



*Central
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THE
XINJIANG
PROBLEM

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Introduction: The Xinjiang Project

This paper is a product of “The Xinjiang Project” involving eighteen of the most competent specialists on Xinjiang, who collaborated over four years to present a three-dimensional picture of the current situation in that province. They drew on the best research available in the social sciences and humanities, including geography, anthropology, sociology, religious studies, and economics. They also sought to elucidate the present in terms of Xinjiang’s entire relevant past, as analyzed by modern historians.

The Xinjiang Project began in 1998, well before the events of 11 September 2001. It was instigated by Sinologist Robert Oxnam and Frederick Starr, along with Ambassador Nicholas Platt, president of The Asia Society, and several other friends who were traveling in Xinjiang with The Asia Society, among them Mr. and Mrs. Ernest Kepper, Rajbir Malkani, Nancy Hawe, and others.

The timing could not have been better. Over the previous two decades a strong cadre of younger scholars interested in Xinjiang had emerged in the West, mainly in the United States. They know all the relevant languages, whether Uyghur, Mandarin, Russian, or more arcane tongues, modern and ancient. Moreover, they all bring solid grounding in their disciplines, as well as considerable field experience in Xinjiang. Their research constitutes the most solid contribution of twentieth century western scholarship to the study of any part of Central Asia.

The Xinjiang Project was conceived as a two-part exercise. The first was designed to produce a single collaborate volume that would provide educated non-specialists in many countries with an authoritative introduction to the territory and its people, past and present. That volume, entitled *Xinjiang: China's Muslim Frontier*, is being published by M.E. Sharpe as the first of the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute's Monograph Series, in December, 2003.

The book, *Xinjiang: China's Muslim Frontier*, neither makes nor implies recommendations on future policy to any government or institution. Those tasks were carefully set aside and assigned to a second and entirely separate work that would discuss the geopolitical implications of the research, draw conclusions, and offer policy recommendations for national governments and international bodies. These are the goals of this monograph.

The two authors are solely responsible for the contents of this paper. While they draw on the work of their colleagues on The Xinjiang Project, the specific use to which they put the data and the conclusions they draw from them are their own.

Interested readers may want to consult *Xinjiang: China's Muslim Frontier* itself for more detailed discussions of many of the issues touched on herein. The Table of Contents is appended to this paper in lieu of a bibliography.

The Xinjiang Project would not have been possible without the steadfast support of the Henry Luce Foundation of New York. The Vice-President of that foundation and its Program Director for Asia, Mr. Terrill E. Lautz, is himself a highly qualified student of China and his colleague, Ms. Helena Kolenda, Program Officer for Asia, also

brings years of first-hand experience in the field. Their deft guidance, intelligent advice, and notable patience helped make The Xinjiang Project a rewarding experience for all participants. We warmly thank them both.

Graham E. Fuller

S. Frederick Starr

I. What is the Problem in Xinjiang?

Xinjiang, China's western border province comprising eighteen percent of the country's entire land area, is a region beset by change, and increasingly, confrontation between two very distinct peoples – the more recently arrived Han Chinese and the indigenous Uyghur Turkish Muslims. The confrontation revolves primarily around a struggle for domination over the province and a Uyghur quest for autonomy or even independence from Beijing's rule. Conflicting interests and goals thus offer two quite different visions and narratives of current Xinjiang realities, reflecting the distinct concerns of each people.

From an official *Chinese* perspective, many of the changes taking place in Xinjiang can be seen as positive and certainly not “problems” at either the national or international level. A generation of rapid economic development in Xinjiang has created sufficient wealth to lift per capita income there to twelfth among all thirty-one Chinese provinces, higher than any other province outside the favored coastal area in the southeast. In a nation of rural poverty Xinjiang ranks third in the equity of income between its rural and urban populations. Ample reserves of oil and gas invite investment. The steady opening of China's western border to trade after 1985 has created unheard-of opportunities for Chinese citizens. Hundreds of schools have been opened, with the result that literacy and school completion at all levels is above the national average. Millions of Chinese, seeking to improve their lives, have flooded to Xinjiang, causing it to be viewed a land of opportunity. Xinjiang's capital, Urumchi, ranks among

China's true "boom towns," with a skyline that would draw favorable notice in any developed country.

Beijing proudly extols these developments, which are indeed impressive by any measure. Yet these same social, economic, and cultural conditions in Xinjiang present a radically different picture when viewed from a Uyghur point of view. Where Han Chinese see recent developments there as uniformly positive, Uyghur Muslims, with equal logic, discern a much darker side by focusing on what they see as the one-sidedness of the benefits those developments bestow. Every change that brings advances to some hypothetical average citizen of Xinjiang, when viewed from their perspective, only helps marginalize them as a group in their own homeland. So ominous is this process of marginalization to members of this minority population that they see it as posing an existential threat.

For a millennium Xinjiang's large Muslim and Turkic population has viewed itself as religiously and ethnically distinct from Han Chinese society. The Uyghurs themselves comprise just under half of Xinjiang's population, but with the addition of Kazaks and Kyrgyz the number of Turkic Muslims rises to over half of the total. The Uyghurs have not, until the past few generations, shared a strong sense of common destiny, focusing their identity instead on the separate irrigated oases or, in the case of Kazaks, open steppe lands, on which their economic existence depended. Increasingly, however, they have come to adopt a consolidated identity as "Uyghurs." Beijing's policies have encouraged this development at least since 1957, when Mao named the entire province the "Xinjiang Autonomous Uyghur Region." But the Uyghurs to whom Mao granted this autonomous status now feel that Beijing's "progress" is placing their very existence as a people in under threat.

Mao's decision to create an autonomous Uyghur region was rooted in the strange dialectics of Communism, specifically in Stalin's nationality policies. Stalin, and later Mao, viewed the creation of autonomous regions as the Communist Party's transitory recognition of local identities that would eventually become obsolete under socialism, and of independent cultural identities that would soon be assimilated in all but a folkloric sense. The creation of autonomous regions was therefore merely a tactic, as the idea of national autonomy would itself ultimately become a meaningless political concept under Communism.

Despite their living in a nominally "autonomous" zone, the many people in Xinjiang who consider themselves Uyghurs, "Muslims," or "Turks" feel that Chinese policy has ignored them or, worse, consciously worked against them. Today these people feel deeply threatened.

In their view, the unequal division of wealth favors Han Chinese at the expense of Uyghurs. Those involved with the development of the province's energy wealth are mainly Han Chinese, rather than Uyghurs, and the profits go mainly to Beijing. That part of the province's wealth that does come back to Urumchi goes to support many projects that further threaten the homelands and environments where Xinjiang's indigenous peoples have lived through the centuries.

The new opportunities created by open commerce across the western border also benefit mainly Han, who increasingly are shouldering Uyghurs to the sidelines. And while it cannot be denied that more Uyghurs are benefiting from education at all levels than ever before, both the language and content of such education strongly favors the Han. The fact that millions of Han immigrants are flooding the province means that all these problems seem daily to grow more

urgent. As a result most Uyghur citizens of Xinjiang view Urumchi's skyline not as a symbol of national pride but of their ethnic and religious humiliation, and as a monument to their own ultimate displacement.

The essence of the "Xinjiang problem" is that its economic development has come to be seen by many active parts of the indigenous population as a zero-sum game, in which they are not only the losers but will, by losing, also forfeit their culture and homeland and even their very existence as a distinct people.

Most Uyghurs strongly oppose what they consider Han colonialism. But given the pervasiveness of Han rule, it is only a minority that is willing to actively resist this process, by either peaceful or even violent means. Some optimists among them believe an answer can be found in working through the system in order to breathe real substance into the notion of a "Uyghur autonomous region" enshrined in the China's constitution. They seek to reduce the Han presence in their ancient land and to gain greater autonomy both in its internal governance and in its relations *vis-à-vis* Beijing. Pessimists are convinced this is impossible and that the only solution is regional and national independence. Some elements of the latter group have already turned to violence. The bulk of the population, however, is fearful, paralyzed, and helpless.

The government of the People's Republic of China, meanwhile, is firmly committed to holding onto Xinjiang and opposing all ideas and actions that might jeopardize the territorial integrity of the state as it has existed since 1949. In the view of official Beijing, Xinjiang has been an integral part of China for nearly two millennia. It has rewritten the official histories to demonstrate and support this claim,

just as Uyghur historians have offered their own counter-histories that stress the many non-Han states that have ruled there.

In support of their claim, Uyghurs note that the very name “Xinjiang” means “new territory” in Chinese, not claimed by China until the eighteenth century and not a province of China until the late nineteenth century, and then of the Manchu, or Manchurian state. They see the two East Turkistan Republics that arose in 1931-1934 in Hami and then in 1944-1949 in the Ili region as the progenitors of the independent state they seek to create.

Besides categorically rejecting these Uyghur assertions, Beijing offers Xinjiang an expansive program of economic development, calling for some \$7 billion to be spent there over the coming five years alone. Its goal is to integrate Xinjiang into the burgeoning economy of China and to assimilate its population as equal citizens of the multi-ethnic state ruled from Beijing. In some respects this program recalls the Soviet Union’s Brezhnev era doctrine of “merging of peoples” (*sliianiie narodov*). As it pursues this strategy, the government of China appears willing to grant only minimal concessions, if any, in the direction of genuine Uyghur autonomy. Over the past decade it has shown itself ready apply whatever degree of force is necessary to eliminate what it sees as the threat of separatism and the use of terrorism by those promoting it.

