

Washington's Incitement of Unrest in Xinjiang

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The region of Xinjiang, located in north-western China, has in recent decades assumed ever greater significance for China, a country whose influence continues expanding internationally. Xinjiang contains about 25% of China's oil and natural gas, along with 38% of the nation's coal reserves; while Xinjiang serves as an entry point to neighbouring Central Asia, a mineral-rich region itself where natural resources, from states like Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, are sent along pipelines through Xinjiang across the remainder of China.

Xinjiang holds geological and climatic extremes. Summer and winter temperatures can entail differences of more than 100 degrees Celsius, from soaring heat to bitter cold. In late November 2022, a temperature of minus 48 degrees Celsius was recorded in northern Xinjiang, resulting in several deaths among workers. (1)

Due to Xinjiang's mountain ranges, deserts and arid climate, in which most of its land receives a mere 6 inches of annual rainfall, the human population of Xinjiang has not exploded. Xinjiang is presently home to nearly 26 million inhabitants, out of a total population in China of 1.4 billion.

China's principal rival on the global scene, the United States, has for years attempted to capitalise on separatist tendencies in Xinjiang, so as to suit its own ends. Washington has believed, by encouraging secessionism in regions like Xinjiang, that it could serve to dislodge the territory from Beijing's control.

Were Xinjiang to become detached from China, it would be a severe blow to Chinese power. On top of its mineral wealth, there is also Xinjiang's vastness at over 1.6 million square kilometres in size, making it slightly bigger than Iran. The strategic importance of Xinjiang has increased this century, as it is a fundamental part of China's international-scale Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a series of infrastructural projects.

The possibility of Xinjiang's separation from China remains a very slim one; but Washington has not given up on such efforts, disguised under the old pretexts of concern over "human rights and the rule of law in China, including in the ethnic minority regions of Tibet and Xinjiang" (2). Scarcely pointed out is that Xinjiang, like Tibet further south, has a

generations-long attachment to China. In modern history, Xinjiang was incorporated to China in the mid-18th century, when the Qing dynasty of China defeated by military force the Mongol Dzungars.

A professor of Chinese history, Gardner Bovingdon wrote, “The Qing dynasty Emperor Qianlong conquered the region now known as Xinjiang in 1759, at great expense and after a long, bloody campaign. He did so not principally out of territorial ambition, but in order to rid the Qing empire of threatening Mongol neighbors”. (3)



Mongol states from the 14th to the 17th centuries: the Northern Yuan dynasty, Four Oirat, Moghulistan and Kara Del (Licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0)

The Chinese had a deeply embedded fear of attack from Mongol armies. In the decades from 1759, Beijing’s control of Xinjiang was not fully secure, and there were competing claims to the region between the Qing dynasty and the Russian empire. Not until 1884 was the area officially bestowed with the title “Xinjiang”, which translates to “New Frontier”, as intended by the Qing government. It was also, in the 1880s, that easily the largest indigenous Muslim group in Xinjiang were first widely referred to as Uyghurs.

After a long period of internal instability, the Qing dynasty in 1912 utterly collapsed, an empire which had lasted for nearly 3 centuries. The Qing dynasty’s fall was mainly as a result of the predatory actions of the Western imperialist nations in China, during the 19th and early 20th centuries. From 1912, until the 1949 communist revolution led by Mao Zedong, Xinjiang went through a phase of de facto independence from China. (4)

Mao Zedong, who believed it was vital to regain control over the country’s historical territories, sought to properly reintegrate Xinjiang to China. Mao had not forgotten the policies of states such as America and England relating to China – when the Western powers exploited the Chinese nation financially, in effect breaking the country into pieces, maintaining China’s weakened condition for American and western European benefit.

By 1940 the Muslim population of Xinjiang had risen to around 3 million, whereas there were 190,000 Han Chinese living in the region that year (5). In order to “fill out the borders” of Xinjiang and help to secure it to China, Mao’s government promoted the migration to Xinjiang of Han Chinese, who currently consist of 1.3 billion out of China’s 1.4 billion population.

A 1953 census by the Chinese authorities in Xinjiang revealed there were 4.87 million people living there, 75% of whom were Uyghurs, with Han Chinese making up 6% of Xinjiang’s populace. Another census in 1964 showed that the Han Chinese population in Xinjiang had increased sharply to nearly 2.5 million, making up a third of the region’s 7.4 million inhabitants in 1964, as opposed to 4 million Uyghurs. (6)

By 1982, 40% of Xinjiang’s residents were Han Chinese with Muslim groups, chiefly the Uyghurs, making up almost all of the remaining 60% of the region’s populace. These later percentages have been stable through to today.

Image: Close to Karakoram Highway in Xinjiang. (Licensed under CC BY-SA 2.5 se)



Beijing has sought to develop Xinjiang, economically and industrially, while there have been notable improvements in the inhabitants’ living standards. In 1949, the average lifespan of a Xinjiang resident was 31 years; by 2008 life expectancy had more than doubled to 72 years. This development is not so surprising when considering that, by 2008, there were 93,600 hospital beds in Xinjiang for a population then of just over 20 million.

To break it down, in 2008 there were 36 hospital beds in Xinjiang for every 10,000 people (7). Whereas in the United Kingdom (UK), a much wealthier place than Xinjiang, there were 24 hospital beds for every 10,000 people in 2020. The impressive healthcare results in Xinjiang would not have been possible, without the extensive funding that Beijing has poured into the area through the decades. None of this receives a mention, when Beijing is accused by Western politicians of committing human rights abuses in Xinjiang.

