

China, Xinjiang and the Internationalisation of the Uyghur Issue

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Abstract: This paper argues that Beijing's handling of the Xinjiang and Uyghur issues at the domestic, regional and international levels is characterised by a number of contradictions. Domestically, the July 2009 unrest suggests that China's long-standing approach to Xinjiang is at risk of failure due to the contradictions inherent to the logic that underpins Beijing's strategy. Regionally, Beijing faces a contradiction between its growing influence with the governments of Central Asia and the ambivalent attitude of Central Asian publics towards China. Internationally, the major implication of the July unrest has been to signal the internationalisation of the Uyghur issue whereby it has become a significant irritant in Beijing's relations with a number of major Western states, including the USA and Australia. It has been Beijing's own approach to Xinjiang domestically and its handling of the Uyghur issue in its diplomacy that has contributed to the internationalisation of the issue.

The violent riots of 5 July 2009 in Ürümqi, the capital of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, caused the deaths of 184 people and seriously injured over one thousand.² The immediate cause of this event was an incident over a week before at a toy factory far to the east in Shaoguan, Guangdong Province, where Han Chinese workers turned on Uyghur migrant co-workers and beat two to death and seriously injured 61 on the basis of a rumour that some Uyghurs had raped Han girls. Reports and images of this violence spread to Xinjiang via the internet, including the posting of a video of the incident on You Tube.³ This proved to be the spark for the 5 July demonstration and subsequent violence in which Uyghurs attacked Han Chinese businesses and individual Han Chinese on the streets in scenes reminiscent of events in Lhasa, Tibet, last year. Significant numbers of Ürümqi's Han population then took to the streets on 6 July, many of them crudely armed, vandalising Uyghur businesses, attacking Uyghurs and chanting 'Smash Uyghurs!' before being dispersed by the

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² 'Fatalities may climb in Urumqi', *China Daily*, 13 July 2009, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2009xinjiangriot/2009-07/13/content_8417973.htm

³ 'Urumqi Tense, Quiet after Violence', *Radio Free Asia*, 6 July 2009, <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/riots-07052009153209.html>

security forces.⁴ Simmering ethnic tension has continued in the months since. On 5 and 6 September there were large protests by Han Chinese in Ürümqi demanding action against alleged syringe attacks by Uyghurs. The protests were forcibly broken up by police and resulted in the deaths of up to five people. The latest unrest has also prompted calls for the resignations of senior officials including Xinjiang's long-serving Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Chairman Wang Lequan.⁵

The Ürümqi violence and its aftermath led to five government responses. First, the security forces clamped down hard, arresting close to 1500 Uyghur men in connection to the riots and deploying a major police and army presence in the city. Second, in what is now a customary refrain regarding any unrest in Xinjiang, officials blamed 'hostile external forces' for the events in Ürümqi. In particular, Chinese officials excoriated US-based exiled Uyghur activist Rebiya Kadeer and the Munich-based World Uyghur Congress (WUC) for orchestrating it. Third, Beijing forcefully reiterated that Xinjiang is an 'integral' part of the 'motherland'.⁶ Fourth, Beijing has also sacked the Ürümqi CCP secretary, Li Zhi, and Ürümqi's police chief, Liu Yaohua, but not Wang Lequan.⁷ Finally, the authorities also paid 200,000 yuan (US \$29,282) in compensation to the families of Han victims of the Urumqi violence.⁸

This response to the unrest in Xinjiang is somewhat incongruous given the current

⁴ Edward Wong, 'New Protests in Western China after Clashes', *New York Times*, 8 July 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/08/world/asia/08china.html?hpw=&pagewanted=print> & 'Is China Fraying?', *The Economist*, 9 July 2009, http://www.economist.com/displaystory.cfm?story_id=13988479

⁵ 'China threatens punishment for rumour-mongering' *Reuters*, 7 September 2009, <http://www.reuters.com/articlePrint?articleId=USPEK28351> & Kathrin Hille, 'All Eyes on Regional Official After Latest Unrest in Western China', *The Washington Post*, 7 September 2009, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/09/06/AR2009090602344.html>

⁶ 'Rebiya not entitled to represent Uyghur people: former Xinjiang chief', *China Daily*, 11 July 2009, http://www2.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2009xinjiangriot/2009-07/11/content_8416140.htm

⁷ 'China, Xinjiang chief survives political firestorm', *Associated Press*, 7 September 2009, <http://www.google.com/hostednews/ap/article/ALeqM5j794twyjYyjeOIdsKWwzCUhsgvUAD9AHTI680>

⁸ 'Bereaved Families to Receive Compensation after UrumqiRiot', *Xinhua*, 10 July 2009, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2009-07/10/content_11686429.htm

status of Chinese power in Xinjiang. Indeed, in 2009 China's position in Xinjiang is more secure than at any previous time in the sixty year history of the PRC. China's sovereignty over Xinjiang is not challenged by any other state, territorial disputes with its Central Asian neighbours have largely been settled, Xinjiang-Central Asian trade is blossoming and Xinjiang has experienced substantial economic development. Despite all of this, Beijing confronts a growing international profile for the Uyghur issue and its ostensible leader, Rebiya Kadeer.

Beijing's handling of the Xinjiang and Uyghur issues at the domestic, regional and international levels is characterised by a number of contradictions. Domestically, the unrest suggests that China's longstanding approach to Xinjiang is at risk of failure due to the contradictions inherent in the logic that underpins Beijing's strategy. From Beijing's perspective, control of Xinjiang since the early 1990s has been built upon accelerating economic growth and development in order to placate the region's non-Han ethnic groups. Yet, this has only been able to occur, in the authorities' view, so long as security and control has been resolutely maintained. However, this circular logic has proved to be fraught with two major contradictions – the program of development has arguably aggravated the Uyghurs' sense of disenfranchisement while simultaneously generating the Han Chinese population's resentment against the state for its perceived favouring of ethnic minorities. These contradictions look set to cause not only further Uyghur unrest but also an increase in inter-ethnic tension or violence between Uyghur and Han communities in Xinjiang.

Regionally, the Xinjiang and Uyghur issues have throughout the last two decades been of increasing salience in China's diplomacy in Central Asia. In particular, they

were important drivers of China's efforts in establishing the 'Shanghai Five' grouping of China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in 1996 and the evolution of this grouping into the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) in 2001. China has used its growing strategic and economic weight in Central Asia to persuade the governments of the Central Asian states, both bilaterally and multilaterally through the SCO, to support its position on Xinjiang and the Uyghur issue. However, the growth of Chinese power and influence in Central Asia has also been coupled with an increasingly ambivalent and even negative perception of China amongst the publics of the various Central Asian states and this has been reinforced by the recent unrest in Xinjiang. Thus, Beijing faces a contradiction between its growing influence with the governments of Central Asia and the simultaneous tarnishing of its image in the wider population of the region.

Internationally, the major implication of the July unrest has been to signal the internationalisation of the Uyghur issue so that it has become a significant irritant in Beijing's relations with a number of major Western states, including the USA and Australia. While a number of geopolitical changes in the international system over the past three decades have contributed to this, it has arguably been Beijing's own approach to Xinjiang domestically, and its handling of the Uyghur issue in its diplomacy, that have contributed to the internationalisation of the issue. In particular, China's portrayal of Uyghurs as 'terrorists' since the attacks of 9/11 and the demonisation of Rebiya Kadeer in more recent times have resulted in the generation of a much higher international profile for the Uyghur and Xinjiang issues. However, the same two factors have also been important domestically in framing the issue of

Uyghur opposition in distinctly nationalistic terms, increasing the potential for future inter-ethnic violence in Xinjiang.

Xinjiang, the Great Western Development and the Contradictions of China's 'Manifest Destiny'

Ever since Xinjiang was 'peacefully liberated' by the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in 1949, China's approach to the region has been defined by one over-arching goal – to integrate Xinjiang with China. This has been a quest not only to consolidate China's territorial control and sovereignty over the region but to absorb, politically, economically and culturally, the various non-Han ethnic groups of Xinjiang into the 'unitary, multi-ethnic state' of the PRC. In this regard it is an inherently imperial project. This imperative has been informed by both geopolitics and history. Indeed, despite China's contemporary claim that Xinjiang has been 'an inseparable part of the unitary multi-ethnic Chinese nation' since the Han dynasty (206 BCE–24CE), the reality is that it was often remained beyond Chinese dominion. Indeed, the geopolitical position of the region as a 'Eurasian crossroad' combined with the ethno-cultural dominance of Turkic and Mongol peoples to result in only intermittent periods of Chinese predominance and control.⁹ It has only been since the Qing conquest of Xinjiang in the mid-eighteenth century that China-based states have been able to consolidate their control over the region for an extended period. From the early nineteenth to the middle of the twentieth century Xinjiang experienced a significant number of rebellions/independence movements by the Turkic-Muslim peoples, often with significant external influence from Central Asia and/or the Soviet Union.¹⁰

⁹ James A. Millward, *Eurasian Crossroads: A History of Xinjiang* (NY: Columbia University Press, 2007).