This, then, is the “Xinjiang problem.” It pits a small but increasingly self-conscious people anxious for its existential future against one of the world’s most powerful states whose leaders are equally concerned to preserve the territory and administrative integrity of the whole. It arises primarily from economic, social, and cultural developments within the borders of the People’s Republic of China. But as we shall see, it is linked in complex ways with currents beyond China’s

borders. Because of this, if the “Xinjiang problem” is not resolved, it is bound to affect not only broader developments within the People’s Republic of China but also the stability of Xinjiang’s neighbors in Central and South Asia and, indeed, of the broader world order.

II. The Geopolitical Realities: a Primer

How one frames the Xinjiang problem directly affects the conclusions one might draw. An obvious case in point concerns the history of the region. As noted above, the Uyghur and Chinese narratives differ fundamentally from each other, with the former asserting that Chinese control came late and as a result of colonial conquest and the latter claiming Xinjiang as a core Chinese territory from time immemorial. The two positions are fundamentally incompatible, so that for one to prevail means the defeat of the other. Three further framework assertions are based on less controversial evidence, and their implications are less categorical. But together, they affect how one approaches the Xinjiang problem.

First, the approximately eight million Uyghurs, Kazaks, and Kyrgyz in Xinjiang constitute the world's fourth largest concentration of Turkic peoples, after only Turkey (53.6 million ethnic Turks), Iran (35 million Azeris), and Uzbekistan (23 million Uzbeks and others), and ahead of neighboring Kazakstan and Kyrgyzstan, as well as Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, etc. Clearly, this number is too large to ignore and too great to neutralize fully through policies of assimilation. Far smaller ethnic minorities, whether Abkhazians, Basques, Chechens, Kosovars, Sudeten Germans, or highland Guatemalans have stubbornly resisted assimilationist policies over decades or centuries.

Second, because of this fact, it is appropriate to view China not as a *neighbor of Central Asia* but as a *part of Central Asia*. As such, Chinese concerns over the interrelationships between Xinjiang and its Turkic and Iranian (Tajik) neighbors to the west is quite understandable and

goes beyond similar concerns over events in these countries expressed by Russia, Pakistan, or India. The fact that China also has a total Muslim population of as many as 16 million, of which only half are in Xinjiang, adds a further urgency to the Xinjiang issue for China, and makes it in some respects comparable to the problem of a Muslim majority in Kashmir for India.

Third, whichever historical narrative one accepts, it is hard to deny that the Qing conquest or “reconquest” of Xinjiang in 1759 and the full absorption of Xinjiang into the Qing state as a province in 1884 were broadly part of colonial-era processes analogous to Russia’s expansion into Central Asia, France’s into Algeria, or Britain’s into India. True, Qing expansion lacked the ideological or teleological passion of the Russians in Central Asia or the modernizing thrust of the French in Algeria or the British in India. Nonetheless, it is not surprising, that the People’s Republic has pursued policies that directly recall nineteenth century Qing policies or Russian or French territorial policies in the twentieth century. Nor is it surprising that Uyghur and Muslim responses to those policies evoke memories of the approximately forty earlier national and religious revolts, whether that of Yakub Bey and his state of Kashgaria in the period 1858-1874 or that of Sheng Shih-ts’ai of the East Turkistan Republic in the 1940s.

Yet another framework consideration involves the nature of China’s so-called “Develop the West” campaign that is generating much of the demographic pressure felt by Xinjiang’s Turkic peoples. Thanks to this initiative, which involves road, railroad, and infrastructure construction, millions of Han laborers are migrating to the western borderlands. Reliable demographic data indicates that they are settling mainly along transportation routes, especially railroad right-of-ways. This in turn reflects the fact that nearly all of those coming

today are voluntary migrants (called “self drifters”) in search of a better life, as opposed to the soldiers, convicts, and workers sent there by state resettlement programs down through 1965.

Stated differently, the core demographic fact of the “Xinjiang problem” today arises not simply from a deliberate demographic policy on the part of Beijing but also from the relatively greater freedom of movement enjoyed by Chinese citizens today and by China’s opening to freer markets, symbolized by its accession to the World Trade Organization. That Beijing welcomes – even encourages -- the “Han-ization” of Xinjiang cannot be doubted. After all, it provides Chinese-type apartment houses and many other amenities for the migrants, not to mention the very favorable salaries they receive, which often exceed pay levels prevailing locally. But if it were to attempt to limit migration it would not only have to stop a program involving elements of forced, subsidized and encouraged resettlement but would also have to restrict the mobility of labor, at least in this region.

Another framework consideration involves the evolution of Uyghur self-consciousness and identity. It has been noted that most Uyghurs until very recently identified mainly with their home oasis rather than with some region-wide *ethnos*. Some have concluded from this that Uyghur identity is weak and the prospects for assimilation good, provided minimal steps are taken to preserve their language and some cultural features. But the same argument was advanced a half century ago in the USSR with respect to the other Turkic peoples of Central Asia. Just as Soviet policy had the paradoxical effect of strengthening national identities, so Beijing’s policies of assigning “Uyghurs” their own autonomous region and then integrating it through improved transport are strengthening Uyghur identity today.

Moreover, Uyghurs now have before them the example of five newly independent Turkic states to their west (Azerbaijan, Kazakstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan), all built on the wreckage of a Communist-ruled empire. This leaves Uyghurs acutely aware of their own weakness and lack of independence and nourishes among them a sense of victimhood. This predicament is far more likely to engender national-thinking and militancy than would a sense of self-confidence. Uyghurs feel that time is running out on them. Similar feelings in Soviet Kazakstan impelled otherwise quiescent Kazaks to mount the first anti-Moscow demonstrations after Gorbachev's accession to power when he replaced the Kazak Kunaev with the Russian Kolbin as head of the republic.

Partially offsetting this is the fact that Xinjiang's economy is developing far more rapidly than are the economies of the neighboring independent Turkic states, with the possible exception of Kazakstan. Whereas a generation ago the relative prosperity of Soviet Central Asia left most of its inhabitants willing to seek some kind of accommodation with Moscow, a similar dynamic could work to Beijing's benefit today.

The geography of Xinjiang creates a further reality that must inform any consideration of social and political conditions there. For the current borders of Xinjiang do not constitute, strictly speaking, a geographic whole. Indeed, it is more a historical entity than a geographic or cultural one. At its heart is the expanse of the Tarim Basin, with the enormous (135,000 square miles) and forbidding Taklamakan desert at its center. Cutting through the northern half of the province from west to east are the snow-capped Tian-Shan Mountains. Together, these divide the province into at least three main zones, each with its own distinct economies and cultures.

Through history this reality limited interaction and cohesion among the various Turkic communities living there, as well as the ability of the Chinese state to administer the entire vast territory as a single whole. Improved transport and communications affect both Uyghurs (as well as other Turkic peoples) and the Chinese state, consolidating the former and rendering the latter more effective.

Yet another fundamental reality that must be borne in mind when considering the Xinjiang problem are the changes in the international environment wrought by the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States. For better or worse, this event transformed the way the international community views many separatist movements, particularly when they involve Muslim populations. Whether in Palestine, Kashmir, the Philippines, Chechnya, Karabakh, the Basque country of Spain, or elsewhere, separatist movements have been branded as terrorist. Where formerly the talk may have been of “decolonization” or, in the old Marxist terminology, “wars for national liberation,” now these struggles are all conveniently subsumed under the rubric of terrorism by the concerned states. The claims of existing states against dissident minorities have been strengthened and are likely to remain so for the foreseeable future.

That said, it is equally clear that over the same period many conflicts that were previously seen as purely the domestic affairs of one country or another are now widely accepted as international issues. Beijing may not welcome the internationalization of the Xinjiang problem, any more than Russia or India welcome international “interference” in Chechnya or Kashmir. But the line between domestic and international issues is everywhere growing blurred, thanks both to this new mood and to the vastly expanded access to information in the internet age.

Finally, and arguably most important, the Xinjiang problem is dynamic and evolving. Facts are being created on the ground daily. No interested party can flatter itself with the belief that the formuli and proposals that passed for wisdom or prudence in the past can prevail in the face of these constant changes. All must be prepared to consider their positions anew.

III. What Do The Key Players Want?

Over the years, each of the key players in Xinjiang---the Uyghurs and the Chinese state— has developed a list of grievances against the other. Each has translated these into a set of goals which it pursues with a single-mindedness that has increased rather than decreased over time. It is therefore useful to review these charges and aims in greater detail.

Uyghur Grievances

Overwhelmingly the most urgent Uyghur grievance concerns the relentless in-migration by Han Chinese. Focused initially in Urumchi, the area around Ili, and the northern ring of the Tarim basin, it is now beginning to spread vigorously towards Kashgar along the rail line to that city opened in 1999, and also to the classic Uyghur oases south of the Taklamakan desert. The Almaty-Kashgar-Islamabad highway undertaken in the same period promises more of the same consequences. Whereas earlier the Han-dominated Military-Construction Corps (bingtuan) concentrated their work in a few relatively isolated locales, the new settlers are entering all of the larger cities and, significantly, the great southern oases that constitute the Uyghur heartland.

This migration is slowly denying to Uyghurs the traditional centers of their civilization. Whereas Urumchi, now over 95% Han, was never a major Uyghur town, the advent of Han in the great oasis cities and especially their penetration into oasis agricultural areas, has cataclysmic impact in Uyghur eyes. The commitment to cotton monoculture and inefficient Han agriculture is rapidly draining non-

renewable oasis aquifers, thus disabling the intensive and efficient traditional covered keres irrigation systems. As this proceeds, the agriculture that formed the basis of Uyghur civilization will die out. Water tables are already falling, desertification is spreading rapidly in Turpan and Khotan, grain production is falling, and even the oil industry is feeling the negative effects of declining water supplies at Karamay, its great center north of Urumchi.

