

## CHINA AND THE UYGHURS: THE “PALESTINIZATION” OF XINJIANG?

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Over a decade ago Dru C. Gladney argued that China faced the prospect of Xinjiang (or East Turkestan as many Uyghurs would prefer it) becoming its own West Bank if it failed to address the problems stemming from its forceful attempts to integrate the region. In a neat summation of Beijing's core dilemma, he suggested, “If China does not explore other options besides repression, restriction and investment, millions of Uyghur Muslims might become disenfranchised, encouraging some to look to the intifada, the Taliban or al-Qaeda for inspiration.”<sup>1</sup> Chinese dissident Wang Lixiong in his 2007 book, *My West China: Your East Turkestan*, also pointed to the likely “Palestinization” of conflict in Xinjiang in which “the full mobilization of a people and the full extent of its hatred” would be directed against the state.<sup>2</sup>

While the situation in Xinjiang has not reached this point, I would suggest that the beginnings of the Palestinization of the region are discernible at three levels. First, the analogy is apt in capturing the hardening of the political and ethnic boundaries between the core actors in Xinjiang: the Uyghur, the Han and the Party-state. Although these boundaries have always existed with varying degrees of intensity,

they are hardening as a result of the state's unrelenting implementation of its strategy of “repression, restriction and investment.” Second, evidence from a number of major terrorist attacks in the region in recent years suggests that some extremist Uyghur militants have begun to adopt the tactics of other regional and global Islamist organizations. Third, the conflict between Uyghurs and the Chinese state has become internationalized, largely through Beijing's efforts to link violence in Xinjiang to globally oriented radical Islamism to obtain diplomatic benefits in the post-9/11 era. Yet such a strategy is beset by a number of pitfalls that have the potential to make the Uyghur and Xinjiang issues points of contention in China's foreign relations with a variety of states.

The implications of these dynamics are potentially far-reaching, as they promise to complicate China's rise in Central Asia. In 2012, Rafeollo Pantucci and Alexandros Peterson cogently drew attention to China's growing economic, political and strategic weight in Central Asia.<sup>3</sup> They argued that this was largely based on the convergence of three factors: China's geopolitical position (its control over Xinjiang) astride Central Asia; its economic strategy to link Xinjiang with the

economies of Central Asia; and the relative waning of Russian and American power in the region.<sup>4</sup> The Palestinization of conflict in Xinjiang, however, not only threatens China's domestic security and stability (a key focus of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) under President Xi Jinping). It also has the potential to derail Beijing's economic strategy in the region and embed the Uyghur issue into the wider discourse of global radical Islamism, potentially complicating its diplomacy in Central Asia and the Middle East.

### REPRESSION, RESTRICTION AND INVESTMENT

Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, Beijing has been focused on achieving the territorial, political, economic and cultural integration of Xinjiang and its non-Han ethnic groups into the Chinese state. 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 overarching 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 twelve non-Han ethnic groups of Xinjiang into the PRC. It is an inherently imperial project, informed by both geopolitics and history. 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), it often remained beyond Chinese dominion. The geopolitical position of the region as a Eurasian crossroad — sharing borders with Russia, Mongolia, the Central Asian republics, Afghanistan and Pakistan — combined with the ethnocultural dominance of Turkic

and Mongol peoples to result in only intermittent periods of Chinese predominance and control.<sup>5</sup> 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 or independence movements by the Turkic-Muslim peoples, often with significant external influence from Central Asia and the Soviet Union.<sup>6</sup>

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 neighboring Central Asia and Afghanistan and internal dynamics associated with China's post-1978 reform era. In Xinjiang, these internal dynamics stemmed from an initial liberalization of the state's approach to the region, particularly toward ethnic minority religious and cultural practices. Ultimately, such liberalization 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. China's strategy to manage it 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.<sup>7</sup>

Since the institution of "reform and opening" under Deng Xiaoping, the core assumption of Chinese policy has been that the delivery of economic development and modernization will ultimately "buy" the loyalty of such ethnic groups as the Uy-

ghur. The question of Xinjiang's economic development assumed national importance under the Great Western Development campaign, formally launched by President Jiang Zemin in 2000. The region was envisaged as becoming an industrial and agricultural base and a trade and energy corridor for the national economy.<sup>8</sup> While this campaign was nationwide, its operation in Xinjiang reflected the intensification of longstanding state-building policies in the region. The goal of transforming Xinjiang into a trade and energy corridor could only be achieved with the development of greater interaction and cooperation between China and the Central Asian states. This point has been underlined by a Chinese policy that seeks to transform Xinjiang into a new "Continental Eurasian land bridge," not only linking the major economies of Europe and East and South Asia but also enmeshing Xinjiang with China.<sup>9</sup> This imperative has been reinforced under President Xi Jinping, who has proposed the deepening of Sino-Central Asian economic cooperation to create a "Silk Road Economic Belt."<sup>10</sup>

China's strategy to ameliorate ethnic-minority discontent with continued rule from Beijing has since the late 1990s almost entirely rested on the delivery of state-led modernization.<sup>11</sup> This approach has been embodied in a variety of mega-projects such as massive oil and natural-gas pipelines and infrastructure developments linking Xinjiang with Central and South Asia. While undoubtedly bringing economic development, such projects have also created new socioeconomic pressures, exacerbating interethnic tensions and complicating Uyghur relations with the state. For example, the "renovation" of much of the old city of Kashgar, one of southern Xinjiang's centers of traditional Uyghur

culture and the hub of the famed Silk Road, through the \$500 million "Kashgar Dangerous House Reform" program has displaced thousands of Uyghur residents and brought an influx of Han migrants to the region. Such dynamics ultimately contribute to longstanding perceptions among Uyghurs of demographic dilution and economic disenfranchisement.<sup>12</sup>

