

Will China's Oasis Become a Mirage?

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The Taklamakan desert may once again bloom. Kashgar, an ancient hub along the northern route of the Silk Road, has fallen under Shenzhen's spell after the recent announcement of being tagged an "economic development zone." The first of its kind, Shenzhen leapt from a small fishing village to a modern metropolis of 10 million in 30 years. But Kashgar's symbolism could represent the entire Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region if it ends up just as sleek.

No beauty will be able to hide the ugly reality if Uyghurs are left in the dust.

Xinjiang, the largest of China's administrative divisions, is set to become a primary economic engine in the 2010's. Its area would rank 17th if an independent state, larger than Iran and twice the size of Turkey, and contains vast coal, oil, and natural gas reserves. Only two major obstacles stand in the way. One is Xinjiang's dilapidated or nonexistent infrastructure, soon to change in Ürümqi, the regional capital, and 900 miles west in Kashgar.

[According to Beijing](#) six new airports will be constructed by 2015. Xinjiang's rail network will expand from 2,200 miles to over 7,000 by 2020, and follow China's Central Asian pipeline into key energy states like Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. Nearly \$100 billion will renovate 4,000 miles of existing highways and lay new national and transnational spans.

All to lead regional economic factors to Kashgar, which China hopes to transform into a Central Asian exchange, "for textile production, the crude oil industry, agricultural products processing, logistics, and tourism." At the center: a five square mile economic development zone granting liberal tax laws to direct foreign investment. Kashgar's urban area will balloon from nine to 60 square miles and the population increased from 350,000 to over a million.

While maintaining high GDP growth remains China's first priority, Kashgar's development is also considered the solution to Xinjiang's second barrier: Uyghur political unrest and low-intensity terrorism stemming from real and perceived oppression. Beijing decided to bring Xinjiang up to speed after last year's riots in Ürümqi by instituting "leapfrog development." Officials believe economic opportunities for Uyghurs will reduce tensions and give security forces "an edge in fighting terrorists from across the western border."

"It is a major and urgent task of strategic significance for us to boost the economic and social development of Xinjiang to achieve lasting stability in the region," President Hu Jintao told a high-level meeting held by the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China Central Committee on April 23.

Except China's flaws become magnified by its solution to, basically, throw money at the

problem.

The ultimate threat posed by Uyghur nationalism and separatism is an insurgency crossing numerous borders and cultures, and thus demands an intricate counterinsurgency (COIN). China has realized this much, but its incomplete response could doom its strategy. Two of COIN's four dimensions are operational – security and economics – but COIN is multiplication, not addition. Any one zero significantly reduces the odds of success.

China currently lacks the appropriate political and social policies, and its actions suggest that economic growth is being used to conceal these shortcomings.

But Beijing cannot afford to leap over the Uyghurs. It must understand that, in the absence of political and cultural sensitivity, more security and foreign investment will exacerbate ethnic tensions and further destabilize the region. Uyghurs must be offered a legitimate outlet to express themselves and vent their anger, not feel as though they have no means of recourse. They remain politically suppressed with most government positions going to China's main ethnic group, the Han, and powerless in the face of China's judicial system.

It goes without saying that enormous problems await Beijing if it continues ruling Xinjiang with an iron fist and without Uyghur representation.

But right now the walls are literally closing in. Will the future Kashgar be a home for all its residents, or an ethnically and economically divided populace swelling with inequality? The same cloud lingers over Ürümqi and can be used for reference. Part of remaking Ürümqi's modern image required tearing down Uyghur property and architecture, and the same process is destroying Kashgar's history.

"They [the government] began systematically bulldozing the Old City block by block and moving the inhabitants into a new compound on the edge of town," [National Geographic's Matthew Teague wrote](#) in early 2009.

[Reuters recently reported from the city](#), "A drive to modernize the old Silk Road city of Kashgar has obliterated whole stretches of old Uighur neighborhoods, even as the government tries to win over residents wary of Chinese rule."