The growth of population in Xinjiang has led to the foundation of new schools and universities and a significant expansion of Uyghur literacy and competence for modern jobs. A form of affirmative action, coupled with financial assistance, has sped this process. However, upwardly mobile Turkic people must master Chinese, which in turn requires that they study in Chinese rather than local-language primary schools. In an effort to preserve their own language and cultural traditions, many Turkic families send their sons to Chinese schools and their daughters to Uyghur or Kazak schools, thus lowering the horizons for women and broadening the gender gap. Uyghurs naturally perceived the termination, in May, 2002, of instruction in the Uyghur language at Xinjiang University in Urumchi as a violation of the Chinese Constitution and a frontal attack against them. Analogous moves in the late USSR and elsewhere have brought the most dire consequences.

Employment patterns reflect the same situation. Notwithstanding the promotion of some Uyghurs within the Communist Party and to senior administrative posts, a “glass ceiling” prevails for most Turkic citizens of Xinjiang. Closed out at the top, Uyghurs either concentrate in certain professions within the Mandarin-speaking cities or revert to the management of their own communal affairs, thus taking the first steps to a kind of Bantustan-type existence. Even

in commercial affairs Uyghur traders, who dominated commerce with Kazakstan and Kyrgyzstan during the early 1990s, now find themselves rapidly losing ground to Han merchants, who have established permanent agents in all the principal markets in Almaty, Bishkek, Osh, and Tashkent.

Even though Xinjiang as a whole is prosperous and rural-urban disparities in income modest, the income gap between Han Chinese and Turkic citizens of Xinjiang is large. The existing economy strongly favors Han Chinese, who fill approximately four fifths of all jobs in manufacturing, the oil and gas industries, transport, communications, and science and technology, and fully nine-tenths of jobs in the burgeoning field of construction.

Uyghur prospects are yet more gloomy in light of the fact that they and other Turkic people have proven far less likely to start their own businesses than Han Chinese (including Han Muslims, or Hui). As the large state sector in Xinjiang shrinks, Turkic peoples there will therefore be pushed still further to the margins of local economic life and condemned to economic subsistence, or worse. The severity of this problem is already evident in the fact that that the ranks of the unemployed in Xinjiang—already large by comparison with other provinces—are disproportionately filled by ethnic Uyghurs, Kazaks, and Kyrgyz. Bearing in mind the high literacy rate and educational attainments among many Uyghurs, this is a formula for disaster.

In other provinces this situation might be leavened by the rise of a major private sector in the economy, in which locals could play a part. But for all its prosperity, the economy of Xinjiang is still heavily dependent on state employment, for which reason Chinese sometimes jokingly refer to it as China's last bastion of state socialism. Indeed, in 1999 no other province received larger central transfers than

Xinjiang, due mainly to investments in the oil and gas industry and infrastructure construction, both of which directly threaten Uyghur aspirations. And whereas coastal provinces benefit from international investment and therefore from fair employment norms championed by some foreign employers, nearly all investment in Xinjiang comes from elsewhere in China, i.e., from Han sources that seem deaf to Uyghur pleas. The rate of foreign investment in Xinjiang is barely a quarter of the national average.

As their Uyghur identity strengthens and their sense of grievance deepens, many Uyghurs turn to Islam. Here, too, they encounter severe restrictions by the state, which, after a period of greater tolerance and even support during the 1980s, has since the mid-1990s reverted to the strictest controls and outright repression. This is particularly irksome to Uyghurs, who realize that Uyghur Islam is subject to far harsher controls than Islam among other peoples in China. The key fields of education and social welfare have been declared off-limits to Islamic influences, thus effectively confining religious life to prayers at officially sanctioned mosques and in the family circle.

Even though they live in a “Uyghur Autonomous Region,” Uyghurs and other Turkic people have little voice in, or control over, public decisions affecting their destiny. While to some extent this situation simply replicates conditions in other provinces of the highly centralized Chinese state, with the Communist Party still monopolizing public life, Uyghurs see their situation as being worse because it has a clear ethnic dimension, which is manifest in the restrictions on Uyghur non-governmental organizations in the province.

In this context it is important for Westerners, and especially Americans, to recognize the profound gap between their own understanding of the term “assimilation” and that of Turkic peoples in Xinjiang. To most Americans the term is generally a positive one, reflecting the American experience of a nation of immigrants, in which, particularly in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the highest ideal has been to create a new nation of common values in which all participants voluntarily give up most of their former “old world” identities for the sake of acceptance in the new, that is, the “melting pot” ideal.

But to Xinjiang Turks, as with minorities everywhere who fear “assimilation” into the culture of a larger ethnic group, the issue is starkly different. They deeply mistrust Chinese talk of a multi-ethnic society and fear their fate is to be absorbed into a specifically Han Chinese world. Hence, they see themselves as fighting to preserve their unique historical homeland, language, culture, and traditions from forces they believe would obliterate them. In a cultural, religious, and linguistic sense, they fear that to assimilate is to die.

Notwithstanding this, large numbers of Uyghurs are participating successfully in the burgeoning Chinese economy. Few of these Uyghurs are involved directly in the more radical forms of resistance to Chinese rule that have arisen over the past decade and a half. Nonetheless, even the most moderate Uyghurs believe that the state has unjustly labeled even innocent activities as manifestations of “splittism” or “terrorism” and has consistently used incommensurate levels of force in suppressing them.

They point especially to two incidents that triggered Beijing’s turn from accommodation to repression in the 1990s. The first occurred in July, 1995, when the government arrested a well-regarded and

moderate local religious leader, or Imam, in Khotan. When local Muslims assembled for Friday prayers and discovered this they moved into the streets, at which time police attacked them, leading to many deaths. The second, in February, 1997, occurred after local youths in Gulcha began convening in a traditional and peaceful form of social gathering, the meshrep, in order to mount a self-help program designed to wipe out drug abuse and heavy drinking. The government branded these self-help activists as religious fanatics and in an ensuing confrontation several hundred youths were killed. Both incidents, the moderates argue, reveal the government's true attitudes and intentions.

The campaign launched in 1998 and intensified in 2001 under the ominous motto "Strike Hard! Maximum Pressure!" has used mass arrests, hundreds of executions, restrictions on both religious and secular organizations, torture, and general curtailment of human rights to suppress most visible Uyghur opposition. Beijing is said to employ 15,000 non-military personnel in Xinjiang for this effort. As a result, outright secessionism is now confined largely to what Dru Gladney has dubbed "cyber-separatism" emanating mainly from members of the million to a million and a half-strong Uyghur emigration elsewhere in Central Asia, in Europe, and America. Nonetheless, this has come at the price of alienating many heretofore moderate Uyghurs, causing them to identify increasingly with their ethnic group and co-religionists rather than with the Han community in which they function from day to day.

Taken together, these conditions have created among many Turkic citizens of Xinjiang a feeling of despair, a bleak sense that their very existence as a people is under mortal threat from Beijing and its representatives locally.

Uyghur Goals and Actions

It is impossible to speak of Uyghur goals as such because the community remains diverse with respect to geography, education, economics, and culture and divided over both the ends it seeks and the best means of achieving them. This said, one may speak of three broad tendencies, each of which has direct parallels worldwide in every other ethnic minority seeking to define its relationship to a state dominated by another group.

Assimilationists, a small percentage of the total, want merely to take their place as equal citizens in the larger multi-ethnic Chinese state. Accepting Beijing's aspirations as their own, they seek nothing more than for the government to remove existing impediments to their equal access and to abolish the many forms of discrimination that prevent Uyghurs and other Turkic peoples from full participation in the Chinese political and social order. They are largely willing to see their Uyghur language, identity, and culture dissolve in the interests of broader assimilation into the dominant and more advanced Han culture. Their goals derive from personal experience and are highly specific. They endeavor to address them through existing institutions, and base their appeal on the Chinese constitution and laws, and to general Chinese norms.

Autonomists, unlike the assimilationists, are strongly committed to the preservation of the Uyghurs' identity, culture, and traditions. They believe that these goals can be achieved only if Beijing grants to Xinjiang a meaningful degree of political autonomy. In giving priority to the issue of autonomy, they do not seek to change the political order so much as to achieve de facto what they believe already is already guaranteed to them de jure in China's constitution thanks to Xinjiang's status as an "autonomous region." They place

high emphasis on the content of self-determination. Their priority is not limited to equality within the Chinese order but extends, in varying degrees of intensity, to Uyghur political, cultural (including religious), and ethnic self-preservation. In practice this means Uyghur control over Han in-migration to the province and a strong voice in the exploitation of Xinjiang's natural resources. Both goals, they believe, can be achieved best through more open and democratic processes, which in turn can exist only through fundamental changes in Xinjiang, if not all China. They seek to ensure that the Uyghur voice will be dominant in Xinjiang, with a few of them going further and demanding powers even over other Muslim minorities there.

Separatists in nearly all cases seek the same ends as the more thoroughgoing *autonomists* but believe these can be realistically achieved only through full political separation from the People's Republic of China. Until quite recently, nearly all *separatists* were secular. Many advocating separatism, like the more outspoken autonomists, receive encouragement, if not help, from like-minded groups of Uyghur émigrés who operate websites, presses, and advocacy or cultural organizations abroad.

Separatists are themselves a small minority among politically active Uyghurs and they are in turn sharply divided between those dedicated to peaceful means and those advocating political violence. The former are drawn above all from the ranks of educated Uyghurs, including sons and daughters of people who are *assimilationists*. Most favor some form of democratization and many are in touch with diaspora groups that operate legally in Turkey, Germany, the United States, and elsewhere in Central Asia.

