

# **Ethnic Conflict Prevention in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region: New Models for China's New Region**

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China makes little distinction between separatists, terrorists, and civil rights activists – whether they are Uyghurs, Tibetans, Taiwanese, or Falun Gong Buddhists. One person's terrorist may be another's freedom fighter. Are the restive Uyghurs of Xinjiang terrorists, separatists, or freedom fighters? And how does one avoid further ethnic conflict in the region? Admitting the vast economic under-development of the region, China has launched a "develop the west campaign" with a special focus on Xinjiang (the westernmost province known in Chinese as "new region"). Three years into this campaign, problems and civil unrest remain. This article examines the challenges facing China's Xinjiang policy and concludes with proposing alternative models for China's development strategy in the region that might contribute to future ethnic conflict prevention.

After denying the problem for decades and stressing instead China's "national unity," official reports have recently detailed terrorist activities in the regions known as "Eastern Turkestan," officially known as the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (the term Eastern Turkestan was not allowed to be used in the official media until last year). In the northwestern Uyghur Autonomous Region of Xinjiang, China's Foreign Ministry and the People's Daily have documented an on-going series of incidents of terrorism and separatism since the large riot in the Xinjiang town of Yining of February 1997, with

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multiple crackdowns and arrests that have rounded up thousands of terrorist suspects, large weapons caches, and printed documents allegedly outlining future public acts of violence. Amnesty International has claimed that these round-ups have led to hurried public trials and immediate, summary executions of possibly thousands of locals. One estimate suggested that in a country known for its frequent executions, Xinjiang had the highest number, averaging 1.8 per week, most of them Uyghur. Troop movements to the area, related to the nationwide campaign against crime known as "Strike Hard" launched in 1998 that includes the call to erect a "great wall of steel" against separatists in Xinjiang, have reportedly been the largest since the suppression of the large Akto insurrection in April 1990 (the first major uprising that initiated a series of unrelated and sporadic protests). Alleged incursions of Taliban fighters through the Wakhan corridor into China where Xinjiang shares a narrow border with Afghanistan have led to the area being swamped with Chinese security forces and large military exercises, beginning at least one month prior to the September 11<sup>th</sup> attack. Recently, under US and Chinese pressure, Pakistan returned one Uyghur activist to China, apprehended among hundreds of Taliban detainees, which follows a pattern of repatriations of suspected Uyghur separatists in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan.

International campaigns for Uyghur rights and possible independence have become increasingly vocal and well organized, especially on the internet. Repeated public appeals have been made to Abdulahat Abdurixit, the Uyghur People's Government Chairman of Xinjiang in Urumqi. Notably, the elected chair of the Unrepresented Nations and People's Organization (UNPO) based in the Hague is a Uyghur, Erkin Alptekin, son of the separatist leader, Isa Yusuf Alptekin, who is buried in Istanbul where there is a park

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dedicated to his memory. Supporting primarily an audience of approximately 1 million expatriate Uyghurs (yet few Uyghurs in Central Asia and China have access to these internet sites) there are at least 25 international organizations and web sites working for the independence of “Eastern Turkestan,” and based in Amsterdam, Munich, Istanbul, Melbourne, Washington, DC and New York. Since September 11, each of these organizations has disclaimed any support for violence or terrorism, pressing for a peaceful resolution of on-going conflicts in the region. Nevertheless, the growing influence of “cyber-separatism” is of increasing concern to Chinese authorities seeking to convince the world that the Uyghurs do pose a real domestic and international terrorist threat.

Chinese authorities are concerned that increasing international attention to the treatment of its minority and dissident peoples have put pressure on the region, with the US and many Western governments continuing to criticize China for not adhering to its commitments to signed international agreements and human rights. Last year China ratified the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights. Article One of the covenant says: “All peoples have the right of self-determination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development.” Article 2 reads: “All peoples may, for their own ends, freely dispose of their natural wealth and resources without prejudice to any obligations arising out of international economic co-operation, based upon the principle of mutual benefit, and international law. In no case may a people be deprived of its own means of subsistence.” Although China continues to quibble with the definition of “people”, it is clear that the agreements are pressuring China to answer criticisms by Mary Robinson and other high-ranking human rights advocates about its treatment of minority peoples.