In parallel with this state-led modernization strategy, the authorities have also implemented yearly "Strike Hard" campaigns against those that it defines as "splittists" and, since 9/11, as terrorists and extremists. Prior to 9/11, these campaigns led to accelerated trials and sentencing of alleged splittists, while the post-9/11 climate has seen an expansion in the actions that the state has criminalized as "terrorist" and an increase in punitive measures.<sup>13</sup> This approach has continued in the wake of new outbreaks of violence in 2013 and 2014 with the chairman of the Xinjiang regional government, Nur Berki, for example, stating in January 2014 that the government would "constantly strike hard against violent terrorism, showing no mercy."<sup>14</sup>

The state's continued efforts to monitor and control elements of ethnic minorities' cultural and religious expression have also contributed to Uyghur disaffection with Chinese rule. Since the 1990s, the regional government has been especially vigilant with respect to "illegal religious activities" — all religious or cultural activities that take place outside of state-sanctioned parameters.<sup>15</sup> A recent example of the state's heavy-handed approach has been the "Project Beauty" campaign that aims to discourage mostly Uyghur women from wearing traditional headscarves or veils.<sup>16</sup> Significantly, the government's continued anti-religious campaigns have played a role in stimulating some of the

major episodes of unrest throughout the region in the last two years, including a number of overt protests.<sup>17</sup> In the wake of such violence, the state has intensified its implementation of restrictions on religious dress with some localities in Xinjiang banning *burqas*, *niqabs* or *hijabs*, Islamic symbols such as “crescent and stars” and even “long beards” on public transport in some cities.<sup>18</sup> In December 2014, the *Global Times* reported that some county-level authorities in Xinjiang had begun disseminating a brochure that identified 75 forms of “religious extremism” for local officials to be aware of. Some of the behaviors identified as religious extremism included referring to local officials or party members as “heretics,” placing pressure on others to stop smoking or drinking alcohol, and the “boycotting of normal commercial activities as ‘not halal.’”<sup>19</sup>

The core problem for Beijing is that it cannot acknowledge that its strategy of “repression, restriction and investment” is a root cause of Uyghur discontent without undermining its hold on Xinjiang. The treatment meted out to the prominent Uyghur scholar Ilham Tohti in 2014 is illustrative. Tohti, a professor of economics at the Minzu University of China in Beijing and a moderate critic of state policy in Xinjiang, was arrested on January 15, 2014, for “inciting separatism.”<sup>20</sup> He was indicted before a court in Xinjiang’s capital, Urumqi, on July 28 and ultimately sentenced to life imprisonment on September 23, 2014, for using his Uyghur and Chinese-language website, *Uygurbiz*, to “spread lessons containing separatist thoughts,” incite “ethnic hatred,” and “separate Xinjiang from China.” Tohti’s treatment gives an indication of how little political space now exists in China for the majority of Uyghurs to engage openly with

the state about the future of their “autonomous” region. Given recent ongoing violence and unrest in the region, it would appear that what little of this space remains will likely be narrowed further, a development that can only reinforce the alienation of Uyghurs from Chinese society and provide fertile ground for the spread of extremism.

### THE RISE OF TERRORISM

Although Xinjiang has experienced periodic outbreaks of ethnic unrest and anti-state violence since the very formation of the PRC, only since the events of 9/11 has Beijing chosen to explicitly frame such episodes as “terrorism.” The intent of this effort, however, has been clear: “To gain international sympathy and acquiescence...so that China can go about its business in Xinjiang.”<sup>21</sup> China’s publication of its first official account of Uyghur “terrorism” in Xinjiang (“East Turkestan Terrorists Exposed”) on January 21, 2002, met with some significant success in this regard. This report claimed that “East Turkestan terrorist forces” had been responsible for over 200 “terrorist incidents” between 1990 and 2001 that claimed the lives of 162 people and injured 440.<sup>22</sup> The report asserted that these “terrorist forces” had carried out “explosions,” “assassinations,” “attacks on police and government officials,” “crimes of poison and arson” and “established secret training bases” in order to create an “atmosphere of terror” in Xinjiang.<sup>23</sup> Finally, one particular group, the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) was singled out in the report as being “supported and directed” by Osama bin Laden. The enumeration of the “terrorist” incidents outlined in this document, however, betrayed a number of discrepancies that cast doubt on Beijing’s

claims. The number of incidents and the number of deaths and injuries for which evidence is provided was the most obvious, with the report claiming the total number of deaths and injuries directly attributed to “terrorism” in Xinjiang between 1990 and 2001 as 56 and 362, respectively. These figures were substantially lower than those enumerated in the introduction to the report. Additionally, the nature and method of some of the incidents detailed (e.g., “crimes of poison and arson”) raised questions as to whether they in fact should have been defined as “terrorist” or merely criminal acts.