The latter have perpetrated several hundred acts of political terrorism in recent years (the actual number is highly controversial), which

have caused the loss of many lives and the destruction of state property. Although the names of nearly a score of such organizations are known, it appears that most, if not all, of them are small and isolated groups not linked by any umbrella structure.

Those resorting to violence and political terror are in turn divided among *secularists* whose stated goal is merely an independent state, and *religious activists* who will not rest content until they have achieved some form of Islamic rule, whether within Xinjiang alone or, more commonly, as part of the larger and presumably undivided community of the faithful, the Muslim umma. The names of many of the better-known militant separatist groups—the East Turkistan Islamic Party,” “Islamic Movement of East Turkistan,” the “East Turkistan Party of Allah,” the “Islamic Holy Warriors,” etc.-- suggest how thoroughly they have been Islamized in recent years. Most of those practicing political violence in the name of religion receive assistance from abroad, channeled from funders in Saudi Arabia, the Gulf, and other Muslim states of the Middle East either directly or, down to 2001, via Afghanistan or Pakistan. Some have forged links with similar-minded organizations in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Turkey, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan.

The numbers of Uyghurs and other Turkic people who fall into each of these categories cannot be known, since public opinion surveys on these issues cannot be conducted in Xinjiang. Nonetheless, all indications are that few Uyghurs today are outright *assimilationists*. And while it is true that many upwardly mobile urban professionals of the older generation followed this path, many of their off-spring criticize their elders for having “sold out” for the sake of personal advancement and favor autonomy or even independence.

Autonomists definitely form the largest group of politically active Uyghurs and Xinjiang Turks. Whatever the differences among them, these men and women seek some form of autonomy that will protect their independent cultural existence.

Avowed *Separatists* of all stripes are probably a distant third, although Uyghur activists argue that the numbers who privately share this view are far larger, and would under any case expand rapidly if the dangers associated with it were less, or if hopes of its realization were to grow. The religious separatists apparently claim the fewest adherents, but it is clear that their numbers have grown over the past half-decade.

To acknowledge that advocates of violence and political terror have had the greatest impact in recent years is to state the obvious. However, two caveats are in order: first, even if the Chinese state succeeds in eradicating this group root and branch it will not have addressed the challenge posed by the other groups. Second, the relative numbers in each category are constantly changing in accordance with evolving conditions, whether good or bad. Improving conditions can turn some towards a more favorable view of assimilation, but can also provide the freer conditions in which the achievement of long-nurtured political aspirations can be seen as a real possibility. Conversely, as conditions worsen, some Uyghurs may come to despair at the possibility of ever achieving autonomy and be willing to settle for whatever they can get; others, by contrast, their hopes fading, their sense of vulnerability deepening, and their anger rising, may move towards autonomy and even embrace separatism. In this context it is worth recalling that ethnic elites in the Soviet republics of Central Asia had enough control to be satisfied

with their roles in the U.S.S.R. but then took their countries to independence as conditions in Moscow deteriorated in 1989-1991.

China's Grievances

Differences of perception between official Beijing and large parts of Uyghur society are broad. But between the Chinese government and all shades of Uyghur activism there yawns a perceptual canyon. Each responds to the other's categorical arguments with equally categorical counter-arguments, eroding whatever little common ground they may once have shared. China's grievances against Uyghur activism are the mirror image of Uyghur charges against China.

Beijing bases its case squarely on what it sees as the march of progress and on its own role as leader of that march. Where Uyghur scholars look on Xinjiang as their primordial home, Chinese consider the entire Turkic population to be relative late-comers to a land celebrated by Chinese writers since early Han times, i.e. from the second century BC. Against the ruins of ancient Central Asian trading centers China points to the ruins of equally ancient Chinese garrisons and signal towers. Conceding that Turkic Karakhanids briefly ruled western Xinjiang in the tenth century AD and that there were many other periods of local rule, China reminds its citizens that half a millennium earlier Chinese armies had made their presence felt as far west as Samarkand in present-day Uzbekistan, drawing the entire region, including Xinjiang, into China's economic orbit through trade along the so-called "Silk Road."

Far from viewing itself as a colonizing power, Beijing argues that only the firmness of Qing rulers from the eighteenth century to the twentieth prevented Xinjiang from being permanently carved up

between the Russian and British empires, and that Mao's People's Republican Army accomplished the same feat for Xinjiang once more in the same in the twentieth century.

Viewed thus, recent Han migrants to Xinjiang are simply filling in a sparsely populated realm of China, not displacing ancient inhabitants or overwhelming an indigenous culture—much like the “empty lands” thesis of American settlers in the West. True, the Turkic peoples of Xinjiang are different, which is why Mao granted them one of five autonomous regions within the People's Republic. But China is a multi-ethnic state whose citizens are free to move as they wish. Since Uyghurs themselves claim this right when they set up trading operations as far afield as Shanghai and the coastal cities, they should not complain when Han Chinese do the same in Xinjiang – so the argument goes.

Besides, Beijing argues, China has pulled Xinjiang from abject poverty and rolled back near-universal illiteracy there. The culture of modern China and the Chinese language are “progressive,” the bearers of modernity, and the windows through which an isolated Xinjiang can interact with the larger world. If Xinjiang suffered during the Great Leap forward and Cultural Revolution, so did the rest of China. The reforms launched in the 1980s brought central investment (and hence control) to Xinjiang that the region could never have generated on its own, and the “Develop the West” campaign singles out Xinjiang as a prime beneficiary of Beijing's continuing largesse. Statistical handbooks issued annually in Beijing and Urumchi attest that this initiative is already bearing fruit.

Against this background, it is obvious in Beijing's eyes that Uyghur activists, by resisting a legitimate developmental program designed to pull the region into the twenty-first century and integrate it

economically both with the rest of China and with lands to the west, are working against the true interests of Xinjiang. In proposing controls on immigration and Han economic activity there, they seek to reimpose discredited controls that fly in the face of the new spirit of free trade.

Uyghurs may complain of a “glass ceiling” in the local administration but the government would argue that careers there, as elsewhere in China, are “open to talent.” True, like France with its holdings abroad, Beijing has opted mainly for *individual* rather than *collective* empowerment, but this has led to special benefits to Xinjiang’s best students, enabling thousands of them to enroll in universities there and elsewhere in China. The few graduates who complain that they are not advancing fast enough should look to their own work ethic, rather than blame the state that lifted them to their present status.

Worse, Beijing would maintain, misguided Uyghur activists would return Xinjiang to the chaos of the warlord era that preceded Xinjiang’s voluntary reintegration with the rest of China in 1949. Like the “warlords” of the two “East Turkistan Republics” of the years 1931-1934 and 1944-1949, they work in collusion with foreign agents, now mainly Islamists, who seek nothing less than to undermine China’s sovereignty and territorial integrity. China claims it has successfully defended these principles of nationhood in Hong Kong and Macao and is determined to do so in Taiwan and Tibet. Xinjiang raises what are seen as nearly identical challenges, which call for equally firm and resolute responses. For Beijing, Chinese sovereignty is indivisible.

Beijing’s pronouncements scarcely distinguish between autonomists and separatists or between secular and religious activists, lumping them all into a single broad tendency whose hallmarks are “splittism”

and “terrorism.” Nor is this illogical, given that the explicit and consistent goal of Chinese policy in Xinjiang is assimilation into the Chinese state and nation to an extent that would preclude all independent religious or ethnic resistance to full Chinese control. It is true that there has been talk of administrative decentralization in the highest levels of the Communist Party, and that specialists in certain institutes and governmental agencies have even broached ideas of intra-Party democracy and federalism. But these notions, so argue China’s leaders, are tentative at best and completely irrelevant to regions that have not yet been fully assimilated politically, economically, and socially.

When certain groups in Xinjiang resorted to armed struggle they catalyzed Beijing’s concern over what it sees as a dangerous amalgam of nationalism, politicized religion, separatism, and terrorism. Uyghur militants despise Uyghur assimilationists and autonomists no less than Han bureaucrats. Both, they argue, are cynics who seek some accommodation with the enemy. Beijing, by contrast, lumps autonomists with the militants and fears that even many Uyghurs who have learned Chinese and advanced in the system may secretly sympathize with the extremists. This fear may have some basis in fact.

Beijing’s suspicions are warranted, Chinese officials would argue, because of what they believe to be the intensive efforts of pan-Turkic and Islamists groups abroad to foment a spirit of resistance among Turkic Muslims of Xinjiang. They are aware that some members of the Uyghur diaspora in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkey maintain contact with dissidents in Ili and Kashgar; that Saudi Arabian groups have disseminated Wahhabi religious literature and possibly small arms through sympathizers in Xinjiang; that traders from friendly

Pakistan have sold religious tracts and chadors in towns accessible from the Kunjerab Pass; that hundreds of young Turkic Muslims have been recruited to study at madrasas in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Saudi Arabia; and that some Uyghurs from Xinjiang -- their number is disputed-- fought with Al Qa'ida in Afghanistan and elsewhere. Any government faced with so many dangerous manifestations of oppositionist sentiment and action, they argue, would strike hard and ask questions only later.

China's Goals and Actions

China's case against some of its Uyghur citizens in Xinjiang is indeed serious. To the extent that they involve political violence and terrorism they would be considered so in any country. However, the particular intensity of China's concern derives from the perception that forces in Xinjiang, aided from abroad, pose a fundamental challenge not only to China's core strategy of development but to China's territorial integrity and sovereignty.

