, Xie Xiaoyan, said in August 2018 that there is no accurate figure, but conceded that areas in Syria and Iraq have “rather a concentration of ETIM terrorists.”<sup>121</sup>

These developments pose several threats to Chinese security interests. The most obvious is the potential for Uyghur militants to return and launch new attacks or otherwise escalate violence in Xinjiang. As early as 2012, PRC Maj. Gen. Jin Yinan warned that TIP could take advantage of the conflict in Syria to gain experience and reinvigorate the group's profile; in 2014, PRC Special Envoy Wu Sike warned that “after being immersed in extremist ideas, when they return to their home country [foreign fighters] will pose a severe challenge and security risk to those countries.”<sup>122</sup> Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan also have citizens fighting with some of the same groups in the Middle East, meaning that Uyghurs do not have to return to PRC territory to pose a threat; simply returning to Central Asia heightens the risk of cross-border collaboration that could diffuse conflict into Xinjiang and provide terrorist networks with a

117. For a skeptical analysis, see Andrew Mumford, “Theory-Testing Uyghur Terrorism in China,” *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 12, No. 5 (October 2018), pp. 18–26; Justine Drennan, “Is China Making Its Own Terrorism Problem Worse?” *Foreign Policy*, February 9, 2015, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/02/09/is-china-making-its-own-terrorism-problem-worse-uyghurs-islamic-state/>; and Nate Rosenblatt, “All Jihad Is Local: What ISIS' Files Tell Us about Its Fighters” (Washington, D.C.: New America, July 2016).

118. Gerry Shih, “China's Uighurs Grapple with Pull of Extremism,” Associated Press, December 28, 2017, <https://apnews.com/360a77319815495a842befe1fcd7f5c9>.

119. Itamar Eichner, “Israeli Report: Thousands of Chinese Jihadists Are Fighting in Syria,” *Ynet News*, March 27, 2017, <https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4941411,00.html>.

120. Ben Blanchard, “Syria Says up to 5,000 Chinese Uighurs Fighting in Militant Groups,” Reuters, May 11, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-mideast-crisis-syria-china/syria-says-up-to-5000-chinese-uyghurs-fighting-in-militant-groups-idUSKBN1840UP>. See also Colin P. Clarke and Paul Rexton Kan, “Uighur Foreign Fighters: An Underexamined Jihadist Challenge,” ICCT Policy Brief (The Hague: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, November 2017), <https://icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/ClarkeKan-Uighur-Foreign-Fighters-An-Underexamined-Jihadist-Challenge-Nov-2017-1.pdf>.

121. Ben Blanchard, “China Envoy Says No Accurate Figure on Uighurs Fighting in Syria,” Reuters, August 19, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-china/china-envoy-says-no-accurate-figure-on-uyghurs-fighting-in-syria-idUSKCN1L508G>.

122. Teddy Ng, “Xinjiang Militants Being Trained in Syria and Iraq, Says Special Chinese Envoy,” *South China Morning Post*, July 29, 2014, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/1561136/china-says-xinjiang-extremists-may-be-fighting-middle-east>; and “Mei xiang tuifan Bashaer zhengquan” [Jin Yinan: America wants to overthrow Bashar's regime], *CNR*, November 1, 2012, [http://mil.cnr.cn/jmhd/gfsk/wgf/201211/t20121101\\_511278541.html](http://mil.cnr.cn/jmhd/gfsk/wgf/201211/t20121101_511278541.html).

support base in neighboring countries. The experiences that Uyghurs gain alongside militants in Southeast Asia and the Middle East could also create more deadly tactical innovations, such as increased use of suicide bombing.<sup>123</sup> Xi Jinping referenced these concerns in internal speeches, saying, “After the United States pulls troops out of Afghanistan, terrorist organizations positioned on the frontiers of Afghanistan and Pakistan may quickly infiltrate into Central Asia . . . East Turkestan’s terrorists who have received real-war training in Syria and Afghanistan could at any time launch terrorist attacks in Xinjiang.”<sup>124</sup>

The second security threat is to Chinese personnel, facilities, and interests overseas. Uyghur involvement with transnational jihadist militancy is not a threat simply because people could return to fight in Xinjiang or conduct attacks inside China; China increasingly projects itself into other countries around the world in ways that significantly increase the country’s attack surface. Forty PRC nationals were killed in eighteen terrorist incidents worldwide from 2004 to 2016; Chinese scholars who study terrorism found nearly 4,000 Chinese companies operating in the “arc of instability” from Central Asia to the Middle East and North Africa—areas that the PRC perceives as especially vulnerable to terrorism and militancy, but that are also key to advancing PRC economic goals, such as Xi’s signature Belt and Road Initiative.<sup>125</sup> Thus, China’s expanding overseas activities and population provide a longer list of potential targets and more ways for militant groups to hold Chinese interests at risk in the future. The August 2016 car suicide bombing of the PRC embassy in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, reportedly undertaken by Uyghurs who had connections to TIP in Syria, exemplifies this risk.<sup>126</sup>

