

For the Sake of the State

Asia

Nathan Wheatley

Abstract: Increasing attention has recently been drawn to the activity of the Chinese government towards ethnic minorities in China's northwestern Xinjiang region, but there is still a substantial lack of information on the discrimination. However, what is clear from analyzing a dozen articles and reports coming out of Xinjiang is that the Chinese government has been increasing surveillance and detainment of suspected separatists. An increase in the number of attacks identified as acts of terrorism has heightened security concerns in Xinjiang. According to the government, the crackdown is an attempt at extinguishing sentiment that could lead to terrorism and violence by extremists. But the construction of internment facilities and the use of political and cultural indoctrination techniques suggest that the government's intent is not that simple, nor is it without problems. Those detained by

the government are disproportionately ethnically Uighur, a Muslim minority in China. These detainees are arrested without trials, kept in re-education facilities, and are forced by government officials to renounce their own culture while applauding the cultural ideals of the ethnically dominant Han. These facilities seem to be aimed at erasing the identity of the culturally divergent Uighur ethnicity to create a cultural homogeneity in Xinjiang. According to this method, this homogeneity will create public and national security, but it does so at the expense of individual liberty and human security.

People have been disappearing in Xinjiang, a large province in the northwest of China. The Uighurs – an ethnic group that makes up the majority of the population in Xinjiang – have been a source of cultural and religious tension for centuries. This tension has intensified in recent years due to conspicuous terrorist attacks throughout Xinjiang and the rest of China. With the installment of new leadership and a heavily surveilled crackdown on the cultural incompatibility of the Uighurs, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has hoped to smother any sentiment that might lead to the ‘three evils’ – terrorism, separatism, and extremism (Turdush 2018). This involves limiting mobility and communication with the outside world, regulating commerce and religious practices, and even disappearing people into ‘re-education’ camps for weeks or months at a time. The result is a crisis caused by the state prioritizing high levels of national security over human security and personal freedom.

Historically, Xinjiang, otherwise known as East Turkestan, has been an important region for Chinese growth and trade, but the region has also frequently been an area of conflict in China. It was brought under Chinese rule in the 18th century when the Qing empire was making its westward expansion and needed access to the Silk Road that ran through the territory (Castets 2019). With Xinjiang’s introduction into the Chinese empire, however, came ethnic and religious differences. Ethnically, Xinjiang was then made up of the more prominent Uighurs, along with the Kazakh and Kyrgyz ethnic groups as opposed to the Han ethnic group of the Qing empire (Millward 2019). So, when the Qing empire ventured westward and conquered Xinjiang, the people there, namely the Uighurs, felt that they were being colonized by a foreign people. Another conflict comes from Xinjiang’s primarily Muslim population. The area had converted to Islam beginning in the year 1000 (Millward 2019), so it was deeply

ingrained in the region's people and culture. Originally, these points of conflict were not especially problematic, since the empire employed a method called culturally pluralist imperialism, where the Han appointed prominent members of the Uighur community to govern locally under the authority of the Qing empire (Millward 2019). But the conflicts would go on to later serve as deep causes of present tensions.

Things became more complicated with the rise of China's Communist Party. Islam was banned during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), and its teaching and practice were again outlawed in the 90s when the Soviet Union fell and the CCP feared that it might lose control of the region (Castets 2019). The suppression of Islam has also served as a primary deep cause of today's crisis. This repeated oppression by the CCP angered Xinjiang's Muslims and forced their religious practices into private where some small groups radicalized and began encouraging violence and insurrection. These groups

carried out minor violent crimes between 1990 and 2001. In response to this, the CCP began carrying out executions of criminals in extreme cases (Castets 2019).

Another response to terrorist attacks was the CCP's encouraging of ethnically Han Chinese to move to the Xinjiang region. Back in 1949, 75% of Xinjiang's roughly 3.3 million population was comprised of the Uighur ethnicity, and the Han made up a meager 7%. But with the mass Han migration, the Uighurs now make up 46% of Xinjiang's roughly 22 million population, while the Han have grown to 40% (Liu and Peters 2017). Xinjiang's 22 million people still make up only about 1.5% of China's 1.4 billion population. But since the Han hold a majority in China of 91.5% (Sawe 2016), this migration was perceived by Uighurs as an attempt at cultural dilution and subtle colonization, which did not help to subdue bitterness or ethnic tension in the area.

Tensions continued to escalate, and China began to fight its own 'war on terror.'