In the face of this threat, Beijing has reaffirmed its intention to administer and develop Xinjiang in the interests of the broader Chinese state and nation. It has repeated its commitment to investment and economic development in Xinjiang, to the construction of roads, railroads and other infrastructure there, to the development of Xinjiang's oil and gas reserves, to promoting the national program of education, to the free movement of labor into Xinjiang, to the principle of advancement based on ability, and to selective affirmative action to benefit minorities.

The goal of these various initiatives is not merely to promote Xinjiang's full and equal participation in the larger world of China

but in the long run to bring about its total *assimilation* into the Chinese polity, economy, and society. In practice, this connotes the elimination of the Uyghur homeland as a politically distinctive region and the merging of the Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslim peoples into the Han political and social order. While they might continue to exist thereafter in some folkloric sense, they would cease to exist as distinct ethnic entities with political and cultural aspirations of their own.

By achieving the goal of assimilation, the People's Republic of China would at the same time attain a second important objective, namely, the elimination of any internal or external threat to Chinese control over the territory of Xinjiang and hence to Chinese sovereignty and territorial integrity.

China promotes its goals through diversified tactics involving both domestic and foreign policy. At home, it declares that it will persist in its developmental program, "Develop the West." This means the perpetuation of many practices in the political, cultural, economic, and ecological spheres that are the particular objects of Uyghur resentment. At present there appears little room for compromise on these policies. Abroad China's tactics call for the continuation of its seven-year effort to neutralize or eliminate all external forces that might threaten its control of Xinjiang and its program of development there. Here, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the heart of this effort, is best seen not as an aggressive effort to project power against its neighbors but as a policy of strategic denial, in which strict control by neighboring states over the activities of their citizens with respect to Xinjiang are rewarded with concrete benefits in the areas of trade and investment. In practice, this has led to restrictions on the rights

of citizens of Kazakstan and Kyrgyzstan that go well beyond denial of the right of sanctuary to Uyghur terrorists.

For the time being Beijing also refuses to take any measures to control the massive Han in-migration that is transforming the demographic balance in Xinjiang and de facto reduction of the demographic importance of Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims. In parallel with this, Beijing will continue to support “divide and rule” policies towards Turkic Muslim peoples, favoring non-Uyghurs in ways that will encourage them to resist the growth of a larger and more consolidated Uyghur identity in the region. Indeed, some of the smaller non-Uyghur Muslim minorities in the province might well prefer a more distant control from Beijing if the choice is between that and some narrow and heavy-handed rule by Uyghurs.

Under-girding all these measures is Beijing’s firm resolve to persist in its heavy-handed crackdown on all forms of secular and religious dissent through the “Strike Hard, Maximum Pressure” campaign. It is true that over the past two decades the Chinese government has swung back and forth between “soft” and “hard” policies towards Xinjiang, at some points hunting down and fiercely punishing all manifestations of dissent with scant regard for human rights, and at others showing surprising flexibility and willingness to seek accommodations with the Uyghur majority. As of this writing, however, there is no evidence that China will waver in its determination to prevail through the relentless application of “hard” measures.

IV. What Is At Stake? Why The Xinjiang Problem Matters

Implications for Ethnic Minorities

The Xinjiang problem has broad implications for the surrounding states of the region. But in examining the international dimensions of the Uyghur issue we should avoid exaggerating the weight of impact of this issue upon others—at least at this juncture. The reality is that, for now, the problematic aspects of the Uyghur problem are largely confined within the borders of China. From the Chinese point of view it is a manageable, if worrying issue. Ironically it is mainly China that seeks to internationalize the Xinjiang problem, by assigning blame to “outsiders” and to external ideologies, and by gaining both external legitimacy and support for crushing it. Yet the seeds of a growing international dimension to the problem are undeniably present, and require examination as we consider its future trajectory.

The Uyghur issue cannot be understood in isolation, as the product of a uniquely Chinese environment. The Uyghur struggle contains many elements familiar to students of ethnic movements elsewhere. Two key international forces bear directly on the nature of the Uyghur issue. The first is the growing global force of identity politics and movements for national autonomy among dissatisfied minorities. The second is the tendency of Islamist movements to play growing roles both in the independence movements of Muslim minorities and among reformist elements struggling against authoritarian rule even

by their own countrymen. These two forces typify much of the politics across the region.

Uyghurs and the Muslim World

Aspirations for ethnic survival, cultural security, and a large measure of political autonomy are hardly unique to the Uyghurs. Such aspirations characterize a large number of ethnic groups around the world that have long been unhappy with having been arbitrarily subordinated by history to other ethnic groups. Modern concepts of identity politics, democratization, and human rights intensify the discontent of minorities living under hostile or partisan ruling orders that are often the consequences of former conquests or empires. Thus, many of the Uyghurs' concerns are shared by many other Muslim peoples living under non-Muslim rule, among them Palestinians, Bosnian Muslims, Kosovars, Chechens, Kashmiris, and the Moros in the Philippines, to cite the largest Muslim examples, or even by Muslim minorities under *Muslim* rule such as the Kurds in Turkey, Iraq, or Iran and the Berbers in Algeria. There are even more cases outside the Muslim world of peoples seeking some form of autonomy or independence; among the most well-known of these are the Tibetans in China, Tamils in Sri Lanka, Sikhs in India, Mayas in Mexico, Christians and animists in southern Sudan, and a multitude of African peoples whose political borders have little to do with ethnic lines.

As the twenty-first century progresses, these and other dissatisfied minorities will be one of the prime sources of regional conflict and even terrorism or warfare. They will impose themselves prominently upon the foreign policy agenda of the international community.

In principle, the entire international community has an interest in the peaceful resolution of the Xinjiang problem, the more so since it involves broader issues of minority rights and aspirations, and of human rights. But at present most regimes facing similar issues have, like China, been unwilling to extend decentralization and minority autonomy and instead favor ever tougher crackdowns and controls.

It is regrettable that policy toward minority problems around the world can easily become a political football. Nations tend to endorse the struggle of those peoples with whom their own interests are linked – or, as often as not, as an instrument against opponents. Governments readily apply double standards depending on how such standards affect friend and foe and how they relate to their perceptions of their own national interests at the moment. At the same time, developments within many societies make such approaches ever less sustainable. As societies become culturally more diverse and as they are forced to recognize long-existing but suppressed multiethnic realities within a seemingly “homogeneous population,” the argument for decentralization and minority autonomy becomes ever more pertinent. Many Chinese may well see decentralization and self-government simply as instruments to weaken Chinese state power. But as problems of minority rights sharpen and move to the front of the international community’s consciousness, it will be more difficult to isolate either the Xinjiang issue or its solution from global trends. Bluntly, the only sustainable solution to these problems appears to be some combination of administrative decentralization and devolution, the exact balance varying according to each country and context. The price of mismanaging these issues is to render them intractable. Any country that reaches this point it is doomed to live under the

permanent threat of extremism. This in turn can lead to the introduction of authoritarian controls which in turn give rise to unending violence, resulting finally in partition.

Failing a broader acceptance of broader solutions to these problems, we foresee a growth in radicalism that will increasingly assume a religious cast. The rise of militant Islam, militant Judaism, militant Hinduism, militant Christianity, and even militant Buddhism attest to this process. Unresolved and burning issues of cultural identity and rights readily become seed beds for terrorism, which in turn quickly elicits counter-terrorism from the side of insecure states.

Thus the Uyghur problem is not a special problem affecting China alone, but part of a much larger and generic issue. The fact that the Uyghurs are also Muslim adds a special intensity to the issue because of the high degree of interconnectedness that exists among the worldwide Muslim community—the umma. The very existence of an umma from Indonesia to Morocco, from Tatarstan to South Africa, and the increasing Muslim presence in Western countries, creates special bonds of awareness and sympathy as Muslim minorities increasingly discover other Muslims in similar predicaments. This reality leads to a greater awareness among all Muslims of the grievances and hardships suffered by all other Muslims worldwide, tends to magnify their concerns, and often gains them support from other Muslims willing to publicize their cause or even to fight alongside them. In short, the very fact that the Uyghurs are Muslims automatically imparts an international dimension to the problem that has little parallel with any other religious or ethnic issues in China.

The reality is that Uyghurs are indeed in touch with Muslim groups outside Xinjiang, some of them have been radicalized into broader jihadist politics in the process, a handful were earlier involved in

guerrilla or terrorist training in Afghanistan, and some are in touch with international Muslim mujahidin struggling for Muslim causes of independence worldwide.

The fact that all this is unfolding within the context of Greater Central Asia adds yet a further dimension to the Uyghurs' struggle and to China's response. Central Asia as a whole—including Xinjiang—faces the constant and growing specter of instability. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the international community expected the new states there to quickly establish unfamiliar political institutions and at the same time carry out radical and destabilizing economic changes, all the while preserving domestic tranquility in the face of the breakup of old patterns of authority and the reemergence of regional and ethnic loyalties. Some states have tried to maintain the public's well-being by promoting stability over change while others have pursued change in the hope that it would create prosperity. With the partial exception of oil-rich Kazakstan, none can as yet claim more than modest results for its efforts.

Disoriented by declining living standards and the collapse of old principles of authority, and in the new search for their cultural roots long denied by communism, many citizens of these new states have sought refuge in religion, with an active minority embracing the certainties of political Islam. Support from Saudi Arabia and other Middle Eastern countries has facilitated this process. In the absence of effective legal channels and of a legitimate opposition, political Islam can emerge as a primary or even sole vehicle for expressing frustrated aspirations. The infusion of political Islam into more traditional movements for reform or national renewal immediately invests such struggles with a greater and potentially more dangerous moral, religious, and cultural intensity.

