

# Uyghur Muslim Ethnic Separatism in Xinjiang, China

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## Overview<sup>1</sup>

- The April 1990 armed uprising in Baren marked an increase in Uyghur Muslim violence in Xinjiang, China. Two justifications—ethnic separatism and religious rhetoric—are given. The Uyghurs, who reside throughout the immediate region, are the largest Turkic ethnic group living in Xinjiang as well as being overwhelmingly Muslim. This combination of ethnicity and religion also involves the movement of religious and political ideologies, weapons, and people.
- The desired outcome by groups that use violence is, broadly speaking, a separate Uyghur state, called either Uyghuristan or Eastern Turkistan, which lays claim to a large part of China. While some Uyghurs want a separate state, others want to maintain cultural distinction within an autonomous relationship with China, and others are integrating into the Chinese system. There is no single Uyghur agenda.
- The violent outbreaks in Xinjiang occur sporadically, and the groups that claim responsibility are frequently splintering, merging, and collapsing. Some of the Uyghur groups make claims that are difficult to substantiate. Nonetheless, the Uyghur grievances against the Chinese government have old roots. Some of the newer elements include Turkey's unofficial support and Muslim funding and training from abroad.
- The heavy-handedness of the multiple “strike hard” campaigns by the central Chinese government in Xinjiang simultaneously tamps down violence in the short-run but fuels a sense of injustice and mistrust among the Uyghurs in the long-run. Beginning in 1996, regular “strike hard” campaigns were used to fight crime and threats to order by mobilizing police, but are used in this decade to deal increasingly with “separatism, extremism and terrorism.” A heavy police presence is a constant in Xinjiang.
- U.S. policy on this issue is constrained. Not only does the US need to work with China on issues of geostrategic importance, but also the Uyghurs who use violence have formed limited associations with groups that are categorized as terrorist organizations. The best option for the United States is to continue to encourage China to use the rule of law and to respect human rights.

## The Roots of the Problem

A January 2007 Chinese raid on a training camp in Xinjiang killed 18 terrorist suspects and one policeman. Seventeen more suspects were reported captured and explosives were seized. The raid was said to have provided new evidence of ties to “international terrorist

forces.”<sup>2</sup> The raid marks the latest clash between Uyghur Muslim separatists and Chinese security services, reflecting a limited challenge to China’s mainland stability. In Beijing’s view, however, instability in Xinjiang could also bring instability to Tibet, Inner Mongolia, and Taiwan. As with many of these disputes throughout Asia, the root causes of the problem are a complex mix of history, ethnicity, and religion, fueled by poverty, unemployment, social disparities, and political grievances.

The central government has gone through several waves regarding the treatment of religion and ethnicity within the territory of the People’s Republic of China. Historically, ethnic minorities that are adherents to religions other than Chinese Buddhism raised fears of social unrest in China. For instance in the nineteenth century, the Taiping Rebellion—including the Hakka subgroup and Zhuang minorities—and the Hui Minorities War<sup>3</sup> both had their roots in religious movements. The Hui, ethnically Chinese but religiously Muslim, are a unique minority in China. The ethnic minorities and Muslim majority in Xinjiang, which means the “New Territories” in Chinese, were largely conquered and integrated into the Chinese state in the 1750s. Xinjiang became a province in 1884, fixing a firm western border with Russia.<sup>4</sup> According to the noted historian Jonathan D. Spence, the Xinjiang region was not initially colonized or settled, but was maintained as a strategic frontier zone, with up to 20,000 Manchu and Chinese banner garrisons, at a huge annual cost. The largely Muslim inhabitants kept their own religious leaders, who were bound by salaries and titles to the Qing state (China).<sup>5</sup> After the dissolution of the Qing Dynasty, the last Chinese dynasty, the Republic of China’s Nationalists gradually saw the country fall into Japanese occupied territories and warlord fiefdoms, including Xinjiang, which was ruled by an autonomous military governor who nervously sought aid and sponsorship first from Soviet Russia and then from the Nationalists, before ultimately surrendering to the Communists in Xinjiang in September 1949.<sup>6</sup>

Although initially declaring the People’s Republic of China as a multinational state<sup>7</sup> in 1949, the Communist Party’s Anti Rightist Policy of 1957 opposed “local nationalism” among ethnic minorities and clamped down on religions. A decade later, the harsh Cultural Revolution (1966-76) saw many even greater injustices against ethnic minorities. Religion was especially suppressed, but so was ethnic language, cultural cuisines and garb. The Uyghur in Xinjiang, like other Muslim minorities throughout China, saw their religious texts and mosques destroyed, their religious leaders persecuted, and individual adherents punished. With the more open policies of the late 1970s through the early 1990s, restrictions on minorities and religions began to loosen. This opening resulted in more minorities speaking out against what were seen as discriminatory economic, religious, and political practices. The Chinese government began to crack down in Xinjiang in 1996, shortly after the first meeting of the Shanghai Five, soon to be the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, whose members include Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to police and military crackdowns, Beijing believes that economic development can undermine Uyghur calls for independence and solve Xinjiang's problems. And economically, Xinjiang has dramatically improved relative to its economy of a decade ago, although it still lags behind the industrialized coastal areas. However,

the very improvements attributed to economic enhancement open China to risk in Xinjiang. For example, as part of its development plans, Beijing is connecting Xinjiang to Central Asia through roads, rails and pipelines to Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. But these very openings are exposing Xinjiang directly to Islamic militant training and arms as well as the drug trade emanating from these countries and beyond.<sup>9</sup>