¹⁰ For example see Andrew D. W. Forbes, *Warlords and Muslims: A Political History of Republican Sinkiang, 1912–1949* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 168–170.

However, China became more concerned regarding the security of Xinjiang with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 due to the convergence of external dynamics such as the Islamic revival in neighbouring Central Asia and Afghanistan and internal dynamics associated with China's post-1978 reform era. In Xinjiang these internal dynamics stemmed from an initial 'liberalisation' and 'reform' of the state's approach to the region, particularly toward ethnic minority religious and cultural practices.¹¹ Ultimately, such 'liberalisation' generated increasing demands by ethnic minorities for greater political autonomy and contributed to a wave of ethnic unrest in Xinjiang toward the end of the 1980s.¹² China's strategy to manage this unrest has rested upon the development of a 'double-opening' approach: to simultaneously integrate Xinjiang with Central Asia and China proper in economic terms and to establish security and cooperation with China's Central Asian neighbors.¹³

Ultimately this strategy has been underpinned by a circular logic. For China, security and control of Xinjiang was increasingly perceived from the early 1990s onward as reliant upon accelerating economic growth and development in order to win the acquiescence of the region's non-Han ethnic groups to ongoing Chinese rule. Yet, this could only occur in the authorities' view, if security and control were resolutely maintained, as demonstrated by the assertion of the autonomous region's chairman in the mid-1990s, for example, that, 'we must use economic development to maintain stability, and on the other hand, we must use political stability to guarantee economic

¹¹ Gaye Christoffersen, 'Xinjiang and the Great Islamic Circle: The Impact of Transnational Forces on Chinese Regional Economic Planning', *China Quarterly*, no. 133 (1993):136.

¹² Michael Clarke, 'Xinjiang in the "Reform" Era, 1978–91: The Political and Economic Dynamics of Dengist Integration', *Issues and Studies* 43, no. 2 (June 2007):39–92.

¹³ See Ibid and Michael Clarke, 'Xinjiang and China's Foreign Relations with Central Asia, 1991–2001: Across the "Domestic-Foreign Frontier"?', *Asian Ethnicity*4, no. 2 (June 2003):217–21.

development'.¹⁴ Thus, security within Xinjiang was to be achieved by economic growth, while economic growth was to be assured by the reinforcement of the state's instruments of political and social control, which in turn was to be achieved by opening the region to Central Asia. Importantly, the economic opening to Central Asia was to provide Beijing with a significant element of leverage to induce Central Asian states to aid it in its quest to secure Xinjiang against Uyghur 'separatism' into the 2000s.

This logic has continued to inform China's approach into the twenty-first century, although it is now framed under the rubric of the Great Western Development or *Xibu da kaifa* (GWD) campaign. The question of Xinjiang's economic development assumed national importance under the GWD with the region envisaged to become an industrial and agricultural base and a trade and energy corridor for the national economy.¹⁵ While this campaign is a nationwide one, its operation in Xinjiang reflects the intensification of the longstanding state-building policies in the region. Domestically, the question of Xinjiang's economic development assumed national importance with the central government's launching of the GWD in 2000. This plan envisages the creation of Xinjiang as an industrial and agricultural base and a trade and energy corridor for the national economy.¹⁶ This goal can only be achieved with the development of greater interaction and cooperation between China and the Central Asian states – a point underlined by Chinese policy which has sought to develop a new 'Continental Eurasian land-bridge' that will link not only the major economies of

¹⁴ 'Xinjiang Chairman Cautions against Ethnic Splittism', *Urumqi Xinjiang Ribao*, 21 April 1996, *China Daily Report*, FBIS-CHI-96-097, 17 May 1996, 57.

¹⁵ Nicolas Becquelin, 'Staged Development in Xinjiang', *The China Quarterly*, no. 178 (June 2004): 358–78.

¹⁶ Nicolas Becquelin, 'Staged Development in Xinjiang', *The China Quarterly*, no. 178 (June 2004): 358–78.

Europe, East Asia and South Asia but also enmesh Xinjiang with China.¹⁷ State investment in regions targeted by the GWD for such infrastructure developments amounted to 1.3 trillion yuan (\$190 billion) in 2007 and Beijing has allocated a further 438 billion yuan (\$64 billion) for 2008/2009.¹⁸ Much of this investment in Xinjiang has been channelled to large infrastructure projects, such as building highways, power plants, telecommunications networks, oil and gas extraction and the construction of pipelines.¹⁹ Xinjiang's own oil and gas resources are substantial, with the region's production of oil accounting for 12.7% of the national total in 2004 while its production of gas accounted for 14% of the national total.²⁰ Perhaps more important than Xinjiang's own oil and gas is the role that it is playing as an 'energy junction' between Central Asia, South Asia and East Asia.²¹

This points toward what has arguably been the major shift in China's approach to Xinjiang since the foundation of the PRC in 1949. Although the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 removed a long-feared threat to the security of Xinjiang, it nonetheless presented China with a new set of challenges, including the uncertain prospect of

¹⁷ See Michael Clarke, "Making the Crooked Straight": China's Grand Strategy of Peaceful Rise and its Central Asian Dimension', *Asian Security* 4, no. 2 (Spring 2008):107–142.

¹⁸ Christian Le Miere, 'China's Western Front: Can Beijing Bring Order to its Restive Provinces?', *Foreign Affairs* (August 2009), <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/65223/christian-le-miere/chinas-western-front>

¹⁹ See Calla Weimer, 'The Economy of Xinjiang', in *Xinjiang: China's Muslim Borderland* (Armonk, NY; M. E. Sharpe 2004), ed. S. Frederick Starr, 188, Susann Handke, *Securing and Fuelling China's Ascent to Power: The Geopolitics of the Chinese-Kazakh Oil Pipeline*, (The Hague, Clingendael International Energy Programme: Netherlands Institute of International Relations, 2006), Tarique Niazi, "China's March on South Asia", *China Brief* 5, no. 9 (26 April 2005), http://jamestown.org/china_brief/article.php?articleid=2373088&printthis=1 and John W. Garver, *China and Iran: Ancient Partners in a Post-Imperial World* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006), 288–291

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 53.

²¹ See Susann Handke, *Securing and Fuelling China's Ascent to Power: The Geopolitics of the Chinese-Kazakh Oil Pipeline*, (The Hague, Clingendael International Energy Programme: Netherlands Institute of International Relations, 2006), Tarique Niazi, 'China's March on South Asia', *China Brief* 5, no. 9 (26 April 2005), http://jamestown.org/china_brief/article.php?articleid=2373088&printthis=1 and John W. Garver, *China and Iran: Ancient Partners in a Post-Imperial World* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006), 288–291.

dealing with five independent Central Asian states and a regional Islamic revival. Both of these seemed fraught with danger from Beijing's perspective given that a wave of unrest had erupted in Xinjiang in 1990–91, including an Islamist-inspired rebellion in the township of Baren in the south-west of the province that raised the spectre of 'hostile external forces' and 'national splittists' colluding to challenge Chinese control.²² China's response to such challenges has been to diverge from its traditional approach of attempting to isolate Xinjiang from Central Asian influences. This attempt to isolate Xinjiang had, as Rudelson observed, worked against the 'geographic template' of the region which 'produced axes of outside cultural influence that penetrated the region' determining that the major sub-region's of the province were in fact oriented 'outward' toward the proximate external civilisations, be they Indian, Central Asian or Chinese.²³ China's approach to the region since 1991 has, however, been underpinned by a realisation that Xinjiang's 'geographic template' need not be an obstacle to its integration with China but rather an asset in the prosecution of this enduring Chinese project.

Hand in hand with this new thrust for 'opening up the west' of China there has been a shift in emphasis in how the state has framed its approach to such regions as Xinjiang and their ethnic minorities. One of the great themes of twentieth century China's history has been the struggle to establish a coherent national form that would not only consolidate China into a modern nation-state but also protect the territorial boundaries inherited from the Qing dynasty. In this regard, the two dominant political movements of the twentieth century – the Guomindang and the Chinese Communist Party – based their strategies to consolidate the post-imperial state on the basis of Han racial

²² See Michael Clarke, 'Xinjiang in the "Reform" Era':76–82.

