

Beijing's Decades-long Policies in Xinjiang, CIA Interference, Funding of Separatist and Terrorist Groups

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Central to China's rise as a global power are the attempts to increase its influence over Xinjiang, the country's biggest and most mineral rich region. Xinjiang has been part of Chinese territory since the mid-18th century, longer than the existence of the United States, and this province at just over 640,000 square miles, is equal to two-thirds the size of continental Europe. Unlike Europe, however, Xinjiang is sparsely populated with just over 20 million people while it contains rare and iconic species like snow leopards, bears and wolves.

In 2019 Beijing oversaw the production of five million tons of cotton in Xinjiang, 85% of the national total for the year. Cotton is considered one of the most important cash crops in China. Oil itself was first discovered in Xinjiang during the mid-1950s, in the opening phase of the Mao Zedong era. Drilling for oil began soon thereafter, but oil production in the whole of China prior to 1960 was almost non-existent. Since the early 1960s, China's oil figures have been greatly increasing with little respite.

Well into this century Beijing's extraction of oil from Xinjiang was booming, while production had already peaked in the early and late 1990s in China's major oil fields to the east, Shengli and Daqing (1). In recent months further significant discoveries of oil have occurred in Xinjiang, along with the finding of new natural gas reserves. Xinjiang holds slightly more than 25% of all known oil sources in China, and is the country's second biggest oil producing area (behind Heilongjiang province).

Xinjiang's terrain has proven particularly challenging, posing unique issues relating to transportation of goods and raw materials eastward. Water scarcity has long been a problem. Xinjiang is encompassed by imposing peaks including the formidable K2, and it is studded with deserts like the Gurbantünggüt and Taklamakan. The latter desert is comfortably larger in size than Britain.



Xinjiang is the linchpin of Beijing's international-scale Belt and Road Initiative. The province has never been more firmly under the sway of China's authorities - thwarting the efforts of separatist US-funded groups such as the right-wing World Uyghur Congress, an umbrella organisation headquartered in Munich; which calls for Xinjiang's complete independence from China, along with its affiliates such as the Uyghur American Association, based in Washington, and funded by the National Endowment for Democracy. (2)

To grasp the social complexities seen in Xinjiang, it is important to examine briefly the relevant history of this increasingly vital landmass. The Islamic religion, of which its followers are called Muslims, first reached the western half of Xinjiang in the 9th century, when it was then part of Central Asia. From the 17th century Islamic teachings spread to the eastern part of Xinjiang. By this time Xinjiang's population consisted of branches of Turkic-speaking Muslims, possessing different dialects, lifestyles and attire. The Qing dynasty governed China from the years 1644 until 1911 - and in 1759 the long-ruling Qing Emperor, Qianlong, conquered Xinjiang by force at the expense of the Mongol Dzungar people. By the mid-18th century, China's main concern in capturing Xinjiang was to secure its mainland from the threat of Mongol invaders, an ancient fear of Chinese leaders. In the late 18th century the Qing dynasty began promoting Chinese migration to Xinjiang, so as to "fill out the borders".

In the 1880s, the most numerous Muslim group in Xinjiang were commonly being referred to as Uyghurs. In 1884 the Qing government officially bestowed its north-western province with the title "Xinjiang", meaning "New Frontier". With the Mongol threat dissipated, China's leadership aimed to place Xinjiang out of the reach of the massive Russian Empire, which believed it had claims to this area.

Complete chaos befell China in 1912 with the collapse of the Qing dynasty, the last empire to rule China. It had been hindered by financial difficulties and inner turmoil, primarily due to Western imperial encroachment, including American and British interference. Over following years both Xinjiang and Tibet, China's two largest provinces, were dislodged from Beijing's sphere of influence. Furthermore, parts of Mongolia northwards gravitated to Russian and then Soviet control, leaving China in a terribly diminished state during the early-to-mid 20th century. China's troubles were compounded by Japanese regional expansionism, that in turn was spurred partly by further Western intrusion into Japan's own realms of concern.

Even before China's independence in 1949, Beijing's officials and intellectuals argued during the 1930s of the pivotal importance not "to lose Xinjiang" to outside powers (3). Yet by 1934, Xinjiang had come under the domination of Stalin's Soviet Union to the north, with

Red Army soldiers intervening in Xinjiang twice, in 1934 and 1937, to support a Soviet-backed warlord named Sheng Shicai. By 1940 there were only around 190,000 Han Chinese still resident in Xinjiang, barely more than the numbers living there in the early 1800s. The Han Chinese, it can be noted, presently make up 1.3 billion out of China's 1.4 billion population.