---

123. Terrone, “Propaganda in the Public Square,” p. 47; and Tschantret, “Repression, Opportunity, and Innovation.”

124. Ramzy and Buckley, “‘Absolutely No Mercy.’”

125. The Belt and Road Initiative is a global geopolitical strategy centered around Chinese investment and infrastructure development. Li, Mei, and Ling, “The Establishment of the National Security Council-Led China Anti-Terrorism Mechanism”; Liu Qingtian and Fang Jincheng, “The New Development of Terrorism and Its Influence on China,” *Guoji wenti yanjiu* [Journal of International Studies], Autumn 2015; and Mathieu Duchâtel, “Terror Overseas: Understanding China’s Evolving Counter-Terrorism Strategy,” ECFR Policy Brief (London: European Council on Foreign Relations, October 2016).

126. Catherine Putz, “3 Convicted for Chinese Embassy Attack in Bishkek,” *Diplomat*, June 30, 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/06/3-convicted-for-chinese-embassy-attack-in-bishkek/>. The Islamic State also claimed responsibility for kidnapping and killing two Chinese citizens in southwestern Pakistan in May/June 2017, though there is no evidence to date that Uyghurs were involved in this incident. Salman Masood, “Chinese Couple Abducted in Pakistan Have Been Killed, Officials Say,” *New York Times*, June 12, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/12/world/asia/pakistan-chinese-couple-killed.html>.

In short, in 2014–16, coalescence of operational ties between Uyghurs and jihadist groups in Southeast Asia and the Middle East produced what one expert called “the most significant set of shifts in China’s external terrorist threat environment since 9/11.”<sup>127</sup> These developments occurred just as Xi’s national security strategy directed the CCP to pay special attention to the interrelationship between external and internal security, and when his Belt and Road Initiative elevated the importance of stability in China’s western regions, making Xinjiang critical for achieving not just the CCP’s domestic stability objectives, but foreign policy priorities.<sup>128</sup>

Not surprisingly, then, these developments prompted changes in China’s foreign policy and security behavior abroad. The PRC increased counterterrorism-focused law enforcement cooperation; passed a counterterrorism law authorizing the People’s Liberation Army to conduct missions abroad; and increased security cooperation in the Middle East and North Africa, from counterterrorism drills with Saudi Arabia in late 2016 to senior Chinese military visits to Syria in summer 2018.<sup>129</sup> Given that the security threat that China perceived was as much internal as external, however, the CCP also pursued major changes to domestic security strategy in Xinjiang. The following section explores how threat perceptions produced the internal security strategy described above.

### *Domestic Vulnerability and Repressive Strategy*

The CCP’s shifting perceptions of threat from Uyghur participation in jihadist organizations abroad during 2014–16 led to an inflection point in the regime’s domestic security strategy in Xinjiang in early 2017. Scholarly work indicates that international developments as well as domestic threats can threaten au-

---

127. Andrew Small, “China and Counter-Terrorism: Beyond Pakistan?” in Clarke, *Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism in China*, p. 130.

128. Faisal Kidwai, “Xinjiang Rides High on Belt and Road Initiative,” *ChinaDaily*, August 8, 2018, <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201808/08/WS5b6a649ba310add14f384a0c.html>; and Yong Wang, “Offensive for Defensive: The Belt and Road Initiative and China’s New Grand Strategy,” *Pacific Review*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (July 2016), pp. 455–463, doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2016.1154690.

129. “China Steps Up ‘Military Cooperation’ with Assad as Top Admiral Visits Damascus,” *Telegraph*, August 18, 2018, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/08/18/china-steps-up-military-cooperation-with-assad-as-top-admiral-v1/>; and Michael Martina, “China Holds First Anti-Terror Drills with Saudi Arabia,” Reuters, October 27, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-saudi-security/china-holds-first-anti-terror-drills-with-saudi-arabia-idUSKCN12R0FD>. See also Zhao Jun and Hu Yu, “On China’s New Era Anti-Terrorism Governance in the Middle East,” *Yonsei Journal of International Studies*, Vol. 4 (2013), pp. 57–68; and Michael Clarke, “The Impact of Ethnic Minorities on China’s Foreign Policy: The Case of Xinjiang and the Uyghur,” *China Report*, Vol. 53, No. 1 (February 2017), pp. 1–25, doi.org/10.1177/0009445516677361.

thoritarian rule at home—and the CCP, in particular, tends to treat external and internal security threats as interrelated and to be suspicious of external actors' intent to destabilize China.<sup>130</sup> We argue that the CCP escalated repression in specific ways in early 2017 as a preventive attempt to stop the transmission of perceived security threats across state borders into China. Leaders in Beijing and Urumqi concluded that a broad swath of Xinjiang's Muslim population was more vulnerable to jihadist infiltration than previously understood—and, beginning in the spring of 2017, they pursued new internal security strategies in an attempt to prevent that possibility from materializing inside China's borders.

