Confronting China’s War on Terror

written by David Brophy | December 29, 2018

For some eighteen months now, ethnic minorities in the region of Xinjiang in northwest China have been living through unprecedented wave of repression. The most extreme element of this crackdown is a network of camps across the region, designated “re-education and training centres,” where anywhere from a few hundred-thousand to upward of a million Muslim minorities have been indefinitely interned. Most victims are Uyghurs – the main non-Chinese ethnic group of the region, but the sweep has also caught Kazakhs and Kirghiz, who, like the Uyghurs, practice Islam.

A striking feature of this campaign is that it is targeting people both inside and outside the official party-state system at the same time. On the one hand, many ordinary Uyghurs have been interned simply for maintaining contact with family members and relatives outside China, or for displaying signs of religious piety—growing a beard, for example, or donning a veil. But alongside this wide dragnet, the party is simultaneously conducting a purge of ethnic minority elites in positions of responsibility. This has the goal of rooting out “two-faced” people, deemed to be insufficiently sincere in their implementation of party directives. This more traditional Stalinist-style purge has swept up party cadres, intellectuals, editors, and university administrators.

With few detainees coming out, we have little detail on the regimen inside the camps, but by all accounts, mind-numbing routines of political indoctrination feature prominently. Some have died while interned. And life outside the camps is not much better. New police stations have sprung up on every major intersection in Xinjiang’s cities and towns. Checkpoints control the flow of traffic along most roads. New loyalty rituals, such as flag-raising and oath-taking ceremonies, structure communal life. In daily anti-terror drills, shop-keepers combat imaginary assailants with sticks and clubs. Mosque attendance is monitored, and security cameras cover every angle of the prayer hall.

Those familiar with the domestic War on Terror in Europe or the US will recognise some similar principles at work in China’s War on Terror: the Islamophobic notion, for example, that people who exhibit religious piety are more likely to endorse, or engage in, terrorist violence. But because of the long-standing, and unresolved, imperial legacy in Xinjiang, there are elements of the campaign that more closely resemble the War on Terror as it is waged internationally. The use of biometric identification and mass surveillance, for example, call to mind US counter-insurgency tactics in Iraq and Afghanistan. A streetscape of concrete blast walls and barbed-wire, and public displays of military hardware and troop drills, all add to the sense that Xinjiang is a place at war with itself.

Islam and counter-terrorism in China

The question of why China is adopting these policies at this point in time is a difficult one. We still have no insight into the deliberations that preceded this turn, though we can assume that Xinjiang officials see themselves engaged on a historic mission to secure China’s northwest frontier once and

for all. The party has lost patience with a more hands-off, gradualist approach to integrate and assimilate the region, which has been tied to Beijing—with brief interludes of independence—since the mid-eighteenth century. With China now turning outwards and championing the economic integration of the Eurasian continent, the lack of political and cultural homogeneity has become a liability.

For much of Xinjiang's history as part of the People's Republic of China, the bogeyman has been "ethnic separatism," i.e. Uyghur nationalism, and the stigmatisation of Uyghur *religious*life on this scale has no precedent. Ostensibly a response to terrorism and religious extremism, the Chinese media has described the objective as "turning terrorists into normal people." But terrorism, strictly speaking, is an infrequent occurrence in China. There have been incidents of violence against ordinary Chinese citizens—2014 saw a knife attack at a train station in Kunming, and a car with explosives driven into a crowd in Ürümchi. But much of what China describes as terrorism consists of small-scale firefights with security forces. On the whole, Xinjiang society is highly demilitarised, and there are no known opposition organisations active on Chinese soil.

A street scene in Kashgar, Xinjiang, July 2018. Photo: ChiralJon via flickr.

China's use of terrorism to justify its policies rests on the claim that "outside forces" threaten the peace and prosperity in Xinjiang. In 2001, the US listed as a terrorist organisation the East Turkistan Islamic Movement, and China felt vindicated when a handful of Uyghurs from Afghanistan ended up prisoners in Guantanamo Bay. But without denying their existence, any such militant organisations have tended to be small, fractious and short-lived, and incapable of mounting a challenge to China. The same can be said for those Uyghurs who more recently made their way to the Middle East. Along routes which remain obscure, a few thousand Uyghurs ended up fighting with either ISIS in Iraq, or jihadist rebels in Syria.

China's policing of Islam has evolved in the last decade from reactive, periodic crackdowns on

“illegal religious activities”, to a mindset that seeks to pre-emptively identifying signs of radicalisation and intervene. As this took hold, it soon wasn’t simply enough to not display the signs of radicalisation—one had to actively, and publicly, disavow such behavioural indicators. If you were offered a cigarette, the safe thing to do was to take it. Restaurants would have to sell alcohol to avoid scrutiny. Once it became known that “extremists” were encouraging Muslims not to dance, the party organised for village imams to dance in public. The idea that undesirable dispositions can be eradicated by repeatedly doing the opposite now finds its logical conclusion in the re-education drills occurring in Xinjiang’s internment camps.