### **State Responses**

The response from Beijing has been officially reasonable, but less so in practice. In September 1999, *National Minorities Policy and Its Practice in China* was released by the Office of the State Council. The policy outlines a fairly generous policy toward minorities.<sup>10</sup> The problem, of course, is always in the actual adherence to policy in real life situations where minorities are often viewed with various preconceived notions of race and ethnicity. Open tolerance of minorities declined further in Xinjiang after September 11, 2001, when China felt it was now both internationally permissible to “crack down” on separatists in Xinjiang and nationally more urgent to protect its porous borders from an influx of more violent forms of Islam, borders which abut Afghanistan as well as Pakistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan.<sup>11</sup>

Chinese central government policies are also reflected in recent policy statements. For instance, at the May 2006 meeting of the Chinese National Islamic Council, Jia Qinglin, chairman of the National Committee of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Congress, urged Islamic leaders in China to play a positive role in building a “harmonious society.”<sup>12</sup> The message reflects the Chinese government’s perceived connection between Muslims, many of whom are also ethnic minorities in China, and social unrest.<sup>13</sup> According to Ye Xiaowen, Director of the State Administration for Religious Affairs, “As Chinese Muslims advance with the nation, this is our response to the many turbid misunderstandings that tarnish the Muslim image: Islam is a peace-loving religion. Chinese Muslims love peace, oppose turmoil and separatism, advocate tolerance and harmony, and treasure unity and stability.”<sup>14</sup>

Clearly the Chinese government has been cracking down on Uyghur militants. Western human rights groups are concerned about overall treatment of prisoners and the targeting of minorities, while the Chinese government is concerned that Islamic militant rhetoric and funding are finding their way into China. The issue then becomes whether China is victimizing the Uyghur minority, using terrorism and separatism as an excuse to violate their human rights, or whether China itself is a victim of separatists and terror networks like the al-Qaeda camps,<sup>15</sup> which trained Uyghurs in Afghanistan for activities in Xinjiang.<sup>16</sup> The Chinese tend to refer to this concern by the three character slogan of separatism, extremism and terrorism, implying a distinct link between the three concepts. For instance, Chinese President Hu Jintao said on June 17, 2004, that “We have to fight against the three evils of separatism, extremism and terrorism,” in a speech at a summit meeting of the six-nation Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), adding that terrorism in all forms must be suppressed and double standards must be ruled out in fighting what is regarded as a grave threat to world peace and development. Efforts should be made to tackle the problems of regional confrontation and poverty, which are considered the roots of terrorism, said the Chinese president. “Terrorism is not

automatically related to certain ethnic groups or religions," he added.<sup>17</sup> It is clear that the Chinese leadership fears that Xinjiang separatism has and will continue to gain support from transnational Muslim extremists, with possible ramifications both for other latent Chinese separatist movements without a Muslim connection and for other Chinese Muslims without a separatist agenda.

The central government's policies on separatists include the use of force, certainly evident in Xinjiang. For example, in August 2001, the Chinese military undertook large-scale exercises in Xinjiang with an imposing parade of military hardware through the center of the city of Kashgar. The Xinjiang exercises, which were spread over almost a month, reportedly involved 50,000 troops, one of the largest ever staged by the Chinese in the region, featuring dozens of armored personnel vehicles, tanks, and camouflaged trucks filled with troops, capped off by a flyover of fighter jets. The parade was presided over by General Fu Quanyou, then chief of general staff of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and a member of the Central Military Commission. A number of other generals and senior officers, based at the Lanzhou military region which co-ordinates defense in Xinjiang, also sat on the podium to view the parade.<sup>18</sup> The use of domestic force is possible partly because of the existing international war on terrorism, the prevailing perception of the linkages between terrorism and separatism, the general regional reluctance to condone ethnic separatism, and the global concern that religion is mixing with both terrorism and separatism.

Economic incentives, however, may well be the largest tool in the central government's policies toward Xinjiang and the Uyghurs, especially the Western Development policies. The western regions, over half of China's vast expanse of land with its highlands and deserts, are made up of six provinces and three autonomous regions, including Xinjiang. The Western Development policies were first an economic development strategy to reduce poverty and then an urgent social necessity of Chinese leaders. In the early 1980s, then-leader Deng Xiaoping developed a policy to first develop the eastern coastal regions, which already had a better economic foundation than the western regions, and then second to increase the development of the western regions after the development of the eastern regions reached a certain point. In the following decades the poverty gap between eastern and western China widened, resulting in Beijing's creation in June 1999 of a leading group responsible for the development of the western regions with Premier Zhu Rongji and 17 ministerial-level officials as members. The attempt to use economic tools to address ethnic separatism in Xinjiang reflects the Chinese government's long-standing belief that most peoples, Uyghurs included, primarily want a good economic life for themselves and their children.

