

The Situation of the Uighurs in China



(Source: *David Gray/Reuters*)

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INAF 5439 Ethnic Conflict
June 13, 2013

I. Executive Summary

The Uighurs in China remain under threat of assimilation, repression and discrimination, slowly becoming marginalised in their indigenous home. Conflict has been ongoing since 1991, with sporadically occurring violence and ethnic riots. On April 24, 2013, 21 people were killed in Kashgar; July 2009 saw riots in Urumqi, with 197 dead and 1700 injured; and executions followed an incident in Ghulja in 1997. The Uighurs are faced with growing political and economic inequalities and denial of services, particularly in education and culture. The risk of continuing instability remains high, with efforts towards regional development fuelling increased in-migration, and repression tactics by the Chinese government indicate the occurrence of Crimes against Humanity. Recommendations to concerned parties are to increase lobbying efforts, and to make human rights issues a central policy focus, as well as to encourage awareness through research.

II. Conflict Background: the Uighurs in China

Nation building has succeeded in the People's Republic of China's ("China") core provinces, often called China proper. The Hans comprise 90% of the population believe in and support the idea of the Chinese nation. Resistance to incorporation into that nation, and to the very idea of nation, is most visible in Xinjiang, where the Hans do not constitute the majority. In this region, covering one sixth of the total area of China, but holding only about 1% the total populationⁱ, the Uighur People are the majority.

The Uighur People are a Turkic ethnic group indigenous to Eastern Central Asia, and the largest part of the population is situated in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR) in the Northwestern part of China.ⁱⁱ They are of Sunni Muslim faith, and they speak their own Turkic language, called Uighur. Uighurs are predominant in the Tarim Basin oases in the south of the region. In 2007, there were 9.65 million Uighurs in the XUAR. Even though Uighurs are still technically the majority in the region, they now constitute only a plurality. Indeed, through government policies, the population of Hans in the XUAR went from a tiny minority in the 1940s to roughly 8.2 million in 2007.

According to the Minorities at Risk Project, the primary grievances of Turkmen in China, of which Uighurs constitute the majority, are political in nature.ⁱⁱⁱ There are no legitimate political parties aside from the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) that they may join (other smaller parties are not even considered to be opposition).^{iv} And even if a Uighur must head the Xinjiang Uighur autonomous regional government under the Regional Ethnic Autonomy Laws (1984)^v, the state also maintains that such leaders are able and expected to represent the common interest of all citizens. Therefore, leaders who focus on the interests of their group have frequently been condemned as narrow nationalists by the party-state and removed from their offices.^{vi}

Another major area of concerns is the territory itself. Even though the region of Xinjiang remains remote in the popular imagination of Chinese, several of the region's features make it integral to China in the eyes of the leadership in Beijing.^{vii} There are rich reserves of natural gas and oil, potentially up to one third of country's total production capacity. It is predicted that the XUAR will become the number-one coal producing region in China by 2020 as it strives to meet its energy needs for development, and is already a major contributor to China's energy needs, holding approximately 38% and 25% of the national coal and natural gas reserves respectively.^{viii} There are also large quantities of gold, nonferrous metals, as well as uranium.^{ix} Finally, some have argued that the size of the land could be a potential solution to overcrowding in China's heartland. Migrations of Hans Chinese in the XUAR since the 1940s could be partly explained by this factor.^x

Finally, in terms of education and religious practice, important Chinese documents give rights on paper to the Uighurs.^{xi} Article 4 of the Chinese Constitution states that, “All ethnic groups have the freedom to use and develop their own spoken and written languages.”^{xii} Also, article 36 of the China's Regional Ethnic Autonomy Law establishes the principle that language policy should be decided at the local level. Indeed, “Schools and other educational organizations recruiting mostly ethnic minority students should, whenever possible, use textbooks in their own languages and use these languages as the media of instructions.”^{xiii} Finally, China's Constitution of 1982 stipulates that all citizens may enjoy freedom of religious belief under Article 36.^{xiv} However, various events and doings that will be discussed in this report seem to limit those guaranteed rights for the Uighurs.