In the first days after the fall of the USSR, the Islamic Renaissance Movement flourished briefly across most of Central Asia and within Russia as well. This group quickly faded, but others soon appeared on the scene:

A violent separatist Muslim movement in Chechnya came increasingly under the influence of Islamist ideology, just as in Xinjiang Islamist ideologies exercise growing influence in that separatist movement.

An armed Islamic insurgency -- the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU)—arose in Uzbekistan and operated out of Tajikistan and Afghanistan; the fall of the Taliban and death of the IMU's founder weakened but did not destroy this organization.

A radical, fiercely anti-western, but nominally non-violent Islamist movement -- the Liberation Party or Hizb ut-Tahrir—was implanted from abroad and now operates widely in Central Asia; based in London, its members reportedly make up the majority of political prisoners in Uzbekistan today and the strongest Islamist opposition movement across Central Asia, and is beginning to make inroads into Xinjiang.

A more moderate Islamist movement in Tajikistan, after many years of civil war, now operates legally, enjoying a share of power in government but only modest public support. Down to 2001 Islamist-dominated Afghanistan played a central role in many of these activities, not least because it had been the scene of a spectacularly successful struggle of Islamist fighters against a superpower, the USSR. In the process Afghanistan had become a magnet for Islamist fighters from other regions who obtained training and support there, including later from al-Qa'ida. While the Muslim mujahidin's long

struggle in Afghanistan helped create the environment, mythology, and élan for other Islamist movements, such movements would not have flourished had the region itself not offered fertile ground for such activities. Down to 2001 Afghanistan was the cradle and natural focus of regional Islamist movements seeking some kind of center for their own activities, training, and financing. The elimination of the Taliban after 11 September of that year eliminated for the time being that country's role as a central rallying point for Islamist and national movements. But many of the conditions that enabled other Islamist movements to germinate in the region still persist, and may be intensifying.

In Central Asia, new and often maladroit governmental institutions, fragile public support, and in nearby Afghanistan a state of civil war lasting nearly two decades created vacuums of power and opened the way to illegal cross-border movements of drugs, weapons, and fervent ideologies. Large-scale production of opium in Afghanistan and its transport through the rest of the region generated illicit revenues that easily found their way into the coffers of guerrilla movements and helped finance the shipment of arms across even the most closely guarded borders. Production of opium in Afghanistan after the fall of Taliban is at record new heights today.

Given all this, it was all but inevitable that Uyghur activists would eventually be affected by the Islamist ideologies that were influencing most other political struggles in the region. With similar inevitability the Uyghurs came to promote their cause as one among the broader array of grievances that should engage the attention of Muslim activists globally. Against this background, it is all the more important that the problem of Xinjiang become part of the international agenda, since radical currents there affect, and are

affected by, movements of arms, drugs, refugees, and migration throughout the region.

Terrorism

World public opinion has danced around the definition of terrorism since, as the cliché goes, “one man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter.” We would suggest that issues of minority rights within centralized and authoritarian states (which Soviet ideologues long championed as “national liberation struggles”) constitute a special analytical category that cannot simply be subsumed under the routine rubric of “terrorism,” even when movements pursuing such minority rights employ methods that must clearly be labeled as terrorism.

Moreover, definitions of terrorism must also acknowledge the possibility and reality of “state terrorism”—brutal or intimidating actions conducted by states against their own people. The implications of the old Weberian definition of the state as “possessing a monopoly on the right to use force” need to be spelled out anew in an age when governments in much of the world conduct their affairs without the consent of the governed.

The events of 9/11 have radically altered the entire discussion of minorities – especially Muslim ones – and the issue of terrorism. As real as is the threat of al-Qa’ida and its international connections, many regimes of the world have seized on the US Global War against Terrorism to legitimize their own repression of Muslim and even non-Muslim minorities. We have witnessed this in China in the case of the Uyghurs, but also in Indonesia, Russia, Israel, and across much of the Muslim world itself where regimes have cracked down upon all

Muslim opposition movements, charging them with terrorism. However difficult it may be, it is essential to avoid self-serving definitions of the problem, whether they come from the non-state actors or the states themselves.

Finally, even though it is political Islam in Central Asia that today draws the most international attention, not so long ago the Soviet Union perceived “pan-Turkism” as the region’s political *bête noire*. Pan-Turkism not only challenged Soviet (and, earlier, Russian imperial) control of the region, but provided an ideology that linked local peoples with the outside power of Turkey, a NATO member with close ties to the West. Today the concept of forging some sort of closer linkages among the states of greater Central Asia is promoted by many, but not all, officials within the region, by certain international agencies, and by outside powers including the United States. Even though such relations are not conceived as “pan-Turkist,” they pose a similar threat to any country that feels its sovereignty to be insecure and its territorial integrity as fragile. Such a country might either oppose such arrangements or, failing that, seek to co-opt them or create its own alternatives to them.

Today, then, movements based on either nationalism or religion are likely to espouse similar political visions for the future across Greater Central Asia. In nearly any form they set themselves against the pretensions of other powers in the region, whether Russia, China, India, or the United States. National movements in Xinjiang, both secular and religious, thus challenge Beijing’s control of that territory. It does not help that the Uyghur nationalist movement is both encouraged by, and in turn helps stimulate, Islamist and nationalist movements across the breadth of Greater Central Asia.

Developments within Xinjiang are tied in with neighboring states in other ways as well. Xinjiang currently has more cases of HIV per capita than any other region in China, thanks to the widespread intravenous use of heroin imported from Burma and Afghanistan. While the Chinese government blames this epidemic on international criminal forces, Uyghurs tend to blame its spread on Beijing's indifference to the Uyghurs' fate. Either way, neither the problem in Xinjiang nor its solution is confined to the border of the Uyghur Autonomous Region. And, significantly, many Uyghurs now see these negative social developments unfolding in the context of a moral vacuum in post-Communist China, and therefore see a role for Islam in helping fight against drugs, alcohol, and the deterioration of the social fabric across Uyghur society. The bloody 1997 conflict in Gulcha is but the most obvious manifestation of this broader trend.

The Xinjiang problem is also intimately linked to questions of foreign investment. Not only is direct international investment good for China, but it would serve to bring greater international scrutiny of human rights and legal norms into Xinjiang by international investors that would foster fair employment practices for ethnic minorities. OPIC in particular could play a valuable role by considering this factor as it extends its support to projects in Xinjiang. Support by international investors for such norms could help nudge Beijing towards more balanced policies.

In short, there are international dimensions to the Uyghur issue that considerably complicate China's control of Xinjiang. In each case they serve to stimulate both nationalism and Islamism within Xinjiang – the two are not mutually exclusive – and strengthen their role as vehicles for Uyghur aspirations, whether for autonomy or independence.

China and Regional Geopolitics

China is poised to become the single greatest external economic influence on the economies of the rest of Central Asia and possibly on its politics as well. It is also the one state whose power poses a *potential* threat to the interests of nearly all the other member states of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Thus, while each regional state shares China's concerns over radical Islam, the drug trade, and arms smuggling, each also views Chinese power with a degree of ambivalence. This ambivalence affects their view of the "Uyghur question."

Islamism, pan-Turkic nationalism, and Uyghur aspirations for independence directly affect a broad collection of states around the region, complicating China's efforts to contain and marginalize the problem. We have already noted that the Turkic states of Kazakstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan are not immune to oppositional national and religious ideologies – and Islamism at the moment is the greater challenge to existing regimes there. Even Persian-speaking Tajikistan, the sole non-Turkic state in Central Asia, has been strongly affected by an indigenous Islamist movement, although naturally unsympathetic to any pan-Turkic ideology.

There is a significant Uyghur diaspora across Central Asia, especially in Kazakstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. Recognizing this, China has long sought to get these states to prevent Uyghur citizens of their countries from supporting separatism in China. This was a key reason for China's establishment in 1996 of the Shanghai group as a forum where regional security issues could be discussed; its founding members were China, Kazakstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan. In June 2001 the group was expanded to include Uzbekistan and changed its name to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. China

hoped that the general threat posed by Afghanistan's Taliban would foster cooperation among the member states not only on questions of radical Islam, but also on diaspora Uyghur activities in these states. Since radical Islam poses a threat to the regimes of each of these countries, a degree of cooperation was forthcoming.

At the same time, at least two of these states – Kazakstan and Kyrgyzstan – nourish primordial and even existential anxieties over potential Chinese expansionism. Looking to the experience of Southeast Asia a century ago, they worry that Chinese merchants might gradually take over their urban commerce, consigning the Turkic natives to subordinate roles in the countryside. Such anxieties will not prevent Kazaks and Kyrgyz from cooperating with China, but could make them mindful of the fact that the Uyghur diaspora provides them with a modest “card” that can be played against China down the road when need be. The Kazaks in particular have tacitly permitted some degree of political activity by Uyghurs in their country but have firmly controlled unauthorized cross-border activities and all forms of violent protest.

None of this is meant to suggest that the regional states intend to use the Uyghur issue against China. But all of them are acutely aware of China's growing power, and will remain mindful that the Uyghurs in diaspora present one of the very few points of leverage they would have against Beijing in any future geopolitical balancing.

Russia too, is well aware that its longer term relations with China include many points of uncertainty. Principal among these concerns are the possibility of a demographic spillover from China's heavily populated northeastern provinces into Russia's sparsely populated maritime provinces, and the implications of Chinese economic dominance in Central Asia.