The current Chinese government, under President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao, is acutely aware of the challenges and dangers that lesser development in the western regions like Xinjiang means for not only China's overall continued prosperity, but also for political stability, the possible enticements of Islamic extremism, and the calls for ethnic separatism. In 2006, Wang Jinxiang, deputy director of the National Development and Reform Commission, assured the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) that the national strategy to develop the

country's western region had made great progress. He said that a total of one trillion yuan (US\$125 B) has been spent building infrastructure in western China with an annual average regional economic growth rate of 10.6 percent for six years in a row.<sup>19</sup> China, continuing with its transportation infrastructure projects, will build twelve new highways in Xinjiang to connect with Russia, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Pakistan. The longest road will stretch 1,680 kilometers from Xinjiang to Uzbekistan, Iran, Turkey, and finally reach Europe, scheduled for completion before 2010.<sup>20</sup> Other infrastructure projects either significantly underway or completed as of 2007 are: a south-to-north water diversion, a west-to-east natural gas transfer, a west-to-east power transmission and the completed Qinghai-Tibet Railway.<sup>21</sup>

The underlying idea is that if the western regions, most notably Xinjiang, have sufficient development, then the minorities will prosper, be less restive, give less support for separatist activities, and be more integrated into the fortunes—both economic and political—of China. A complicating factor that has become manifest along with this economic development has been migration into the western regions, primarily of Han (or majority) Chinese. Not only is this making the western regions more ethnically Chinese, but also it is reinforcing the “minority” status of the Uyghurs, who watch the better paying jobs go to Han Chinese while the harder labor, poorer paying positions are given to Uyghurs. The other ethnic groups living in Xinjiang—Kazaks, Hui, Kirgiz, Mongols, and others—have more mixed feelings about Han money and people moving into the region.

In addition to the national Western Development policies, there are the provincial and local policies in Xinjiang.<sup>22</sup> As in many places, politics are local in China. While it would be a mistake to underestimate the importance of Muslim status and politics inside of China, with a Muslim population of approximately 20 million,<sup>23</sup> there is a decidedly regional, provincial and ethnic character to Islam in China as well. China's ten Muslim ethnic minorities usually find common cause only when they feel an issue denigrates Islam, as was the case with the offensive Danish cartoons of the Muslim prophet Mohammed. The largest group, the Hui who have blended fairly well into Chinese society, regard some Uyghurs as unpatriotic separatists who give other Chinese Muslims a bad name. The Hui “don't tend to get too involved in international Islamic conflict,” said Dr. Dru Gladney, a scholar of Chinese ethnic minorities. “They don't want to be branded as radical Muslims.”<sup>24</sup>

The local perception of groups as radical Muslims or ethnic separatists can have severe consequences. Provincial policies also include the threat of force. Armed police held a large-scale anti-terror exercise in Xinjiang on August 30, 2005. In the exercise, special police forces fought and subdued a group of “armed terrorists” who took over a company building and held some people as hostages following a failed attack at a prison.<sup>25</sup>

There are mixed policy assessments in the Xinjiang region itself regarding the Uyghurs.<sup>26</sup> On the one hand, deputy secretary of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region committee of the Chinese Communist Party and a Han Chinese, Zhang Xiuming, implied that separatism and terrorism in Xinjiang is an issue when he said, “We need to take the

initiative and go on the offensive, crack down on gangs as soon as they surface and strike the first blow. We must absolutely not permit the three vicious forces to build organizations, have ringleaders, control weapons and develop an atmosphere. We need to destroy them one by one as we discover them and absolutely not allow them to build up momentum.” On the other hand, the Chair of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region government and a Uyghur Chinese, Ismael Tiliwaldi, implied something quite different, when he said, “In Xinjiang, not one incident of explosion or assassination took place in the last few years....Last year Xinjiang’s public security situation was very good...”<sup>27</sup>

It is clear nonetheless that both the central government and the provincial authorities broadly fall on the side of avoiding becoming a victim of terrorist or separatist activities when it comes to the question of whether China is victimizing the Uyghur minority or whether China itself is a victim of Uyghur militants. For instance, following the mass protests and violent riots of April 1990 in Baren township, there were further Uyghur demonstrations and disturbances in various cities including Yining, Khotan and Aksu in the mid-1990s. This was followed by the Chinese government response: the initiation of a "strike hard" campaign against crime throughout China in 1996 which made Uyghurs and separatists in Xinjiang a key target. After the forceful suppression of a demonstration by Uyghurs in the city of Yining in February 1997, several days of serious unrest reigned in the city. A renewed national "strike hard" campaign against crime was initiated in April 2001 and has never formally been brought to a close. Several levels of police conspicuously and daily patrolled the Uyghur sections of Urumqi in 2007; Han police officers patrolled the streets in a six-man formation wearing black uniforms and black flack jackets, armed with batons and side arms.

China’s official statement on "East Turkestan terrorists" published in January 2002 listed several groups allegedly responsible for violence, including the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM), the East Turkistan Liberation Organization (ETLO), the Islamic Reformist Party ‘Shock Brigade’, the East Turkestan Islamic Party, the East Turkestan Opposition Party, the East Turkestan Islamic Party of Allah, the Uyghur Liberation Organization, the Islamic Holy Warriors and the East Turkestan International Committee.<sup>28</sup> There is not always clarity in the way these groups are officially labeled nor do these groups seem to stay static. For instance, in 1997, the Uyghurstan Liberation Front and the United National Revolutionary Front of East Turkestan (UNRF) overcame their differences and joined together in a jihad in Xinjiang. The UNRF fears Uyghurs who agree with China, and announced that it had assassinated an imam of the mosque in Kashgar in 1996 because of his pro-China views.<sup>29</sup> When China destroyed an Islamist camp in Xinjiang in January 2007, killing 18 suspected terrorists and capturing 17 others, a police spokeswoman, Ba Yan, said the training camp was run by ETIM.<sup>30</sup>