What can be done?

News about camps began to filter out to the international media late in 2017, generating immediate alarm. The first official efforts to seek a response from Beijing came at the United Nation’s Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination in August, where the Chinese delegation denied the existence of the camps. Evidently conscious of their extra-judicial nature, in October Xinjiang authorities gave the camps a firmer legal basis by enacting legislation allowing for the detention of citizens to combat religious extremism. With that in place, the Chinese media – or at least the section of it that engages an international audience – took a more combative stance towards Western criticisms. The *Global Times* has justified the camps as vocational training institutions, twenty-first century workhouses that will prepare ethnic minorities to take advantage of China’s economic boom.

At China’s annual review at the UN Human Rights Committee in November, some member states voiced criticisms of China’s policies. Following this, diplomatic envoys from fifteen countries wrote a letter to the Xinjiang party secretary Chen Quanguo, requesting a meeting to discuss the internment camps. This prompted a predictably sharp rebuke from China’s foreign minister, who accused these countries of violating diplomatic protocol and meddling in China’s internal affairs.

Apart from UN bodies, much of the Uyghur diaspora’s lobbying efforts have centred on Washington, seeking to insert the Xinjiang question into Donald Trump’s trade war confrontation with Xi Jinping. The Congressional Executive Committee on China, chaired by Republicans Marco Rubio and Chris Smith, has held a series of hearings on the issue, which led to the introduction of a new piece of legislation, the Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act.

The Uyghur Human Rights Act contains a range of provisions, some of them modelled on previous congressional resolutions on Tibet. It stipulates, for example, the creation of a United States Special Coordinator for Xinjiang, akin to the Special Coordinator for Tibet, which has existed since 2002. It calls for the application of the Global Magnitsky Act, which will sanction individuals deemed personally responsible for the repression of the Uyghurs: top of the list is be party secretary Chen Quanguo. The act also floats the idea of increased support for Uyghur-language broadcasting into China via Radio Free Asia.

In the absence of any alternative, it is hard to fault Uyghurs for pinning their hopes on generating pressure on China via the US. But this strategy carries questionable benefits and considerable risks for the Uyghur cause. To begin with, the measures will likely be ineffectual. China has pledged to reciprocate on any Magnitsky sanctions, and will have no difficulty coming up with a comparable list of American officials implicated in human rights abuses. Inserting the Xinjiang issue into US-China trade negotiations will make it a bargaining chip that Trump could very well end up sacrificing for the sake of economic and security goals deemed more important. Tibet itself presents a salutary example of a once hot-button issue now neglected: the role of Special Coordinator for Tibet has been vacant for almost two years.

Secondly, like any lobbying effort, the bid to enlist US support requires advocates to moderate, or simply drop, criticisms of the US that should form part of the global response to China's actions. One of the best things that people outside China could do to help the Uyghurs would be to end the War on Terror, the chief source of worldwide Islamophobia. As long as the terror threat in the West is invoked to justify extra-judicial drone-strike assassinations and pre-emptive detentions, China will find precedents to justify its own policies.

Protest in 2009 in Washington to ond against the detention of Uyghurs at Guantanamo (via wiki commons)

To be effective, foreign criticism of China needs to be consistent in its rejection of violence and persecution in the name of counter-terrorism, but allying with Washington's leading anti-China voices renders this all but impossible. On 28 November, Marco Rubio expressed his outrage at China's repression at a session of the CECC, only to vote on the very same day against a senate resolution calling for an end to US support for Saudi Arabia's war on Yemen.

Thirdly, this approach will provide ammunition for China to paint Uyghur activism as a tool in the hands of Washington's China hawks, which may prompt a further tightening of security measures in Xinjiang. The new Human Rights Act, for example, calls for the identification of "regional security threats posed by the crackdown across Xinjiang," and involves the Armed Services Committee in policy discussions.

Acknowledging the shortcomings of this style of advocacy should in no way diminish international solidarity with the Uyghur people. Some self-identified "anti-imperialists" have cited US support for Uyghur activism to cast doubt on claims of mass repression in Xinjiang and the existence of the internment camps. But progressives who criticise racism and Islamophobia in the West while turning

a blind eye to in China only end up discrediting the left, and entrenching the emerging Cold War dynamics on this issue. It is perfectly possible to condemn China's actions in Xinjiang, while at the same time remaining clear-eyed about Washington's efforts to utilise the issue for its own ends.

The point of these criticisms is to highlight the need for a more credible, consistent response to the repressive consequences of Xi Jinping's consolidation of power. These consequences are being felt not just by Muslims in Xinjiang, but by workers, students, feminists, and anyone getting in the way of authority across China. Although those outside China can offer no immediate solutions, an orientation towards people-to-people solidarity, and not state-to-state diplomacy, offers the best chance of contributing to real change in the long run.

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Originally posted on the RS21 website.