Russia's active interest in Xinjiang is quite concrete and of long standing, dating to the nineteenth century. Intensive economic and political maneuverings gave tsarist Russia a strong presence there before 1917. In the years preceding the emergence of Communist rule in China the USSR indirectly ruled large sections of Xinjiang through its client, the East Turkistan Republic. During the Sino-Soviet conflict of the 1960s Soviet agents distributed visas in Xinjiang to encourage Kazaks and Uyghurs there to emigrate--indeed, it is largely these émigrés of the 1960s who constitute today's Uyghur diaspora in Central Asia. In the same years the USSR amassed large nuclear-armed forces along the Xinjiang border and the Chinese, responding to the threat, built up their military presence in Xinjiang.

Given this long history, some future Russian role in the area is not inconceivable, depending on the evolution of Sino-Russian relations. For the time being, however, the reduced level and quality of Chinese forces in Xinjiang, estimated at not larger than 100,000 troops, indicates that Beijing perceives little or no threat from the Russian side. The greater uncertainties will lie on the side of Russia, some of whose commentators have already suggested that the 2001 Russia-China treaty may come to be seen as the high-water mark of a less than solid Sino-Russian rapprochement.

Yet other states have a geopolitical interest in the fate of Xinjiang since it bears on their own relations with Beijing. Briefly summarized, India and Mongolia, both of which border on Xinjiang, have cool relations with China and fear any further spread of Beijing's political influence. Japan, with its own uncertain relations with China, has long-standing emotional and cultural ties with Xinjiang due to its important Buddhist past; the region still holds a romantic attraction for many Japanese, as burgeoning Japanese tourism there

attests. Turkey, although a distant power, has a large Uyghur diaspora that actively promotes autonomy and separatism from various offices in Istanbul. On the level of Realpolitik Ankara must maintain good relations with China but at the popular level in Turkey there is great emotional support for the Uyghurs as part of the “Turkic nation.” Iran, too, is torn between the need to affirm its ties with China as a means of alleviating its geopolitical isolation and its still-nourished hopes of restoring its ancient and powerful economic and cultural presence in Central Asia, not to mention its sympathy for a Muslim people seeking self-determination.

Finally, the United States has broad concerns over the nature of China’s future role on the international scene. Bilateral relations at present are generally positive, but many questions remain. It would be unrealistic to rule out categorically American willingness to play the “Uyghur card” as a means of exerting pressure on China in the event of some future crisis or confrontation.

In sum, many of China’s rivals have in the past pursued active policies in Xinjiang and exploited the Uyghur issue for their benefit. There is no immediate prospect today of such activities being renewed, but the possibility cannot be excluded from any survey of possible longer-range futures for the Xinjiang issue.

Members of the highly diverse Uyghur diaspora work wherever they can in the international arena to gain support for their cause. Some of its members focus on presenting the human rights grievances of Uyghurs and other Turkic peoples against Beijing. Others frame the issue as a struggle to build in Xinjiang a democratic system freed from Beijing’s tyranny or Han ethnic pretenses. Still others focus on pan-Turkic dimensions, Islam, or simply the systematic undermining of

Chinese rule there through acts of terrorism. One of the few things the diaspora agrees upon

is the importance of placing Xinjiang on the “international map” and of gaining leverage over Beijing through international sympathy and diplomatic support. For the time being, presenting its grievances as a human rights issue is the diaspora’s best means of eliciting international support in the West.

Human Rights Issues

As the international community came to look more closely at questions of minority rights around the world, the Uyghurs’ grievances inevitably came to the attention of such non-governmental organizations as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International. Whatever the levels of external sympathy may be for Uyghur calls for self-determination, the ample evidence that China has abused the Uyghurs’ basic human rights, as defined by international norms, is bound to command serious interest. Unfortunately the historical record suggests that the decision of countries and even of international organizations to raise specific human rights issues is often politicized and highly selective. Many countries will devote attention to human rights issues in China in inverse proportion to the quality of their overall bilateral relationship. Hence, human rights issues inevitably will be both the object and instrument of international relations with China.

Economic Factors

To date, economic ties between Xinjiang and neighboring states are quite modest. China consumes its own energy production from

Xinjiang and Xinjiang imports some oil from Kazakstan. But the \$9.5 billion Chinese investment proposed for Kazakstan's Uzen oil field—its largest overseas investment to date, has yet to materialize, and the pipeline connecting that field with China via Xinjiang remains on paper.

Bilateral trade for either Xinjiang or its Central Asian neighbors has yet to reach a level at which it becomes a decisive element in the strategic thinking of either side. Foreign direct investment fosters such trade in other parts of China, but Xinjiang, starved of this crucial input, lags well behind the rest of China in foreign trade. Kazakstan is by far Xinjiang's largest external trading partner, but China's trade with Kazakstan is barely a tenth of its trade with Russia. And exports from Xinjiang overall have fallen by nearly a half since 2002.

It is possible that trade might one day come to play a more strategic role in the thinking of the Central Asian states. It is already considered such in Kyrgyzstan. But as has been noted, while the advantages of trade with China are important, Central Asian states remain aware that the immense power of the Chinese economy could one day overwhelm their weaker economies. In short, trade could become a source of friction as well as a spur to closer ties.

Overwhelming these considerations is the possibility that the sustained boom in Xinjiang might flag. Were this to occur, competition within Xinjiang over a declining "economic pie" might sharpen and Uyghurs' grievances might deepen, with many of them placing even greater emphasis on the need for autonomy or even separatism. The fact that Xinjiang's rate of growth has already slipped vis-à-vis other provinces and the mounting evidence that the government no longer commands the resources to sustain present high rates of investment in Xinjiang's relatively state-dependent

economy, suggests that this process has already begun—
notwithstanding the heroic aspirations of the campaign to “Develop
the West.”

V. Four Alternative Scenarios.

We have seen that many different international factors help shape the dynamic of the Xinjiang problem. Yet in the end it is overwhelmingly clear that by far the most significant variable affecting the evolution of this issue is China itself. Xinjiang's fate will be determined above all by the fate of China as a whole. For all the talk of Xinjiang as an "autonomous region," Beijing's policies and practices there are part and parcel of its policies elsewhere, not only in the four other autonomous regions but in all ethnic territories and, in the end, in the other provinces. Thus, scenarios on the future of Xinjiang are in large measure scenarios on the future of China.

Neither China's evolution nor the likely directions of Beijing's future policies towards Xinjiang can be predicted with even the slightest degree of certainty. One need only review the many prognoses on the future of the USSR written at the time of the fiftieth anniversary of the Russian revolution to appreciate the need for great modesty on this point. Recognizing this, we offer four sharply differing alternative paths for China's own evolution, each of which will have important implications for how the Xinjiang problem might develop in the years to come. For convenience's sake let us refer to these as (1) a Floundering China, (2) a Hostile China, (3) a Triumphant and Successful China, and (4) a Wise and Effective China. These scenarios are hardly exhaustive or comprehensive, but they serve to identify some of the key potential variables that can affect the evolution of the Xinjiang problem – as well as the fate of China itself.

A Floundering China

The prospect of a “floundering China” is chilling indeed. Such a condition would be triggered by spreading unemployment and labor unrest, a financial crisis stemming from bad bank loans and persisting state intervention in the economy, declining confidence on the part of international investors, division among elites over policy, weak leadership that is unable to set a clear direction, inability to abandon the strictures of one-party control, growing regionalism as centrifugal forces come to predominate over centripetal forces, and a preoccupation with domestic affairs to the neglect of international issues.

Under such dire circumstances the most urgent changes occur from below rather than from above. If this occurs, Beijing’s handling of Xinjiang might evolve along the following lines:

- ?? Both domestic and foreign investment in Xinjiang, especially in the key energy sector, would flag, causing stagnation.
- ?? Employment in Xinjiang’s large state sector would shrink, causing social unrest but also the return of some Han migrants to their home provinces.
- ?? Internal security in Xinjiang would weaken as Beijing dedicates its best military and security forces to maintaining order in the key coastal and central provinces.
- ?? Local administrators would increasingly take decisions on their own, leading to *de facto* autonomy.
- ?? A new flow of emigration by Turkic peoples to neighboring countries to the west, dislocating those economies. And leading to direct or indirect migration to southern Siberia.

- ?? As control of the western border decays, it would become the scene of a growing influx of drugs, guns, and radical nationalists and Islamist activists into Xinjiang.
- ?? Any appeal of integration within China would weaken among Uyghurs, while many former autonomists would begin to side with separatists. Violence against Han settlers would rise, as well as attacks on Chinese security installations. Growing numbers of Uyghurs would call for recognition of Xinjiang's full sovereignty as stipulated in China's constitution.
- ?? To deflect internal pressures, Central Asian and other states would quietly permit the Uyghur diaspora to engage directly with events inside Xinjiang.

A Hostile and Belligerent China

The driving force behind this scenario is the conjunction of continuing but erratic economic growth at home, a series of setbacks or humiliations on the international scene, and leadership that turns its back on innovation and acts instead in the name of a narrow chauvinism. Unsure of its ability to control events, the leadership reaffirms the leading role of an elite Communist Party, imposes tighter controls over the politics and the economy, and cuts back on free market experimentation except in areas of state capitalism and controlled zones for foreign investment. Frustrated over the Taiwan issue but unwilling to accept the situation, this China would become openly hostile towards the United States and would seek to develop its own informal alliances of anti-U.S. forces. It would also increase its military budget and adopt a heavy-handed approach toward

Central Asian neighbors, using its economic clout to gain a dominant voice there as the U.S. gradually withdraws from the region.