Some of the issues between Uyghurs and the Chinese government, however, seem unrelated to separatist issues. In another recent incident, hundreds of Uyghurs protested outside government offices over plans to push them off their farmlands to build a dam, according to a Chinese police official and Radio Free Asia. Police arrested at least 16 protesters in Xinjiang's Yili county, the site of clashes between security forces and Uyghurs in 1997. The June 2004 protests began outside the offices of a reservoir and

hydropower station planned for the local Tekas River, according to U.S.-based Radio Free Asia. Authorities plan to move about 18,000 farmers, forestry workers and herders to make way for the reservoir, but protesters said they've been paid only 880 yuan (about US\$100) out of 38,000 yuan (US\$4,600) promised to them, the station said, citing anonymous witnesses. An officer at Tekas County police headquarters confirmed the June 11, 2004, protest, saying, "The protest was big. People don't want to move because they aren't satisfied with the amount of compensation for resettlement."<sup>31</sup>

### **International Responses**

It is less clear how the international community stands on this question of whether China is victimizing the Uyghur minority or whether China itself is a victim of Uyghur militants. A report produced in December 2001 by the US Congressional Research Service, for instance, documented a number of armed groups operating in the region.<sup>32</sup> Its list of armed groups included: the United Revolutionary Front of Eastern Turkestan, the Organization for the Liberation of Uighurstan, the Wolves of Lop Nor, the Xinjiang Liberation Organization, the Uighur Liberation Organization, the Home of East Turkestan Youth and the Free Turkestan Movement. Pakistan also considers several of these organizations as terrorist or militant separatist organizations.

The US did agree in 2002 to specifically single out ETIM as a terrorist organization in response to a planned attack on the US Embassy in neighboring Kyrgyzstan.<sup>33</sup> Deputy Secretary of State Richard L. Armitage announced that ETIM had been added to a State Department list of terrorist groups, freezing its assets in the United States, saying the group "committed acts of violence against unarmed civilians without any regard for who was hurt." A spokesman for the embassy went further, accusing ETIM of working with Osama bin Laden's al Qaeda network and "planning attacks against U.S. interests abroad, including the U.S. Embassy in Kyrgyzstan." ETIM's leader and China's most-wanted terrorist, Hasan Mahsum, who was later killed by Pakistani forces on October 2, 2003, said, "We don't have any organizational contact or relations with al Qaeda or the Taliban.... Maybe some individuals fought alongside them on their own."<sup>34</sup> Two suspected ETIM members were deported to China from Kyrgyzstan in May 2002 for planning terrorist attacks. The Kyrgyz government has identified the men as Mamet Yasyn and Mamet Sadyk and said they were planning attacks on embassies, markets and public gathering places in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan.<sup>35</sup>

However, the US has declined to formally add another Uyghur organization, ETLO, to its list. In a Radio Free Asia interview, conducted on 24 January 2003, the leader of ETLO, Mehmet Emin Hazret reportedly stated, "Our principle [sic] goal is to achieve independence for East Turkestan by peaceful means. But to show our enemies and friends our determination on the East Turkestan issue, we view a military wing as inevitable."<sup>36</sup> Regarding other Uyghur militants, Chinese officials asked the United States to return Chinese Uyghurs captured fighting in Afghanistan. The United States has rejected China's claims and in May 2006 released five Uyghurs<sup>37</sup> to Albania, a neutral third country, while continuing to hold thirteen more Chinese Uyghurs in the U.S. prison in Guantanamo Bay.<sup>38</sup> Lawyers for these thirteen Uyghurs say the men were moved to

Guantanamo Bay's high-security facility,<sup>39</sup> while the U.S. Government does not comment on enemy combatants held in Guantanamo.

Pakistan, both a neighbor and friend of China, has taken a more stringent line toward Uyghurs, closer to the policies of most Central Asian neighbors. China and Pakistan agreed to enter into an extradition treaty to facilitate the exchange of prisoners in 2003. Ismail Kadir, reported to be the third highest leader of ETIM, was returned to China in March 2002 following his capture by Pakistani authorities reportedly in either Kashmir or in the city of Rawalpindi, northern Pakistan, home to a sizeable community of Uyghurs. In Pakistan, a senior Interior Ministry official confirmed Kadir's repatriation to China, saying the man had been arrested in March. "He was sent back to China after being interrogated," the official said giving no further details.<sup>40</sup> Ismail Samed, allegedly another Uyghur ETIM founder, was executed in Urumqi after being deported from Pakistan where he had fled after serving two jail terms for alleged involvement in the violent Baren uprising in 1990. Samed was convicted in October 2005 of "attempting to split the motherland" and the possession of firearms and explosives.<sup>41</sup> And Pakistani troops reportedly killed Hasan Mahsum, yet another ETIM leader, in the South Waziristan region of Pakistan on 2 October 2003.<sup>42</sup> Pakistan President Musharraf stated during his November 2003 visit to Beijing that "his country will never allow anybody, including the terrorist force of 'East Turkestan', to use the territory of Pakistan to carry out any form of anti-China activities."<sup>43</sup> Thousands of Uyghurs reportedly travel to and from Pakistan for business and religious purposes, particularly to study in Pakistan's madrassas. China believes that more than 1,000 Uyghurs were trained by bin Laden's forces in Afghanistan,<sup>44</sup> with approximately 110 returning to China, about 300 allegedly captured or killed by U.S. forces, and about 600 escaping to northern Pakistan.<sup>45</sup> In addition, some reports suggest that Uyghurs have been trained in unofficial Pakistan militant training camps.<sup>46</sup>