The new repressive strategy launched in 2017–18 sought to address this risk in several ways. Targeting diaspora networks aimed to cut off a likely vector by which terrorist threats could reenter China, while detention and re-education sought to inoculate the population from infection. The strategy shift, therefore, was a type of “diffusion-proofing” against a specific threat—jihadist terrorism—by both cutting off extremism at its supposed entry point and simultaneously immunizing the population against those ideas taking root.<sup>131</sup> In that sense, it was a form of preventive repression that targeted dissent at even earlier stages than many forms of preemptive repression studied by scholars—seeking to keep contention from emerging altogether, rather than trying to respond after it has materialized.<sup>132</sup>

---

130. There is a vast literature on the international diffusion of authoritarian breakdown. For a summary, see Edward Goldring and Sheena Chestnut Greitens, “Rethinking Democratic Diffusion: Bringing Regime Type Back In,” *Comparative Political Studies*, published ahead of print, June 16, 2019, doi.org/10.1177%2F0010414019852701. See also Sulmaan Wasif Khan, *Haunted by Chaos: China's Grand Strategy from Mao Zedong to Xi Jinping* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2018); M.E. Sarotte, “China's Fear of Contagion: Tiananmen Square and the Power of the European Example,” *International Security*, Vol. 37, No. 2 (Fall 2012), pp. 156–182, doi.org/10.1162/ISEC\_a\_00101; and Michael Clarke, “China's ‘War on Terrorism’: Confronting the Dilemmas of the ‘Internal-External’ Security Nexus,” in Clarke, *Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism in China*, pp. 17–38. More generally, see Stephen R. David, “Explaining Third World Alignment,” *World Politics*, Vol. 43, No. 2 (January 1991), pp. 233–256, doi.org/10.2307/2010472; Kurt Dassel and Eric Reinhardt, “Domestic Strife and the Initiation of Violence at Home and Abroad,” *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 43, No. 1 (January 1999), pp. 56–85, doi.org/10.2307/2991785; and Johan Eriksson and Mark Rhinard, “The Internal-External Security Nexus: Notes on an Emerging Research Agenda,” *Cooperation and Conflict*, Vol. 44, No. 3 (September 2009), pp. 243–267, doi.org/10.1177 %2F0010836709106215.

131. Karrie J. Koesel and Valerie J. Bunce, “Diffusion-Proofing: Russian and Chinese Responses to Waves of Popular Mobilizations against Authoritarian Rulers,” *Perspectives on Politics*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (September 2013), pp. 753–768, doi.org/10.1017/S1537592713002107.

132. Some of this literature conflates preventive and preemptive repression. Emily Hencken Ritter and Courtenay R. Conrad, “Preventing and Responding to Dissent: The Observational Challenges of Explaining Strategic Repression,” *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 110, No. 1 (February 2016), pp. 85–99, doi.org/10.1017/S0003055415000623; Greitens, *Dictators and Their Secret Police*; Rory Truex, “Focal Points, Dissident Calendars, and Preemptive Repression,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 63, No. 4 (April 2018), doi.org/10.1177%2F0022002718770520; and Ragnhild

A wide range of official statements, speeches, and documents—including the recently leaked speech from Xi Jinping quoted above—reveal the CCP’s growing concern that international terrorist networks might penetrate Xinjiang and inflame violence.<sup>133</sup> Chinese-language scholarship emphasizes the potential for Uyghurs’ transnational ties to provide ideological and material support, radicalize the population, and increase its capacity for violence.<sup>134</sup> A 2013 news story on one incident reported, “Rioters had internalized religious extremism spread by foreigners . . . [and were] deluded by overseas terrorist organizations who incited them to action”; it pointed particularly to extremist videos accessed via the internet and cited “collusion between hostile forces at home and abroad.” It also quoted a military researcher, saying that the “three evil forces” (terrorism, separatism, and extremism) were boosted “because some countries offered consent and support religious extremist forces.”<sup>135</sup> In 2014, Special Envoy Wu Sike referred to China as a victim of terror that had its roots in the Middle East,<sup>136</sup> and in 2017, CCP officials in both Xinjiang and Ningxia (the autonomous region of the Muslim Hui people) warned of the risk of religious extremism and jihadism infiltrating the populations of their respective provinces.<sup>137</sup> A *China Daily* editorial written after the 2017 Islamic State video that promised to make “blood flow in rivers” in China stated, “The video lends further credence to . . . the oft-ignored assertions of links between domestic and foreign terrorist elements.”<sup>138</sup> Chinese sources often express concern that Xinjiang will become “China’s Libya” or “China’s Syria,” a metaphor meant to suggest that Islamic militancy and terrorism could plunge the country into instability, even civil conflict.<sup>139</sup>

---

Nordås and Christian Davenport, “Fight the Youth: Youth Bulges and State Repression,” *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 57, No. 4 (October 2013), pp. 926–940, doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12025.

