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Terrorism in Xinjiang?

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ABSTRACT China rarely evokes images of radical Islam, bus bombings and mosque razings. Yet all of these elements have had a distinct impact on life in China's north-western province, Xinjiang. While the Chinese government has emphasized Islamic extremism and acts of terror to convince international actors that it is confronted with an international terrorist movement, human rights organizations have pointed out the high level of dissatisfaction pervasive among Xinjiang's Uighur population. The desperation among Uighurs in Xinjiang has spawned a significant terrorist movement. Were the numerous grievances of the Uighurs addressed by Beijing, the movement would lose its limited popular support, which is currently on the rise.

Introduction

China rarely evokes images of radical Islam, bus bombings, and mosque razings. Yet all of these elements have had a distinct impact on life in the north-western province of Xinjiang. Since 1989, the territory has been rocked by protests, occasional rioting and even terrorist attacks, which Beijing claims are perpetrated by Islamist extremists belonging to the region's sizable Muslim Uighur population.

The potential for instability emanating from Xinjiang is high on the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP's) list of priorities. Indeed, as confidential papers detail, Beijing considers the province the greatest threat among the country's problem regions (Nathan & Gilley, 2003, p. 247). Luo Gan, Secretary of the Central Politics and Law Committee recently "warned of a new crackdown on 'separatism' in the region, telling officials to 'be prepared for danger'" (BBC News, 2005). Xinjiang's proximity to the unstable Central Asian republics as well as the fact that the "multiple ethnicities and fractures among the Uighur population are compounded by the greater recourse to violence as a form of protest" (Nathan & Gilley, 2003, p. 248) create a serious security threat for China. Beijing's interest in Xinjiang also stems largely from the province's potential to serve as a critical transit route for Central Asian energy sources and trade, essential for further spurring domestic economic growth.

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In seeking to create a stable environment for foreign investment and secure its borders, the CCP has launched a variety of initiatives against “separatists” and “radical Islamists”, most notably the Strike Hard campaign. Especially in the wake of 9/11, China has attempted to link these individuals to a wider network of Islamic extremists, hoping to convince other states that it is confronted with an international terrorist movement and justify its treatment of Muslims and the Uighur population in particular. However, human rights groups denounce the harsh methods used against accused terrorists, including collective punishment, lack of due process and quick executions. Moreover, they contend that years of repressive Chinese policies underlie much of the discontent and violence seen in Xinjiang today.

We will provide a brief history of the Uighur–Chinese conflict in Xinjiang, then examine several incidents of violence that the Chinese government characterizes as Islamist terrorism. This will illustrate the complexities of the situation and better elucidate the nature of Uighur resistance. In referring to terrorism, we will use Bruce Hoffman’s definition: “The deliberate creation and exploitation of fear through violence or the threat of violence in the pursuit of political change” (Hoffman, 1998, p. 43).

We also draw upon theories of conflict analysis to demonstrate that the problem of political violence in Xinjiang is a lasting one. Current CCP policies have temporarily halted further attacks. However, they have failed to undermine, and have even increased, popular support for independence or autonomy and, to some extent, violent means of expression. For example, in September 2005 (the 50th anniversary of Xinjiang’s incorporation into China), the East Turkestan Liberation Organization warned via video that it would use all means possible to launch an armed struggle against China (BBC News, 2005).

Ending this conflict requires more than simply revising CCP policies or granting greater local administrative autonomy to Uighurs. A genuine resolution to the conflict will only emerge if the CCP recognizes that Uighur discontent is rooted in nationalist sentiment aimed at preserving ethnic identity and territorial integrity, rather than supporting independence and international Islamist violence. While these measures are important, a lasting resolution requires sustained political engagement between moderate Uighur leadership and the CCP. Towards this end, we detail policy prescriptions for relevant local, regional and international actors, while acknowledging the sizable political hurdles that must be faced. Without greater dialogue and support for moderate leaders, extremists will continue to gain support in Xinjiang and abroad, endangering provincial development and further escalating the violence.

Background

History

Even the name Xinjiang denotes different perspectives on the region’s history and politics; it translates from Chinese as “New Frontier”, whereas for the Uighurs it is part of their ancestral homeland of Turkestan. Currently, the region comprises 18% of modern China’s territory. Moreover, since the 1st century BC, it has been considered a geopolitically strategic area. Xinjiang has had an extremely bloody and tumultuous history, which included rule by the Huns, the Uzbek Confederation, the Tibetans, the Uighurs, the Arabs and the Mongols, as well as six invasions by the Chinese (who

have controlled the territory for roughly 500 out of the last 2000 years) (Tyler, 2003, p. 268).

The region was finally established as a Chinese province in 1881, but remained essentially independent until the Chinese Communists gained control there in 1949. In 1955, the region, which was then 74% Uighur, became the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR), and included within it autonomous areas for the Hui, Kazakh, Kyrgyz and Mongol minority groups. During the following decades, the forced and voluntary migrations of the nationally dominant Han ethnic group have caused the demographic balance in the region to shift dramatically. Hans now comprise almost half of the population in the XUAR (as opposed to 6% in 1949). More recently, Hans have been migrating there by choice, in response to economic opportunities and other incentives offered by the government (Encyclopedia.com, 2002). However, the eight million Uighurs, Kazakhs and Kyrgyz in the region still constitute the world's fourth largest concentration of Turkic peoples (Fuller & Starr, 20003) p. 11).

The Separatist Movement

The origins of the modern separatist movement can be traced to the establishment of the East Turkistan Republic (ETR) from 1944 to 1949 in the Ili region of Xinjiang. The leaders, who were supported by the Soviet Union, promoted democratic, antifascist and pan-Turkic ideals (Rudelson, 1997, p. 29). The Republic's establishment was contested by the Kuomintang (KMT), and pitched battles were fought until a 1945 agreement was brokered by the Soviet Union. While the deal specified joint ETR-KMT rule, the Republic was pretty much left to run Xinjiang.