This combination of ethnicity and religion also involves the Uyghur population resident in Central Asia who are associated with the movement of religious and political ideologies, weapons, and individuals. Uyghurs are often viewed with a great deal of leeriness in Central Asia. Uyghur separatists within Xinjiang drew inspiration and envy from their Central Asian neighbors' independence after the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, and they increased their movement toward a separate Uyghur state. Militant Uyghur groups exploited Xinjiang's porous border with Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Afghanistan to establish training camps outside of China's reach<sup>47</sup> as well as to move explosives and small arms into China. Additionally, it is much easier for citizens of surrounding countries to serendipitously travel into China. "This year, we have arrested 19 people from abroad who were sent to Xinjiang for violent sabotage," Xinjiang Communist Party Secretary Wang Lequan told reporters at a news conference in Xinjiang's capital, Urumqi. "When they entered the territory of Xinjiang, we immediately caught them," Wang said without elaborating.<sup>48</sup>

The very rapid growth of economic relations and connecting infrastructure between China and Central Asian countries<sup>49</sup> has also enabled the enhanced movement of ideas, weapons and people. There are roughly a half million Uyghurs in Central Asia. Most of

the Central Asian governments, notably Kyrgyzstan, have made several attempts to crack down on Uyghurs whom they view as undesirable or militant. There is a tendency to view Uyghurs with suspicion—they are frequently unemployed and thus seen as thieves and troublemakers as well as harboring discontent toward their host governments. Uyghurs in Central Asian countries often join hands with other dissident groups, united by the global Islamic resurgence. For instance, Uzbek leaders believe that ethnic Uyghurs from Central Asia and China are members of the terrorist organization known as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU).<sup>50</sup> Since the beginning of 2005, there has been a wave of “election-related turmoil” or so-called “Color Revolutions” in Central Asia, with terrorist and extremist forces often funded from outside and uniting religious extremists with political dissidents against authoritarian governments. Afghanistan has witnessed the resurgence of Taliban and al Qaeda in the wake of a new wave of terrorist attacks following the Iraq War. More severely, Hizb-ut-Tahrir and other extremist groups are quickly winning popular support in Central Asia, particularly in the poverty-stricken Fergana countryside, bespeaking a reemerging grim security situation in the region that poses new challenges to both Central Asian countries and China.<sup>51</sup>

### **Energy**

Although most experts would agree that the primary issues at stake in Xinjiang are ethnic separatism and Muslim extremism, the issue of energy is not negligible. Not only does Xinjiang have considerable energy resources in terms of gas and oil, in addition to its former role as the Chinese nuclear test grounds, but also Xinjiang is the gateway to Central Asian energy resources. China is pursuing pipeline deals with its oil rich neighbors in Central Asia, as well as Russia, to help meet the booming economy's demand for energy.

China and Kazakhstan started energy cooperation in 1997, marked by an intergovernmental agreement covering diverse means of collaboration in oil and gas fields, including an oil pipeline between western Kazakhstan and China's Xinjiang. The transnational Atasu pipeline was completed in November 2005. The deal, signed in 2004, came as Kazakhstan's president, Nursultan Abishevich Nazarbayev and President Hu Jintao signed a broad agreement for joint exploration and development of oil and gas resources in the Caspian Sea. The two sides also are stepping up consideration of plans for a natural gas pipeline to connect gas fields in the Caspian Sea with China.<sup>52</sup> Kazakhstan and China signed an agreement to build up international passenger and freight rail transport, as part of an effort to boost trade and complete routes through Kazakhstan to Europe. A China-Kazakhstan rail link opened in 1992.<sup>53</sup> Additionally, China and Kazakhstan have opened a free trade zone at their mutual border to further enhance their already rapidly growing economic relationship.

Gas pipelines from Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan to China are also in the works. These pipelines, if connected with the Xinjiang-Shanghai gas pipeline, will also contribute to the implementation of China's Western Development policies. Turkmen President Saparmurat Niyazov, now deceased, and Chinese President Hu Jintao signed a framework agreement on oil and gas cooperation on April 3, 2006, including a

Turkmenistan-China gas pipeline to be commissioned in 2009.<sup>54</sup> Turkmenistan's gas reserves are considered to be the largest in Central Asia.<sup>55</sup> These developments usher in new energy cooperation between China and Central Asia, and these energy supplies—unlike Middle Eastern or other energy supplies—do not require maritime security.<sup>56</sup>

### **Alternative Futures**

The future that most worries the Chinese is that the Uyghur Muslim movement in Xinjiang will, on the one hand, externally hook up with international Muslim movements throughout Asia and the Middle East, bringing with it an influx of Islamic extremism and a desire to challenge the Chinese central government. On the other hand, the Chinese fear the Uyghur movement could internally radicalize other minorities, whether it was the ethnic Tibetans or the Muslim Hui. While Beijing is currently successfully managing the separatist movements in China, the possibility of increased difficulty is linked partly to elements outside of Chinese control, such as political instability or increased Islamic extremism in neighboring Pakistan, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan. Partly, however, the progress of separatist movements in China will be determined by the Chinese themselves in policies and reactions. If “strike hard” campaigns do or are seen to discriminate against nonviolent Uyghurs and if the perception that economic development in Xinjiang aids Han Chinese at the expense of Uyghurs, the separatist movements will be fueled.