The overt attempt to link violence in Xinjiang with international concerns over radical Islamist terrorism in the wake of 9/11 was nonetheless initially successful; the U.S. State Department and the UN Security Council listed ETIM as an “international terrorist organization” in September 2002.<sup>24</sup> Chinese claims regarding linkages between groups such as ETIM and al-Qaeda were also given some further credence when American forces captured 22 Uyghurs in Afghanistan who were subsequently detained at Guantanamo Bay. As early as 2004, however, U.S. military officials had concluded that 16 of the 22 were not “enemy combatants” and were eligible for release.<sup>25</sup> The State Department then attempted to find third countries, such as Turkey, to take them; the administration of President George W. Bush was loath to repatriate them to China, given its past “mistreatment” of Uyghurs. Ultimately it would take until 2013 for all of the 22 Guantanamo Uyghurs to be released, with five granted asylum in Albania in 2006, four in Bermuda and six in Palau in 2009, two in Switzerland in 2010, two in El Salvador in 2012 and three in Slovakia in 2013.<sup>26</sup>

China’s claims that it faced Islamist-inspired terrorism in Xinjiang increased again in intensity after large-scale interethnic violence rocked Urumqi in July 2009; up to 200 people were killed and hundreds injured.<sup>27</sup> Since then, numerous incidents of violence have occurred in the region including anti-government protests, attacks on police stations and interethnic clashes. The year 2013 alone was punctuated by at least five major incidents including three in the major southern city of Kashgar and surrounding areas (April 23, October 10 and December 16), as well as in the cities of Turpan (June 26) and Khotan (June 28). The regional authorities claimed that these incidents were the handiwork of “gangs” of “extremists and terrorists” bent on “jihad” with links to “hostile external forces.”<sup>28</sup> In their attempts to link unrest in Xinjiang with such forces, the authorities have also made the expansive claim that “up to 100 Uyghurs” had traveled to Syria to “sharpen their terrorist skills.”<sup>29</sup> The year ended with what came to be described as a “suicide attack” in Tiananmen Square on October 28, when an SUV driven by a Uyghur man accompanied by his wife and mother ploughed into barricades before bursting into flames, killing five people and injuring 40 others near the iconic portrait of Mao Zedong.<sup>30</sup>

The trend toward greater extremism and violence was dramatically underlined by four major incidents in 2014. On March 1, a group of eight masked assailants unleashed a mass stabbing attack on bystanders at the Kunming train station in Yunnan Province, leaving 29 people dead and over 140 injured. The Chinese government was quick to identify it as a “terrorist attack” by “extremists” from Xinjiang, with Foreign Ministry spokesman Qin Gang asserting that “some Eastern Turkestan flags

were found at the scene.”<sup>31</sup> Chinese authorities subsequently reported that four of the assailants (three men and one woman) had been shot dead and a second female attacker detained by police at the scene, while the remaining three attackers (all male) were captured days after. Authorities also identified the “mastermind” of the attack as Abdurehim Kurban, indicating the likely Uyghur ethnicity of the attackers.<sup>32</sup> This attack was followed by a reported suicide bombing of Urumqi’s main train station on April 30 that killed three (including the two attackers) and injured 70. On May 1, a number of assailants in two unmarked SUVs attacked an open-air market in Urumqi, killing 43 and injuring 94. Finally, in the early hours of the morning on July 28, a “mob” of Uyghurs armed with “knives and axes” attacked the local police and government buildings in Shache township in Yarkand and called for jihad against the Chinese. The authorities ultimately quelled this incident at the cost of the lives of 59 attackers and 37 civilians.<sup>33</sup>

Beijing’s response to this intensifying violence has focused on three fronts: the strengthening of security and counterterrorism measures; renewed exhortations regarding the importance of stability and ethnic unity; and a renewed effort to demonstrate the links between Uyghur “terrorism” and “hostile external forces.” With respect to the first issue, Beijing rapidly increased Xinjiang’s internal security budget for 2014 to some \$1 billion, and President Xi Jinping now heads a specially formed committee on China’s new National Security Council to deal with security and counterterror strategies in Xinjiang.<sup>34</sup> The authorities have also stepped up repressive measures in the region, with Xinjiang CCP Chairman Zhang Chuxian calling for a “people’s war” in which the state will

“exterminate” the “savage and evil separatists” who are influenced and directed by foreign “extremists.”<sup>35</sup> This has entailed not only accelerated arrests and trials of suspected “terrorists” — including public, mass sentencing rallies of Uyghur suspects — but also ongoing sweeps of Uyghur neighborhoods and mosques in search of potential militants and their weapons.<sup>36</sup> The authorities have also attempted to elicit the assistance of ordinary Uyghurs through the offer of financial rewards for “tip-offs” to police regarding suspicious individuals and activities.<sup>37</sup> President Xi, in an effort to ensure his pet ideological project of the “China Dream” would not be derailed by such an obvious baring of China’s ethnic problems, has reminded Chinese citizens that “unity and stability are blessings, while secession and turmoil are disasters. People of all ethnic groups of the country should cherish ethnic unity.”<sup>38</sup> Such rhetoric, as James Leibold has noted, rings hollow after attacks such as those in Kunming and Urumqi; clearly, the “China Dream” is not one shared by all of China’s ethnic groups.<sup>39</sup>

Finally, Beijing has made a concerted effort to draw links between the Kunming attack and radical Islamists beyond China’s borders in Central Asia, Afghanistan, Pakistan and the wider Middle East. Chinese government spokesmen have linked the Kunming attackers to the Turkestan Islamic Party (TIP), based in the tribal areas along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, which it claims is a successor organization to the ETIM, a group it has previously held to be responsible for various attacks in Xinjiang.<sup>40</sup> ETIM functioned for a brief period from the late 1990s to early 2000s and effectively ceased after the death of its leader, Hasan Mahsum, during a Pakistani military operation in Waziristan

in October 2003. Despite Chinese claims, there has been little concrete evidence that ETIM mounted successful attacks in Xinjiang during that time.<sup>41</sup> TIP emerged as a successor organization sometime between 2006 and 2008; it consists of 200-400 militants based near Mir Ali in North Waziristan and allied with the Pakistani Taliban and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU).<sup>42</sup> In contrast to its forerunner, TIP has maintained a higher profile through regular statements by its leadership regarding events in Xinjiang (its leader, Abdullah Mansour, for example, issued a statement praising the Kunming attack) and its use of the Internet as a vehicle to disseminate its calls for jihad against Chinese rule.<sup>43</sup>