In 1949, Chinese Communist forces occupied the region, facing only sporadic resistance. In addition, Mao Zedong capitalized on lingering Uighur animosity towards the Nationalists. In return for their support, Mao had promised as far back as 1931 that regions such as Tibet and Xinjiang would be allowed to secede and form independent states. Following the KMT flight to Taiwan, the Uighurs reminded the CCP provincial governor of this, but Mao's response was to summarily reject the request. Xinjiang was fully integrated into the PRC in 1955 (*The Economist*, 2001). The separatist movement started soon afterwards, with the Uighur leadership fleeing to Turkey while several other separatist groups went to Almaty, Kazakhstan. Opposition movements still exist in both places (Human Rights Watch, 2000).

From the mid-1950s to Deng Xiaoping's rise to power in the early 1980s, Beijing imposed steadily more restrictive measures on religious and cultural expression in Xinjiang. Initially, Chinese policy towards Muslims in the province was relatively liberal. However, the Great Leap Forward "was accompanied by a more assimilationist cultural thrust, political attacks on Xinjiang natives associated with the former ETR and Soviet Union, and an upsurge in Han in-migration and settlement in northern Xinjiang" (Millward, 2004). The restrictions reached a high point during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), when Islam and other forms of religious worship were effectively outlawed. Mosques were closed and occasionally used as pork warehouses. Imams were also imprisoned, and Uighur families were forced to rear pigs (Human Rights Watch, 2000).

During this time, however, widespread tensions and violence erupted in Xinjiang between Han Chinese factions. Notable among the combatants was the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (the "Corps"). Established by Beijing in the 1950s, it

served to funnel demobilized soldiers towards work in construction and development projects in “pioneer” areas in Xinjiang, which is rich in mineral, oil and natural gas deposits. During the civil strife of 1967–1968, it worked alongside—but independent from—the People’s Liberation Army in securing the Xinjiang border and suppressing riots. The Corps eventually took on other quasi-military functions, such as administering the regional prisons and labor camps (Human Rights Watch, 2000). Organizationally, it reported directly to the State Council, China’s cabinet, bypassing the predominantly Muslim local administrations (Becquelin, 2000, p. 80). Beijing channelled increasing amounts of development funding and administrative authority to the Corps, and critically, the PRC has used it in the “Hanification” of Xinjiang. For example, the Corps (now called the Xinjiang New Construction Corporation) controls 48% of the province’s land—including 30% of the arable land—and has a membership that is 90% Han (Becquelin, 2000, p. 78). While in the 1950s the Corps numbered around 100 000 members, it has expanded to above 2.4 million, fully one-third of Han Chinese living in Xinjiang today. With its economic and military roles, the Corps serves as “a bastion of Beijing’s security preparedness in the region” (Human Rights Watch, 2000).

The expansion of the Corps reflected and fuelled larger demographic and economic changes in Xinjiang, particularly after the great reforms conducted under Deng in the 1980s. Through Beijing’s voluntary incentives and involuntary migration, the Han Chinese swelled from 6.7% of the total population in 1949 to around 40% today (seven million out of 18.5 million total inhabitants). Figures vary, but rapid development in Xinjiang has increased per capita income to between 12th and 15th among China’s 31 provinces, the highest outside of the favoured coastal and southeast regions (Fuller & Starr, 2003, p. 4; Mackerras, 2005). Moreover, literacy and school completion at all levels are above the national average (Fuller & Starr, 20002, p. 4).

However, the distribution of economic benefits somewhat undercuts this picture. The majority of development projects are directed towards the mostly Han northern and central regions rather than the southern, Uighur-majority areas, contrary to state policy. This divide is reflected in the workforce breakdown. In 1982, Uighur and other minority groups constituted around 52.8% of the total population and 69.4% of the agricultural workforce. Currently, they represent around 54% of the population, but account for more than 76% of agricultural workers. The breakdown in higher paying, white-collar employment also evinces some preferences for Hans, with minorities making up only 41% of liberal and technical professionals and less than 30% of managers and administrators (Castets, 2a003). As an example, those involved in the development of energy wealth are primarily Han while most profits from these ventures go straight to Beijing (Fuller & Starr, 2003, p. 6). These economic disadvantages have also translated into higher infant mortality rates among minorities. Rudelson also points out that the disproportionate presence of HIV/AIDS in the Uighur population and widespread heroin addiction greatly contributed to crime and social disruption as much as anti-PRC feelings (Rudelson, 2003, pp. 8–9). In addition, the language and content of education in Xinjiang strongly favours the Hans (Fuller & Starr, 2003, p. 6).

Despite this, Deng’s reforms allowed a measure of social liberalization as well, and Uighurs experienced a cultural and religious revival. Many young people travelled to other countries, often to attend tuition-free *madrassas* (Islamic schools), which will be discussed later. Mosques were renovated or newly built, and student groups were established in the provincial universities to promote Uighur cultural identity and practices.

However, “as in China itself, this relaxation may have encouraged an airing of grievances, and a wave of student demonstrations occurred in Xinjiang in the 1980s” (Millward, 2004, p. 8). Much like their Han counterparts, Uighur youth were protesting for democratic rights, although their message also focused on ethnic nationalism and unity. Consequently, since 1989, nationalist protest demonstrations and bombings have been common occurrences in Xinjiang (Shanor & Shanaor, 1995, p. 232).

Contemporary Chinese Policy

Like Deng, the Jiang and now Hu regimes placed economic development as a top priority for the Chinese domestic and foreign agendas, consequently pursuing a common approach towards ethnic relations, social policy, and economics in Xinjiang. Of paramount importance is Xinjiang’s capacity as a secure energy and trade route to Central Asia and potentially the Middle East. Currently, despite China’s impressive growth of around 8.5% annually, unemployment, labour unrest, and an increasing income disparity between the interior and coastal regions necessitate further foreign and domestic investment to create new jobs and develop emerging industries (Zweig & Bi, 2005, p. 25). Reliable energy supplies are critical to this, especially in powering the manufacturing industries, while shortages have already restricted production and efficiency. Just outside of Xinjiang, Beijing has worked out agreements with Russia and the Central Asian republics to assist in developing their oil and natural gas production capacity. A stable Xinjiang—with improved infrastructure, transportation facilities and perhaps even a pipeline—would be a vital link between China and energy markets with relatively less penetration by American and European firms. Trade in manufactured goods in the other direction cannot be discounted either, and strengthening Central Asian relations can be seen as a push to offset Russian and American interests in that region. One effort to collaborate more closely with neighbours was the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which includes China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, and was originally founded in 1996 (as the “Shanghai Five”) to address border delimitation issues.