The region as a whole has concerns about growing Uyghur violence. Central Asian countries, especially those with sizable Uyghur minorities, already worry about Uyghur violence and agitation. Many of the regional governments, especially authoritarian secular governments, in South Asia and Central Asia are worried about the contagion of increasing Muslim radicalization. The governments of Southeast Asia are also worried about growing radical networks and training camps, but they also fear the very idea of a fragmenting China. Not only is China economically important to the region, but also political instability in China would impact all of Asia.

### **Implications for the United States**

Given that the existing scope of the Uyghur Muslim separatist movement in China remains weak and under reasonable control, this need not be a top issue for the United States. Although Beijing has decided to cast this ethnic separatist movement in light of new global perceptions following September 11, 2001, the Uyghur issue, both inside of China and in the neighboring countries, well predates the war on terrorism. While this is a genuine ethnic separatist movement with at least some ties to global Muslim networks, it is not supported by any of the immediate neighboring country governments and thus is unlikely to erupt into a major concern in the near term.

The United States is constrained in its policy on this issue in any case. Not only does the US need to work with China on issues of geostrategic importance, but also the Uyghurs who use violence have formed limited associations with groups that are categorized as

terrorist organizations. The best option for the United States is to continue to encourage China to use the rule of law and to respect human rights.

The primary concern for the United States has been<sup>57</sup> and should remain human rights abuses. The US-led war on terrorism has led some international human rights organizations to speculate that this new international environment will lead to an increase in human rights abuses globally. Many of the human rights groups that watch Xinjiang, especially the Chinese “strike hard” campaigns, fear that China is using the war on terror to disregard the human rights of Uyghurs. Not only are human rights abuses abhorrent in and of themselves, but also the Chinese worsen the problem by targeting and antagonizing nonviolent Uyghurs.

A focus on human rights is consistent with the US decision to cite one Uyghur militant group as a terrorist organization, specifically when it was asserted by a third party government that that organization (ETIM) was targeting both civilians and an American embassy, but not to label other Uyghur organizations as terrorists. There are a few issues with the Uyghur detainees held at Guantanamo, according to a 2007 Congressional Research Service Report, with some Uyghurs being released and other Uyghurs being held indefinitely.<sup>58</sup> The United States should neither absolutely agree to other countries’ allegations of who is a terrorist nor ignore the growing linkages between extremist organizations that train and arm militants.

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<sup>1</sup> The Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies (APCSS) is a regional study, conference and research center under the United States Department of Defense. The views in this paper are personal opinions of the author, and are not official positions of the U.S. government, the U.S. Pacific Command, or the APCSS. All APCSS publications are posted on the APCSS web site at [www.apcss.org](http://www.apcss.org).

<sup>2</sup> “Police Destroy Islamist Camp, Killing 18” *China Daily* January 8, 2007.

<sup>3</sup> See Kim Hodong, *Holy War in China: The Muslim Rebellion and State in Chinese Central Asia, 1864-1877* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004).

<sup>4</sup> Jonathan D. Spence, *The Search for Modern China* (New York: WW Norton & Company, 1990) p. 97, 110, 210, 221.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 450, 512.

<sup>7</sup> “The People's Republic of China is a united multi-ethnic state founded jointly by the people of all its ethnic groups. So far, there are 56 ethnic groups identified and confirmed by the Central Government, ... As the majority of the population belongs to the Han ethnic group, China's other 55 ethnic groups are customarily referred to as the national minorities.” See Office of the State Council, *National Minorities Policy and Its Practice in China*, September 1999, Part 1.A.

<sup>8</sup> “In April 1996 and April 1997, two agreements for security and disarmament along the borders—the “Treaty on Deepening Military Trust in Border Regions” and the “Treaty on Reduction of Military Forces in Border Regions”—were signed by China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. These two

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agreements marked the beginning of the Shanghai Five-SCO process.” Pan Guang, “China and Central Asia: Charting a New Course for Regional Cooperation,” *China Brief/The Jamestown Foundation* Vol. 7, Issue 3 February 7, 2007.

<sup>9</sup> Justin Rudelson, *Xinjiang's Uyghurs In The Ensuing US-China Partnership* (Congressional-Executive Commission on China, Uyghur Panel, June 10, 2002).

<sup>10</sup> In 1994, the Regulation Governing Venues for Religious Activities was released with terms defining acceptable activities. There are several dimensions to the rules on religion. According to Article 2, “Registration is required for the establishment of a venue for religious activities.” And “‘venues for religious activities’ refers to monasteries, temples, mosques, churches and other fixed venues.” This registration allows the government to keep administrative tabs on all religious activities to prevent excessive dissidence against the government, but allows their practice in principle. See *Regulation Governing Venues for Religious Activities – 1994* (Promulgated by Decree No. 145 of the State Council, signed by Premier Li Peng, January 31, 1994).

<sup>11</sup> See Gaye Christoffersen, “Islam and Ethnic Minorities in Central Asia: The Uyghurs” in *Islam, Oil, and Geopolitics* edited by Elizabeth Van Wie Davis & Rouben Azizian (Boulder: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006).

<sup>12</sup> “贾庆林会见中国伊斯兰教第八次全国代表会议代表 (Jia Qinglin Meets with Representatives of the Chinese National Islamic Congress).” *Guangxi News* 15 May 2006.

<sup>13</sup> See CIIR, “Chinese Muslims Encouraged to Help Build a Harmonious Society” *Global Issues Report* 22 May 2006.