133. Ramzy and Buckley, “‘Absolutely No Mercy.’”

134. Zhang Xiuming, *Xinjiang fan fenlie douzheng he wending gongzuo de shijian yu sikao* [Analysis of counter-separatist struggle and stability work in Xinjiang] (Urumqi: Xinjiang Renmin Chubanshe, 2009); and Jeffrey Reeves, “Ideas and Influence: Scholarship as a Harbinger of Counterterrorism Institutions, Policies, and Laws in the People’s Republic of China,” *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol. 28, No. 5 (2016), pp. 827–847, doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2014.955915.

135. Xinhua, “Investigations Reveal Details of Xinjiang Terror Attack,” *China Daily*, July 6, 2013, [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2013-07/06/content\\_16741513.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2013-07/06/content_16741513.htm).

136. Bai Tiantian, “China at Risk from Syria Spillover,” *Global Times*, July 29, 2014, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/873090.shtml>.

137. Gerry Shih, “Chinese Officials Express Jitters over Jihad Threat,” *Times of Israel*, March 13, 2017, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/chinese-officials-express-jitters-over-jihadi-threat/>; and Philip Wen, “Fellow Uighurs Should Beware of ‘Two-Faced’ People in Separatism Fight, Official Says,” Reuters, April 10, 2017, <https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2017-04-10/fellow-uighurs-should-beware-of-two-faced-people-in-separatism-fight-official-says>.

138. Martina and Blanchard, “Uighur IS Fighters Vow Blood Will ‘Flow in Rivers’ in China.”

139. “Protecting Peace, Stability Is Top of Human Rights Agenda for Xinjiang,” *Global Times*, August 18, 2018, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1115022.shtml>.

Rhetoric from China's top security officials has consistently focused on disrupting connections between international and domestic actors to prevent terrorist attacks. Meng Jianzhu, PRC minister of public security (2007–12) and head of the Central Political-Legal Affairs Commission (2012–17), characterized the 2009 violence in Urumqi as the work of domestic and international separatists and terrorists, framing the threat as a transnational one.<sup>140</sup> In 2013, Meng began to call for increased preventive counterterrorism work, in keeping with broader shifts toward preventive social management under Xi's leadership.<sup>141</sup> In a 2015 meeting of the Central Political-Legal Affairs Commission and the National Counterterrorism Leading Small Group, he emphasized the international roots of terrorist violence in China, and proposed increased border security to prevent terrorists from entering China from abroad, as well as proposing that the CCP intensify its management of religious affairs to prevent religious extremism from taking root.<sup>142</sup>

Chen Quanguo provided an encapsulation of CCP thinking in 2017, when he outlined six principles for fighting terrorism in Xinjiang.<sup>143</sup> His remarks characterized prevention as central; he specified that this included preventing both "returns from abroad" and "weapons inflows." Chen further highlighted the need to prevent collaboration between international and domestic terrorists (and between domestic terrorists across regions), both in person and on-

140. Over time, Meng used the term "separatist" less and "terrorist" more. "Zhongguo gong'anbu buzhang Meng Jianzhu dao Wulumuqi weiwengong'an tejing" [China's Minister of Public Security Meng Jianzhu visits Urumqi to encourage public security special forces], *China News*, July 8, 2009, [http://news.china.com.cn/txt/2009-07/08/content\\_18096000.htm](http://news.china.com.cn/txt/2009-07/08/content_18096000.htm); "Meng Jianzhu qianfa weiwexin weiwengong'an tejing" [Meng Jianzhu sends a letter to the XUAR police to encourage them] (Beijing: Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China, February 3, 2010), [http://www.gov.cn/ldhd/2010-02/03/content\\_1527048.htm](http://www.gov.cn/ldhd/2010-02/03/content_1527048.htm); and "Meng Jianzhu zai Wushi chuxi Xinjiang wujing budui fankong weiwengong'an tejing" [Meng Jianzhu participates in the armed police rally for counter-terrorism and social stability] (Beijing: Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China, June 30, 2013), [http://www.gov.cn/gzdt/2013-06/30/content\\_2437296.htm](http://www.gov.cn/gzdt/2013-06/30/content_2437296.htm).