III. Causes, Implications

A. Geography and Territory

The conflict is caused in part by territorial competition.^{xv} Historical narratives place the territory of Xinjiang within either a legacy of Chinese ownership, or within a historical Uighur homeland. The Chinese government has long argued that Xinjiang has been controlled by the central government for hundreds of years, while the Uighurs can clearly identify two periods during the 1930s and 1940s, when they maintained independent republics.^{xvi} Thus, the Chinese have constructed an image of an indivisible territory, upon which Chinese sovereignty rests. On the contrary, the Uighurs view the territory of Xinjiang as their homeland, and this can be necessary for their survival. The territory has strategic worth however, bordering the Central Asian Republics, and containing large quantities of mineral resources.

B. Inequalities

Consequently, resources play a significant role in the conflict, as the Uighurs are unable to participate equally in the competition for resources. The situation in Xinjiang demonstrates an instance where cultural differences coincide with, and are reinforced by socio-economic and political differences.^{xvii} Due to their status as an autonomous minority within China, the Uighurs are able to maintain limited political inclusion. As stated earlier, though there must be a Uighur at the head of the regional government, the leadership must remain loyal to the Chinese state, and local parties are unable to be represented in government, as the Communist Party maintains a monopoly. However, there are clear economic and social grievances that leave the Uighurs disadvantaged. Economic participation is constrained, and assimilationist policies have diluted the population demographics, in addition to creating difficulties for the Uighur to publicly practice either their religious or cultural values.

C. Religion

A question that must be raised however, is how superficial is culture in relation to other factors? Islam is at the heart of Uighur identity, and thus relinquishing their rights to Fasting and Prayer seems counterintuitive. Religion may not be the primary factor that motivates violence, as inequalities and territorial representations may speak to a larger audience. However, even if religious identities are not necessarily salient, any form of discrimination against Islamic values has the potential to produce extreme salience.^{xviii}

D. Relative Deprivation

Xinjiang thus makes a good case for a more instrumentalist argument. The establishment of the XUAR and the structures established by the dominant Han Chinese group can be interpreted to have led to a contention of power, and a separation along ‘civilizational fault lines.’ The existence of the Uighur region contributes to

a perpetuation of a cultural distinction, and the increasing levels of competition and inequality have led to a greater salience of ethnic identity.^{xix} Consequently, the Uighurs are beginning to understand that they are limited from engagement in the political, social and economic processes within a region that bears their name.

E. Regional Implications

The Central Asian Republics host a Uighur Diaspora group that became vocal concerning Uighur sovereignty following the collapse of the Soviet Union. This has complicated relationships with China, and has led to Chinese pressures on the Central Asian Republics, primarily Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, to ‘muffle’ the Uighur voices.^{xx} The states of Central Asia have generally obliged, as China is an increasingly important trading and security partner, particularly in the involvement of regional actors in the security-oriented Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, and the increasing fears of terrorism and radicalisation from Uighurs in Afghanistan and Pakistan. However, it must be noted, that the triggers for a regional spillover exist, and may become active in the event of large-scale violence in the XUAR. The role of Turkey must also be considered, as Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan described the violence in 2009 as “genocide,” and has vocalised Turkish concerns with the Chinese.^{xxi}

IV. Risk Assessment

The Uighur face the threat of having their culture, language, and religion slowly disappear under state-sponsored policies of assimilation and repression. As one scholar noted, it is becoming increasingly easy for Uighurs in Xinjiang to become “sinified,” or inducted into the ethnic Han Chinese population, and increasingly difficult to resist this assimilation.^{xxii} The region’s social, cultural and economic policies have the dual aims of developing the region for Han Chinese and promoting the assimilation of ethnic Uighur. Combined with a military force in the region that numbers 220,000 troops to quell any unrest that may surface in the region - peaceful or otherwise - Uighurs are faced with the slow erosion of their ethnicity without any recourse for resistance.^{xxiii}