<sup>14</sup> “国家宗教局:中国穆斯林要继续弘扬爱和平的传统 (State Administration for Religious Affairs: Chinese Muslims Must Continue to Carry Forward their Peace-loving Tradition).” *China News* May 8, 2006.

<sup>15</sup> The primary target of China’s anti-terror campaign is the “East Turkestan” terrorist group. Evidence recently disclosed reveals Osama bin Laden told the terrorists: “I support your jihad in Xinjiang” Information Office of the P.R.C. State Council, “*East Turkestan*” *Terrorist Forces Cannot Get Away with Their Offences*, Beijing, January 1, 2002.

<sup>16</sup> See Gaye Christoffersen, “Islam and Ethnic Minorities in Central Asia: The Uyghurs” in *Islam, Oil, and Geopolitics* edited by Elizabeth Van Wie Davis & Rouben Azizian (Boulder: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006), p. 48.

<sup>17</sup> See “Chinese President Calls For Joint Efforts In Fighting Terrorism In Central Asia,” *People’s Daily* June 18, 2004. Similar comments were made were when China and Tajikistan agreed May 14, 2006 to intensify cooperation in fighting the “three evil forces” of terrorism, separatism and extremism. The two countries vowed to continue their joint crackdown on drug trafficking, according to a consensus reached between Chinese Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing and his Tajik counterpart Talbak Nazarov. “China, Tajikistan Pledge To Further Cooperate In Fighting ‘Three Evil Forces’,” *People’s Daily* May 16, 2006.

<sup>18</sup> Richard McGregor, “Chinese Military in Muslim Region,” *Financial Times* August 15, 2001, Pg. 8.

<sup>19</sup> The combined GDP of western regions reached 3.33 trillion yuan last year, compared with 1.66 trillion yuan in 2000, when the central government launched the current strategy to help its relatively backward west catch up with the more prosperous east, said Wang. According to Wang, in the period 2001-2005, net income grew on average 10 percent for urban residents in the west and 6.8 percent for rural residents. The progress was spurred by increased financial support and infrastructure projects from central government. In addition, the central government has invested more than 122 billion yuan on western environmental

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protection in the past six years, said Wang. "One Trillion Yuan Spent On Western Infrastructure" *China Net* September 6, 2006 [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2006-09/06/content\\_5055217.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2006-09/06/content_5055217.htm)

<sup>20</sup> "China to build twelve new highways linking its west region with Central Asia" *Xinhua* April 6, 2007. [www.chinaview.cn](http://www.chinaview.cn)

<sup>21</sup> See Michael H. Glantz, Qian Ye & Quansheng Ge, "China's Western Region Development Strategy And The Urgent Need To Address Creeping Environmental Problems" *Arid Lands Newsletter* No. 49 May/June 2001.

<sup>22</sup> See Amnesty International, *People's Republic Of China: Uighurs Fleeing Persecution As China Wages Its 'War On Terror'*, July 7, 2004. <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engasa170212004>

<sup>23</sup> The count of the number of Muslims in China is rich in disparity and controversy. The US Government adheres to a number of 19.5-20 million. See *The CIA Fact Book* at <https://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/> and the US State Department's *International Freedom Report* at <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2006/71338.htm>. The BBC's Religion and Ethics webpage, however, assesses a range of 20 million to 100 million Muslims in China. [http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/history/china\\_4.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/history/china_4.shtml). Official Chinese censuses, whatever their flaws, are closer to the 20 million mark.

<sup>24</sup> See Jim Yardley, "A Spectator's Role for China's Muslims" *New York Times*, February 19, 2006.

<sup>25</sup> "Armed Police Holds Large-Scale Anti-Terror Exercise in Xinjiang" *People's Daily* August 30, 2005.

<sup>26</sup> See "China's Xinjiang Chief Urges Intensified Crackdown On 'Three Forces'", *Zhongguo Xinwen She*, 17 January 2004. And then see, "Governor Says China's Xinjiang Has Seen No Terrorist Attacks For Years" *Xinhua*, 12 April 2004. Both cited in Amnesty International, *People's Republic Of China: Uighurs Fleeing Persecution As China Wages Its 'War On Terror'*, July 7, 2004. <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engasa170212004>

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Information Office of the P.R.C. State Council, "East Turkestan" *Terrorist Forces Cannot Get Away with Their Offences*, Beijing, January 1, 2002.

<sup>29</sup> See Gaye Christoffersen, "Islam and Ethnic Minorities in Central Asia: The Uyghurs" in *Islam, Oil, and Geopolitics* edited by Elizabeth Van Wie Davis & Rouben Azizian (Boulder: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006).

<sup>30</sup> One police officer was killed and another was injured during the gun battle with the suspects. Police seized 22 hand grenades and more than 1,500 others that were still being made, as well as guns and other home-made explosives, Ba said. "Police Destroy Islamist Camp, Killing 18" *China Daily* January 8, 2007.

<sup>31</sup> "Government Land Grab Plan Causes Stir In Muslim China" *Associated Press* June 16, 2004.

<sup>32</sup> "China's Relations with Central Asian States and Problems with Terrorism," *CRS Report for Congress*, 17 December 2001.

<sup>33</sup> Erik Eckholm, "China Muslim Group Planned Terror, U.S. Says," *New York Times* August 31, 2002.

<sup>34</sup> Philip P. Pan, "U.S. Warns Of Plot by Group in W. China" *Washington Post* August 29, 2002; Page A27.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

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<sup>36</sup> "Separatist leader vows to target Chinese government", *RFA*, 29 Jan 2003.