141. Diana Fu and Gred Distelhorst, "Grassroots Participation and Repression under Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping," *China Journal*, Vol. 79 (January 2018), pp. 111–113, doi.org/10.1086/694299; "Meng Jianzhu zai Wushi chuxi Xinjiang wujing budui fankong weiwengong'an tejing"; and "Meng Jianzhu, Guo Shengkun zai Xinjiang jiancha zhidao fankong weiwengong'an tejing" [Meng Jianzhu and Guo Shengkun direct counter-terrorism and stability activities in XUAR] (Beijing: Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China, July 1, 2013), [http://www.gov.cn/ldhd/2013-07/01/content\\_2437549.htm](http://www.gov.cn/ldhd/2013-07/01/content_2437549.htm).

142. Note that the CCP's conception of "extremism" includes aspects of Islamic religious practice that are not linked directly to violence. Cai, "Meng Jianzhu."

143. "Xinjiang Weiwu'er zizhiqū dangwei changwei (kuoda) huiyi chuanda xuexi Meng Jianzhu zai Xinjiang diaoyan shi de jianghua jingshen—Chen Quanguo Zhuchi" [The Xinjiang Autonomous Region's Party Standing Committee (enlarged) conference carried forward the study of the spirit of Meng Jianzhu's speech during his investigation of Xinjiang—Chen Quanguo], *Xinjiang Daily*, August 30, 2017, <http://cpc.people.com.cn/n1/2017/0830/c117005-29504540.html>.



line. Finally, he emphasized digitization of public security, which has been used to amass intelligence on China's Muslim minorities and their links abroad, as well to apply predictive policing to counterterrorism.<sup>144</sup> Chen's speech provides insight into how PRC public security organizations combat the perceived risk of terrorist infiltration of Muslim populations on an operational level: one of the mobile applications used for surveillance in Xinjiang, for example, flags individual "returns from abroad" and prompts a security investigation.<sup>145</sup>

A subset of this work focuses on reducing online contact between China's Muslims and transnational jihadists. The XUAR Informatization Promotion Regulations, passed in 2009 and amended in 2014, explicitly aim to stop flows of online jihadist content into the region.<sup>146</sup> Regulations that tightened authorities' control over online religious content were justified in terms of "fend[ing] off foreign influences" and "combat[ing] extremism" by "banning religious-involved separatist activities and any practice that stirs religious conflict among citizens."<sup>147</sup> Revisions made in 2017 by the State Council were explained with reference to their anti-extremism function, and said to be especially important "to deal with newly emerging situations or problems," suggesting that recent developments were behind the policy changes.<sup>148</sup>

The rise of this approach was based on the CCP's growing belief that China's Muslim population was more vulnerable to foreign jihadists than previous assessments had indicated. PRC leaders became convinced that Xinjiang was threatened, not just by a handful of foreign-backed separatists, but by the thinking of large percentages of certain ethnic minorities. In late 2015, references to "infection" in people's thinking began to appear in discussions of

144. For example, the chief engineer of one of the companies involved in Xinjiang's Integrated Joint Operations Platform was quoted as saying, "It's very crucial to examine the cause after an act of terror. But what is more important is to predict the upcoming activities." Shai Oster, "China Tries Its Hand at Pre-Crime," *Bloomberg*, March 3, 2016, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2016-03-03/china-tries-its-hand-at-pre-crime>. See also HRW, "China: Big Data Fuels Crackdown in Minority Region" (New York: HRW, February 26, 2018), <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/02/26/china-big-data-fuels-crackdown-minority-region>.

145. HRW, *China's Algorithms of Repression: Reverse Engineering a Xinjiang Police Mass Surveillance App* (New York: HRW, May 2019).

146. Julia Famularo, "Fighting the Enemy with Fists and Daggers': The Chinese Communist Party's Counter-Terrorism Policy in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region," in Clarke, *Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism in China*, pp. 50–53.

147. Yang Sheng, "China's Revised Regulations on Religion Fend Off Foreign Influences," *Global Times*, September 11, 2017, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1065935.shtml>.

148. Cui Jia, "State Council Amends Rules Governing Religion," *China Daily*, September 8, 2017, [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2017-09/08/content\\_31717459.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2017-09/08/content_31717459.htm). See also "China Tightens Controls on Religious Activity, Targets Ethnic Groups," *Radio Free Asia*, September 14, 2017, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/china/religion-crackdown-09142017155745.html/>.

Xinjiang. The party secretary of the region's Justice Department, Zhang Yun, explained that approximately 30 percent of Xinjiang's population had been infected by religious extremism, and proposed that re-education would "get a grip on the origin [of extremism] and put an emphasis on the 30% who have been affected by extremist religious views"; thereby removing pressure to "strike hard" later.<sup>149</sup> In early 2016, Li Xiaoxia, a Xinjiang sociologist, estimated the number of people contaminated by extremism at around 20 percent.<sup>150</sup> These figures track fairly closely with estimates of the percentage of the population detained for re-education.