In addition, this economic unrest is closely related to PRC concerns over regime stability, as the recent Chinese governments, in gradually abandoning communist ideology, have instead pegged their reputation and legitimacy on their ability to create financial prosperity without political liberalization. As David Zweig and Bi Jianhai state, “Beijing’s access to foreign resources is necessary both for continued economic growth and, because growth is the cornerstone of China’s social stability, for the survival of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)” (Zweig & Bi, 2005, pp. 25–26). And, as another analyst puts it:

To be fair to the Chinese government, Xinjiang has a greater potential than all other regions of China to cause upheaval. [...] In Beijing’s view, instability in Xinjiang could bring instability to Tibet, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. (Rudelson, 2003)

As Roland Paris puts it, “the process of political and economic liberalization is inherently tumultuous and disruptive”, with the potential to unleash highly disruptive, even violent, side effects which could easily jeopardize development efforts (Paris, 2004, p. ix). Beijing sees a domino effect from challenges to state authority, potentially leading to multi-provincial unrest. Consequently, stability in Xinjiang is an integral part

of government calculations on economic development, maintaining political legitimacy, and increasing international engagement and stature.

Because of these international goals and domestic fears, the years following Deng's reforms saw a reversion to strict state controls on Islam and Uighur cultural movements. In September 1990, the regional government declared martial law and enacted the Regulations for Religious Personnel and Regulations on Religious Activities, restricting religious activities that threatened the status quo (Dillon, 2004, p. 73). Many mosques were shut down and all imams were required to write letters to the government pledging their loyalty (Dillon, 2004, p. 73). In March 1996, the Politburo Standing Committee outlined policies for Xinjiang in Document No. 7, which included intensified controls over religious activities, the reinforcement of military and security preparedness, and closer collaboration with China's neighbours to counter US-led efforts inside China and abroad to destabilize the region (Human Rights Watch, 2000).

A month later, Beijing launched the "Strike Hard" campaign to address crime and state-perceived terrorism in Xinjiang. It was also "quite clearly directed against unofficial political organizations and in particular separatist activists in Tibet, Inner Mongolia and . . . Xinjiang" (Dillon, 2004, p. 85). Again figures vary, but it is agreed that authorities arrested at least several thousand individuals they suspected of terrorism and separatism. In addition, those arrested move through an expedited judicial process, which, according to Human Rights Watch, has resulted in group sentencing, confession by torture and inadequate legal counsel (Human Rights Watch, 2001, p. 6). Moreover, there is some evidence that non-violent protestors were charged and found guilty of participating in supposedly terrorist and separatist activity (Human Rights Watch, 2000). However, the Strike Hard campaign does appear to be effective, successfully halting attacks since 2001 and, indeed, the RAND-MIPT Terrorism Incident Database only details three relatively minor incidents in Xinjiang—one in October 2001 and two on 22 November 2001 (RAND- Memorial Institute for the Prevention of Terrorism (MIPT) Terrorism Incident Database 1998–Present). Based on this achievement, the Chinese leadership has since declared that the "Strike Hard" campaign would become a permanent feature of life in China (Human Rights Watch, 2000).

Analysis

Selected Violent Incidents

These policies have led many Uighurs to believe that the Chinese government poses a salient threat to their cultural and ethnic viability, and the ranks of Uighurs who overtly or covertly support separatism are growing. While their dissatisfaction is not always manifested violently, the total number of physical attacks directed against the Chinese government and the Hans comes to at least 200. In a rare statement about its actions in Xinjiang, Zhao Yongchen, a top anti-terrorism official in the Chinese government, said that the number of attacks organized inside and outside of China by Muslim separatists comes to 260 in the past decade (*Associated Press*, 2005). Given this pattern of violence, and its development interests in Xinjiang, Beijing is understandably concerned about the threat of instability. Having laid out the historical background, we can now make a focused inquiry into specific incidents of terrorism since 1990, better elucidating the character of the Uighur separatist movement.

The five selected incidents provide clear benchmarks of increasingly violent and even terrorist activity. The 21 January 2002 PRC State Council report, “East Turkistan terrorist forces cannot get away with impunity” will be the baseline for the assessment of violent activity, and will represent the official Chinese view on the issue. The report divides terrorist incidents in Xinjiang into six categories: Explosions; Assassinations; Attacks on Police and Government Institutions; Crimes of Poison and Arson¹; Establishing Secret Training Bases and Raising Money to Buy and Manufacture Arms and Ammunition; and Plotting and Organizing Disturbances and Riots, and Creating an Atmosphere of Terror.² Notably, the report excludes isolated incidents instigated by Uighurs in parts of China other than Xinjiang, although it includes incidents perpetrated by Uighurs abroad.³ Additional perspectives from independent media and human rights organizations are also included to provide a broader perspective on Beijing’s position.

The major problem with the government’s response is that the crack-down against what it calls “acts of terror” has included a broad range of activities, many of which do not come close to being “terrorism” as we define it in this paper.

There is also one incident that we will consider because of its significance, which was excluded from the report but reported by the official Chinese media and widely reported in the foreign media—the bombing of a bus in Beijing in March 1997. In addition, we will look at the bus bombings of February 1992 in Xinjiang, the attempted assassination of Muslim cleric Arunhan Aji in May 1996, the Yining riots in early February 1997 and the bombings on the last day of official mourning for Deng Xiaoping in late February 1997.

First, in early February 1992, the Chinese government claims that Uighur terrorists blew up two buses in Urumqi, killing three people and injuring 23 others. Bombs planted in a cinema and a residential building were reportedly discovered before they exploded and were defused. While differing with the government’s account on the number of persons killed and buses bombed, Michael Dillon affirms that the attack was perpetrated by Islamic separatists, most likely the East Turkistan Islamic Party (Dillon, 2004, p. 67). *Asiaweek* described the event as “the first blast in a campaign of terror” (Winchester, 1997).