The Minorities at Risk project notes that the probability of rebellion continuing is quite high, given the territorial concentration of the Uighur, the various militant political organizations dedicated to continued resistance, and the continued government repression of the region.^{xxiv} Simultaneously, Minorities at Risk outlines how the rebellion is stifled by the high level of support for the government by Han Chinese both within Xinjiang and across the rest of the country. This is in addition to both the difficulties that Uighurs face in crossing the national border to supporting the rebellion from abroad and the continued governmental efforts at economic development,^{xxv} which brings increased migration of Han Chinese to the region and creates an additional incentive for Uighur to induct themselves into the Han majority.

As has already been noted, there has been a desire for a Uighur-led separation of Xinjiang since the short-lived success of East Turkestan in the 1930s and 1940s.^{xxvi} China on the other hand claims historical dominion over all territory that belonged to the Qing dynasty (1644—1912), which includes Xinjiang.^{xxvii} This plays into part of an important source of legitimacy for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP): Chinese nationalism. Greve notes how quickly the CCP will fall back on nationalism to bolster its legitimacy, and how effective the rhetoric invoking the threat of Uighur “separatists” has been in justifying draconian action towards the ethnic minority.^{xxviii} In terms of government priorities, China now places stability in Xinjiang on the same level as achieving sovereignty over Taiwan.^{xxix}

The increasing economic development of Xinjiang, which has increased since Zhang Chunxian replaced Wang Lequan as Secretary of the Xinjiang branch of the CCP, has many impacts.^{xxx} The development causes

increased migration of Han Chinese to the region,^{xxxii} which further dilutes Uighur population, exacerbates ethnic tension between the Uighur and Han,^{xxxiii} increases the incentive for the CCP to maintain stability in the face of threats,^{xxxiii} and produces economic benefits that are not equally enjoyed by residents of Xinjiang.^{xxxiv}

Economic development and internal migration is not the only way in which the Chinese government looks to stabilize Xinjiang, however. The CCP also employs a range of social and cultural policies that amount to what one scholar calls “coercive assimilation.” In terms of education, teaching the Uighur language has been phased out in elementary schools and kindergartens, while simultaneously, “Children attending the five-days-per-week ‘boarding’ day-care establishments may never fully master their parents’ native languages.”^{xxxv} As alluded to earlier, any economic or education opportunity that Uighur children wish to take advantage of comes at the cost of abandoning their ethnic identity, with bright students becoming educated far from home in eastern universities, putting pressure on intergenerational ethnic ties.^{xxxvi}

The treatment of the Uighur’s Muslim faith is perhaps the most troubling. In an effort to combat one of the motivations of Uighur separatism, the practice of Islam is heavily restricted. Parents are forbidden from teaching their religion to their children. Eighteen is the minimum age to enter mosques in the region, which are surrounded by armed guards. Fasting during Ramadan is prohibited for students, government employees and almost all others.^{xxxvii} And again, this is all overwhelmingly supported by Han Chinese, who views this not only as a nationalistic and security issue, but also as a project of civilizing what is seen as a backward race. In an anecdote, Cliff writes,

A Xinjiang-born Han businessman related to me the story of “a little Uighur girl whose role was to pick up a brick and smash the skulls of Han people lying beaten on the ground—to make sure that their brains were splattered.” He continues, his voice breaking with anger and disgust, “What do you say? A little 13-year-old girl! This whole ethnicity is animal! They’re animals.” Stories of children involved as both perpetrators and victims of violence were deployed by all sides, but all of the stories remain unconfirmed.^{xxxviii}

Given the increasing incentives for the CCP to continue its present policy direction and the assimilating impact that these policies have on ethnic Uyghur, there continues to be a high risk of genocide and crimes against humanity against the Uighur in Xinjiang. Genocide and crimes against humanity in this case is as defined under Section 2 of the constitution of the All-Party Parliamentary for the Prevention of Genocide and Other Crimes Against Humanity. The parts of the definition for genocide that apply are sections 2.1.b and 2.1.c: the causing of serious mental harm to members of the group and deliberately inflicting conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part.