Before the revolution over 70 years ago, there were a meagre 54 medical centres across Xinjiang; in 2001 there were more than 7,300 healthcare centres in the province, including 1,357 hospitals. By 2008, the number of hospitals in Xinjiang rose further to 1,629. (8)

Following the Chinese governments’ construction of large numbers of schools in Xinjiang, the literacy rate has grown rapidly to over 96% by 2021 (9). A study published with Global

Media Journal in England outlined that “by the 2000’s the situation in the autonomous region [of Xinjiang] has changed. So the number of primary schools has increased to 6,220... the number of universities increased to 21, and the number of students was 110 thousand people... Also for the national minorities, special courses were opened. According to official data, the number of illiterates among the young and middle-aged people dropped to 2%”. (10)

Shortly after the revolution, in 1951 a group of Uyghur leaders in Xinjiang proposed the founding of a “Republic of Uyghurstan”, and which would be led by the Uyghurs outside of Beijing’s influence (11). The Chinese government, alarmed by this, convened a meeting to rebuke the notion, and to state that Xinjiang’s independence from China would not be tolerated.

If diplomatic efforts or persuasion failed, and if Mao Zedong felt there was a genuine threat to China and its territorial integrity, he was prepared to use military means to safeguard his goals. This was evident in the autumn of 1950, when Beijing sent tens of thousands of troops into Tibet in south-western China, in order to dismantle the Tibetan independent forces, and to hammer home the point that Tibet would be returned to China. Mao further chose military action to overcome the March 1959 Tibetan uprising, which had been encouraged by the US and India.

In the meantime Mao, the leader of China until 1976, continued with the reforms in Xinjiang. Bovingdon wrote, “The economic priorities of the Mao era brought considerable benefits to Xinjiang. Boons to the region included significant growth in gross domestic product (GDP), nascent industrialization, and infrastructural improvements... Moreover, the party placed an emphasis on hiring large numbers of Uyghurs, Kazakhs, and other non-Hans. To integrate Xinjiang more tightly with China proper, the government expanded the network of roads, rail, and airports. Economic growth also brought general, if modest, improvement in living standards”. (12)

Over the past 3 decades US governments, and the CIA, have been active in stoking unrest in Xinjiang (13). Prior to the 1990s, Xinjiang was quite simply out of reach for the CIA, because of the region’s direct proximity to the rest of China and the USSR. The latter’s fall in 1991 enabled the Americans to penetrate ex-Soviet republics like Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, each of which has frontiers with Xinjiang; though US influence in the Central Asian states has decreased in recent years, as Russia steadily recovers its power this century. The CIA had been able to conduct covert operations in Tibet from the early 1950s; because Tibet shares borders with India and Nepal, US allies at the time.

Among Washington’s aims in Xinjiang is to open up the area’s fossil fuels for exploitation by Western energy corporations (14).

Image: Statue of Mao Zedong in Kashgar (Licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0)



The CIA, with the assistance of foreign insurgents, attempted to destabilise Xinjiang, promote separatism among the Uyghurs and create armed rebel groups to fight against the Chinese forces. This was all within the CIA's remit of severing Xinjiang from China.

The East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), an Uyghur extremist organisation, was founded in the late 1980s and sponsored by the CIA (15). The ETIM has also had ties to Al Qaeda and received training and funding from its ally. Between 1990 and 2001, the ETIM committed over 200 terrorist attacks, which included the assassination of Chinese government officials, bomb attacks against market places and vehicles such as buses. In 2007 Chinese troops destroyed the ETIM training camps in Xinjiang.

Beijing's Ministry of Security linked the ETIM to the World Uyghur Congress, which is based in Munich and previously presided over by Rebiya Kadeer. Of Uyghur ethnicity from northern Xinjiang, Kadeer is also a former president of the Uyghur American Association, created in 1998 and headquartered in Washington. Both the World Uyghur Congress and the Uyghur American Association have received funding from the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), which is bankrolled primarily by the US Congress. The Chinese are well aware they are among the primary targets of those formulating policies in Washington. (16)

The World Uyghur Congress was established in April 2004 by Xinjiang-born Erkin Alpstein, a former adviser to the CIA. Alpstein, who resides in Munich, has worked closely with Kadeer. The latter lives in the state of Virginia in the US, and she has visited the White House where she spoke to then president George W. Bush in July 2008. Kadeer had already met Bush during a visit to the Czech Republic the year before. The meetings between Kadeer and Bush were condemned by the Chinese government. Kadeer may have had influence over the bloody uprising that occurred in July 2009 in Urumqi, the capital city of Xinjiang. (17)

The revolt in Urumqi was looked upon favourably by Uyghur independence groups in the US and Europe. According to Brazilian author Moniz Bandeira "there was no doubt that the riots were prepared outside of China by separatist Uyghurs, who wanted to stir animosity against the Han Chinese in the hopes of advancing a conspiracy for the secession of Xinjiang" (18). During this rebellion, up to 200 people were killed and many hundreds injured. The majority of those who lost their lives were Han Chinese. The revolt was a dismal failure with the Chinese authorities subduing it with ease.

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Notes

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3 William A. Joseph, Politics in China (Oxford University Press; 2nd edition, 11 April 2014) p. 430

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5 Ibid.

6 Stanley Toops, "Demographics and Development in Xinjiang after 1949", East-West Center, May 2004, p. 5 of 45

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