Second, on 12 May 1996, as the 75-year-old senior imam of the Aitga Mosque in Kashgar, Arunhan Aji, and his son were on their way to the mosque to pray, they were attacked by Uighurs armed with cleavers. Mullah Arunhan Aji was also the Vice-Chairman of the Xinjiang Chinese People’s Political Consultative Committee and a member of the Standing Committee of the state-sponsored China Islamic Association (Dillon, 2004, p. 87). Both men were seriously injured from multiple stab wounds. Dillon highlights the fact that the incident was “one of a series of assassination attempts that targeted ethnic Uyghurs who were seen to be collaborating with the Chinese authorities” (Dillon, 2004, p. 87). The message inherent in these acts appears to be opposition to Chinese authority—encompassing Uighurs connected to the government—as a means to protect ethno-nationalist interests. While Dillon only describes the assailants as “Uyghurs” (Dillon, 2004, p. 86), the Chinese government claims that “The ‘East Turkistan’ terrorist organization plotted the assassination” (State Council of the People’s Republic of China, 2002). Beyond this discrepancy, the two accounts are remarkably similar.

Third, like its 1992 predecessor, the bus bombings on 25 February 1997 also occurred on a symbolic date—the final day of official mourning for Deng Xiaoping’s death. Explosions occurred almost simultaneously on three buses in Urumqi, with estimates of four to nine people killed and dozens injured. Beijing attributed the attacks to the “‘East Turkistan’ terrorist organization” (State Council of the People’s Republic of

China, 2002), while Agence France Presse calls the perpetrators “Moslem separatists” (Agence France Presse, 1997b). The United Revolutionary National Front also issued a claim of responsibility (Dillon, 2004, p. 99). These attacks caused great alarm in Beijing, where the entire public transportation system was put on alert (Dillon, 2004, p. 100). The death of Deng may have raised hopes among Uighur nationalists that the political climate in China might change. According to the theory that terrorism is a response by an opposition movement to an opportunity (Crenshaw, 1998, p. 16), the separatists may have believed that the regime of Jiang Zemin, who had much less charisma than Deng, would be vulnerable during its period of transition. Moreover, Uighurs were likely still fuming about the Yining riots earlier in the month (as discussed below). Dillon connects the attacks to a statement made the previous day: “Representatives of Uyghur nationalist and Islamist groups at a press conference in Moscow the previous day had confirmed that some separatist groups had decided that a terror campaign was the only way they would be able to create an Islamic state in the region” (Dillon, 2004, p. 99). Immediately after the attacks, it looked like the separatists might have had some success. A Kazakhstan-based Uighur group claimed that Hans were fleeing from the area (*Agence France Presse*, 1997a), although this does not appear to have been a lasting effect.

Fourth, Beijing’s fears following the Urumqi bus bombing were realized on 7 March 1997, when a bomb detonated on a public bus in the capital. This was the first terrorist incident in Beijing since 1949. The Turkish-based Organization for Turkestan Freedom corroborated the PRC’s claim that the bombing was carried out by Uighurs from Xinjiang (Reuters, 1997). Dillon makes a slightly different claim—that émigré Uighur sources in Turkey immediately claimed responsibility for the bus bombing (Dillon, 2004, p. 100). The mayor of Beijing, Jia Qinglin, described the attack as “a political incident of retaliation against society” (Dillon, 2004, p. 100). The likely reasons for the attack are the same as those for the 25 February bombings. However, by striking in Beijing, 2500 miles from Urumqi, the separatists involved in the attack showed their ability and willingness to project the battle beyond Xinjiang. Moreover, the attackers may have aimed at garnering greater attention from the Chinese public and international audiences.

Finally, from 5 to 8 February 1997, over 1000 Uighur separatists rioted in Yining, a town near Kazakhstan. Beijing claims that rioters beat people to death and damaged cars, buses and stores while demanding independence. While the State Council report does not include reasons for the riot, several sources provide conflicting accounts. CNN reported that the riots began after a Uighur criminal suspect resisted arrest by the police. Alternatively, the Kazakhstan-based United Revolutionary Front of East Turkistan blamed the execution of 30 Uighurs the week before by the Chinese authorities for provoking the riots (CNN, 1997). Still another version cited in an Amnesty International report connects the riots to an incident in which Chinese police used force to break up a group of Muslim women as they prayed at a mosque, charging them with forming an “illegal” gathering (Amnesty International, 1997). Estimates of the numbers killed in clashes with police range from zero to 300 (CNN, 1997). Because of the wide variations of the accounts of this incident, it is difficult to determine precisely what transpired. However, it is clear that a significant number of Uighur nationalists clashed with police in Yining, exacerbating ethnic tensions.

However, although Wang Lequan, Xinjiang’s Communist Party leader, was quoted as referring to the riots as “acts of terror” (Amnesty International, 1997), and the Chinese government categorizes them as contributing to “creating an atmosphere of terror”

(State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2002), this was not a genuine terrorist incident. From the independent reports, this incident could better be considered a violent ethnic protest. It was, however, "the worst ethnic violence to hit the predominantly Muslim region in 50 years" (CNN, 1997). The PRC's official account implied that the Uighurs are simply prone to violent outbreaks, painting them as a group of violent Islamist extremists. While the Chinese government draws attention to the violence of the Uighurs, there is little question that both sides were violent and that this was a clash between civilians and police. Notably, the riots also impelled the Xinjiang regional chairman to finger the fundamentalist "Party of Allah" in inciting the riot. This was the first time the government had acknowledged that a group, not simply a series of individuals, was responsible for the separatist violence (Agence France Presse, 1997c).