As with ETIM, however, TIP's operational capabilities remain unclear. Indeed, the only attack to date that the group has directly claimed as its handiwork was the October 28, 2013 Tiananmen attack. Yet the details of that incident suggest that TIP may have been opportunistically attempting to capitalize on the event to enhance its profile, as the attack was carried out by a Uyghur man, Usmen Hasen, his wife and mother with the crude instruments of an SUV and cans of gasoline.<sup>44</sup> This is not to suggest that the attack was not meant to cause harm but rather to note that it does not appear to bear the hallmarks of a well-organized militant organization. In fact, due to its geographic isolation from Xinjiang, lack of resources and limited number of militants, it seems probable that TIP's influence in the region may be limited to the virtual realm of the Internet. This is not an inconsiderable problem for Beijing, and it has made clear in both word and deed that it views such influence as a threat to security. For instance, in the aftermath of the Kunming attack in March, Xinjiang

Communist Party chief Zhang Chunxian asserted that the easily accessible nature of Islamist propaganda on the Internet had facilitated such terrorism, while officials in Xinjiang announced that they had arrested over 200 people for accessing or disseminating "jihadi" videos on the Internet.<sup>45</sup>

The major attacks in 2014 suggest a much deeper problem for Beijing than simply combating small groups like ETIM and TIP. These attacks arguably represent a tipping point in the long-simmering tension between the Uyghur, on the one hand, and the Chinese state and Han Chinese society, on the other. Despite the limited evidence available as to the effectiveness of groups such as the TIP, Beijing's current rhetoric is a continuation of a campaign launched after 9/11 to portray its struggle against Uyghur separatists as part of the U.S.-led "War on Terror." Although many have noted the diplomatic benefits Beijing has achieved by aligning itself with the global anti-terrorist campaign, what has tended to pass unremarked upon is that China's "Uyghur terrorism" narrative is arguably a reflection of Beijing's inability to conceive that its policies in Xinjiang have played a role in generating violence and disaffection.<sup>46</sup> Zhang Chunxian, in a response to a journalist's question about whether government policy had contributed to terrorism, has revealed the continuation of this mindset: "Will it [terrorism] not take place if you don't strike hard?...Terrorism is not something that happens because you fight it; it is a malignant tumor that is born from society."<sup>47</sup> Terrorism in Xinjiang is indeed born from society, but from an increasingly disenfranchised segment of Chinese society: the Uyghur.

The use of indiscriminate violence in the Kunming and Urumqi attacks and the tactical use of suicide bombers may signal

a qualitative shift in the nature of Uyghur resistance. In this respect, such attacks as those in Kunming and Urumqi may be seen as harbingers of shift from what Mark Juergensmeyer has termed “ethnic religious nationalism” towards “ideological religious nationalism.”<sup>48</sup> For Juergensmeyer, the former type of nationalism is ultimately “linked to people and land” and is “ethnic” in the sense that it refers to “communities bound by race, history or culture who feel oppressed...and who wish to establish a political identity of their own, usually in a geographical region native to them.”<sup>49</sup> Emblematic of this type of nationalism is activists’ “fusion” of the religion of their ethnic community “with a slogan of liberation for oppressed people.”<sup>50</sup> Since the formation of the PRC, this type of nationalism has been at the core of Uyghur resistance to rule from Beijing; the Uyghurs’ Islamic religious identity has become a key marker of difference and resistance to an ethnically non-Uyghur and avowedly atheist state.

The recent upswing in violence, however, including the use of suicide bombings and the targeting of public spaces to cause indiscriminate casualties, suggests that at least some Uyghurs may be in the process of reframing their struggle as an ideological and religious one. In this context, Juergensmeyer notes that, while “the ethnic approach to religious activism politicizes religion by employing religious identities for political means, an ideological approach does the opposite,” i.e., it “tries to make politics religious.” Ideological religious nationalism, therefore, “embraces religious ideas as the basis for politics,” and “national aspirations become fused with religious quests for purity and redemption. Religious justice replaces secular law as the pillar of government-

tal authority.” Importantly, ideological religious nationalists find the “enemy” not only in a rival ethnic group (as do ethnic religious nationalists), but also within their own ethnic community.<sup>51</sup>

The July 30, 2014, assassination of Jume Tahir, the imam of Kashgar’s Id Kah mosque and deputy president of the Xinjiang Islamic Association, fits into this pattern. Tahir had figured heavily in the authorities’ previous efforts to denounce “religious extremism.” His assassination by a group of Uyghur men suggests that at least some Uyghurs may be beginning to target co-ethnics whom they view to be “collaborators” with the state.<sup>52</sup> Externally based groups such as TIP have also been actively framing violence in Xinjiang in ways consistent with an ideological religious-nationalist approach. In the wake of the October 2013 Tiananmen attack, for example, TIP released a video claiming the attack and warning Beijing that it was the harbinger of a Uyghur “awakening”: “O Chinese unbelievers, know that you have been fooling East Turkestan for the last 60 years, but now they have awakened. The people have learned who is the real enemy and they returned to their own religion. They learned the lesson.”<sup>53</sup> TIP spokesman Abdulheq Damolla also praised the Urumqi bombings of March 2014, asserting that they “would fill the suppressed hearts of believers with joy, and fill the apostates and infidels’ hearts with fear.”<sup>54</sup> Abdulheq continued by lauding his “mujahedeen brothers” for “the voluntary act that you carried out...when the filthy paws of Chinese leader Xi Jinping were stepping onto our motherland East Turkestan.”<sup>55</sup> “Taking part in this soldierly act,” he continued, “proves that the Muslims of East Turkestan will never welcome the Chinese immigrant invaders.” Significantly,