²³ Justin Rudelson, *Oasis Identities: Uyghur Nationalism along China's Silk Road*, (NY: Columbia University Press, 1997): 39–41.

nationalism and Leninist multiculturalism respectively.²⁴ Unlike the Soviet Union, however, the PRC did not maintain the ‘fiction’ of a multi-national union with a theoretical right to national self-determination, but implemented a system of ‘national regional autonomy’ for the fifty-five non-Han ethnic groups officially recognised by the state after 1949.²⁵

In the CCP’s construction, the various non-Han ethnic groups could only achieve their own social revolutions within a unified Chinese state and under the leadership of the Han-dominated CCP. Indeed, soon after establishing the PRC, the CCP adopted five guiding principles for its handling of the ethnic minority issue: (1) no region would be permitted to secede from the PRC; (2) both ‘Han chauvinism’ (i.e. assertions of Han cultural superiority) and ‘local nationalism’ (i.e. separatism) would be opposed; (3) autonomous organs of government would be established in regions predominantly populated by minority peoples; (4) equality between nationalities, freedom of religion, and the preservation and development of minority languages and customs would be guaranteed; and (5) the central government pledged to aid in the development of ethnic minority regions.²⁶ While the CCP’s implementation of each of these principles varied with the ideological vicissitudes and campaigns of the Maoist era, they nonetheless remained entrenched in the party’s discourse on the minority issue. However, as Liu notes, the effect was that plurality existed only in a cultural sense

²⁴ For the 1911–1949 period, see John Fitzgerald, *Awakening China: Politics, Culture and Class in the Nationalist Revolution*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996) and for the CCP’s post-1949 approach see Colin Mackerras, *China’s Minorities: Integration and Modernization in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

²⁵ Walker Connor, *The National Question in Marxist–Leninist Theory and Strategy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 38.

²⁶ See Henry Guenter Schwarz, *Policies and Administration of Minority Areas in Northwest China and Inner Mongolia, 1949–1959* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1962), 100–101 and Linda Benson and Ingvar Svanberg, *China’s Last Nomads: The History and Culture of China’s Kazaks* (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1998), 89

while the ‘political unity’ of the PRC remained Han-centred.²⁷ Under Deng Xiaoping and his successors, the CCP has arguably tended to emphasise its commitment to the economic development and modernisation of China’s ethnic minorities, often to the detriment of its commitment to protect the cultural plurality of the PRC.²⁸ This has had two major effects in the context of Xinjiang. The first relates to changing Han conceptions of Xinjiang and predominant attitudes toward non-Han groups such as the Uyghur. The second relates to the impact of this discourse on the state’s approach to the region’s ethnic minorities.

Under the GWD in particular the balance the CCP had long-maintained between cultural plurality and Han-centred political unity has shifted in favour of a discourse that envisages ‘China as a transformative force of civilisation’ with the ‘primitive’ and ‘underdeveloped’ periphery, such as Xinjiang, as its subject.²⁹ Some observers have suggested that this is akin to a Chinese version of ‘manifest destiny’ whereby Xinjiang, with its relatively untapped natural resources, wide open spaces and, by Chinese standards, sparse population is simply awaiting the ‘spiritual impulse of the Chinese nation’ to transform it.³⁰ This is reflected most clearly in the official language of the GWD which embeds ‘ethnic minorities in an exotic aura’ and ‘localize[s] them in one geographic area, the West, thus demarcating them as

²⁷ See Xiaoyuan Liu, *Frontier Passages: Ethnopolitics and the Rise of Chinese Communism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 159–172.

²⁸ See Elena Barabantseva, ‘From the Language of Class to the Rhetoric of Development: Discourses of ‘Nationality’ and ‘Ethnicity’ in China’, *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 17, No. 56, (August 2008):577 and Colin Mackerras, *China’s Ethnic Minorities and Globalisation* (London: Routledge, 2004).

²⁹ Magnus Fiskesjo, ‘Rescuing the Empire: Chinese Nation-Building in the Twentieth Century’, *European Journal of East Asian Studies*5, No. 1 (2006):15.

³⁰ See Becquelin, ‘Staged Development in Xinjiang’, Matthew D. Moneyhan, ‘China’s Great Western Development Project in Xinjiang: Economic Palliative or Political Trojan Horse?’, *Denver Journal of International Law and Policy*31, no. 3 (Winter 2002/2003):491–519.

localized elements of the Chinese nation state'.³¹ The 'West' is officially constituted not only by geographically western regions such as Xinjiang and Tibet but also autonomous regions in Guangxi and Jilin, demonstrating that it is a political, economic and ideological designation.³²

These disparate regions are united in the official imagination as they are conceived of as economically under-developed, lacking in infrastructure, and predominantly 'ethnic'. A June 2000 article by the head of the State Ethnic Affairs Commission, Li Dezhu, clearly exhibited this change to a 'developmentalist' approach to solve China's ethnic minority issue. For Li, the key to 'solving' China's 'ethnic question' lies in accelerating the development of the 'economy' and 'culture' of the ethnic minorities. The rationale of economic development as a cure-all for China's ethnic problems was clearly expressed:

So the final solution for these problems lies in developing social productivity in areas of minority nationalities. The strategy to promote social and economic development of western China is a fundamental way to speed up the development of minority nationalities, and *a necessary choice to solve China's nationality problems under new historical circumstances*.³³

Significantly, for the subsequent discussion of the trajectory of Chinese policy in Xinjiang, Li also elucidated the state's conviction that 'national unity' and 'development' are inter-linked, arguing that the GWD, 'will provide the material foundation for strengthening national unity and social stability; while national unity

³¹ Elena Barabantseva, 'Development as Localization: Ethnic Minorities in China's Official Discourse on the Western Development Project', *Critical Asian Studies* 41, no. 2 (2009):228.

³² See David S. Goodman, 'The Campaign to 'Open Up the West': National, Provincial-level and Local Perspectives', *The China Quarterly* 178 (June 2004):320, Barabantseva, 'Development as Localization', 238 and Sines, 'Civilizing the Middle Kingdom's Wild West', 6.

³³ Li Dezhu, 'Xibu Da Kaifa yu Minzu Wenti' [Large-scale Development of Western China and China's nationality problem], *Qiushi* [Seeking Truth], 1 June 2000, in FBIS-CHI-2000-0601, 2 June 2000. My emphasis.

and social stability will create a favourable environment for implementing the strategy'.³⁴ However, it also acknowledged that the process of accelerated economic development and integration entailed by the GWD could not only contribute to inter-ethnic tension but also provide an opportunity for external 'hostile forces' to meddle in China:

On the other hand, implementing the strategy may bring about new issues and problems which might challenge national unity and social stability. Implementing the strategy will lead to further opening-up. *Overseas hostile forces will probably take this opportunity to penetrate China. We must be highly vigilant on this and take effective measures to safeguard national unity and social stability in order to smoothly implement the strategy.*³⁵

This perception of a relationship between internal challenges to 'national unity' and the penetration of external influences has been a defining anxiety for Beijing in the context of Xinjiang. Yet, as we shall see below, the reliance on economic modernisation and development as an instrument to neutralise ethnic minority dissatisfaction with Chinese rule fails to account for the fact the ideology of 'developmentalism' that has engulfed Xinjiang has contributed to political, economic and cultural marginalisation of the Uyghur, providing the conditions not only for Uyghur unrest but also inter-ethnic tensions.