With the anti-Muslim rhetoric being used by the United States (U.S.) after 9/11 in fighting Al Qaeda, China began using similar rhetoric to fight domestic terrorism (Millward 2019). Their goal was to combat what they called the three evil forces – terrorism, ethnic separatism, and religious extremism (Turdush 2018). At the same time, several of the smaller terrorist groups banded together, calling themselves the Turkestan Islamic Party (TIP). They organized several violent attacks beginning in 2008 (Castets 2019) which would serve as proximate causes for the later conflict. Terrorists attacked Tiananmen Square in October 2013, Kunming station in March 2014, and an Urumqi market in May 2014. Altogether, the victims of terrorism in China in 2014 were more than 300 (Castets 2019).

These attacks prompted the appointment of Chen Quanguo as the new party chief of Xinjiang in 2016 (Wong 2017). Chen's stringent policies as the new party chief would serve as an additional

proximate cause for the conflict. The previous party chief of the region had been considered by many to be too lenient, but Chen had previously had success as the party chief of Tibet, where he was also quelling ethnic tensions. His reputation for being uncompromising and strict made him perfect for the job of policing the restless Xinjiang (Wong 2017). Since he was appointed party chief, he has not disappointed his reputation. Chen had hired at least 30,000 new police recruits only one year after filling the position (Wong 2017). Heavy surveillance has become normal for people living in Xinjiang. Facial scanners carefully watch people who come in and out of hotels and shopping malls. Police officers will constantly search citizens' cellphones for photos and videos that might be considered 'sensitive content,' and the government carefully watches conversations happening on social networking apps (Carney 2018). Because of a handful of attacks that involved knives, the government now requires that anyone

buying a knife must have their identification information laser-engraved onto it. These are only a few of the security measures being taken by the CCP in Xinjiang, and it is now considered by many to be one of the most heavily surveilled places in the world (Chin and Bürge 2017).

Another aspect of the CCP's invasive surveillance of the people living in Xinjiang is what they call the "Becoming Family" initiative (Turdush 2018). In this initiative, Han government officials will move in with a family, often Muslim and often for five days at a time roughly every two months (Wang 2018). Officially, these visits happen in order to increase a sense of unity between China's east and west and between Han and Uighur. But it seems more likely that the main purpose of the visits is to identify subversive individuals by their behavior, literally invading their homes to do so. Estimates say that as many as one million government officials are involved with this program (Castets 2019).

The more troubling aspect of these security measures, however, is in how targeted they are at the Muslim Uighur population living there. The CCP is on the lookout for behavior or information that may indicate someone to be extremist. When evaluating a person's behavior, the government will create a survey on each person that keeps a record of their personal information, travel history, religious practices, and purchases (Carney 2018). These surveys are scored, and if the person exhibits any behavior that could indicate extremism, their score is automatically reduced. People are then labeled trustworthy, average, or untrustworthy based on their score (Wang 2018). For the CCP, however, anything resembling Islam has now been categorized as extremist. Fasting for religious holidays like Ramadan, growing beards, wearing head coverings, attending a mosque, and eating halal are just a few of the many things now considered "extremist" (Turdush 2018), and will result in survey score deduction.

Even simply being of the Uighur ethnicity or speaking Turkic, the native Uighur language, will result in a deduction of points (Millward 2019). Uighur Muslims can no longer exist in their homes without being labeled dangerous by the government. What happens when a person's score gets too low, and they become too 'extremist'? They may end up disappearing.

The Chinese government has been building facilities throughout Xinjiang which they are calling 're-education' facilities (Shih 2018). People who are considered to be potential threats to security are arrested by Chinese officials at any time of the day or night and brought to these facilities. They are given no charges or trials. People will often come home to find their family members missing. Contact may suddenly become impossible. Authorities give no explanation, and it is as if these people have simply vanished (Shih 2018).

Chinese authorities have made precious few statements on the re-education

facilities and their purpose. They have described the facilities as employment training centers for criminals but will allow no monitoring or reporting on the facilities by international organizations or by media (Wang 2018). A more accurate description of these facilities comes from the people that have experienced them, who describe them as relentless Communist Party indoctrination camps (Fifield 2019). Chinese citizens are brought to the camps and forced to live in close proximity to other detainees (Shih 2018). Those held in the camps are required to constantly renounce their own religious and cultural beliefs and must also every day read traditional Han literary works and sing the anthem of the CCP (Carney 2018). If they do not follow these instructions, they are subjected to isolation or psychological and physical torture (Wang 2018). The true purpose of these camps is evident when considering these re-education practices. They are intended to erase the culture and identity of the Uighur people and

indoctrinate them in CCP ideology and Han Chinese nationalism (Carney, 2018). The CCP seems to have identified cultural heterogeneity as the source of their security concerns and is using these camps as a means of bringing about cultural, ideological, and even ethnic homogeneity.