Chinese Policy and Uighur Separatism

A closer analysis of the characteristics of Uighur nationalism and violence in Xinjiang, as well as Beijing's response and policy positions, will greatly clarify the options available to the Chinese government, the international community, and indeed, the Uighurs themselves in resolving this conflict. Since the start of attacks in the 1980s and 1990s, Beijing has attempted to link the rise of Uighur ethnic nationalism to a wider global Islamist terror network, and this eventually dovetailed with the Global War on Terror following the 9/11 attacks. The PRC has made three general claims justifying its treatment of suspected Uighur separatists. First, they are receiving support from regional and global Islamist networks, particularly Al-Qaeda. For example, China announced at the UN in November 2002 that "the terrorist forces of East Turkistan are trained, equipped, and financed by international terrorist organizations" (Tang, 2001). Second, and consequently, Beijing asserts that certain Uighur groups espouse radical Islamic ideology and are pursuing violent and terrorist attacks against the legitimate Chinese state. Finally, the CCP argues that this issue is an integral concern of the war on terror, particularly in its ability to spread beyond Xinjiang's Muslim population. There are also elements of "clash of civilization" thinking, as articulated by Minister of Religious Affairs Zhou Guohai's statement that the Chinese "deeply fear Islamic extremism" and "deeply distrust the Koran and what it teaches. [. . .] We will make sure that Islam is practiced in a way that is in line with Chinese culture and tradition" (BBC World Service, 2001).

China has pushed these points to gain regional and international support. The SCO has expanded its scope to address regional security concerns, including separatism and Islamic extremism (Declaration by the Heads of the Member States of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, 2002), Beijing has used this forum to garner regional support for its policies on Xinjiang.

Since 1996 Beijing has received ample assurances from fellow members of the [SCO] that organizations representing Uighur opposition groups will not be allowed to operate from Central Asia. The governments of Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, under severe pressure from China, dissolved Uighur political parties, closed newspapers, and arrested militants, particularly after serious riots in Yining, Xinjiang, in 1997. (Human Rights Watch, 2001, p. 2)

In addition, the instability of the Central Asian republics has also helped justify Beijing's stewardship of Xinjiang. Many Uighurs realize that an independent East Turkistan would face problems similar to those of its neighbours, and are therefore wary of founding a new state (Shanor & Shanor, 1995; Hsieh & Lu, 2004, p. 419). Moreover, after 9/11, the PRC has pressed its perspective on Uighur separatists in wider international circles, persuading the US, UN, Afghanistan and Kyrgyzstan to place the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) on their lists of international terror groups in August 2002. Journalists covering local and diaspora Uighurs, as well as human rights groups, argue that Beijing has used this development to intensify its restrictions in Xinjiang and widen the use of collective punishment.

However, Chinese concerns about Islamic radicalization should not be summarily dismissed. Following the reversal of Deng's reforms, more and more Uighurs have turned to some form of fundamental Islam, and this was coupled with a rise in violent protests. The rash of bombings in Xinjiang and Beijing detailed above point to a growing trend of indiscriminate and politically-motivated attacks. Castets also documents the enrolment of Uighur youth in *madrassas* in response to relaxed Chinese border and travel controls in the 1980s.

Through connections established during the 1980s or through family links, these young people—and also Uyghurs in the Diaspora—took religious courses in Koranic schools sometimes attached to Islamist movements.

Thus, in Kazakhstan it seems that some Uyghurs joined the Islamic Renaissance Party. In Uzbekistan and in Kyrgyzstan some of them joined the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan or else Hizb-ut Tahrir. The other favored place for recruitment was Pakistan. (Castets, 2003)

While a significant draw of these schools was their free tuition and more culturally-friendly education, handfuls of Uighurs were recruited into Islamist groups through this medium. Beijing has pointed to this fact as evidence of links to religious extremism, with some returning youths evidently seeking to foment violent separatism based on a radical pan-Islamic ideology. Coupled with this, both Pakistan and Turkey have been known to train Uighur separatists (Christoffersen, 2002), and several hundred were captured or killed in Afghanistan fighting American forces for the Taliban in 2002 (*The Economist*, 2002; Christoffersen, 2002). In addition, the radical, but nominally non-violent Islamist movement Hizb ut-Tahrir is beginning to make inroads into Xinjiang, causing much concern among Central Asian governments (Fuller & Starr, 2003, p. 38).

The increasing Islamic radicalism of Uighur nationalism should be seen in a wider cultural and historical context, however. The Chinese government likely overstates three characteristics of this movement. First, extremist religious adherents, while growing, constitute only a minority of the population and certainly do not dominate the mainstream Uighur conceptions of Islam. According to Bruce Hoffman's typologies, the terrorist campaign in Xinjiang is primarily an ethno-nationalist/separatist movement. For example, reports indicate that there are significant differences between Islam practiced in Xinjiang and more general fundamentalism.

A western diplomat describes the Wahhabism of Khotan as "a protest theology" and says that many "Wahhabis" have little idea what that really means. Most Muslims in

Xinjiang practise the mystical—and far more liberal—Sufi form of Islam, which Wahhabis oppose. Some women who wear veils also wear mini-skirts. The puritanism of the Taliban movement would have little market here. (*The Economist*, 2002; see also Mackerras, 2005)

The hardline political demands of groups such as Al-Qaeda and Hezbollah (for example, the creation of a strict Islamist state) are largely missing in this situation. Critically, Islam appears to be far less of a religious badge than a hallmark of Uighur cultural or ethnic identity, with an intrinsically local orientation removed from pan-Islamic ideologies.

And although Islam is a major marker of Uygur identity, it is certainly not the only one. Others include common cultural heritage, diet, architecture, and language. What is very clear is that the Chinese government makes use of its brand of religious freedom, which includes restrictions, to increase its control in Xinjiang and help keep the region in China. (Mackerras, 2005, p. 8)

Moreover, while numbers are obviously difficult to come by, anecdotal reports from journalists, international rights organizations and researchers appear to confirm that the majority of Uighurs favour non-violent protests and perhaps autonomy over separation. Of course, concerns over bias are salient here, and the existence of radical, violent Islamist elements cannot be denied. However, moderates in the Uighur diaspora rallied behind Erkin Alptekin in April 2004 to challenge the rising hardliners by advancing a leader with a history of strong support for non-violence in seeking Uighur independence (Lawrence, 2004).