Yet the reliance on economic modernisation and development as an instrument to neutralise ethnic minority dissatisfaction fails to account for the fact the ideology of 'developmentalism' that has engulfed Xinjiang has contributed to political, economic and cultural marginalisation of the Uyghur, providing the conditions not only for Uyghur unrest but also inter-ethnic tensions due to a change in Han Chinese

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid. My emphasis.

perceptions of Xinjiang stimulated by the GWD. In this latter respect, while Xinjiang was long considered by most Han to be a barren, isolated cultural backwater that served as a place of exile, recent Han migrants are increasingly envisaging the region as a 'land of opportunity'.³⁶ In addition, Han in Xinjiang are increasingly prone to be dismissive of Uyghur claims to disadvantage pointing to the government's preferential treatment of minorities – from exemption from the one child-policy to affirmative action-type quotas to tertiary institutions and political/administrative positions – and to the economic development and modernisation that Beijing has brought to the region.³⁷ The prevailing attitude, and one that was borne out during the unrest in early July, was that Uyghurs are ungrateful 'natives' treated too leniently by the state. Indeed, one Han demonstrator on the streets after the initial unrest asserted that the Han Chinese population had simply 'run out of patience' with the Uyghurs.³⁸

Such perceptions of Xinjiang often conflict with reality. For example, the notion that Xinjiang has 'untapped' resources and abundant land is undermined by the fact that most of the arable land in Xinjiang is already under cultivation and water resources are increasingly scarce, while there has been significant desertification due to urbanization, extensive irrigation and land reclamation projects spurred by increased Han settlement since 1949.³⁹ While economic stimulus has been provided by the direction of state investment toward large-scale infrastructure or mineral extraction

³⁶ Amy Kardos, 'A New "Frontier Thesis" for the Northwest Chinese Borderland? The Reinvention of Xinjiang from a Place of Chinese Exile to a Land of Opportunity', *Central Eurasian Studies Review* 7, no. 2 (Fall 2008):7–12.

³⁷ See Barry Sautman, 'Preferential Policies for Ethnic Minorities in China: The Case of Xinjiang', *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 4, no. 1 (1998), 86–118.

³⁸ Quentin Sommerville, 'Ethnic Mobs Overrun Chinese City', *BBC News Online*, 7 July 2009, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pt/fr/-/2/hi/asia-pacific/8139587.stm>

³⁹ See Antoine Blua, 'China's Mounting Influence – Xinjiang's Thirst Threatens Kazakh Water Resources', *Eurasianet*, 24 November 2004, <http://www.eurasianet.org>, Becquelin, 'Staged Development in Xinjiang', 366 and 'China Moves Farmers as Tarim River Waters Dwindle', *Radio Free Asia* 3 April 2006, http://www.rfa.org/english/uyghur/2006/04/03/uyghur_tarimriver/

projects it has also led to competition for resources and jobs in which the region's ethnic minorities are at a disadvantage due to lower levels of education, particularly given their generally lower proficiency in Mandarin.⁴⁰ Uyghur marginalisation is also reflected in their lack of representation in the Xinjiang CCP, with ethnic minorities comprising around a third of party members. Despite the fact that China's policy on regional autonomy explicitly states that the head of an autonomous region, prefecture or county must be a member of the ethnic group exercising autonomy, none of the first Party secretaries at any level of the party in the region are from an ethnic minority.⁴¹

Such political and economic marginalisation has also been accompanied by a gradual demographic marginalisation of the Uyghur. While Han colonisation of the region has been a constant element of the state's strategy for integrating Xinjiang, it has accelerated since 1990. Indeed, the Han population rose from 5.32 million or 37.6% of the region's population in 1990 to 7.49 million or 40.6% of the population in 2000.⁴² Significantly, the figures from 2000 did not account for the substantial 'floating population' of some 790, 000 Han seasonal migrants seeking employment in the energy and cotton industries which would have taken the Han population to close

⁴⁰ See Calla Wiemer, 'The Economy of Xinjiang', in *Xinjiang: China's Muslim Borderland*, (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2004), ed. S. Frederick Starr, 186-188, David Bachman, 'Making Xinjiang Safe for the Han? Contradictions and Ironies of Chinese Governance in China's Northwest', in *Governing China's Multiethnic Frontiers* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004), ed. Morris Rossabi, 161-173, and Robert Moeller, China's Campaign to Open the West: Xinjiang and the Center, Masters Thesis, University of Pittsburgh, November 2006.

⁴¹ Colin Mackerras, 'Why Terrorism Bypasses China's West', *Asia Times* 23 April 2006 <http://www.atimes.com> and Becquelin, 'Staged Development', 363.

⁴² See Colin Mackerras, 'Xinjiang at the Turn of the Century: The Causes of Separatism', *Central Asian Survey* 20, no. 3 (2001):291-293 and Colin Mackerras, 'Ethnicity in China', 8.

to 8.28 million or near parity with the total Uyghur population in 2000 which stood at 8.345 million.⁴³

Two aspects of Uyghur culture – religion and language – have also been closely managed by the state. The CCP has always exhibited a concern to manage the Islamic faith of the Uyghur. The state’s approach has been characterised by alternating periods of ‘soft’ and ‘hard’ policies toward religious and cultural expression. The ‘soft’ approach has been characterised by a relative tolerance and even encouragement of institutionalised Islam when it is perceived as necessary to gain the acquiescence of the Uyghur population. The ‘hard’ policies in contrast have been characterised by campaigns against religious education outside of state-sanctioned institutions, ‘illegal’ mosque construction, the institution of bans on mosque attendance by persons under eighteen years of age, and the ‘re-education’ and ‘reform’ of religious leaders when the state perceives Islam to be a threat to security.⁴⁴ The state also identifies censorship of cultural and media circles as an important instrument of social control. This has arguably been reinforced since 2001, with the authorities limiting the use of Uyghur language in education and the increased censoring of Uyghur literature dealing with political or cultural history.⁴⁵

The close link between Islam and Uyghur identity has meant that any attempt by the state to regulate religious practice and expression is a cause of resentment for the

⁴³ See Becquelin, ‘Stage Development in Xinjiang’, p. 369-370, ‘SW China farmers leave for border region for ‘cotton exodus’, *People’s Daily*, 22 August 2006, <http://www.peopledaily.com.cn> and Mackerras, ‘Ethnicity in China’, 8. All figures are taken from the PRC’s 2000 census.

⁴⁴ Graham Fuller and Jonathan Lipman, ‘Islam in Xinjiang’, in *Xinjiang: China’s Muslim Borderland* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe 2004), ed. S. Fredrick Starr, 333-334

⁴⁵ Michael Dillon, ‘Uyghur Language and Culture Under Threat in Xinjiang’, *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, 14 August 2003, http://www.cacianalyst.org/view_article.php?articleid=23 and Amnesty International, *People’s Republic of China: China’s Anti-Terrorism Legislation and Repression in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region*, March 22, 2002, <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/ENGASA170102002>.

Uyghur and is often perceived as an attempt to weaken Uyghur identity. For the state, however, heightened Islamic consciousness, if not managed, is perceived to be at the root of outbreaks of opposition and violence.⁴⁶ Since 9/11 China has routinely characterised and denounced overt signs of Uyghur opposition or unrest as ‘terrorism’. This has served two major functions. Internationally, Beijing has sought to leverage the international community’s concern over Islamic extremism of the Al Qaeda variety to lessen criticism of its handling of Uyghur dissent in Xinjiang. Domestically, Beijing has deployed a discourse that equates calls for greater autonomy from the Uyghur with ‘terrorism’ in order to delegitimise dissent and mobilise public support for its suppression.⁴⁷ While Xinjiang and the Uyghur have long posed problems for Beijing, it has only been since the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington on 11 September 2001 that China has chosen to go on the diplomatic ‘front foot’ on these issues.

The Uyghur Issue and China’s Diplomacy in Central Asia and the Islamic World

Geopolitics has always played a crucial role in determining the relationship between China and Xinjiang. This is no less the case when addressing the issue of the importance of the Uyghur for China’s foreign policy. While an East Turkestan Republic was proclaimed by Uyghur and Kazakh nationalists in Xinjiang in 1945 with major Soviet support, the geopolitical interests of the Soviet Union intervened at a crucial point to ensure it was dissolved and incorporated into the PRC in 1949.⁴⁸ From

⁴⁶ For the alternation of the ‘soft’ and ‘hard’ approaches see, Yitzhak Shicor, ‘Blow Up: Internal and External Challenges of Uyghur Separatism and Islamic Radicalism to Chinese Rule in Xinjiang’, *Asian Affairs: An American Review* 32, no. 2 (Summer 2005):126–129.

⁴⁷ See Michael Clarke, ‘China’s “War on Terror” in Xinjiang: Human Security and the Causes of Violent Uighur Separatism’, *Terrorism and Political Violence* 20, no. 2 (2008):271–301.