Official discourse on Xinjiang has often employed medical metaphors to evoke a sense of preventive urgency. Officials from Xi Jinping down to the county level have compared extremism to both cancer and infectious disease, and frame detention and re-education as necessary interventions to preempt serious health crises for patients at risk.<sup>151</sup> A university work team sent to identify targets in a village for re-education described its work as finding "tumors" that needed to be eradicated, presumably before they could metastasize and grow.<sup>152</sup> A party document from Hotan, in southern Xinjiang, stated that "anyone infected with an ideological virus must be swiftly sent for 'residential care' of transformation-through-education classes before illness arises."<sup>153</sup> An October 2017 speech distributed to the Xinjiang Communist Youth League embraced the medical metaphor's preventive logic in detail: "If we do not eradicate religious extremism at its roots, violent terrorist incidents will grow and spread all over like an incurable malignant tumor. Although a certain number of people who have been indoctrinated with extremist ideology have not committed any crimes, they are already infected by the disease. There is always a risk that the illness will manifest itself at any moment, which would cause serious harm to the public. That is why they must be admitted to a re-education

---

149. Chen Fang, "Xinjiang qu jiduanhua diaocha" [Investigating extremism in Xinjiang], *Fenghuang zixun*, October 12, 2015, <http://news.ifeng.com/mainland/special/xjqjdh/>. See also Chinese Human Rights Defenders, "China: Massive Numbers of Uyghurs and Other Ethnic Minorities Forced into Re-education Programs."

150. Li Xiaoxia, "Xinjiang zongjiao jiduan sixiang chuanbo tedian ji diyu zhengce fenxi" [Analysis of the special characteristics of transmission of religious extremism in Xinjiang and a resistance policy], *Minzu shehui xue tongxun* [Studies of Ethnic Societies], No. 213 (August 2016), [http://www.shehui.pku.edu.cn/upload/editor/file/20180829/20180829124750\\_8488.pdf](http://www.shehui.pku.edu.cn/upload/editor/file/20180829/20180829124750_8488.pdf).

151. Ramzy and Buckley, "Absolutely No Mercy."

152. Ben Dooley, "'Eradicate the Tumors': Chinese Civilians Drive Xinjiang Crackdown on Separatism," *Agence France-Presse*, April 26, 2018, <https://www.afp.com/en/eradicate-tumours-chinese-civilians-drive-xinjiang-crackdown>.

153. Chris Buckley, "China Is Detaining Muslims in Vast Numbers. The Goal: 'Transformation,'" *New York Times*, September 8, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/08/world/asia/china-uyghur-muslim-detention-camp.html>.

hospital in time to treat and cleanse the virus from their brain and restore their normal mind.<sup>154</sup> These were not just rhetorical flourishes for an external audience. Internal CCP documents employed the same language, warning that “violent terrorist acts will multiply like cancer cells” if religious extremist thought itself was not rooted out of people’s minds.<sup>155</sup>

The CCP explains re-education as deep preventive counterterrorism work to internal and external audiences. It calls extremism the ideological foundation of terrorism, implying that the only truly effective form of prevention is altering people’s thinking. XUAR officials warn that “as long as extremism exists, terrorism will spread like cancer,”<sup>156</sup> echoing Xi’s 2014 assertion that extremist religious ideology lay behind “a series of violent terrorist incidents from Bachu [in Kashgar] to Shanshan [in Turpan] and from Kunming to Urumqi.”<sup>157</sup> The objective of prevention is therefore easily linked to the tool of re-education; Meng Jianzhu referred to it as creating “a healthy heart attitude.”<sup>158</sup> At a February 2019 conference for foreign diplomats in Beijing, Deputy Foreign Minister Zhang Hanhui and XUAR Deputy Governor Erkin Tuniyaz referred to detention as “preventive counter-terrorism and de-extremism work.”<sup>159</sup> The Youth League recording quoted above defended re-education as preventive and actually lifesaving: “Going into a re-education hospital for treatment is not a way of forcibly arresting people and locking them up for punishment; it is an act that is part of a comprehensive rescue mission to save them.”<sup>160</sup> If extrem-

154. Quoted in James Millward, “‘Reeducating’ Xinjiang’s Muslims,” *New York Review of Books*, February 7, 2019, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2019/02/07/reeducating-xinjiangs-muslims/>.

155. “Dao jiaoyu zhuanhua ban xuexi shi dui sixiang shang huan bing qunzhong de yici mianfei zhuyuan zhi” [Going to the Transformation-through-Education class is a free hospitalization for ideologically ill people], *Hetian lingjuli*, April 10, 2017, <https://read01.com/BL28Bk.html#.XFOZC88zY0Q>.