The CCP's concern for public security in this situation is not baseless. After all, many were harmed and even killed in the terrorist attacks that happened prior to 2016 (Castets 2019). And while in the west human security often manifests as individual freedom and human rights, in the east the priorities may be different. There, security often means stability and safety for citizens. Considering this, the CCP's actions against Muslims make more sense. If China perceives that cultural divergence and certain individual freedoms are a threat to the safety and stability of the public as a whole, then it is only rational to limit or smother those threats. From this perspective, the Chinese government's actions are necessary for the sake of the

greater good of the public and the state (Wang 2018). But considering their treatment of individuals for the sake of the state, are the costs outweighing the benefits? Accounts from those affected may help to answer this question.

One such account of the CCP's re-education process comes from Omir Bekali, a Kazakh Muslim who was detained by Chinese authorities in March of 2017 (Shih 2018). He had crossed the Chinese border to visit his parents in Xinjiang, and only one day later was arrested by five armed policemen. He was not allowed to contact his parents or his lawyer. Bekali was held in a cell without charges for a week and was then transported 500 miles away to the city of Karamay in northern Xinjiang. There, he was strapped into a chair or strung against a wall and interrogated about his work and connections, despite his desperate claims that he had not committed any crimes. He was then sent to a cell with 17 other people. He spent seven months in this cell, but even after that he was not free (Shih 2018).

From the cell, he was brought to another compound in Karamay, made up of three buildings and housing more than 1,000 people (Shih 2018). Every morning they were forced to sing China's national anthem and raise the flag. They would then sing songs of the CCP and do studies of Mandarin Chinese and Han history. Before every meal, they were required to shout their gratitude to the CCP and President Xi. Aside from these assigned times, they were often not allowed to leave their cells and were not allowed to bathe. But according to Bekali, the worst part was how they were constantly required to criticize themselves and their culture. They were given numerous lectures about the dangers of practicing Islam. In addition to this, they were also taught about how the great CCP liberated the backward central Asian people, like the Uighurs and Kazaks, and helped them benefit from China's modern and progressive world. They even had to give presentations describing the detriment of their past religious and cultural

experiences. The harsher their self-criticism, the less they suffered. If they answered any questions incorrectly or gave unsatisfying responses, they would face consequences like being strapped into a chair for a full 24 hours (Wang 2018). After about a month spent in this compound, Bekali was feeling so hopeless that he began begging officials to kill him. They moved him to solitary confinement and then, on November 24, released him without explanation. A few days later he was allowed to leave China and return home to Kazakhstan (Shih 2018).

Bekali is, unfortunately, only one example of human security infringement that is happening in mass scale in Xinjiang. Exact numbers are uncertain, as the Chinese government will release no official numbers or reports on their camps but estimates by the Human Rights Watch places the number of internees at around one million (Wang 2018). The human security of these internees is being compromised in multiple ways, certainly in

terms of personal security since basic human rights are being violated. People, especially Uighurs in the region, do not have the right to privacy with the disturbing amount of government surveillance happening, nor do they have the right to trial amidst unfair arrests (Turdush 2018). Health security is at risk for those put into the camps, as there have been reports of poor conditions like overcrowding and psychological abuse (Wang 2018). But above all, community security is being actively and intentionally infringed upon. The Uighur identity itself is being threatened by the precautions of the CCP through the attempted extermination of Uighur language, tradition, and religious expression in China. It is a domestic crisis, but one that is being perpetrated by the state against its own people for the sake of stability.

Unfortunately, the CCP has thus far faced no consequences for their mass human rights violation (Fifield 2019), and it is clear that they do not expect to.

Unfortunately, their expectations are realistic. Since it is the state perpetrating these actions against its people, the international community cannot legally take action against China's government without encroaching on their state sovereignty. China's position as a permanent member of the United Nations (UN) security council further reinforces that other world powers will not be able to hold China accountable, nor will the international community be able to ensure the CCP's obeying of international laws prohibiting discrimination.

China's hegemonic status in Asia also means that even other states being affected by this crisis are not willing to condemn China's actions. There are citizens of surrounding states like Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan that are being detained, like Omir Bekali, even though they have citizenship elsewhere (Shih 2018). But China, in 2001, initiated the Shanghai Cooperation Organization with those very countries,

aimed at working together to fight terrorism (Wang 2018). The formation of this security network, coupled with China's influence in the region, makes it unlikely that neighboring states will take any action in response to China's methods of reducing terrorism.

For these reasons, it appears that nothing has been done to prevent the crisis up until this point. Some people in the UN and U.S. government have been calling attention to the crisis like John Sullivan, the US Deputy Secretary of State (Zheng and Jiangtao, 2019). But aside from calling attention to the situation and attempting to question Chinese government officials, efforts to prevent or undo the crisis in Xinjiang seem unlikely. China has no real obligation to admit that the actions taken against its minority groups are in violation of human rights. CCP officials have commented on how the detainees are living happy lives, and that the ethnic groups in the region are collaborating harmoniously (Fifield, 2019). There is even a state-run

Chinese news site that has published articles celebrating the lack of terrorist attacks for the past three years. It criticizes western media's portrayal of the facilities as concentration camps and calls all negative claims empty (Parenti, 2019). If China will not take responsibility for its security measures, it is regrettably unreasonable to expect progress to be made.