⁴⁸ For the East Turkestan Republic see David D. Wang, *Under the Soviet Shadow: The Yining Incident. Ethnic Conflicts and International Rivalry in Xinjiang, 1944-1949*, (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1999).

this moment onward Uyghur separatism disappeared from the international spotlight and Beijing purposefully dealt with it as an ‘internal’ question. When it did arise as a factor in its foreign relations, it did so within the context of Beijing’s deteriorating relationship with Moscow. For example, when around 60, 000 Uyghurs and Kazakhs fled the region for Soviet Kazakhstan in 1962 due to famine and persecution in Xinjiang, Moscow subsequently attempted to incite further ethnic minority unrest in order to undermine China’s control of the region, and Moscow gave its tacit approval for the organisation of Uyghur advocacy groups by Uyghur émigré leaders. However, due to the fact that the Soviet Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan contained significant Uyghur populations, Moscow was careful to ensure that such efforts were directed solely at China. Such tacit Soviet support nonetheless contributed to the consolidation of Uyghur ethnic identity which would have important implications in the 1990s and beyond.⁴⁹ Throughout this period official Chinese pronouncements on the issue, such as they were, significantly referred to Uyghur ‘separatism’ in veiled terms, reflecting Beijing’s concern to keep the issue contained. As Sino-Soviet relations improved throughout the 1980s, however, the Uyghur issue once more faded from a position of any prominence in China’s foreign relations.

However, the relative unimportance of the Uyghur issue changed dramatically with the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991. As noted earlier, China’s strategy after the fall of the Soviet Union was to open Xinjiang to Central Asia in order to achieve economic growth and ensure stability and security of its Central Asian frontier. The opening to Central Asia also held the potential for the Uyghur communities in the now independent Central Asian republics to re-establish links with the Uyghurs of

⁴⁹ See Ablet Kamalov, ‘Uyghurs in the Central Asian Republics: Past and Present’, in *China, Xinjiang and Central Asia: History, Transition and Crossborder Interaction into the 21st Century*, (London: Routledge, 2009), eds. Colin Mackerras and Michael Clarke, 117–125.

Xinjiang. Uyghur organisations in the Central Asian republics, particularly Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan in which an estimated 250, 000 Uyghurs resided, proliferated in the early 1990s and resulted in widespread advocacy of greater autonomy for the Uyghurs of Xinjiang.⁵⁰ These two factors combined with a third – concern to resolve border disputes left over from Sino-Soviet acrimony – to spur China to rapidly establish relationships with the independent Central Asian states. Indeed, all three major Chinese interests – economic ties, separatism and border demarcation – were explicitly raised by Chinese premier, Li Peng, on his diplomatic tour of Central Asian capitals in April 1994, and were central to the establishment in 1996 of the multilateral talks between China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan (thereafter called the ‘Shanghai Five’ or S-5).⁵¹

The inclusion and ongoing importance of the issue of ‘separatism’ within the multilateral framework of the S-5 reflected solely Chinese interests as none of its partners in these groupings themselves face serious separatist challenges. From 1996 to 2000, China succeeded through the S-5 process, and its increasing close bilateral relations with Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, to effectively neutralise Uyghur advocacy organisations in Central Asia. Indeed, the 1998 S-5 joint statement, in a clear reference to such organizations, stated that the member states would not ‘allow their territories to be used for the activities undermining the national sovereignty, security and social order of any of the five countries’. Over the course of the next two years regional developments, including the consolidation of the Taliban in Afghanistan and the intensification of the insurgency of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan in the Ferghana Valley, increased China’s ability to persuade it’s S-5 partners to take a

⁵⁰ Ibid, pp. 123–130.

⁵¹ Keith Martin, ‘China and Central Asia: Between Seduction and Suspicion’, *RFE/RL Research Report*3, no. 25 (24 June 1994):30–32.

stronger stance on what it increasingly termed the ‘three evils’ of ‘separatism, extremism and terrorism’.⁵² These issues became a foundational concern for the S-5’s successor organization, the SCO, when it was inaugurated on 14 June 2001 in Shanghai. One of the SCO’s first acts was to adopt the ‘Shanghai Covenant on the Suppression of Terrorism, Separatism and Religious Extremism’, which declared the organization’s intent to establish a regional response to the perceived threat of radical Islam to their states.⁵³

The impact of 9/11 was in many respects contradictory for Beijing. On the negative side of the equation the ‘tilt’ of the majority of Central Asian republics toward the USA after the invasion of Afghanistan undoubtedly undermined China’s diplomatic gains in the region since the mid-1990s, particularly the SCO. For example, in 2001 and 2002 all of the Central Asian states except Turkmenistan signed military cooperation and base access agreements with the USA, as well as receiving significant economic aid packages.⁵⁴ Over the intervening seven years, however, Beijing has been able to reassert its role in the region, both bilaterally and also multilaterally through the SCO. A key element of this process has been its promotion of a normative framework for inter-state relations in Central Asia, particularly via the SCO, which privileges the maintenance of ‘stability’ and non-interference in ‘internal affairs’ of member states.⁵⁵ This has been reflected in the establishment and operation of the SCO’s ‘Regional Anti-Terrorism’ centre in Tashkent (Uzbekistan), the SCO’s joint

⁵² Anthony Davis, ‘A Marriage of Convenience: Why China is Cozying Up to Central Asia’, *Asiaweek*25, no. 36 (1999) and Ahmed Rashid, *Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press). These dynamics also persuaded Uzbekistan to join the grouping in 2000.

⁵³ Marc Lanteigne, ‘*In Media Res*: The Development of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization as a Security Community’, *Pacific Affairs*79, no. 4:605–622

⁵⁴ Boris Rumer, ‘The Powers in Central Asia’, *Survival*44, no. 3 (2002):59–60.

⁵⁵ Thomas Ambrosio, ‘Catching the “Shanghai Spirit”’: How the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Promotes Authoritarian Norms in Central Asia’, *Europe-Asia Studies*60, no. 8, (2008): 1321–1344.

annual military exercises since 2003, and the organization's response to the 'Tulip Revolution' in Kyrgyzstan and the Andijan Incident in Uzbekistan in March and May 2005 respectively.⁵⁶ China's success in embedding the normative values of 'stability' and 'non-interference' within the SCO was best illustrated by the fact that Russian President Dmitry Medvedev attempted, but ultimately failed, to get the SCO's unconditional support for its incursion into Georgia at the August 2008 summit meeting in Dushanbe, Tajikistan.⁵⁷ Moreover, since 2001, through bilateral security agreements with key Central Asian states (e.g. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan) and police/security cooperation through the SCO China has successfully extradited a significant number of alleged Uyghur 'separatists and terrorists' from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan.⁵⁸

While Beijing has been successful in convincing the governments of the Central Asian states to accept its characterisation of the Uyghurs as 'terrorists, extremists and separatists', the same can not be said for the general population of key Central Asian republics. In recent years the Uyghur population in these states has been very critical of the Kazakh and Kyrgyz governments for 'colluding' with China in extraditing alleged Uyghur 'terrorists'. The July unrest in Xinjiang has also prompted a wave of Uyghur protest in these states, while both governments have remained circumspect in their responses to the Ürümqi violence.⁵⁹ The cause of the Kazakh and Kyrgyz

⁵⁶ Michael Clarke, 'China and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization: The Dynamics of "New Regionalism," "Vassalization," and Geopolitics in Central Asia', in *The New Central Asia: The Regional Impact of International Actors* (London: World Scientific and Imperial College Press, 2010), ed. Emilian Kavalski.

⁵⁷ S. Farizova, 'Allies Let Him Down', *Kommersant*, 29 August 2008 and Stephen Blank, 'The Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Georgian Crisis', *China Brief*, Vol. 8, No. 17, (2008).

⁵⁸ Clarke, 'Widening the Net'.

⁵⁹ Maria Golovnina, 'Central Asian Uighurs Harbor Revenge for Xinjiang Kinfolk', *Reuters*, 16 July 2009, <http://www.reuters.com/articlePrint?articleId=USTRE56F2EU20090716> and 'Central Asia Uighurs Look On with Fury at Bloodshed', *ABS-CBN News Online*, 9 July 2009, <http://www.abs-cbnnews.com/print/619995>

government's subdued responses to the Xinjiang unrest not only stems from their own interest in maintaining domestic stability but also from their countries' SCO and economic relationships with China. In this latter respect it should be noted that China accounts for around 34 per cent of Kyrgyzstan's foreign trade and 15 per cent of Kazakhstan's, while Chinese companies have expanded significantly into these countries.⁶⁰ Therefore, it is not surprising that a Uyghur protest organized by the Uyghur Friendship Society Ittipak in the Kyrgyz capital of Bishkek on 10 August 2009 was dispersed by Kyrgyz police and its leaders detained on the basis that Kyrgyz officials did not wish to see Sino-Kyrgyz relations damaged by activities of the Uyghur diaspora.⁶¹

Beyond the Uyghur issue itself, Central Asian publics, especially that of Kazakhstan, remain ambivalent at best and fearful at worst about Chinese intentions in the region. Indeed, according to a 2009 survey Kazakhs are generally concerned about potential Chinese territorial expansion into Central Asia, Chinese demographic expansion into Kazakhstan and Chinese economic domination of Kazakhstan, particularly of its energy sector.⁶² Thus China's government-to-government relations with Central Asia, particularly Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, remain solid from Beijing's perspective. China's image in the publics of these states is, however, tarnished by the perceived ill-treatment of the Uyghurs in Xinjiang and fears regarding Beijing's influence in Central Asia.