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Several organizations asked President Bush on his last visit to China to press for the release of Rebiya Kadir, a Uyghur businesswoman who was a prominent delegate to the 1995 Beijing women's conference, now languishing in ill health in prison for passing state secrets (consisting of public ally available newspaper articles) to Westerners. In Spring 2002, Ms. Kadir's case was widely promoted by Amnesty International as their "detainee" of the month. Clearly, with Xinjiang representing the last Muslim region under communism, large trade contracts with Middle Eastern Muslim nations, and 5 Muslim nations on its western borders, Chinese authorities have more to be concerned about than just international support for human rights.

The real question is, why call so much attention to these separatists' activities and external organizations since September 11? It is clear that these activities are not new and that China is taking advantage on the international war on terrorism to attempt to eradicate a domestic problem. The Istanbul-based groups have existed since the 1950s, the Central Asian Uyghurs under Soviet rule received tremendous support in their anti-China rhetoric regarding policies in Xinjiang, and the Uyghurs have been increasingly vocal since the independence of the Central Asian Republics in 1991 led many to hope for an independent Uyghuristan would have followed on the heels of the other newly independent -stans. Separatist actions have taken place on a small but regular basis since the expansion of market and trade policies in China, and with the opening of six overland gateways to Xinjiang in addition to the trans-Eurasian railway, and China's Western development campaign, there seems to be no chance of closing up shop. The Chinese government itself in a landmark 1999 white paper, admitted serious economic shortfalls in the region despite 50 years of state investment in the development of the region: "The

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Chinese government is well aware of the fact that... central and western China where most minority people live, lags far behind the eastern coastal areas in development (1999: 50).”

The 2000 census revealed that though the nearly 8.4 million Uyghur maintain a bare majority in their own autonomous region, the resident Han Chinese population has risen to 38% (Uyghur population stands at 42%). Nevertheless in terms of education, health, and mortality, the Uyghur lag far behind the Han in quality of life, and even most other Muslim groups in the region (there are 7 other official Muslim minorities in Xinjiang, including 1 million Kazakhs and 500,000 Hui, as well as Kyrgyz, Uzbek, Tajik, and others). Most importantly, separatist and violent incidents in Xinjiang have dropped off dramatically since the late 1990s. According to interviews with local Xinjiang security officials, Philip Pan reported in a recent Washington Post interview with only able to site 3 relatively small occurrences. Interestingly, few have noted that despite many incidents of ethnic and civil unrest in the region, not one significant terrorist attack against any strategic infrastructural target (oil refinery, pipeline, railroad, dam, or bridge) has ever been documented, nor have any incidents been verifiably identified with any international Uyghur or Islamic organization.

Such as they are, China's Uyghur separatists are small in number, poorly equipped, loosely linked, and vastly out-gunned by the People's Liberation Army and People's Police. And note that though sometimes disgruntled about other rights' and mistreatment issues, China's nine other official Muslim minorities do not in general support Uyghur separatism. Local support for separatist activities, particularly in Xinjiang and other border regions, is ambivalent and ambiguous at best, given the economic disparity between these regions and their foreign neighbors, including