Xinjiang started slipping out of Soviet control from the summer of 1941, as Stalin's gaze was fixed on the murderous Nazi invasion of the western USSR. The Soviets were never quite able again to reinstate their authority over Xinjiang, a region which Stalin prized like the Tsar before him. In November 1944, it is true that a Soviet-supported East Turkestan Republic was declared in Xinjiang. This comprised merely of parts of northern Xinjiang and it was short-lived, dissolving five years later as China's communist forces entered Xinjiang. They found that most of the arable land was controlled by a small number of landlords. (4)

At the end of World War II, the Uyghur people consisted of 82% of the approximately four million people then living in Xinjiang, with other Muslim folk like ethnic Kazakhs and Hui filling in most of the remaining percentage. When China's communists came to power in October 1949 their leader Mao Zedong, recognising the importance of safeguarding his boundaries, sought to swiftly integrate Xinjiang and other vast provinces like Tibet.

In state-sponsored moves, Mao encouraged Han Chinese to migrate in large numbers to Xinjiang; this process was quickened from the late 1950s with the Sino-Soviet split, as Mao became worried and suspicious of Russian intentions close by. He was moreover keen to erode Xinjiang's centuries-long cultural links to neighbouring Central Asia, which is heavily populated by Muslim groups. In the decades after 1949 Xinjiang therefore shifted steadily towards Beijing's command, a strategy which continues. (5)

Mao's financial injections into Xinjiang led to a raising of the living standards for the majority of people there, including Muslims, which peaked at least in GDP terms in 1960 before gradually dropping off in the ensuing 15 years. During the latter stages of Mao's reign, by 1967 two million Han Chinese had relocated westwards to Xinjiang (6). The arrival of Han Chinese, whose culture is notably different to the indigenous groups, inevitably resulted in varying levels of tension and dissatisfaction among Xinjiang's Muslim people. This includes principally the Uyghur communities, many of whose roots in the province date back centuries.

In 1945 Han Chinese amounted to just 6% of people living in Xinjiang, and by 1982 this figure had risen to 40%. The percentages have stabilised through to this century, with Muslim groups having a majority of about 60% to the 40% of Hans. Most of the Han Chinese dwell in cities along Xinjiang's more industrialised north, such as the capital Urumqi and oil metropolis Karamay. The Uyghur people, many of whom are farmers, tend to lead simple lives and the prospect of city existence can be repellent. Uyghurs generally have a strong connection to the soil. For the bulk of Uyghurs, it is worth stressing that their deepest concern is a potential loss of their ethnic and religious identities (7). Nevertheless in Xinjiang there are 24,400 mosques in operation, equating on average to one mosque for every 530 Muslims.

From 1978 until today, the rate of reform enacted by China's governments has risen substantially, bringing with it rapid economic development to Xinjiang. There have been commendable social benefits too. The average life expectancy of a Xinjiang native in 1949

was very low at 31 years. Six decades later it had more than doubled to 72 years. The huge increase in life expectancy can be attributed to Beijing's implementation of health care programs, which have accelerated since the 1990s. These policies are highlighted in independent studies published four years ago showing that, by 2001, there were just over 7,300 health care facilities in Xinjiang, including 1,357 hospitals. (8)

By 2008, the number of hospitals in Xinjiang rose further to 1,629 – whereas when the communists first came to power, 54 medical centres existed throughout Xinjiang. Seventy years ago just 10% of people in Xinjiang could read or write, but by 2017 this figure had climbed to a well over 90% literacy rate (9). These figures receive scant mention in the major Western media, despite their significance. Prior to 1949 a minority of children attended primary school, mainly because of a shortage of such schools. Beijing's development of educational initiatives has led to the construction of many hundreds of schools in Xinjiang, both first and second level. In November 2017, the Chinese government outlined a 15 year free education program for all of Xinjiang's high school students (10). Extra subsidies were reportedly provided to children from poorer backgrounds.

Through the decades, Beijing has poured the equivalent of over a quarter of a trillion dollars into Xinjiang, most of which was forthcoming after 1978. Under China's president **Xi Jinping**, since 2017 the average income of a rural Xinjiang resident has increased by nearly 10%, with the majority of Uyghurs residing in rural areas (11). Those living in Xinjiang's cities still enjoy a considerably higher income overall, as it is easier to generate more wealth in a city environment where opportunities are usually greater; although, with urban life comes certain disadvantages such as a detachment from nature and the land, health problems due to pollution, etc.



A large proportion of Uyghurs practice a moderate form of Islam called Sufism, which promotes an ascetic lifestyle and shuns material wants. Sufism is incompatible with radical Islamic fundamentalism and Wahhabism, extremist beliefs which are prevalent in states like Saudi Arabia, a country which has fanned the flames of terrorism in recent decades along with its Washington sponsor; whose endless wars in the Middle East have been a boon to terrorists past and present. Beijing is understandably anxious about extremism afflicting some disgruntled Uyghurs, which has been the case; but it should be stated that the overwhelming majority of Uyghurs are not militant or extremist in outlook.