Damolla did not refer in his statement to “Uyghurs” but rather only to “the *Muslims* of East Turkestan” and “immigrant Chinese invaders” in an effort to clearly link the struggle of Uyghurs to the perceived “persecution” of Muslims by non-Muslim states and societies that is so often central to the rhetoric of contemporary Islamists.

### CHINA IN CENTRAL ASIA AND THE MIDEAST

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 Uyghurs for China’s foreign policy. In the mid-twentieth century, for example, when Uyghur and Kazakh nationalists proclaimed an independent East Turkestan Republic (ETR) in the northwest of Xinjiang in 1944, it was done with significant support from the Soviet Union. When Mao Zedong’s communists triumphed over Chiang Kai-shek’s Guomindang (GMD) in 1949, the Soviet Union facilitated the PLA’s “peaceful liberation” of Xinjiang and the absorption of the ETR into the new People’s Republic. During the Cold War, the Uyghur issue remained marginal in the context of China’s foreign policy. This was due to three major factors: the initially close Sino-Soviet ties during the 1950s, the subsequent international isolation of China during the 1960s at the height of Maoism, and a general lack of knowledge about Xinjiang and the Uyghur at the global level.

For the subsequent four decades, the periodic reemergence of the issue of Uyghur separatism was largely isolated within the context of Beijing’s relationship with Moscow. While the immediate post-1949 years of Sino-Soviet comity ensured that the issue effectively disappeared from the

international spotlight, the souring of Sino-Soviet relations in the 1960s provided Moscow with the opportunity to meddle. For example, when around 60,000 Uyghurs and Kazakhs fled Xinjiang for Soviet Kazakhstan in 1962 due to famine and persecution, Moscow attempted to incite further ethnic unrest in order to undermine China’s control of the region and encouraged the organization of Uyghur advocacy groups by émigré leaders in Soviet Central Asia.<sup>56</sup> Throughout the Cold War, official Chinese pronouncements on the issue also significantly referred to Uyghur “separatism” in veiled terms, reflecting Beijing’s concern to keep the issue contained. Uyghur opposition was framed ideologically as the work of “reactionary” and “pan-Turkist” nationalists from the exploitative pre-liberation-era “feudal” classes.

In the Middle East, the Uyghur issue was also subsumed during the Cold War by China’s diplomatic overtures in the 1950s and 1960s that appealed to the “anti-imperialist” sentiment of many of the regimes in the region. China’s foreign policy in the Middle East in this period was guided by Mao’s “intermediate zone” theory: the prevailing contradiction in the post- World War II world lay not between the United States and the Soviet Union (as the Kremlin then maintained), but between U.S.-led Western imperialism and Asian, African and Latin American states.<sup>57</sup> This, as Yitzhak Shichor has noted, “reflected its [China’s] belief that Middle Eastern problems had been created by the great powers to justify their intervention and they prevented a settlement of these problems to justify their continued presence.”<sup>58</sup> From this theoretical position flowed China’s subsequent support for national-liberation movements throughout the Third World, including the supply of limited quantities

of small arms, with the Middle East being no exception.<sup>59</sup>

China's relative international isolation from the late 1950s through the late 1970s and its activist diplomatic championing of national-liberation movements in the Third World also made it very difficult for two of the most prominent Uyghur exile leaders, Mehmet Imin Bughra and Isa Yusuf Alptekin (both of whom had fled to Turkey after 1949), to gain significant traction for their cause. Alptekin, who assumed leadership of the Uyghur community in Turkey upon Bughra's death in 1964, focused on a two-track approach. First, he actively sought to cultivate links to Turkish political and military leaders with pan-Turkist leanings, most notably Suleyman Demirel and Turgut Ozal. Internationally, Alptekin attempted to enlist support for Uyghur nationalist claims through a broad appeal to anti-communist sentiment in the Muslim world, the nonaligned developing world and Taiwan.<sup>60</sup> These efforts bore little fruit due to Beijing's limited ties with Turkey, its ideological offensive in the Third World, and its ability to ideologically paint such figures as Bughra and Alptekin as reactionary elements aided and abetted by both "Soviet revisionism" and "reactionary Turkey."<sup>61</sup> For these reasons, the Uyghur and Xinjiang issues were never truly embedded into the prevailing global geopolitical discourse of the Cold War.