⁶⁰ For China's economic relationships with these states see, Sebastian Peyrouse, 'Economic Aspects of Chinese-Central Asia Rapprochement', *Silk Road Paper*, September 2007, 17–20, Sadykzhan Ibraimov, 'China-Central Asia Trade Relations: Economic and Social Patterns', *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly* 7, no. 1 (2009): 47–59 and *Chinese Statistical Yearbook 2008*, Section 17–8, 'Value of Imports and Exports by Country (Region) of Origin/Destination', <http://www.sei.gov.cn/hgjj/yearbook/2008/html/R1708e.htm>

⁶¹ Masud Ali-uul, 'Uighur Demonstration in Kyrgyzstan Ends with Arrest of Leaders', *Central Asia Online*, 13 August 2009, http://centralasiaonline.com/en/articles/090913_arrested_nws/

⁶² Konstantin Syroezhkin, 'Social Perceptions of China and Chinese: A View from Kazakhstan', *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly* 7, no. 1, (2009): 36–45

In the context of the wider Islamic world, however, the Uyghur issue has had only moderate resonance due to the fact that many Islamic states, particularly in the Middle East, increasingly perceive China to be not only a major source of investment and a reliable customer for oil and gas but as a potential foil for US dominance in the region. Indeed, the lack of censure from the wider Islamic world has been remarkable with, for example, Indonesia's ambassador to China stating simply that Jakarta viewed events in Xinjiang as 'China's internal affair'. Meanwhile major Arab states that are usually vociferous advocates for 'repressed' Muslims elsewhere, such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia have remained tight-lipped.⁶³ But, similar to the case of the Central Asian republics, Beijing's success in isolating government-to-government relations from the Uyghur issue has not been matched by a neutralisation of adverse opinion from publics in the Islamic world. While Indonesia, for example, has maintained at an official level the position that Xinjiang is an 'internal affair', societal groups such as the Indonesian Chinese Muslim Association (PITI) and the Muslim-based Prosperous Justice Party (PKS) have openly criticized China's 'brutality' in Xinjiang and called for Muslim 'solidarity' with the Uyghurs.⁶⁴

The only exceptions to this lack of traction for the Uyghur issue in the Islamic world have been Turkey and Iran. The former has throughout recent decades expressed a strong concern for the fate of the Turkic Uyghurs. Indeed, after the fall of the Soviet

⁶³ Chris Zambelis, 'Xinjiang Crackdown and Changing Perceptions of China in the Islamic World?', *The China Brief* 9, no. 16 (5 August 2009):4-7, Moises Naim, 'Mute Muslims: Why Doesn't the Muslim World Speak Up about the Uighurs', *Foreign Policy*, 13 July 2009, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2009/07/13/mute_muslims and Prasanta Kumar Pradhan, 'Why Uighurs Don't Get Support from West Asia?', *IDSIA Strategic Comment*, 24 July 2009, <http://www.idsa.in/publications/stratcomments/PrasantaPradhan240709.htm>

⁶⁴ Ary Hermawan, 'Muslim Nations Told to Help Uighurs', *The Jakarta Post*, 10 July 2009, <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2009/07/10/muslim-nations-told-help-uighurs.html>

Union Turkey mounted a diplomatic offensive in the newly independent Central Asia which also had an impact in Xinjiang. The basis for Turkey's interest in Xinjiang stems from its longstanding ethnic and cultural affinities with the Uyghurs and a perception of them as an 'authentic' Turkic people suffering under Chinese rule.⁶⁵ This sentiment was most recently expressed by Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan when he likened Beijing's treatment of Uyghurs to 'genocide' and called for China to 'abandon its policy of assimilation' in the wake of the Ürümqi unrest.⁶⁶ Meanwhile, Iran's clerical establishment called for the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) to intervene on behalf of the Uyghurs and Ayatollah Jafar Sobhani asserted that Muslims in Xinjiang had been 'mercilessly suppressed' by 'yesterday's communist China and today's capitalist China'. At the official and diplomatic level, however, Iran has been more circumspect in its response, suggesting that the regime is not willing to damage the strong diplomatic, economic, and military relationship that has developed between the two simply in order to gain some prestige in the Islamic world by standing up for the Uyghurs.⁶⁷

The Internationalisation of the Uyghur Issue

While the fall of the Soviet Union was central in establishing the Uyghur issue as an important one for Sino-Central Asian relations, 9/11 and China's response to it have contributed to its elevation to an international issue. However, this has been a contradictory process for Beijing. Although China's immediate post-9/11 portrayal of Uyghur opposition or unrest within Xinjiang as 'terrorism', and exile Uyghur independence or advocacy organizations as in league with 'hostile external forces',

⁶⁵ Yitzhak Shicor, 'Ethno-Diplomacy: The Uyghur Hitch in Sino-Turkish Relations', *Policy Studies* 53, (Washington DC: East-West Center, 2009).

⁶⁶ Philip Bowering, 'The Echoes of Xinjiang', *New York Times*, 14 July 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/15/opinion/15iht-edbowring.html>

⁶⁷ Zambelis, 'Xinjiang Crackdown and Changing Perceptions of China in the Islamic World?', 6-7.

paid some important diplomatic dividends it has in the longer term boomeranged on China in two important ways. First, the ongoing strident denunciations of Uyghur exile organizations, including the Rebiya Kadeer-led WUC, as ‘terrorists’ and ‘extremists’ responsible for assorted outrages in Xinjiang and beyond has begun to lose traction internationally as the alleged linkages between such groups and terrorist organizations have gradually been revealed to be superficial at best.⁶⁸ Second, this has also been accompanied in recent years by an approach which has tended to conceive of Uyghur ‘separatists’ as forming a united and organized front against China, which has culminated in the contemporary focus on Rebiya Kadeer as the ‘leader’ of this movement. Ironically, Beijing arguably created this problem for itself by exiling her after her release from prison in 2005. Moreover, prior to Beijing’s increasing focus on Kadeer, Uyghur diaspora organizations were divided by both geography and strategy.⁶⁹ China’s diplomatic offensive in this respect has therefore been counterproductive as it has raised the Uyghur issue, and the profile of Rebiya Kadeer in particular, to a level of international prominence that was inconceivable prior to 9/11.

Although China as tended to portray Uyghur separatism as ‘terrorism’ and ‘extremism’ since the mid-1990s, it did so in the regional context of Central Asia through either its bilateral relations with states such as Kazakhstan or multilateral relations in the form of the S-5 and SCO. The events of 9/11 in effect persuaded Beijing to make this approach ‘global’. This strategy systematically to present its problems in Xinjiang as intimately connected to the global ‘war on terror’ began with

⁶⁸ See James A. Millward, ‘Violent Separatism in Xinjiang: A Critical Assessment’, *Policy Studies* 6, (Washington: East-West Center, 2004) and Clarke, ‘China’s “War on Terror” in Xinjiang’, 271–301.