In terms of crimes against humanity, the CCP appears to be engaging in acts that fall under sections 2.2.e, 2.2.h, and 2.2.k of the aforementioned constitution: severe deprivation of physical, persecution against any identifiable on ethnic, cultural, religious, or other grounds that or other inhumane acts intentionally causing great suffering, or serious injury to body or to mental or physical health.^{xxxix}

V. Implications for Canada

In the past, Canada spoke up against human rights violation in China, notably in the region of Tibet. During his most recent trip to Canada, Prime Minister Stephen Harper mentioned that “Canada would always be ‘a vocal advocate’ for human rights.”^{xl} While the Prime Minister’s recent trip focused mostly on economy and trade, Canadian actions are generally favorable to the human rights cause. For example, the spiritual leader of

the Tibetans, the Dalai Lama, received Honorary Canadian Citizenship in 2006^{xli}, which is a very important political gesture. Canada, in the past at least, was not scared to give importance to human rights, even if it could create tensions with China. If there is a will to intervene politically, it could be done.

Uighur Diaspora groups in Canada have also been trying to bring more attention to the Human Rights abuses suffered by the Uighurs. The Uyghur Canadian Society has been the most active, and has earned not only the ear of Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, but has briefed various Canadian politicians, Canadian Embassy staff, and the Office of Religious Freedoms.^{xliii}

VI. Policy Options and Recommendations

Policy Options

We recognize that the mandate of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for the Prevention of Genocide and Other Crimes Against Humanity is limited. Its main focus is on communication and the flow of information between the government, the civil society, like-minded organizations and the people of Canada regarding genocide and crimes against humanity prevention.^{xliii} Generally, the options available to the Group are:

- Classifying the situation of human rights abuses against the Uighurs as either an act of genocide, as crimes against humanity, or as benign (non-escalatory) abuses;
- Sharing pertinent information with the government regarding human rights violations against the Uighurs in China;
- Lobbying the government to take political actions regarding the said human rights violations;
- Discussing the Uighurs' human rights violations with United Nations Special Advisor for the Prevention of Genocide, the International Criminal Court, and other organizations working in the field of genocide prevention;
- Encouraging fact-finding research to be conducted by Canadian universities' professors and other scholars, and collaborating with their research.

Recommendations

We respectfully recommend to the All-Party Parliamentary Group for the Prevention of Genocide and Other Crimes Against Humanity to:

- Take a strong stance and classify the large-scale human rights abuse against the Uighur in XUAR as crimes against humanity that could lead to genocide. There are documented killings of thousands of Uighurs, including through political death penalty. Furthermore, many of the elements discussed in this brief could be attributed to apartheid.
- Lobby the government of Canada to make public statements in favor of human rights and against the documented crimes against humanity. Canada has done it in the past in the case of Tibet. While there are no Uighur public figures that can promote the cause as the Dalai Lama could in the case of Tibet, the Group should lobby the government of Canada to establish some political recognition of the Uighurs' struggles and XUAR's autonomous political leadership.
- Promote research on the Uighurs in Canadian universities. There is great potential for research in Canadian universities, such as the current qualitative research on effects of urbanization on human rights in XUAR by Professor Huhua Cao at the University of Ottawa.^{xliv} The Group can encourage the creation of more research projects on the Uighurs' struggles, as well as encourage collaboration between researchers. The Group could also be the link between this Canadian research, and the government and other organizations working in the field of genocide.

Endnotes

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Annex