This situation changed dramatically with the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 and most of these constraints were removed. 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 the stability and security of its Central Asian frontier. The opening to Central Asia also held the potential for Uyghur com-

munities in the now-independent Central Asian republics to re-establish links with the Uyghurs of Xinjiang. Uyghur organizations 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.<sup>62</sup> 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. All three major Chinese interests — economic ties, separatism and border demarcation — were, for example, explicitly raised by Chinese premier Li Peng on his diplomatic tour of Central Asian capitals in April 1994. They were central to the establishment in 1996 of the multilateral talks among China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, thereafter called the "Shanghai Five" (S-5).<sup>63</sup>

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 neutralize Uyghur advocacy organizations 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, assisted China in its ability to persuade its S-5 partners to take a stronger stance on what it increasingly termed the “three evils” of “separatism, extremism and terrorism.”<sup>64</sup> These issues became a foundational concern for the S-5’s successor organization, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), when it was inaugurated on June 14, 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 declaring the organization’s intent to establish a regional response to the perceived threat of radical Islam.<sup>65</sup>

The impact of 9/11 was in many respects contradictory for Beijing. On the one hand, the “tilt” of the majority of Central Asian republics toward the United States after the invasion of Afghanistan 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 United States, and received significant economic-aid packages.<sup>66</sup> Since that time, however, Beijing has been able to reassert its role in the region both bilaterally and multilaterally through the SCO. A key element in this process has been its promotion of a normative framework for interstate relations in Central Asia, particularly via the SCO, which privileges the maintenance of “stability” and non-interference in the “internal affairs” of member states.<sup>67</sup> This has been reflected in the establishment and operation of the SCO’s “Regional Anti-Terrorism” center in Tashkent (Uzbekistan), the SCO’s joint 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. China’s success in embedding the normative values of “stability” and “non-interference” within the SCO was best illustrated by the fact that, at the August 2008 summit meeting in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev attempted (but ultimately failed) to get the SCO’s unconditional support for its incursion into Georgia.<sup>68</sup> Moreover, since 2001, China, by virtue of bilateral security agreements with key Central Asian states (Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan) and police/security cooperation through the SCO, has successfully extradited a significant number of alleged Uyghur “separatists and terrorists” from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan.<sup>69</sup>

While Beijing has been successful in convincing the governments of the Central Asian states to accede to its conception of the Uyghurs as “terrorists, extremists and separatists,” the same cannot 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 2009 unrest in Xinjiang, for example, prompted some protests among the Uyghurs in these states, although both governments remained circumspect in their reactions.<sup>70</sup> The cause of the Kazakh and Kyrgyz governments’ subdued responses to the Xinjiang unrest stems not only from their own interest in maintaining domestic stability but also their countries’ SCO and economic relationships with China. By the late 2000s, China accounted for 34 percent of Kyrgyzstan’s foreign trade and

15 percent of Kazakhstan's, while Chinese companies had also expanded significantly into these countries.<sup>71</sup> Therefore, it is not surprising that a Uyghur protest organized by the Uyghur Friendship Society (Ittipak) in the Kyrgyz capital of Bishkek on August 10, 2009, for example, 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.<sup>72</sup>

Beyond the Uyghur issue itself, Central Asian publics, especially in Kazakhstan, remain ambivalent at best and fearful at worst about Chinese intentions in the region. Kazakhs are generally concerned about potential Chinese territorial and demographic expansion into Central Asia and economic domination of Kazakhstan, particularly of its energy sector.<sup>73</sup> China's government-to-government relations with Central Asia, particularly Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, therefore remain solid from Beijing's perspective. China's image among the publics of these states, however, is tarnished by the perceived ill-treatment of the Uyghurs in Xinjiang and fears regarding Beijing's influence in Central Asia. Sebastien Peyrouse and Marlene Laurelle have also noted that many Central Asian China experts are highly critical of what they judge to be Beijing's political, economic and social "marginalization" of the Uyghurs in Xinjiang, arguing that the "Chinese refusal to listen to any autonomist demands, even cultural ones, can only encourage radical separatism to take root."<sup>74</sup>

In the context of the wider Islamic world, however, the Uyghur issue has had only moderate resonance. Many Islamic states, particularly in the Middle East, have for the majority of the past decade perceived China to be not only a major source

of investment and a reliable customer for oil and gas but also a potential foil for U.S. dominance in the region.<sup>75</sup>

Indeed, the lack of censure from the wider Islamic world for China's ongoing repression of Uyghur dissent has been remarkable. Most significant here was the tepid response to this event from major Arab states that are usually vociferous advocates for "repressed" Muslims, such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia.<sup>76</sup> Others overtly sided with Beijing's handling of the Urumqi violence. For example, Sudan's ambassador to China, Mirghani Mohamed Salih, asserted, "The measures adopted by the Chinese government after the riot aim to defend its sovereignty, safeguard social stability, and protect people's lives and property"; the "incident had an obvious political motivation and had nothing to do with Islam."<sup>77</sup> More recently, in the wake of the March 1, 2014, Kunming knife attacks, Turkey, Jordan, Egypt and the Palestinian Authority all strongly condemned them as "terrorist" attacks without mentioning the Uyghur issue.<sup>78</sup>

There are two exceptions to this general lack of traction for the Uyghur issue at the official level in the Muslim world. Throughout recent decades, Turkey has expressed a strong concern for the fate of the Turkic Uyghurs. Indeed, after the fall of the Soviet Union, Turkey mounted a diplomatic offensive in newly independent Central Asia that also had an impact in Xinjiang. The basis for Turkey's interest 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. 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 Urumqi unrest.<sup>79</sup> Iran’s clerical establishment has called on the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) to intervene on behalf of the Uyghurs, while 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 levels, however, Iran has been more circumspect, suggesting that the regime is not willing to damage its strong diplomatic, economic and military relationship with China simply to gain some prestige in the Islamic world.<sup>80</sup>

