

China's "war on terrorism"—brutal repression of ethnic unrest in Xinjiang

John Chan
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Since the attacks on the US on September 11, the Chinese bureaucracy has seized on the pretext of the Bush administration's "war on terrorism" to justify intensified repression against ethnic Uighurs in the resource-rich western province of Xinjiang. Beijing has accused separatist groups of having connections with Osama bin Laden's "global terrorist network" and of receiving training in Afghanistan, to wage a "violent campaign" for an independent Eastern Turkestan.

Just nine days before September 11, Xinjiang regional government chairman Abdulahat Abdurixit told the Chinese paper *Ta Kung Pao* that "by no means is Xinjiang a place where violent and terrorist accidents take place very often." He was seeking to encourage Hong Kong investment in the province and to allay fears about the decade-long armed conflict between armed Uighur separatists and Chinese security forces.

After September 11, however, Beijing wasted no time in launching its own war on terrorism, instituting a crackdown not only on armed separatist groups but on other non-violent expressions of Uighur nationalism and the Islamic religion. Like other countries, China seized on the opportunity to dramatically increase the penalties on those found guilty of being in any way connected to a "terrorist" organisation.

An extensive Amnesty International report in March found repression had broadened and intensified following a national conference in Beijing last December which identified "ethnic separatist forces, religious extremist forces and violent terrorist forces", as well as the Falun Gong spiritual movement, the first of four main priorities in "political and legal work" for the year 2002. The authorities imposed new restrictions on religion, closed down mosques and subjected Muslim clergy to close scrutiny and "political education".

"The search for dissenters through the same type of campaign was extended in early 2002 to other sectors of society in the XUAR, including cultural and media circles. Official sources made clear that the 'struggle against separatism' is wide-ranging and encompasses repressing all potential dissent and opposition activities, including the peaceful expression of views via poems, songs, books, pamphlets, letters, or the Internet," the report explained.

A report by the US-based Human Rights Watch in February elaborated: "In January 2002, pressure to follow the official ideological line was explicitly extended to include artists, writers, performers, and historians, among others, when Abulahat Abdurixit, the region's chairman, made clear that 'all who openly advocate separatism using the name of art' would be punished.

"The announcement followed recitation of a poem by a homeless man at the end of a concert at Xinjiang People's Hall on January 1. That same month, Yili prefecture ordered a campaign against folk customs such as wedding, funeral, and house-moving rituals. Uighur cadres were required to obtain permission before attending such events and to report back to their superiors afterwards."

According to Amnesty International, Uighur exile sources estimated that at least 3,000 people were detained in the political crackdown from mid-

September 2001 until the end of 2001. During the same period at least 20 people were tried on politically motivated charges and sentenced to death and executed. Many more were sentenced to prison terms.

The campaign has continued this year. An article in the *Washington Post* on July 15 included several interviews with local Uighurs in Xinjiang. A taxi driver described the oppressive conditions in his area. "Since September 11, the situation has gotten worse. The police are everywhere, and they pay Uighurs to spy in every neighborhood and every mosque. Sometimes, people just disappear," he said. An Uighur shopkeeper commented: "Many people here have been rounded up and shot. Some are terrorists. Some aren't. I know an innocent boy who was accused of terrorism who was killed by the Chinese. The situation is terrible."

In an interview with the Associated Press in late May, Aziz Ait, the Deputy Director General of People's Armed Police in Xinjiang, attempted to justify the repression by saying that his security forces had broken up at least six groups "making guns and weapons" before they could "commit terrorist attacks". Beijing has organised a public exhibition of 1,000 photographs and 500 objects that are evidence in "violent terrorist criminal cases" in order to try to win support for its crackdown.

Aziz Ait's comments were also directed at countering international criticism of China's actions in Xinjiang. Following the US invasion of Afghanistan and its stationing of US military forces in several Central Asian republics on China's western borders, Beijing has been particularly concerned that the US could possibly exploit Uighur separatism to intervene directly in Xinjiang. Since September 11, China has bolstered its military forces along the border with Afghanistan.

Indeed much of the criticism is entirely hypocritical. While pointing to the ways in which Beijing has exploited the "war on terrorism" for its own ends, the same media, organisations and individuals have supported the US invasion of Afghanistan and its abrogation of basic democratic rights in the US in the name of "fighting terrorism". As far as the Bush administration is concerned, the treatment of Uighurs is just another of the human rights issues that are exploited to isolate China in order to advance US interests in the region.

The two-faced nature of the Bush administration's policy reaches the absurd when it comes to replying to Beijing's demand for the handover of Uighurs captured in Afghanistan. In the case of other countries such as Australia and Britain, Washington has expressed concerns over whether detainees held in Cuba would be charged and found guilty if handed over. Beijing, however, is just as indifferent to democratic rights as Washington and just as willing to mete out tough punishment, including the death sentence.

So when Beijing last December first called for Uighur captives to be returned to China for punishment, Washington turned down the request by saying that it had "a different interpretation of terrorism" to that of China. While US officials did not spell out the "different interpretation", they were clearly referring to the criticism that China was branding all Uighur nationalists as "terrorists". As a result, the US deems the Uighur detainees

to be “terrorists” in order to justify their detention without charge. But the same detainees become “nationalists,” possibly even fighters for Uighur liberation, when it comes to answering China’s repeated requests. Xinjiang’s Communist Party secretary Wang Lequan claimed in June that at least 1,000 Uighurs had fought alongside the Taliban in Afghanistan and 300 were captured by US forces.