<sup>37</sup> See Radio Free Asia, "*Guantanamo Uyghurs Find Freedom 'Like a Celebration'*" May 10, 2006. [http://www.rfa.org/english/news/2006/05/10/uyghur\\_guantanamo/](http://www.rfa.org/english/news/2006/05/10/uyghur_guantanamo/)

<sup>38</sup> Josh White, "Lawyers demand Release of Chinese Muslims," *Washington Post* December 5, 2006 p. A13.

<sup>39</sup> Jeffrey Smith & Julie Tate, "Uighurs Detention Conditions Condemned" *Washington Post* January 30, 2007, p. A4.

<sup>40</sup> Kadir fled Xinjiang after Sept. 11, said Wang Lequan, Xinjiang's Communist Party secretary, adding China finds it "hard to understand and a pity that some people do not believe that our efforts to fight terrorism are part of the international campaign." Aziz Ait, deputy director general of the paramilitary People's Armed Police in Xinjiang, said the number of terrorist incidents has declined, though he did not give details and said he could not give an estimate of how many active terrorists there are in the region. "It is not safe to say Xinjiang is completely free of terrorist attacks, so we have to remain on guard," Ait said. Associated Press, "China: Terror Suspect Handed Over" May 27, 2002 as quoted in *The World Uighur Network News*. [http://www.uygur.org/wunn02/2002\\_05\\_27.htm](http://www.uygur.org/wunn02/2002_05_27.htm)

<sup>41</sup> "China 'Executes' Uighur Activist" *BBC News* February 9, 2007. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/6345879.stm>

<sup>42</sup> See Amnesty International <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engasa170212004>

<sup>43</sup> "China, Pakistan Highlight Cooperation in Beijing", *Xinhua* November 4, 2003.

<sup>44</sup> That claim is supported by the United National Revolutionary Front of East Turkestan (UNRF), which also claimed that there were more than 100 Uyghurs in Afghanistan at that time helping the Taliban. The UNRF's backing of these figures that support the Chinese claim is given credence because the UNRF stridently opposes Sinification of Xinjiang. See Gaye Christoffersen, "Islam and Ethnic Minorities in Central Asia: The Uyghurs" in *Islam, Oil, and Geopolitics* edited by Elizabeth Van Wie Davis & Rouben Azizian (Boulder: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006).

<sup>45</sup> See Associated Press, "China: Terror Suspect Handed Over" May 27, 2002 as quoted in *The World Uighur Network News* [http://www.uygur.org/wunn02/2002\\_05\\_27.htm](http://www.uygur.org/wunn02/2002_05_27.htm)

<sup>46</sup> See Congressional Research Service Report, 17 December 2001, op. cit. Also See: <http://www.uyghuramerican.org/statements/letter-to-colin.html>

<sup>47</sup> See Adam Wolfe, "China Takes the Lead in Strategic Central Asia" *Asia Times*, September 17, 2004. <http://www.atimes.com>

<sup>48</sup> "China Arrests Foreign Militants in Restive West" *New York Times* October 18, 2005 [nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com)

<sup>49</sup> Overall levels of trade have grown from a meager US\$500 million in 1992 to \$8.5 billion in 2005, an increase of more than 16 times in 14 years. Among the bilateral trade relations between China and the Central Asian countries, Sino-Kazakh trade is the largest, reaching \$6.8 billion in 2005. Pan Guang, "China and Central Asia: Charting a New Course for Regional Cooperation," *China Brief/The Jamestown Foundation* Vol. 7, Issue 3 February 7, 2007.

<sup>50</sup> The IMU changed its name to the Islamic Party of Turkestan in 2001, but it is still commonly referred to as the IMU.

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<sup>51</sup> Pan Guang, "China and Central Asia: Charting a New Course for Regional Cooperation," *China Brief/The Jamestown Foundation* Vol. 7, Issue 3 February 7, 2007.

<sup>52</sup> See "Kazakhstan Oil Piped into China," *The China Daily* May 25, 2006.  
[http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2006-05/25/content\\_600060.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2006-05/25/content_600060.htm)

<sup>53</sup> "China, Kazakhstan to Build Oil Pipeline" *New York Times* May 18, 2004.

<sup>54</sup> Sergei Blagov, "Turkmenistan Seeks to Strengthen Energy Ties with China," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, April 10, 2006.

<sup>55</sup> "Chinese Sign Up For Turkmen Gas: Turkmenistan And China Have Agreed To Build A Pipeline To Supply Turkmen Natural Gas For The Energy-Hungry Chinese Economy" *BBC News* April 3, 2006.  
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/4872668.stm>

<sup>56</sup> Pan Guang, "China and Central Asia: Charting a New Course for Regional Cooperation," *China Brief/The Jamestown Foundation* Vol. 7, Issue 3 February 7, 2007.

<sup>57</sup> "Democracy activists and some spiritual or religious adherents, including Tibetan Buddhists, Uighur Muslims and the Falun Gong practitioners, continue to suffer harsh treatment." See Lorne W. Craner, "Prospects on Human Rights and Democracy in China," Statement before the East Asian and Pacific Affairs Subcommittee, Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Washington, DC, April 22, 2004.  
<http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/rm/31721.htm>

<sup>58</sup> Kerry Dumbaugh, "China-U.S. relations: Current Issues and Implications for U.S. Policy," *CRS Report for Congress* October 1, 2007, p. 28.