As with 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 neutralizing of adverse public opinion in the Islamic world. While Indonesia, for example, has officially maintained the position that Xinjiang is an “internal affair,” groups such as the Indonesian Chinese Muslim Association (PITI) and the Muslim-based Prosperous Justice Party (PKS) openly criticized China’s “brutality” in Xinjiang and called for Muslim “solidarity” with the Uyghurs after the July 2009 Urumqi violence.<sup>81</sup> In Egypt, Essam al-Erian, a leader of the Muslim Brotherhood, argued that the official silence of his country (and other Arab states) on the July 2009 violence in Urumqi was based in part on a desire to avoid drawing attention to their own intolerance of dissent: “They make the same systematic separation of opponents, of Islamic groups, of opposition groups, and they arrest many and they kill many. How could they criticize the Chinese? They are in the same boat.”<sup>82</sup>

Another major factor driving such official insouciance has been the growth

of China’s economic presence throughout the Middle East. China has emerged over the past decade as a leading exporter of goods and services to the region; a major importer of oil, natural gas and other resource commodities; and a market for capital investment.<sup>83</sup> In 2012, for example, China overtook the United States as the major trading partner of all of the Persian Gulf states.<sup>84</sup> Even in the wake of the Arab Spring, China’s diplomacy in the region, John Calabrese argues, is characterized by an almost ruthless pragmatism based on the judgment that “China’s future relationship with the state is ultimately more important than its ties with particular regimes.... Chinese officials have kept all options open in order to limit the damage to China’s long-term economic interests.”<sup>85</sup> This is consistent with China’s strict “non-interference” principles, a centerpiece of its foreign policy since the end of the Cold War. This logic also explains, in part, China’s consistent veto of UN resolutions with respect to the ongoing crisis in Syria.<sup>86</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Illustrative of the global pitfalls now arising from Beijing’s management of the Uyghur and Xinjiang issues was the brief furor surrounding the arrest and, ultimately, the harsh sentencing of prominent Uyghur academic Ilham Tohti in 2014. Tohti, as noted earlier, was sentenced to life in prison for using his Uyghur and Chinese-language website, Uygurbiz, to “spread lessons containing separatist thoughts,” incite “ethnic hatred” and “separate Xinjiang from China.” Many observers noted at the time that Beijing’s repression of Tohti was “fruitless,” not only because it denied China “a critical Uighur viewpoint and an alternative approach to the deteriorating situation in Xinjiang” but also “subjected

itself yet again to international opprobrium” from Western governments and various human-rights NGOs.<sup>87</sup>

What was missing from such reactions to the Tohti affair, however, was comment on the significance of Beijing’s framing of the issue as both domestic and international. Days after Tohti’s arrest, for instance, the CCP’s English-language mouthpiece *Global Times* published a revealing article. “Tohti,” the article claimed, “is no ordinary Joe” but someone with links to the World Uyghur Congress and the West who has used his position to give “aggressive lectures in class” on the Uyghur issue.<sup>88</sup> Moreover, through his criticism of the Chinese government and his questioning of whether such acts as the October 28, 2013, incident in Tiananmen Square constituted “terrorism,” Tohti “was attempting to find a moral excuse for terrorists.” Most damningly, the editorial suggested that the academic was the “brains” behind the “terrorists,” who without such guidance would “be like a clueless mob.”<sup>89</sup> Meanwhile, in the final verdict at Tohti’s trial on September 23, 2014, the court declared that he had “built a criminal syndicate” that was

organized...to write, edit, translate and reprint articles seeking Xinjiang’s separation from China. The articles attacked China’s ethnic, religious, economic and family-planning policies, and incited ethnic hatred by distorting the causes of a number of riots and disputes that occurred in Xinjiang and Beijing.<sup>90</sup>

The court statement also contained the pointed criticism that Tohti had “colluded with foreign groups and individuals in hyping incidents related to Xinjiang with the aim of making domestic issues international.”<sup>91</sup>

The irony here is that Beijing has facilitated the internationalization of the issue. Beginning in the early 1990s, Beijing made the issue of Uyghur “separatism” or “splittism” a key concern in its bilateral and multilateral diplomacy with the states of Central Asia. Governments in the region committed to a zero-tolerance approach to potential Uyghur “separatist” activism in their countries as the bedrock of their expanding relationships with Beijing.<sup>92</sup> This approach was also extended to China’s relations with Turkey, where a major Uyghur population had migrated after Xinjiang’s absorption into the PRC in 1949.<sup>93</sup> However, as we have seen, the attacks of 9/11 and Washington’s subsequent commitment to a “war on terror” provided Beijing with a major opportunity to convince the international community that its repression of Uyghur dissent was justified, as it too faced Islamist-inspired terrorism in Xinjiang. Since that time, Beijing has regularly sought to embed the Uyghur issue into the discourse of the “war on terror,” blaming the periodic violence in Xinjiang upon externally inspired Islamist terrorism. If there is any doubt that this effort remains an ongoing concern for Beijing, one need look no further than China’s attempts in 2014 to link violence in Xinjiang to the radical Islamist threat *du jour* — the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). China’s envoy to the Middle East, Wu Sike, for instance, stated on July 23, 2014, that after consultations with various governments in the region, including Iraq, “up to 100” Chinese nationals, mostly “East Turkestan elements,” were fighting with various Islamist groups in Syria and Iraq, including ISIS.<sup>94</sup>