Armed Uighur groups are involved in sporadic attacks inside and outside China. The latest involved the killing of the first secretary of the Chinese embassy in Kyrgyzstan on June 29 by two gunmen. According to the Kyrgyzstan Interior Ministry, the murder may be linked to radical Uighur separatists. The Chinese government immediately denounced the assassination is an “evil act” and an investigative team has sent to Kyrgyzstan. Uighur separatists have strong cultural, language and religious affinities with Central Asia and have a presence in a number of republics as well as Turkey, the US and Europe.

Beijing’s brutal repression in Xinjiang stems from its inability to address the basic democratic aspirations of national minorities such as the Uighurs as well as its determination to retain a strong grip over a region that is strategically positioned in Central Asia and has the majority of the country’s oil and gas reserves. The province is central to China’s plans for major pipelines linking oil and gas fields in the Central Asian republics to the industrial areas of China in the east.

Although Xinjiang has a long historical association with China, the region was dominated by rival warlords or occupied by other forces for much of the first half of the 20th century. The Kuomintang did not establish its control of the region after the 1911 nationalist revolution and the local Turkic elites declared an independent Eastern Turkestan Islamic Republic twice during the interwar period. On the last occasion in 1944, Stalin backed the “independent” republic as a buffer state and provided limited aid.

When the peasant armies of Mao Zedong seized power in 1949, Xinjiang was occupied and proclaimed a “national autonomous” region. But as in Tibet, the Stalinist regime in Beijing failed to overcome the region’s economic and cultural backwardness and sought to exploit the region’s resources with scant regard for local sensibilities. Most of China’s nuclear tests were carried out in the province.

The exploitation of mineral resources and the opening up of the region for cotton production brought an influx of ethnic Chinese which dramatically altered the province’s ethnic balance and reduced the Uighurs to second-class citizens. In 1949, Xinjiang had 3.2 millions Uighurs and only 140,000 Chinese; now Chinese make up about one third of the population. Attempts to accommodate cultural differences have given way to a ban on education in the local Turkic language and an enforced curriculum of “patriotic education” in Chinese.

These tensions continue today. The majority of Uighurs still live in rural areas or the poorest areas of towns and cities. Many Chinese immigrants have moved into newly constructed apartments and have taken most of the jobs in new factories and firms. Such a social divide breeds hostility. A local Chinese worker told the *Washington Post*: “You have to watch them [Uighurs] very carefully. A lot of them hate us, you know.”

Ethnic resentment, unrest and even mass demonstrations in Xinjiang have marked every decade since 1949. The oppressive and impoverished conditions of Uighurs have long been seized upon by the anti-China lobby in the US to criticise Beijing. But with China’s support, Washington gave a huge boost to Islamic extremism in Central Asia in the 1980s through its huge CIA operation to arm, finance and train rightwing Mujaheddin militia groups to wage war against the Soviet-backed regime in Kabul.

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of independent Central Asian republics gave a further spur to armed Uighur separatist groups in the 1990s. The crimes of Stalinism both in Moscow and Beijing carried out in the name of “socialism” strengthened those who advocated an exclusive ethnic solution to the oppressive conditions faced by the

Uighur minority.

Protests and armed conflict erupted in the mid-1990s. The most serious incident occurred in February 1997 when at least 1,000 Uighurs rioted in the Xinjiang city of Ili for two days after Chinese security forces crushed a peaceful pro-independence demonstration with the loss of at least 100 lives. One month later, in the provincial capital of Urumqi, separatists detonated bombs in two buses. In the same month, a separatist group based in Turkey claimed responsibility for a bus bomb explosion in Beijing which injured 30.

Since then there have been continuing attacks on police stations, military installations and government officials. In April 1999, for instance, a People’s Armed Police convoy was attacked on the road between Urumqi and Shihezi and 10 were killed. In August 2000, a senior police officer was assassinated in Poskam County by Uighur militants.

Beijing has responded not only with police repression but by attempting to isolate Uighur separatist groups based in Central Asia. In 1996, China collaborated with Russia to establish the so-called Shanghai Five, which included several Central Asia republics. The organisation had several aims including preventing the US and other major powers from gaining a foothold in the resource-rich region. At the same time, China and Russia used the forum as a means to pressure the Central Asian republics to take a stand against “terrorism, separatism and extremism”.

Beijing’s “Hard Strike” campaign of 1998 was directed mainly against “separatist terrorist forces”. More than 13,000 were arrested and officials claimed to have confiscated 6,000 firearms, 70,000 bullets, 80 tonnes of explosive and 190,000 detonators. Under strong pressure from Beijing, the Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan governments dissolved Uighur political parties and shut down their newspapers.

The US invasion of Afghanistan has simply compounded the tensions in Xinjiang as it has throughout the region. Beijing is no doubt pleased that the US military have destroyed a base of operations for at least some of the armed Uighur groups active in Xinjiang. At the same time, however, China is clearly concerned about the consequences of a string of US military bases on its doorstep and the potential for Washington to manipulate Uighur separatism into a pretext for a more direct intervention in Xinjiang.

However, Beijing’s only answer to the US threat is further repression—for which the Bush administration’s “war on terrorism” has conveniently supplied the pretext.



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