Beijing's reforms in Xinjiang, such as relating to agriculture, have allowed many Han Chinese to prosper and some Uyghurs. Over the past generation especially, Beijing has undertaken large-scale infrastructural projects in Xinjiang, overcoming serious logistical problems. This is borne out by the construction of sprawling railroads, airports and highways, including recently a 1,600 mile long road, completed in July 2017, linking Xinjiang's most populace city Urumqi to Beijing. The Chinese government's oil and gas

pipelines criss-cross Xinjiang, like the enormous West-East gas pipelines, which transport natural gas from Xinjiang to eastern China. These industries have tied Xinjiang closer to mainland China, and has also helped to push Central Asia in Beijing's direction where China's infrastructure extends to.

In 2010 Beijing established a "pairing assistance" system, in which some cities in China are required to aid Xinjiang by providing "human resources, technology, management and funds". In recent years Beijing has directly furnished south-western Xinjiang, almost entirely populated by Uyghurs, with \$1.1 billion worth of earthquake-resistant housing construction, low-income housing renovation, and sanitation (12). Chinese leaders have continued to bankroll projects in Xinjiang, despite the disturbing number of terrorist attacks in the province following the Soviet Union's collapse.

There have reportedly been different degrees of discrimination against Xinjiang's Muslim communities, along with the human rights abuses which the Western media have devoted such huge attention to; mainly relating to extensive internment of Uyghurs and other Muslims in detention camps (13). However, the press have failed to cover the above positive aspects of Beijing's policies in Xinjiang over the decades, which by a large measure outweigh negative factors.

The media in the West, who have a history of supporting US and British wars, also betray a long established tendency to overlook the more severe human rights violations perpetrated by Western allies, like the Gulf oil dictator countries. Perhaps the leading newspaper in the Western hemisphere, the New York Times, strongly endorsed the US-led invasions of Iraq and Libya this century - and the Times previously backed the brutal attack on Vietnam launched in early 1962 by the Kennedy administration; with the newspaper continuing its support for the war as it escalated and expanded across Indochina from the mid-1960s, by the Johnson and Nixon administrations.

Various New York Times journalists championed the US military assault on Vietnam. They erroneously described "the free world's fight to contain aggressive Communism", while defending the southern half of Vietnam "against proxy armies of Soviet Russia" as the US Army sought to "resist" the Vietcong (14).

Relating to Xinjiang, over the past generation Washington and the CIA has provided consistent support to Uyghur separatist organisations, and terrorist groups such as the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP). Since 2003 the TIP has been led by the now 48-year-old extremist Uyghur militant, Abdul Haq al-Turkistani, who was born in southern Xinjiang. The TIP, originally going by the name the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, received direct CIA funding and sponsorship (15). From 1990 until 2016 scores of terrorist attacks were perpetrated in Xinjiang. Many of these rampages were subsequently traced back to the TIP, which has close connections to Al Qaeda. The TIP leader Abdul Haq has, for example, served on Al Qaeda's executive leadership council, and he is a firm believer in waging jihad (holy war) against China to attain the TIP's separatist goals.

Contrary to numerous US intelligence reports and media accounts at the time, Abdul Haq was not in fact killed in an American drone strike on 15 February 2010, in north-western Pakistan. On 5 June 2015 he was seen alive and kicking, as he spoke in a video interview about how he had been "heavily injured in 2010" but duly recovered. He also appeared in later videos providing undeniable evidence of his apparent reincarnation. Abdul Haq was well acquainted with former Al Qaeda boss Osama bin Laden, who was not so fortunate,

having been killed by US Special Forces in northern Pakistan on 2 May 2011. The Americans took the extreme risk of violating Pakistan's sovereignty, and sparking a possible war with a nuclear power, in order to eliminate bin Laden who once had ties to the CIA. (16)

In the months prior to the summer 2008 Olympic Games held in China, Abdul Haq ordered the TIP to unleash terrorist attacks against a number of cities in mainland China – particularly those hosting sporting activities – in order to disrupt and overshadow Beijing's hosting of the Olympics (17). Almost all of the terrorist plots were foiled. Following China's clampdown in Xinjiang starting in 2017, including increased surveillance, it can be acknowledged that no terrorist acts have since taken place in the province.

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Shane Quinn obtained an honors journalism degree. He is interested in writing primarily on foreign affairs, having been inspired by authors like Noam Chomsky. He is a frequent contributor to *Global Research*.

Notes

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