The Obama administration’s statement on Tohti’s sentencing, not only expressing deep concern over his fate but also

portraying him as a “civil-society leader” promoting interethnic dialogue between Uyghur and Han, also drew a strident response from Beijing linking the Uyghur, Xinjiang and the ISIS threat. *Xinhua*, for instance, editorialized that such lauding of “criminals as human-rights fighters” demonstrated the West’s “deep-rooted belief that China has colonized Xinjiang” and its desire to “hype Xinjiang-related incidents with the aim of making domestic issues international.” “As the warplanes of the United States and its allies bomb the Islamic State,” it continued, China’s “painstaking efforts to eradicate the three evil forces of terrorism, separatism and extremism in Xinjiang should have been viewed as part of the world’s anti-terrorism endeavors. Ilham Tohti should be denounced as a criminal threatening the peace and security of a country.”<sup>95</sup>

Beijing’s strategy of internationalizing the Uyghur issue has now become a double-edged sword. Its heavy-handed response to the recent upswing in violence in Xinjiang has been one contributor to this. President Xi Jinping’s call for a “people’s war” to make terrorists “like rats scurrying across the street”<sup>96</sup> has resulted in an increased security presence in the region, including mass arrests of suspected “terrorists” and their sympathizers and regular house-to-house sweeps in search of suspected militants. Thousands of CCP cadres have been dispatched to the countryside to “educate” the population regarding the threats of Islamism and the virtues of “ethnic unity” and “stability.”<sup>97</sup> In parallel, the authorities have fallen back upon their default strategy for combating Uyghur dissent — attempts to control Uyghur religious and cultural practices. Since the beginning of 2015, there has been renewed emphasis on longstanding policies such as

restricting religious observance by state employees, party members and the young, and attempting to limit outward expression of Islamic identity such as beards and headscarves. Predictably, such policies have been counterproductive; many Uyghurs increasingly adopt such outward markers of their ethnic identity as a symbolic form of resistance to Chinese rule.<sup>98</sup>

More significantly, Beijing’s approach is not only being questioned by Western governments and human-rights organizations; it is creating dilemmas for China in the Middle East. China has long fostered pragmatic ties with major states in the region, based on its growing energy needs and economic clout and on its role as a brake on the meddlesome tendencies of the West, the United States in particular.<sup>99</sup> However, its role (alongside Putin’s Russia) in the provision of diplomatic, military and economic support to the Assad regime in Damascus puts it in a difficult position with some of its key partners in the region, such as Saudi Arabia and Turkey, which have clearly backed Assad’s opponents. Beijing’s motives have largely stemmed from its broad interest in undermining Western-led intervention and the potential implications for Xinjiang, should Assad fall and create an Islamist haven.<sup>100</sup>

Yet China’s equivocation on the Syrian crisis and its own hard line toward the Uyghurs have nonetheless made it a target for some of the Middle East’s new wave of radical Islamists. In an address in Mosul on July 4, 2014, the self-styled ISIS “caliph,” Abu Bakr al Baghdadi, declaimed that “Muslim rights are forcibly seized in China, India, Palestine” and a host of other countries before exhorting his supporters to take up the fight against such “oppressors.”<sup>101</sup> Here, China’s repression of the Uyghur in Xinjiang and its ambiguous role

in the fractured Middle East have intersected to embed the Uyghur issue firmly in the discourse of globally oriented radical Islamism. This poses significant dilemmas for Beijing's foreign policy and its approach in Xinjiang. Does China now, in light of the apparent threat posed by ISIS to China and the reported involvement of Chinese nationals, reassess its approach to the Syrian crisis and consider deeper

cooperation in international efforts to combat ISIS? This would undermine much of Beijing's strategy in the region focusing on China's strict adherence to principles of non-interference and its role as a counterweight to the United States. Finally, will Beijing recognize in time that its hard line in Xinjiang is giving oxygen to the radical Islamism that it fears the most?

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<sup>3</sup> Rafeollo Pantucci and Alexandros Petersen, "China's Inadvertent Empire," *National Interest* (Nov/Dec 2012): 30.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 31-32.

<sup>5</sup> James A. Millward, *Eurasian Crossroads: A History of Xinjiang* (Columbia University Press, 2007).

<sup>6</sup> Andrew D. W. Forbes, *Warlords and Muslims: A Political History of Republican Sinkiang, 1912-1949* (Oxford University Press, 1986), 168-170.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Clarke, *Xinjiang and China's Rise in Central Asia — A History* (Routledge, 2011), 125-129.

<sup>8</sup> Nicolas Becquelin, "Staged Development in Xinjiang," *China Quarterly* 178 (June 2004): 358-78.

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<sup>10</sup> "Xi Suggests China, CA Build Silk Road Economic Belt," Xinhua, September 7, 2013, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2013-09/07/c\\_132700695.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2013-09/07/c_132700695.htm).

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<sup>14</sup> Cui Jia and Gao Bo, "Xinjiang Doubles Terror Fight Budget," *China Daily*, January 17, 2014, [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2014-01/17/content\\_17240295.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2014-01/17/content_17240295.htm).

<sup>15</sup> Millward, *Eurasian Crossroads*, 340-348.

<sup>16</sup> See James Leibold and Timothy Grose, "Why China Is Banning Islamic Veils and Why it Won't Work," *China File*, February 4, 2015, <http://www.chinafile.com/reporting-opinion/viewpoint/why-china-banning-islamic-veils>; and "China's Anti-Veil 'Project Beauty' Sows Ugly Tensions," *Straits Times*, November 25, 2013, <http://www.straitstimes.com/breaking-news/asia/story/chinas-anti-veil-project-beauty-campaign-sows-ugly-tensions-20131125>.

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