Second, the Uighurs as a group are fractured. While the Strike Hard campaign has halted violent attacks, it has also severely disrupted the social cohesion of Xinjiang through collective punishment and arrest. In addition, as Millward states, “Over the years, of course, most Uyghur groups have proved unstable; names, leaders, and presumably membership shift frequently” (Millward, 2004, p. 29). He also makes two further points: the majority of violent attacks has not targeted symbols of PRC authority, and many victims of these attacks have been Uighurs. Consequently, internal social fragmentation can in many ways be responsible for the violence. “Economic factors, organized crime, rivalries over market turf, and the like seem as probable an explanation in many cases as Uyghur political terrorism” (Millward, 2004, p. 30). Moreover, “the Uygurs are not necessarily united as Muslims. There are competing Sufi and non-Sufi factions among the Uygurs. There are also age-old territorial loyalties and linguistic discrepancies” (Mackerras, 2005, p. 8). As a result, Beijing’s concerns over a pervasive, coordinated and socially integrated insurgency must be viewed with caution.

Finally, the PRC’s linkage of Uighur nationalism with the Taliban or other transnational Islamist groups is likely overstated. The group points to a variety of political and geographic obstacles to communications, movement, transportation and cooperation between Xinjiang and the former Taliban strongholds (Human Rights Watch, 2001, p. 3).⁴ Interviews published by *Le Monde* on 30 September 2001 suggest that Uighur *jihādists* came on an individual basis following recruitment in Pakistani *madrassas* (Human Rights Watch, 2001). In addition, Hasan Mahsum, the self-acknowledged leader of the ETIM, has denied any connections to Al-Qaeda, and Islamists figures like

Osama bin Laden have been silent on the issue of Xinjiang. While Mackerras points out that “silence is not a strong argument when one is talking of a secretive terrorist organization like al-Qaeda” (Mackerras, 2005, p. 12), it does invite caution in accepting PRC claims of a strong connection between the groups.

Consequently, the characterization of this conflict by the Chinese government as intractable and based in fundamentalist Islam is likely unwarranted. However, this approach fits with general PRC policy towards Central Asia. Beijing can rally regional support against Uighur groups, particularly from Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, and can tie its actions to the wider war on terror, thereby circumventing admonishments from the United States. On the other hand, it is important to note that China’s policies are not driven solely by the counterterrorism rubric. Rather, Beijing has attempted to balance the harsher measures mentioned above by touting rising standards of living, rapid economic development (as in the current “Develop the West” campaign) and preferential social policies for Uighurs.

Nevertheless, Beijing’s restrictive and at times repressive policies have played a key role in fostering resentment and perhaps even propelled the turn of many Uighurs towards radical Islam. As detailed earlier, despite rising economic indicators, minorities in Xinjiang appear to suffer from some systemic discrimination. Independent sources cited throughout this paper indicate Uighur resentment and sometimes anger at perceived inequalities in employment, cultural expression and religious practice. The student protests of the 1980s, and the demands of certain ethnic nationalist groups in the 1990s, quite consistently focused their grievances on these factors. Equally important, despite strong representation in local administrative positions, Muslims are largely kept out of the primary political and development bodies, the CCP and the Corps, which have significantly more resources and power than the XAR offices. Indeed, the Corps maintains a military/security force independent of official authority, and has been instrumental in implementing Beijing’s Han migration projects. Consequently, these forms of systemic inequalities—what Galtung would term structural violence (Galtung, 1996, p. 2)—have themselves propagated a great deal of Muslim animosity towards the Han Chinese and PRC authority.

Theories of Conflict

Despite the Strike Hard campaign’s success, tensions in the province remain high. Writing in 2004, Millward states, “Nor have tensions in Xinjiang relaxed overall—quite to the contrary, I think that interethnic relations between Uyghurs and Han in Xinjiang are more tense today than they were five or ten years ago” (Millward, 2004, p. 46). Possibly up to a third of the PLA’s forces are tied up in the region, and the Uighur population appears supportive of protest against Beijing’s authority (although not necessarily violence), which began, as mentioned, soon after Mao rejected requests for Xinjiang’s independence following the Communist Revolution. This suggests a degree of lasting popular support for an alternative political arrangement with significantly less Chinese control. The PRC’s failure to fully quell Uighur nationalism stems from a failure of politics, both in Beijing’s reluctance or inability to engage in political dialogue with Muslims in Xinjiang, and in the lack of institutional channels for discontent and grievances. Ultimately, a lasting resolution to this conflict, we submit, should follow the thoughts of General Francis Taylor, President Bush’s special envoy on counterterrorism.

“Muslims in Xinjiang have legitimate economic and social issues that. . . need political solutions, not counterterrorism” (Rosenthal, 2001).

At this juncture, theories of conflict can provide some substantial insight into the limited effectiveness of Chinese policy and why political engagement is necessary to genuinely resolve this situation. Beijing’s hardline stance against Uighur “separatism” is certainly in line with general policy on Tibet and Taiwan, and serves to legitimate CCP rule by appeals to Chinese nationalism. However, this prevents any dialogue with “extremists”, and entails notable costs, the foremost being an inability to compromise.

Compromise is always difficult when extremists dominate the political arena; it is more difficult because cultural identity is fixed and non-negotiable; exclusive claims on resources for distinct cultural groups mobilized by myths of superiority and intrinsic rights are particularly difficult to compromise. (Crawford, 1998, p. 29)

Coupled with this, Paris argues that a critical function of open political dialogue is that:

[it] can, under the right conditions, limit the intensity of intercommunal tensions and conflicts. [. . . It] paradoxically encourages the public expression of conflicting interests in order to limit the intensity of such conflicts by channeling them through peaceful political institutions before they turn violent. (Paris, 2004, pp. 74–75)

Taken together, the lack of these two factors can drive a continuing escalation of conflict on a national policy level. In these situations, government leaders do not have the political space to endure negotiations or make sacrifices without being seen as caving into the opposition. Consequently, the policy options that remain closely mirror China’s measures: cooption through economic incentives, demographic changes, and military or police repression. Moreover, on the local level, Crawford explains that properly designed and administered institutions are instrumental in shaping attitudes and therefore allowing alternative strategies in ethnic conflict.