156. See the quote from Nayim Yessen, director of the Standing Committee of the regional legislative body that passed Xinjiang’s 2017 Regulation on De-extremification, in Mao Weihua and Cui Jia, “New Xinjiang Regulation Aims to Prevent Extremism,” *China Daily*, March 31, 2017, [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2017-03/31/content\\_28747922.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2017-03/31/content_28747922.htm).

157. Quoted in Famularo, “Fighting the Enemy with Fists and Daggers,” p. 47.

158. Mao and Cui, “New Xinjiang Regulation Aims to Prevent Extremism”; PRC Supreme Court, “Meng Jianzhu: Kaichuang Xinjiang shehui wending he changzhi jiu’an xin jumian” [Meng Jianzhu: Creating a new phase of Xinjiang’s social stability and permanent order], August 28, 2017, cited in Adrian Zenz, “Thoroughly Reforming Them toward a Healthy Heart Attitude: China’s Political Re-education Campaign in Xinjiang,” *Central Asian Survey*, Vol. 38, No. 1 (2019), pp. 102–128, doi.org/10.1080/02634937.2018.1507997; and “Zhuanfang Xinjiang zhengfa wei shuji jianjue dadiao jiduan shili muhou heishou” [Wipe out the extremists behind forces], *Tianshanwang*, October 15, 2015, [http://www.china.com.cn/news/2015-10/15/content\\_36814937\\_2.htm](http://www.china.com.cn/news/2015-10/15/content_36814937_2.htm).

159. Reuters, “China Says ‘Preventive’ Work in Xinjiang Detention Camp Should Be Applauded,” *Guardian*, February 24, 2019, <https://amp.theguardian.com/world/2019/feb/24/china-says-preventive-work-in-xinjiang-detention-camps-should-be-applauded>.

160. Millward, “‘Reeducating’ Xinjiang’s Muslims.”

ism or terrorist inclination is a disease, then re-education is the immunization that protects patients, and the entire body politic, from future infection.

In short, around 2015–16, just as the CCP observed new evidence of Uyghur participation in Islamic militant groups abroad, it also concluded that as much as a third of Xinjiang's population was vulnerable to extremist influence; that it was imperative to preventively re-educate a much broader swath of that population than previously believed; and that this must be done before extremist infection could manifest in terrorist symptoms. This precipitated the deployment of wide-scale involuntary detention, shifting the CCP from selective to collective repression and differentiating Xinjiang from other minority regions. XUAR officials appear to embrace the shift toward collective targeting; one Kashgar-based police chief recalled being told by a party official, "You can't uproot all the weeds hidden among the crops one by one—you need to spray chemicals to kill them all. Re-educating these people is like spraying chemicals on the crops. That's why it is a general re-education, not limited to a few people."<sup>161</sup>

Perceptions of widespread domestic vulnerability also explain the CCP's intense focus on re-education. Officials concluded that existing policies focused on degrading citizens' capacity for terrorism were inadequate; they needed additional policies aimed at addressing the root causes of the propensity for extremism and terrorist violence—a goal that could be achieved only through intensive, longer-term re-education of a large number of Xinjiang's inhabitants.<sup>162</sup> Mass re-education as preventive counterterrorism policy, therefore, securitizes large areas of cultural, religious, and educational life in Xinjiang, because these are seen as underlying causes of behavior that threatens China's security.<sup>163</sup> Defining religious and cultural practice as a security threat helps explain the turn to collective targeting, mass detention, and dilution of minority culture that accompanies re-education, as well as the extension of these policies to diaspora communities where Uyghur culture can reside and survive abroad. Heightened perceptions of domestic vulnerability to infiltration by a newly coalescing external threat, then, explain the 2017–18 shift to collective repression, re-education, and targeting of diaspora networks and online contacts—perceived as vectors of potential terrorist infection.

---

161. Shohret Hoshur et al., "Chinese Authorities Jail Four Wealthiest Uyghurs in Xinjiang's Kashgar in New Purge," *Radio Free Asia*, January 5, 2018, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/wealthiest-01052018144327.html>.

162. Leibold, "The Spectre of Insecurity." We discuss the implications of this capacity/willingness distinction in the conclusion.

163. Yuhua Wang and Carl Minzner, "China's Security State," *China Quarterly*, Vol. 222 (June 2015), pp. 339–359, [doi.org/10.1017/S0305741015000430](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741015000430).