This conflict of interests [poses the latest controversy](#) in Xinjiang and captures the essence of the whole struggle. Beijing counters, somewhat justifiably after a series of earthquakes, that many buildings require refurbishing and earthquake-proofing. Nuer Baikeli, governor of Xinjiang, told a press conference in March, "Some people are now making an issue of Kashgar's renovation as destroying Uighur traditional culture. To equate dilapidated houses with Uighur culture shows they don't understand Uighur culture, indeed they disrespect it."

This may be true to a point, but those Uyghurs brave enough to speak tell the darker side of the story. Uyghurs speak of government intimidation, a complete lack of input in the process, and sadness as their cultural history disintegrates. China is also a professional denier. Internet to Xinjiang was severed after Ürümqi's riots – except for state-sponsored sites. Uyghurs across Xinjiang were then told not to speak to foreign media on the anniversary.

Ask a tour guide in Kasghar [and he'll reply](#), "Anniversary? I do not know anything about any anniversary."

What replaces Kashgar's fallen buildings stands to decide the final outcome as much as the destructive process, but given that Uyghurs are already uninvolved there's no good reason to expect China to factor in their design sense. One plan aims to complete 28 housing blocks for 60,000 people by 2015. "This shows the Communist Party's concern for minorities," said one official.

But project housing isn't synonymous with "concern for minorities." Usually antonymous.

China is playing with fire and would be wise to implement as much Uyghur input as possible, not glamorize Kashgar like Shanghai. Preserve heritage sites, accommodate those who wish to stay to the best ability, incorporate the Old City's style into new architecture. Make the future Kashgar feel like Kashgar, not Shenzhen, and change the mindset of engaging Uyghurs. Otherwise they'll perceive the economic development zone as it is - another Han invasion, just like Ürümqi.

From here the snowball rapidly picks up speed. Economic trends in Ürümqi weigh against Uyghurs and the same fate will befall them in Kashgar if growth meets Beijing's projections. Uyghurs already suffer employment discrimination and cannot easily obtain loans or passports. Demographics skewed towards the Han, exempt from China's one-child policy, don't help. Prejudice inside Ürümqi's economic growth has produced the opposite effect - without moving up the economic ladder Uyghurs have been marginalized more than ever by inflation. Instead of buying a better house, many are having a harder time affording food.

Xinjiang's newfound prosperity will continue favoring the Han and leaping over the Uyghurs in the absence of political and cultural reforms. And no amount of security can extinguish a determined urge to revolt.

[40,000 cameras](#) will suppress daily angst but build up long-term rage. More heavy-handed police and security foster perpetual resentment, as do "patriotic education campaigns" proclaiming "the ethnic minorities are inseparable from the Han." And killing simply doesn't work as well as China would like. The East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), an alleged al-Qaeda offshoot and violent manifestation of the Uyghur's oppression, lost its leader, Abdul Haq al Turkistani, this year in Pakistan.

A US drone picked him off on the border, where ETIM allegedly operates with the help of al-Qaeda and Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP).

China believes the loss will significantly impact ETIM's operations, whatever their questionable extent may be, but Beijing thought the same thing after US and Pakistani forces [eliminated ETIM founder Hasan Mahsum](#) in 2003. America and Israel have similarly overestimated the termination of top militants. The concept is so simple and yet so complex: fail to kill the cause and fail to eliminate the militancy.

China does possess a few advantages despite its deteriorating relations with the Uyghurs. Perhaps most importantly it can rely on friendly Pakistan patrolling ETIM's external sanctuaries; the two states are conducting military drills during the anniversary of Ürümqi's riots. Beijing also has America's support, whose hands have been tied by the al-Qaeda card. And of course China wields massive repression to contain violent and nonviolent dissent.

These measures won't work forever though. The situation is unsustainable without total improvement in Uyghurs' standard of living - political, economic, and social. Until Xinjiang's

abundant resources cease being exploited and their profits enable better lives for Uyghurs, enough guerrillas will breed to trigger ethnic fault-lines and target foreign investments in 2020 and beyond.

And Xinjiang will remain China's vulnerable underbelly.

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