Institutions do not treat all forms of conflict impartially because their function is to channel conflict, not simply to mitigate and prevent it. Because of this channeling function, institutions not only constrain behavior, but also they shape political preferences and identities. (Crawford, 1998, p. 14)

Of course, institutions can exacerbate social tensions, channelling resources towards particular groups or towards certain political goals. Finally, above all, success in ethnic conflict cannot simply be measured by the number of violent attacks, although this is important. Rather, non-violent protestors and religious extremists alike rely upon a network of passive and active local support. Success in this situation depends on the perception of governmental legitimacy and acceptance of state authority. Ethnic conflict “is a political, even an ideological conflict. . . That is what is meant when it is said that the battle is for the ‘hearts and minds’ of the people” (Walzer, 1992, p. 187).

From this perspective, China’s reluctance to address Uighur political and economic concerns has limited its ability to diminish tensions in Xinjiang. Provincial institutions, notably the Corps and the CCP, have not effectively addressed concerns over discrimination, nor have they constituted an adequate outlet to air grievances and deal

substantively with Uighur complaints. The restrictions on Islam and use of language also threaten their ability to preserve cultural and ethnic symbols and distinctions. In short, Beijing neglected the existential threat its own policies posed towards the preservation of an acceptable level of Uighur self-identification. Consequently, with the policy options currently available to it, the Xinjiang local authorities and the Chinese government are caught in a bind. They can liberalize and accept the potential risk of ethnic tensions and regional instability which threatens Central Asian trade and energy supplies. Or, they can maintain strict controls which suppress the problem, but likely never resolve it, and exacerbate the terrorist threat in the future. Even if Chinese authorities contemplate negotiations with Uighur nationalists, the difficulty then becomes moderating against demands for full independence, while maintaining legitimacy and state stability more generally. In addition, there is a possibility that allowing greater religious freedom and movement could increase exposure to Islamist ideology. Consequently, “Beijing appears to be in a no-win situation in Xinjiang” (George, 1998, pp. 10–11) and a viable solution to this conflict requires a PRC political engagement, which we will attempt to outline below.

Policy Prescriptions

If popular support for Uighur Islamist extremists continues to grow, and ties to foreign sponsors of terrorism grow stronger and more numerous, Beijing may lose control of the situation in Xinjiang. There are three potential trends of threat that could arise with renewed separatist violence. First, actual Uighur terrorists will choose targets outside of Xinjiang—perhaps in Beijing or Shanghai—to garner attention from a broader Chinese and foreign audience. Second, those individuals may turn to suicide bombing for its ease, effectiveness despite extremely limited resources, and sensational quality. Matthew Oresman and Daniel Steingart point out that the Chinese government still has a chance to learn from the mistakes of the Russian government in this area—suicide bombing was only recently introduced as a tactic in the Chechen conflict (Oresman & Steingart, 2003). Thus far, there have been no confirmed incidents of suicide bombings by Uighur extremists (although disenfranchised individual Chinese have increasingly been using this tactic). Third, and perhaps most dangerous for the Chinese government, separatist elements in Xinjiang, Tibet and Inner Mongolia could form a unified front. This unlikely scenario was proposed by a leader of the Organization for the Liberation of Uighurstan back in 1996 (Agence France Presse, 1996). While these groups have many common interests, strict government controls will likely prevent collaboration between them in the near future. However, coordinated efforts among separatists could become a major problem during any periods of political transition.

Therefore, there are no easy solutions in resolving this conflict. A re-established East Turkestan is highly unlikely. In addition to their lack of cultural and social cohesion, “Uighurs are in no position to confront the Han and their security apparatus: the army, the armed police, the *bingtuan* militia [the Corps], their tanks and aircraft. The cost of insurrection would be enormous” (Tyler, 2003, p. 269). And, given Xinjiang’s importance to other areas of state stability, Beijing will not let go of the territory and allow the establishment of an independent Uighur state. However, a continuation of the Strike Hard campaign, while currently halting violent attacks, provides no guarantee that extremists will not develop the capacity to circumvent Chinese measures. For example, the situation

may worsen as trade and cross-border exchanges with Central Asia increase, concurrently multiplying potential targets. George indicates that “China’s increasingly harsh treatment of separatist groups in Xinjiang could quickly change the level and nature of external support, especially from Middle East states such as Saudi Arabia and Iran” (George, 1998, p. 8). Regardless, the constant possibility of attacks has already proven a disruption to trade and development in Xinjiang, and current measures, if anything, have only served to exacerbate the underlying social fractures fuelling the conflict. The effects of this situation are two-fold: while many Uighurs cannot see how the Chinese could possibly be driven out and are not prepared to live a life of constant resistance (Tyler, 2003, p. 270), others feel that their only hope for achieving true autonomy or independence is through violent and even terrorist means.

Given these circumstances, political compromise provides the most viable, long-term solution to the Uighur-PRC situation. Without greater access to information from the region, it is perhaps impossible to detail a complete list of measures for managing this conflict. However, from the evidence available, three general prescriptions can be made:

1. Beijing should reform local institutions to address Uighur concerns over discrimination;
2. Beijing should support moderate Uighur leaders and engage in political dialogue with groups seeking greater autonomy (but who are not necessarily pushing for independence); and
3. Beijing must create the necessary political space in China as a whole by delinking Uighur nationalism from issues of state legitimacy.

Clearly, the policy of forced and voluntary Han migration; the purposeful or accidental under-representation of Uighurs in advanced industries, development projects, and supervisory roles; and the lack of effective political channels to address these political, social and economic concerns have aggravated the conflict and probably alienated much of the Uighur population from Chinese rule. Others have already discussed the need to dismantle Xinjiang’s extensive prison system, divert resources towards health and standard living policies, halt collective punishment, and temper Han migration. These suggestions follow the advice of alternate Politburo member Wang Gang, granting real autonomy to Xinjiang, as its status as an autonomous region promises on paper; limiting Chinese immigration; and privatizing the military-run development body, the Corps (Nathan & Gilley, 2003, p. 250). While we agree that these measures would undoubtedly improve Uighur sentiment towards Beijing, a critical factor is investing minorities in the participation and procedures for change. Towards that end, for a genuine and lasting diffusion of tensions, Beijing and local Chinese authorities must develop some kind of consultative forum or dialogue with, at a minimum, the XUAR officials, particularly with regard to the Corps’ activities. In addition, these measures should at least have some formalized political relationship, for example giving Uighur and other minority representatives lasting input into, if not some level of oversight over, centrally administered infrastructure and economic development programs. Ideally, greater resources will be directed towards predominantly Uighur areas in line with past official statements on the “Develop the West” campaign. If any additional options are open for negotiation, then freedoms of ethnic and religious expression should be considered. Xinjiang’s CCP institutions have a great deal of power in channelling materials and affecting lives. What is needed here

is political dialogue and consultation to guide those channels and directly invest Uighurs in the welfare of these institutions.