⁶⁹ See Yitzhak Shicor, ‘Limping on Two Legs: Uyghur Diaspora Organizations and the Prospects for Eastern Turkestan Independence’, *Central Asia and the Caucasus* 48, no. 6 (2007), <http://www.ca-c.org/journal/2007-06-eng/12.shtml>

China's publication of its first official account of Uyghur separatist 'terrorism' in Xinjiang in January 2002.⁷⁰ This met with some significant success in the context of Sino-US relations, with the US State Department listing the 'East Turkestan Islamic Movement' (ETIM) – a group that China claimed was 'supported and directed' by Osama bin Laden – as an 'international terrorist organization' in September 2002. Chinese claims regarding linkages between groups such as ETIM and Al Qaeda were also given credence by the fact the USA captured 22 Uyghurs in Afghanistan who were subsequently detained at Guantanamo Bay.⁷¹

However, from 2003 onward, this apparent coup for Beijing began to turn sour, as Washington somewhat tortuously attempted to balance its traditional concerns to promote and protect human rights in China with the exigencies of the 'war on terror'. This tortuous path is best reflected in Washington's handling of the Uyghurs at Guantanamo and in its rhetorical support for Uyghur human rights. The first signs of second thoughts within the Bush administration regarding the Uyghur issue came at the end of 2003 when it refused to acknowledge China's issuing of its first list of Uyghur 'terrorist' organisations. This equivocation was underlined in 2004 when controversy broke out within the US over the fate of the Uyghur detainees at Guantanamo, with then Secretary of State Colin Powell declaring in August that the USA would not repatriate them to China in the event of their release due to concerns about their likely treatment. Indeed, in May 2006 when the USA released five of the twenty-two Uyghurs held at Guantanamo they were not repatriated to China but rather

⁷⁰ Information Office of the State Council of the PRC, 'East Turkistan Terrorist Forces Cannot Get Away with Impunity', *People's Daily*, 1 January 2002, http://www.peopledaily.com.cn/200201/21/print200020121_89078.htm

⁷¹ Colin Mackerras, 'Xinjiang and Central Asia since 1990: Views from Beijing and Washington and Sino-American Relations', in *China, Xinjiang and Central Asia: History, Transition and Crossborder Interaction into the 21st Century* (London: Routledge, 2009), eds. Colin Mackerras and Michael Clarke 138–140.

granted asylum in Albania, prompting a swift diplomatic protest by China to both Tirana and Washington.⁷² Despite this, the Bush administration maintained that the seventeen remaining Uyghurs were in fact ‘enemy combatants’ and should not be released. However, in late 2008 a Washington DC circuit judge ruled that the remaining Uyghurs should be freed and resettled in the USA, an outcome that the Bush administration refused to accept. It has subsequently emerged from litigation mounted against the US government by a number of law firms representing the Uyghur detainees that the Bush administration had in fact as early as 2003 designated some of them as ‘non-enemy combatants’. Their release, however, was stymied when the administration re-defined them in 2005 as ‘no longer enemy combatants’, thus implicitly justifying their continued detention on the basis that they had at some time in the past been ‘enemy combatants’.⁷³

Beyond the Uyghur detainee issue, however, the Bush administration shifted more toward the USA’s traditional concern regarding the human rights of ethnic and religious minorities in China. This shift was reflected in a number of Uyghur-related developments. First, from 2004 the National Endowment for Democracy provided US \$75,000 annual funding for the Uyghur American Association (UAA), an organisation that promotes independence for ‘East Turkestan’, much to the displeasure of Beijing. Second, President George W. Bush met face to face with Rebiya Kadeer in Prague in June 2007 and praised her as a ‘human rights defender’, while prior to attending the opening ceremony for the 2008 Beijing Olympics Bush also made direct reference to

⁷² See ‘Albania Takes Guantanamo Uighurs’, *BBC News Online*, 6 May 2006, <http://newsvote.bbc.co.uk> and ‘China Demands Return of Guantanamo Detainees’, *China Daily*, 5 May 2006, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2006-05/10/content_586168.htm

⁷³ For a detailed account of this litigation see Jason S. Pinney, ‘The Uighurs at Guantanamo: “Sometimes We Just Didn’t Get the Right Folks”’, *Northeastern University Law Journal* 1, no. 1 (2008):139–156. Pinney, a lawyer with Bingham McCutchen, represented nine of the Guantanamo Uyghurs.

the Uyghurs and Tibetans in a speech celebrating the tenth anniversary of the US Congress passing the 'International Religious Freedom Act'.⁷⁴

Under the Obama administration the profile of the Uyghur issue has continued to rise due to a number of factors. The Obama administration, much like its predecessor, has had to grapple with the issue of the remaining Uyghur detainees at Guantanamo Bay. In May 2009 the Obama administration planned to release and resettle the remaining Uyghur detainees in Virginia as, like its predecessor, it could not persuade third countries such as Germany, Sweden or Australia to accept the former Guantanamo detainees.⁷⁵ This plan fell victim to US domestic politics as Republicans seized on it as an example of Obama's 'soft' stance on terrorism in order to score a 'hit' on the administration.⁷⁶ This was perhaps a relief for the Obama administration given that the resettlement of Uyghur detainees in the USA would have undoubtedly been perceived in Beijing as a slap in the face. In the end, the administration was able to extricate itself from this dilemma by persuading Bermuda and the tiny Pacific island state of Palau in July to accept four and thirteen Uyghurs respectively.⁷⁷ The Obama administration's efforts to close Guantanamo Bay have also raised accusations that the previous Bush administration had permitted Chinese military and security personnel to interrogate Uyghur detainees at Guantanamo in September 2002, raising a further

⁷⁴ Shirley A. Kan, 'US-China Counterterrorism Cooperation: Issues for US Policy', *CRS Report for Congress*, 7 May 2009, 9, 'Bush Praises Rebiya Kadeer as a Human Rights Defender', Uyghur American Association, 5 June 2007, <http://uyghuramerican.org/articles/948/1/President-Bush-praises-Rebiya-Kadeer-as-a-human-rights-defender/index.html>

⁷⁵ Peter Lee, 'Uyghurs Sold Out in the US', *Asia Times*, 28 May 2009, <http://www.atimes.com/atimes/China/KE28Ad01.html>

⁷⁶ For the Republican attack see Newt Gingrich, 'Let's NOT Meet the Uighurs', *Washington Examiner*, 15 May 2009, <http://www.washingtonexaminer.com/opinion/columns/Newt-Gingrich/Lets-NOT-meet-the-Uighurs-45080387.html>

⁷⁷ Eric Eckholm, 'Out of Guantanamo, Uighurs Bask in Bermuda', *New York Times*, 15 June 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/15/world/americas/15uighur.html>

potential problem in developing the administration's relationship with Beijing.⁷⁸ Perhaps it has been due to the Obama administration's desire to not complicate its relations with Beijing further that it has remained muted in its response to the Ürümqi unrest. The challenge for the Obama administration, as it was for the Bush administration, will be how to balance the USA's longstanding concern for the human rights of ethnic and religious minorities in China with its broader strategic and economic interests in which China is perceived to be playing an ever greater role.⁷⁹

Beijing's portrayal of Uyghurs as 'terrorists' has not only been an important diplomatic strategy to enhance its leverage with states such as the USA, but has also had a significant impact domestically. The domestic portrayal of Uyghurs as 'terrorists/extremists' bent on 'splitting' Xinjiang from China with the aid of 'hostile external forces' has linked in the public imagination the two enduring anxieties of Beijing in the region – separatism and foreign intervention or influence. This was reflected in the Han population's nationalistic response to the events in Ürümqi, as their ire was not only directed at the Uyghurs but also toward the West, and the USA in particular, for 'harboring' such 'splittists' as Rebiya Kadeer.⁸⁰ It is at this juncture that the discourse of the GWD intersects with China's foreign policy and diplomacy. It will be recalled that one of the dominant themes of the GWD is that China's continued 'rise' can only be ensured through the exploitation of the abundant and 'under-developed' resources of China's west.

⁷⁸ Grace Chung, 'Uighur Detainees: US Helped Chinese Interrogate Us', *McClatchy*, 17 July 2009, <http://www.mcclatchydc.com/251/v-print/story/72000.html>

⁷⁹ Frank Ching, 'World Reaction to Trouble in Xinjiang Different from Tibet', *The China Post*, 15 July 2009, <http://www.chinapost.com.tw/commentary/the-china-post/frank-ching/2009/07/15/216348/World-reaction.htm>

⁸⁰ This nationalistic sentiment was most evident in the 'blogosphere' where one could find numerous posts from Chinese criticising the West's response to the Urumqi events.

From this perspective, the threat of ‘separatism’ from ethnic minorities such as the Uyghur, in league with ‘hostile external forces’, imperils China’s future and cannot be tolerated. Indeed, Ürümqi’s mayor claimed in the wake of the unrest that the Xinjiang issue was ‘neither an ethnic nor a religious issue but a battle of life and death to defend the unification of our motherland’.⁸¹ More recently this dynamic has clearly been in operation in Sino-Australian relations with respect to the controversies relating to the visit of Rebiya Kadeer. China’s handling of the Kadeer issue has been particularly interesting as the goal of protecting China’s sovereignty has clearly trumped the goal of enhancing China’s prestige. In the lead-up to Kadeer’s visit, timed for the premiere of a documentary about her life (*10 Conditions of Love*) at the Melbourne International Film Festival, China attempted to pressure the Australian government to not issue the Uyghur leader a visa and demanded that the film festival pull the film. The justification for such a heavy-handed response was clear – China would, in the words of a Foreign Ministry spokesman, ‘resolutely oppose any foreign country providing a platform for her anti-Chinese splittist activities’.⁸² Additionally, Beijing also cancelled the scheduled visit of Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs, He Yafei, in response to Canberra’s decision to grant Kadeer a visa. This was despite the fact the Australian government made it abundantly clear to the Chinese that Canberra recognises that Xinjiang is a part of China and does not support its separation from the PRC.⁸³ Arguably, China’s heavy-handed and clumsy attempt to pressure the Australian government and the wider public has made Australians far less likely to accept China’s claims with respect to Xinjiang and the Uyghur issues.