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Tadjikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, and especially Afghanistan. Memories in the region are strong of mass starvation and widespread destruction during the Sino-Japanese and civil war in the first half of this century, including intra-Muslim and Muslim-Chinese bloody conflicts, not to mention the chaotic horrors of the Cultural Revolution. Many local activists are calling not for complete separatism or real independence, but generally express concerns over environmental degradation, anti-nuclear testing, religious freedom, over-taxation, and recently imposed limits on childbearing. Many ethnic leaders are simply calling for "real" autonomy according to Chinese law for the five Autonomous Regions that are each led by First Party Secretaries who are all Han Chinese controlled by Beijing. Freedom of Religion, protected by China's constitution, does not seem to be a key issue, as mosques are full in the region and pilgrimages to Mecca are often allowed for Uyghur and other Muslims (though recent visitors to the region report an increase in restrictions against mosque attendance by youth, students, and government officials). In addition, Islamic extremism does not as yet appear to have widespread appeal, especially among urban, educated Uyghur. However, the government has consistently rounded up any Uyghur suspected of being "too" religious, especially those identified as Sufis or the so-called Wahabbis (a euphemism in the region for strict Muslim, not an organized Islamic school). Nevertheless, many positive policies, increasing domestic and international economic investment, and extraordinarily heavy repression, have eradicated tension and unrest, which continue to simmer in the region. It is clear that China needs a new approach to resolve tensions in the region. Purely Marxist and Keynesian economic development strategies are not enough. In a recent Foreign Affairs article, Chien-Peng Chung of the Singaporean Institute of Defense and Strategic Studies, called for an

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immediate political changes in the region to avoid further deterioration in ethnic relations.

To further this discussion, I would like to suggest possible new models for Xinjiang's future, peaceful development, something that all Uyghurs and Chinese, as well as the other 24 ethnic groups in the region, seem to want.

1. The Alaska model: Award residents of Xinjiang direct dividends for returns on wealth derived from regional natural resources, in accord with Article Two of the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights mentioned above. By according benefits to all 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> generation residents of Xinjiang, China can perhaps obviate inter-ethnic tensions in the region and deflect criticisms that recent non-local migrants "lured to the region" by a government interested in integration through immigration are the real beneficiaries of China's increased investment of the region.
2. The Scotland model: Although it is clear China would never consider granting full independence to the region (lest it lose its authority over Tibet and Taiwan as well), an approach that grants the region more control over its own resources and governance, while maintaining central control over national defense and international trade would not only seem to make sense in the modern era, but parallels traditional models of Chinese imperial control of the region under the last dynasty.
3. The Hawai'i model: China must find a way to allow its local peoples to legally, democratically, and officially express their concerns about the development process in the region, the future directions of tourism and trade, and the prospects for greater autonomy and sovereignty. State and Federal funding for elected

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- representatives of indigenous peoples that have real input into the legislative process such as the elected Office of Hawaiian Affairs attempts to accomplish.
4. The Australia model: Peoples regarded by themselves and international organizations as aboriginal and indigenous must have the right to address land and environmental rights issues, despite government disagreements about historical migration to the region. As yet, China's extremely beneficial special entitlement laws for the official minority nationalities, including nationwide bilingual education, exemption from many taxes and birth-planning restrictions, and educational advancement opportunities apply only to those regarded by the state as designated official minorities, and not to those regarded as indigenous to a region or district (Korean migrants to Xinjiang have as many rights as Uyghur). China has no laws pertaining to indigenous rights, and often regards treaties relating to "peoples" as affecting all the peoples of China, including the Han majority, when their original intent was to alleviate suffering of underprivileged indigenes.
  5. The West Bank model? International observers and frequent visitors to the region are concerned that if China does not explore other options besides repression, restriction, and investment, millions of Uyghur Muslims might become increasingly marginalized and disenfranchised, encouraging some of the more disgruntled among them to look to the Intifada, the Taliban, or the al Qaida for inspiration. This would not be in China's or the West's interest in the region, both of which publicly support goals of stability, prosperity, and human rights.

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China is a sovereign state, and like all modern nations in the era of globalization faces tremendous challenges from migration, economic imbalance, ethnic unrest, and cyber-separatism. Clearly, the Xinjiang model must be as unique to the region as the region is to China itself. Not unlike Hong Kong (which under the one country, two systems formulae continues to fly its own flag), and many proposals for Taiwan integration, the unique situation in Xinjiang, and possibly Tibet, calls for dramatic and creative solutions. The future of this vastly important region, which Owen Lattimore once called the “pivot of Asia,” depends upon it. Since September 11<sup>th</sup>, the entire region has once again become pivotal to the rest of the world.

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