## Conclusion

In early 2017, the CCP changed its domestic security strategy in Xinjiang. In addition to existing policies of securitization and surveillance, authorities escalated the use of mass detention, ideological re-education, and pressure on Uyghur diaspora networks. Common explanations (contentious politics, minority policy, and regional leadership) are helpful, but incomplete. We have argued that changing perceptions of China's international security environment, and related perceptions of vulnerability on the domestic security front, significantly contributed to the CCP's adoption of a new internal security strategy in Xinjiang. Specifically, new policies appear to have been catalyzed by perceptions of an increased threat from Uyghur participation in transnational Islamic militant groups in Southeast Asia and the Middle East—a threat that shifted from potential to operational in 2014–16 and accompanied a revised assessment of heightened domestic vulnerability to infiltration among China's Muslim population. The CCP concluded that it needed to block diffusion of terrorism into China and preventively inoculate its population from infection by extremist and terrorist networks, which explains the early 2017 timing, shift from selective to collective repression, emphasis on re-education, and pressure applied to Xinjiang's transnational ethnic (Uyghur) and religious (Muslim) networks. It also helps explain why Xinjiang experienced a marked change in domestic security strategy whereas other regions, such as Tibet, did not.

The CCP's changing perceptions of internal vulnerability to an evolving transnational terrorist threat shaped repressive strategy in Xinjiang. As noted above, Beijing may have misperceived the threat, it may invoke the threat instrumentally, and its new strategy may well be counterproductive. Even if this is true, however, our findings have important theoretical and practical implications.

Theoretically, we contribute to the field's understanding of authoritarianism and preventive repression. The CCP has used two approaches to policing in Xinjiang, both aimed at identifying and eradicating dissent before it translates into oppositional public behavior: (1) surveillance-intensive, intelligence-based policing; and (2) detention-based re-education. Both forms of repression are preventive, and while they are complementary in many respects, they work via different pathways. Intelligence-based and technology-based policing seeks to target and preempt citizens' capacity to challenge the party-state, while re-education and "transformation through education" target their willingness to do so.<sup>164</sup> Re-education, therefore, should be incorporated into dis-

---

164. On capacity versus willingness, see Davenport, "State Repression and Political Order." On

cussions of authoritarian survival (perhaps in a comparative framework with other forms of legitimation) and preventive repression. This would be particularly useful because some work on preventive repression assumes that its advantage lies in its selective and covert nature, which can minimize potential blowback. China's strategy in Xinjiang highlights conditions under which preventive repression is not necessarily more selective or covert, and instead produces higher, more visible repression. There are many questions here that future research could explore more systematically.

Our analysis also has implications for foreign policy related to Xinjiang and to various countries' relations with the PRC. We conclude that perceptions of terrorist threat have shaped CCP behavior in Xinjiang, an argument that many analysts have been reluctant to embrace. China's threat perceptions may be inaccurate, and/or its public rhetoric may be instrumental, but our analysis suggests that those who seek to alter China's treatment of its Uyghur citizens may be more effective if they approach that behavior as grounded in counterterrorism policy, rather than framing objections on human rights grounds.

At the same time, China's linking of international terrorism with policies of domestic repression poses an operational conundrum for countries that seek to collaborate with China on common terrorist threats. Mass internment of Chinese Muslims will likely make it harder, not easier, for countries to justify and craft law enforcement and counterterrorism cooperation with the PRC. (Turkey's criticism of China's treatment of the Uyghurs is a recent example.<sup>165</sup>) At the same time, however, if cutting off counterterrorism cooperation with China increases their own terrorist risk, countries that collaborate with China on these efforts will face significant and potentially difficult trade-offs; this may be why countries that conduct significant counterterrorism cooperation with China were largely absent from the letters that adopted a public stance on Xinjiang.<sup>166</sup> Policymakers who want those countries to act differently will have to recognize the trade-offs that their governments face, and craft solutions that realistically address their security challenges.

---

preventive repression, see Ritter and Conrad, "Preventing and Responding to Dissent"; Greitens, *Dictators and Their Secret Police*; Truex, "Focal Points, Dissident Calendars, and Pre-Emptive Repression"; and Christopher M. Sullivan, "Undermining Resistance: Mobilization, Repression, and the Enforcement of Political Order," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 60, No. 7 (October 2016), pp. 1163–1190, doi.org/10.1177%2F0022002714567951. For a similar discussion on terrorism framed in terms of supply-side and demand-side approaches, see Max Abrahms, "What Terrorists Really Want: Terrorist Motives and Counterterrorism Strategy," *International Security*, Vol. 32, No. 4 (Spring 2008), pp. 78–105, doi.org/10.1162/isec.2008.32.4.78.

165. Duchâtel, "China's Foreign Fighters Problem."

166. Putz, "Which Countries Are For or Against China's Xinjiang Policies?"

More broadly, examining external sources of China's domestic security policies in Xinjiang reinforces the analytical leverage and potential policy traction that scholars can gain by viewing CCP behavior not just through the lens of a repressive party-state, but as the behavior of a state that, despite its growing power, is simultaneously insecure at home and abroad, and that sees these insecurities as deeply interrelated.<sup>167</sup> Even insecurities that appear primarily domestic may have significant origins in China's changing role on the world stage.

---

167. Susan L. Shirk, *China: Fragile Superpower: How China's Internal Politics Could Derail Its Peaceful Rise* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).