⁸¹ ‘Restive Chinese City Under Curfew’, *BBC News Online*, 7 July 2009, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/asia-pacific/8139065.stm>

⁸² Ross Peake, ‘Subject of Censorship: China’s Newest Public Enemy #1’, *Canberra Times*, 8 August 2009.

⁸³ Greg Sheridan and Michael Sainsbury, ‘Beijing Bites Back over Kadeer Visa and Iron Ore Prices’, *The Australian*, 18 August 2009, <http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/story/0,25197,25944029-601,00.html>

Resolving Contradictions in Xinjiang and Beyond?

The core dilemma that faces Beijing in Xinjiang, as James Millward has recently noted, is one that 'is essentially the same as that in any large, modern state: how to incorporate ethno-cultural diversity into the national vision'.⁸⁴ Yet, as we have seen, the problem is that the state's development strategy and the rhetoric that surrounds it has simultaneously contributed to the increasing political, economic, demographic and cultural marginalisation of the Uyghur and a growing sense amongst Han Chinese that Xinjiang and its future 'belong' to China. But two major implications stemming from this sense have the potential to undermine Beijing's grip on Xinjiang. The first is that historically civilizing and 'modernising' missions tend to generate greater ethnic consciousness amongst those who are being 'civilized', a dynamic that has been apparent amongst the Uyghur for some time.

Second, the apparent success in embedding Han dominance in Xinjiang, and the collective feeling of superiority towards ethnic minorities that it appears to have engendered, has continued to butt up against expressions of this feeling, resulting in more inter-ethnic confrontation and violence. Indeed, the latest unrest in Ürümqi surrounding the issue of syringe attacks, which according to officials stands at 531, has reflexively been blamed on Uyghurs and has resulted in further inter-ethnic violence. For example, it was reported that on 7 September 2009 a group of 100 Han 'migrants' beat a group of Uyghurs, killing two men and one woman, while Han passengers beat to death a Uyghur in possession of a needle and syringe on a public

⁸⁴ James Millward, 'Urumchi Unrest Revisited', *The China Beat*, 29 August 2009, <http://thechinabeat.blogspot.com/2009/07/reflecting-on-urumchi-events.html>

bus.⁸⁵ The syringe attacks have been labelled by Meng Jianzhu, a top security official dispatched to Ürümqi from Beijing, as an attempt by ‘ethnic separatist forces’ to undermine ‘ethnic unity’.⁸⁶ Perhaps just as worrying for Beijing has been that Han anger over the syringe attacks is not only directed at Uyghurs but also at local government and party officials, including Xinjiang CCP boss, Wang Lequan.⁸⁷ Internally, the contradictions that have emerged from what one observer has termed a strategy of ‘imposed modernization’ in Xinjiang cannot be easily remedied.⁸⁸ However, what is clear is that Beijing cannot simply continue to reflexively fall back on its longstanding logic that economic development and modernization will ‘solve’ its ethnic problem in Xinjiang, or other restive regions such as Tibet for that matter, as this has clearly contributed to Uyghur unrest. The problem is, however, that Uyghur grievances in many areas cannot be redressed adequately without reversing what have been central elements of Beijing’s strategy to integrate the region such as Han colonisation. While the political, economic and demographic marginalisation of the Uyghur has been evident for many years, Beijing now has to deal with the aspirations and expectations of the vast numbers of Han Chinese settlers that it has directly and indirectly encouraged into the region. As the recent unrest demonstrates, the state’s portrayal of the Uyghur as a ‘problem’ of either a ‘terrorist’ or ‘separatist’ nature, combined with the nationalistic rhetoric regarding Xinjiang as an ‘inseparable’ part of

⁸⁵ See ‘Xinjiang Boss Deploys “Harmony Makers” to Calm Urumqi Streets’, *Bloomberg*, 6 September 2009, <http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=20601087&sid=absFq.EuqDI8> & ‘China Unrest: Appeal for Help’, *News 24.com*, 7 September 2009, http://www.news24.com/Content/World/News/1073/9ce9d0d373f54b3798c21154e99d21f6/07-09-2009-09-47/China_unrest_Appeal_for_help

⁸⁶ ‘Five Die in China ethnic unrest’, *BBC News*, 4 September 2009, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/8238768.stm>

⁸⁷ John Garnaut, ‘Leadership struggles may put potholes in the smooth road of reform’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 September 2009, <http://business.smh.com.au/business/leadership-struggles-may-put-potholes-in-the-smooth-road-of-reform-20090906-fft5.html>

⁸⁸ James Leibold, ‘The Xinjiang Riots: Tried Paradigms, Fresh Tensions’, *The China Beat*, 14 July 2009, <http://thechinabeat.blogspot.com/2009/07/xinjiang-riots-tried-paradigms-fresh.html>

the ‘motherland’, has clearly made them a scapegoat of first resort for many Han residents in Xinjiang.

The problem here, however, is that China is simultaneously attempting to build a ‘harmonious society’ where citizens of all ethnic groups abide by a shared concept of nationhood. This looks increasingly unlikely for those such as the Uyghur who are not only marginalised in the ways described above but are increasingly perceived in stereotypical terms by their Han Chinese neighbours. Moreover, the Han response to the events in July 2009 and the subsequent syringe attacks may point to a potentially greater threat to China’s position in the region than increased Uyghur discontent – the dissatisfaction of the region’s Han population with what is perceived to be the government’s failed policies toward Xinjiang’s ethnic minorities. Indeed, Rian Thum has said that the July 2009 events signal the ‘ethnicization’ of discontent in Xinjiang.⁸⁹ Uyghurs, Thum argues, have begun to focus their frustrations not only on the government, as in past cases of unrest in the region, but also upon ordinary Han residents of Xinjiang as demonstrated by the 5 July violence. Significantly, he also suggests that:

the ethnicization of Uyghur discontent has widened the scope of conflict by drawing in the Han population at large. The Han demonstrations that took place in September in Urumqi are the work of a newly disgruntled segment of Xinjiang’s population, which had until now remained relatively silent. The state now finds itself confronting two conflicting pressures from its citizens, with Uyghurs demanding greater freedoms, and Han citizens insisting that the violence was a result of government laxity toward the Uyghurs.⁹⁰

⁸⁹ Rian Thum, ‘The Ethnicization of Discontent in Xinjiang’, *The China Beat*, 2 October 2009, <http://www.thechinabeat.org/?p=905>

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

Internationally, the biggest issue China faces regarding the Uyghur issue concerns its impact on its relations with key states in its region (i.e. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan) and beyond (i.e. the USA and Australia). In the context of Central Asia, the Uyghur issue is likely to remain bubbling below the surface due to China's growing strategic and economic influence. However, both the Uyghur issue and China's rise in Central Asia hold the potential to hurt Beijing through increasing societal fears in those states about Chinese intentions. Beyond Central Asia, China itself may determine the influence of the Uyghur issue on its relations with Washington and Canberra. Its handling of the issue has only been a partial success. Immediately after the events of 9/11 Beijing was largely successful in framing its struggle against Uyghur separatists in Xinjiang within the USA's 'global war on terror'. From 2003 onward, however, Beijing's approach has been self-defeating as not only did its portrayal of some Uyghurs as 'terrorists' lose traction but its concerted diplomatic offensive against Rebiya Kadeer simply brought the Uyghur issue greater international attention. Here the problem has been a failure to perceive that the strategy that has been relatively successful domestically, in terms of the portrayal of Uyghur separatism, would not work internationally. In this respect it is incredible that Beijing thought its labelling of Kadeer as the 'Uyghur Dalai Lama' would result in negative perceptions of her in the West. Thus, if Beijing wishes to diminish the influence and profile of the Uyghur issue internationally it would do well to tone down its vehement attacks on Kadeer and not assume that tactics that work domestically will produce the same results in western democratic societies.

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