These measures are of course predicated on having reliable partners for political dialogue. Fortunately, such groups and individuals exist, but they largely derive from the sizable Uighur diaspora (comprised of some 600 000 people). As mentioned earlier, Erkin Alptekin has risen as a prominent moderate supporting non-violent protest against Beijing's harsher policies. His warm reception by US Congressmen last year suggests that he can play a crucial role mediating between American demands on human rights and China's security concerns. However,

... his close ties to the US may blunt his appeal to radical Uyghurs, while his long absence from Xinjiang, which he last visited in the early 1980s, may make him less relevant to Uyghurs in China. Gladney also notes that Alptekin is not a practising Muslim. (Lawrence, 2004)

This last point may also dampen Alptekin's appeal to radical elements. Because of the concern that Alptekin will lose out to fundamentalists, China, the US and other regional powers should emphasize the importance of moderate, autonomy-minded Uighur political leaders to lead their ethnic group towards long-term peace with Beijing. Moreover, to indulge in some speculation, if China's long-term goal is to democratize, consistently suppressing moderate leaders and empowering Islamists through antagonistic policies will make political engagement significantly harder in the future.

Underlying all of these suggestions, however, are significant sacrifices that Beijing must make to open the political space to allow dialogue, maintain legitimacy with their wider Chinese population, and ease repressive measures in Xinjiang. Perhaps most importantly, the PRC must temper its nationalism and its characterization of Uighur "separatism" as inspired by fundamentalist Islam. The state organs, particularly the media and education ministry, should adopt a consistent and more tolerant stance on Xinjiang. This would involve recognizing that this conflict is driven by Uighur ethnic nationalism, not terrorism, and marking a clear distinction between non-violent Muslims and the small number of actual extremist elements. This should be coupled with the establishment of a comprehensive set of reform measures, linking the local-level steps towards the dialogue and consultation mentioned earlier with support for moderate Uighur leaders. Moreover, the international community and Uighur diaspora can also adopt certain positions to facilitate these measures. At a minimum, other states, while recognizing that terrorism is a rising concern in Xinjiang, should press China to either provide incontrovertible evidence that Uighur separatists have clear, widespread links with international terror, or else drop the accusations of a linkage and halt its collective punishment policies. Certain nations, particularly the US and Europe, could provide verbal support for moderate Uighur groups, fostering an international environment portraying Alptekin and other like-minded social leaders as credible partners for dialogue. Above all, the material costs of delay should be emphasized to China. Repressive measures only make the territory more unstable and embolden extremists, which in turn hinder the trade of energy and goods with Central Asia and possibly the Middle East. Lasting, long-term development of these economic ties requires a comprehensive political resolution to the Uighur-PRC conflict.

Conclusion

While it is impossible to fully assess the situation without full and unfettered media access to the region, it is clear that Beijing faces prohibitive challenges from the Xinjiang Uighurs. If the Chinese government does not directly address the causes of the nationalist discontent that permeates the Uighur community, it will be confronted indefinitely with political violence. In early 1997, *Jane's Intelligence Review* suggested that Beijing might have been facing “a Northern Ireland situation in Xinjiang—an intractable, low-level terrorist campaign with some popular support that resists easy solutions and requires the dedication of large numbers of security forces” (*Financial Times*, 1997). This is an apt comparison, particularly given Beijing's sizable role in creating and exacerbating Uighur discontent.

However, the PRC's claims regarding terrorism in the region also have a certain degree of merit. The Uighurs' social fragmentation and discontent have spurred an Islamist salient threat of extremism that cannot be ignored. The difficulty—and the opportunity for interested regional and international parties—lies in creating the opportunities that allow the Chinese government to develop a political resolution while maintaining the strength and integrity of the CCP. Equally important is having a credible negotiating partner—in this case, the moderate Uighur groups who favour greater regional autonomy rather than complete independence. Thus, Beijing should refrain from undermining these groups to prevent popular support from turning in favour of radical Islamists. Like other ethno-nationalist insurgencies, it is insufficient to merely address the proximate causes of terrorism, going after only those who could perpetrate violence (and Beijing casts a wide net in identifying those who fall into this category). China has thus far expounded the policies of the Strike Hard campaign and the merits of its economic stewardship as the best approach to addressing the violence and discontent in the region. However, these measures fail to provide the pressing political engagement required to truly air Uighur nationalist grievances and resolve this conflict. A comprehensive solution based on the policy prescriptions outlined above requires input from local, regional and international actors, but it provides the most viable road map for a genuine solution to violence in Xinjiang.

Notes

1. Although it would have been interesting to explore an incident in the category of “poisoning”, we were unable to find any independent reports on the one incident cited in the State Council report.
2. According to Hoffman's definition of terrorism, the sixth category does not qualify as terrorism at all. However, because the Chinese government consistently categorizes incidents that fall into this category as terrorism, it is worth considering.
3. Most notably, the explosion of a bomb on a bus near Tiananmen Square in Beijing, discussed below, and a bus bombing in the south-western Chinese city of Chengdu on 25 June 1999, which killed one and injured at least 50 and is attributed to Uighur separatists (reported by Agence France Presse, 1999).
4. Human Rights Watch points to several concerns, including the lack of substantiation of connections between the Taliban and Uighur separatist groups; the fact that Uighurs have ethnic ties to Afghanistan's Uzbek population which are hostile to the Pashtun-dominated Taliban; and that the primary transit point between Afghanistan and China is controlled by the Northern Alliance, preventing contact there.

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