Nevertheless, some measures should be taken. The obvious solution would be for the CCP to shut down their political re-education camps across Xinjiang, allowing the detainees to return to their homes and their families. At the very least they should allow monitoring of the facilities by human rights organizations and media. Mass restrictive surveillance in Xinjiang should be reduced substantially, so that citizens may live in privacy, and be able to leave the country if they wish. Laws forbidding 'extremist' behavior, targeting the practice of Islam and anything resembling it, should be abolished so that the citizens of Xinjiang may enjoy the

freedom to practice their religion and express themselves culturally. The CCP must reevaluate its condemnation and treatment of ethnic and religious minorities in Xinjiang and should consider human security along with public security. Regarding the international community, there should be a substantial increase in pressure both from individual governments and from international organizations. The rest of the world must not tolerate human rights violations on such a massive scale. While it does not guarantee reparative action, the international community must demand that the CCP take responsibility for its behavior, so that the Chinese

government may not perceive that it is innocent or exempt from consequences.

Until then, the Muslims living in Xinjiang will continue to live without freedom, privacy, or community. Chen is doing everything he can to prevent further terrorist attacks from happening. He surely believes that he is doing a service to the Chinese people, but his vision of security comes at a great cost. When super-high levels of public and national stability come at the expense of the equally important human security, the state must reconsider its priorities and reevaluate the freedoms that its people deserve.

Works Cited

- Carney, Matthew. "The Struggles of Reporting on China's Secret Uighur 'Re-Education Camps'." *Australian Broadcasting Company*, September 15, 2018. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/about/backstory/television/2018-09-16/inside-chinas-secret-re-education-camps-cracking-down-on-islam/10249426>.
- Castets, Rémi. "What's Really Happening to Uighurs in Xinjiang?" *The Nation*, March 19, 2019. <https://www.thenation.com/article/china-xinjiang-uighur-oppression/>.
- Chin, Josh, and Bürge, Clément. "Twelve Days in Xinjiang: How China's Surveillance State Overwhelms Daily Life." *The Wall Street Journal*, December 19, 2017. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/twelve-days-in-xinjiang-how-chinas-surveillance-state-overwhelms-daily-life-1513700355>.
- Fifield, Anna. "China Celebrates 'Very Happy Lives' in Xinjiang, after Detaining 1 Million Uighurs." *The Washington Post*, July 30, 2019. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/china-celebrates-very-happy-lives-in-xinjiang-after-detaining-a-million-uighurs/2019/07/30/0e07b12a-b280-11e9-acc8-1d847bacca73_story.html.
- Liu, Amy H., and Kevin Peters. "The Hanification of Xinjiang, China: The Economic Effects of the Great Leap West." *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 17, no. 2 (November 17, 2017): 265-80. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/sena.12233>.
- Millward, James A. "Reeducating' Xinjiang's Muslims." *ChinaFile*, February 7, 2019. <http://www.chinafile.com/library/nyrb-china-archive/reeducating-xinjiangs-muslims>.
- Parenti, Fabio Massimo. "Xinjiang Visit Exposes Hollow Western Media Claims." *Global Times*, September 16, 2019. <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1164630.shtml>.
- Sawe, Benjamin E. "The Largest Ethnic Groups In China." *WorldAtlas*, August 17, 2016. <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/largest-ethnic-groups-in-china.html>

Shih, Gerry. "China's Mass Indoctrination Camps Evoke Cultural Revolution." *Associated Press*, May 17, 2018. <https://apnews.com/6e151296fb194f85ba69a8babd972e4b>.

Turdush, Rukiye. "China Is Trying to Erase the Uighurs and Their Culture." *Al Jazeera*, October 13, 2018. <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/china-erase-uighurs-culture-181012155613937.html>

Wang, Maya. "'Eradicating Ideological Viruses.'" *Human Rights Watch*, September 9, 2018. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2018/09/09/eradicating-ideological-viruses/chinas-campaign-repression-against-xinjiangs>.

Wong, Edward. "Chinese Security Forces Rally in Xinjiang in a Show of Power." *The New York Times*, February 20, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/20/world/asia/xinjiang-china-police-rallies.html>.

Zheng, Sarah, and Jiangtao, Shi. "U.S. to censure China for abuses in Xinjiang; Human rights concerns set to increase friction between nations, as senior American official criticises 'brutal campaign of repression' against Uygurs". *South China Morning Post*. September 25, 2019.

Wednesday. <https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:5X4B-TVW1-JC8V-11T6-00000-00&context=1516831>.