Such a forbidding state of affairs in Beijing might impinge on Xinjiang in many ways, among them the following:

- ?? China actively fosters an increased flow of Han migration to Xinjiang as a means of siphoning off discontent elsewhere and realizing national aspirations.
- ?? More of Xinjiang's land and resources are taken over by Han settlers, and Uyghurs in the work force are increasingly marginalized.
- ?? Deepening alienation and radicalization of Uyghurs, with increased acts of violence and more frequent invocations of Islamist ideology.
- ?? Free trade across the western border is suspended, affecting the economies of Central Asian states and Pakistan and leading to the isolation of Xinjiang.
- ?? International backing for energy development in Xinjiang dwindles and Beijing's plan for a pipeline across Central Asia is suspended.
- ?? Russia responds to China's heightened military presence in Xinjiang with corresponding actions behind the demilitarized borders of neighboring states.
- ?? Central Asian states, anxious over China's direction, crack down hard on the Uyghur diaspora and other manifestations of dissent, creating destabilizing social tensions.

- ?? Concern over China's direction causes Russia and India to renew their anti-Chinese coalition of the 1960s and to seek to induce others to join.
- ?? Other states, including the U.S., grow more hostile towards China, and are use the "Uyghur card" to keep China off-balance and to blunt Chinese hegemonic moves in Central Asia and elsewhere.

A Successful and Triumphant China

This scenario foresees a China that has managed its economy successfully. It has fostered further privatization, resolved problems in the banking sector, maintained a high rate of growth, further expanded its mushrooming foreign trade, and reduced, but by no means eliminated, joblessness and poverty. The Communist Party preserves its monopoly of power but now accepts more businessmen into its ranks and welcomes intra-party democracy. Thanks to this, China achieves full acceptance as a major world power and withal a strong sense of national destiny and self-confidence.

While positive for China overall, the implications for Xinjiang of this generally optimistic scenario are, to say the least, paradoxical. For in this scenario a "successful" China does not necessarily lead to the amelioration of the Uyghur problem, and is as likely as not even to exacerbate it. For success as thus defined would have the effect of vindicating Chinese policies across China and within the province and would diminish external pressures on China to make concessions to its critics.

China's Communist Party has long exhibited its own ideological blinders in viewing "nationalism" as simply the product of economic

forces, and in believing that expressions of “bourgeois” nationalism would vanish before the advance of development and assimilation. Indeed, on the basis of this presupposition Deng Xiaoping opened Xinjiang’s borders with Central Asia in the 1990s, only to be surprised that the re-establishment of Uyghur contacts with the external world intensified nationalism and religious ideologies.

Successful development in China is most likely to engender a spirit of triumphalism that would indiscriminately validate existing policies, including both the “Develop the West!” and the “Strike Hard! Maximum Pressure!” campaigns. The lesson of this scenario is that any form of economic development in Xinjiang that favors Han Chinese over the indigenous Turkic peoples will exacerbate the Uyghurs’ sense of deprivation and disaffection rather than ameliorate them.

Thus, this scenario might lead to the following consequences:

- ?? An increase of Han in-migration into Xinjiang and a growing marginalization of the Uyghurs, who are powerless to resist.
- ?? Heightened ethnic tension within Xinjiang, which in turn requires a major security presence and the continuation of existing policies based on centralized state controls over political and economic life.
- ?? Gradual evolution of a reservation system or “Bantustan” arrangement in Xinjiang, under which the shrinking Turkic population would be confined to specified traditional but marginal areas where their lives and well-being would be protected, but at the price of their decisive marginalization from most of the active polity of the province.

A Successful, Liberalizing, and Restrained China

This vision is characterized by many of the same features that appeared in the portrait of a “successful and triumphant China.” The crucial difference is that this scenario foresees also a *political* evolution that leads toward greater decentralization of Chinese power, to a partial acceptance of the principles of devolution and self-government, and to an overall liberalization of the domestic polity. Conversely, it assumes a minimal role for chauvinistic or xenophobic thinking in China, and a kind of confident integration into the world community.

The essential conditions for such developments are steady but not destabilizing economic and social development, a relatively unthreatening international environment, and an early experience by China’s “fourth generation” leaders of positive interaction with it. The chief drivers of change in this direction are communication, education, and above all leadership. It assumes that members of the new leadership who come from interior provinces and understand their predicament will develop constructive solutions to issues of governance that can be achieved through evolutionary processes, and that those who still champion old command and control techniques can be gradually and peacefully marginalized.

Such developments would have the following implications for Xinjiang:

- ?? A greater degree of accountability by local leaders to the local populace, and a broader sphere of initiative in the exercise of their local authority.
- ?? A stronger voice at the provincial level (in the case of Xinjiang, at the level of the “autonomous region”) in shaping programs of economic development.

- ?? A broader role for non-governmental action that is defined and protected by enforceable laws.
- ?? A willingness on the part of both Beijing and such international agencies as the World Trade Organization to constrain Han in-migration into Xinjiang to the degree necessary to minimize ethnic and inter-communal clashes.
- ?? A sufficient degree of communal self-government at the level of districts, towns, and villages to convince Uyghurs and other minorities that they have a voice in their own communal and cultural destiny.
- ?? The steady redirection of Uyghur, Turkic, and Muslim oppositional sentiment into legitimate institutionalized channels and the decay of radical movements both in Xinjiang and abroad.

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Clearly, the last of these four scenarios offers not only the best but arguably the only prospect for the successful management of the Xinjiang problem and, more generally, for China's overall stability, welfare, and long-term viability. We note that all of the other three scenarios leave the Uyghur issue essentially unresolved, with little or no movement towards any kind of outcome that would be acceptable to Uyghurs themselves.

We note, too, that China's development and prosperity alone will not necessarily ameliorate the problems that are the subject of this study.

Indeed, the paradox of the Xinjiang problem is that it can worsen through the playing out of two quite contrary scenarios: one that foresees a marked economic deterioration of the situation (scenarios 1 and 2, above), and also one that entails further vigorous Xinjiang economic development in Xinjiang (scenario 3). We shall return to this paradox shortly.

Finally, let it be noted that the kind of decentralization or even federalism that lies at the heart of the benign fourth scenario is impossible under an authoritarian state. Absent fundamental changes in the status of the Communist Party and some broadening of channels of public participation in decision making, this scenario will remain a fantasy. True, yet another cycle of relative openness is conceivable and at some point even likely, as occurred briefly after the death of Mao Zedong in 1978, and in the wake of the 1992 decision to permit more initiative at the provincial and sub-provincial level as allowed by the Law on regional Autonomy passed seven years earlier. Even a short-term “charm offensive” like the one China mounted over Tibet in 2002 is conceivable. But without deeper changes, such developments will remain shallow, fragile, and of brief duration.

VI. Key External Variables In The Evolution Of The Uyghur Problem

Among the core realities of the Xinjiang problem is its dynamic and rapidly evolving character. Headlong change in the economic, social, and political conditions there reduce the likelihood that any of yesterday's brave formuli can successfully address today's reality. In sketching out possible scenarios for the future, we suggested that the fate of Xinjiang and the Uyghurs will be shaped above all by the direction of change within the People's Republic of China. But if China's evolution is the *key* variable, it is by no means the only one. Important external variables will also affect Xinjiang and the Uyghur problem. Several of these warrant scrutiny.

The Pace of Stability, Progress and Reform in Greater Central Asia

As noted in an earlier section, intimate links between Xinjiang and the rest of Central Asia bind the two regions together in such a way as to constitute a single (if highly differentiated) zone with respect to ethnicities, languages, cultures, and religion. If the states of Greater Central Asia manifest thwarted economic and social development, bad governance, political turmoil, or ethnic strife, radical forces will emerge there and inevitably exert a powerful influence on Xinjiang. The only three ways this can be avoided are, first, if the borders are closed and Xinjiang entirely isolated, as occurred during the early decades of Communist rule in China; second, if Beijing chooses to control Xinjiang with a brutal ruthlessness that ignores international opinion; or if Beijing manages the autonomous region with sufficient deftness as to render the Uyghurs content with their lot and immunized against external negative developments.

While not minimizing the achievements of some of the new Central Asian states in the area of institution building, privatization, and reform, they all remain “works in progress.” Nor is this surprising, given that they have had only one decade to undo a Communist system that lasted three quarters of a century and to build national institutions de novo—all in a highly volatile and in many ways hostile international environment. As a consequence, new institutions remain fragile, even as they are often heavy-handed, the economies are only gradually recovering, incomes are becoming polarized, and reform tentative. Meanwhile, liberal reformism has gained a solid toe-hold, even if it remains relatively weak, political Islam is a constant factor, and various neo-Communist, nationalist, and pan-Turkic currents flow beneath the surface of public life.

With the exception of neo-Communism, all these tendencies in the new states of Central Asia affect Xinjiang as well. Whether or not they are radical or violent in nature, such ideologies, taking root among the Uyghurs, serve to preserve and promote a separate and distinct Uyghur identity.

The Rise of Other Great Powers in the Region

The only great regional powers capable of challenging China’s preeminence in Greater Central Asia are Russia and India. Under certain conditions, both could become factors in Xinjiang. Neither of these powers alone can significantly influence China’s development, but should Chinese power in Xinjiang markedly decline, as in Scenario 1, above, either or both of these states could develop greater influence in the territory. It is worth noting that historically China’s voice in the affairs of the Xinjiang region has been strongest in periods when it is not being challenged there by other powers.

No serious regional external challenge faces China today, but this condition has obtained for barely half a century, or less if one counts the serious Sino-Russian tensions during the Chinese Cultural Revolution. Thus, one cannot categorically exclude the possibility that Russia might conceivably at some point make a bid to become the “patron” of Turkism in the region as part of an effort to head off problems of its own in Tatarstan and to keep the new Central Asian states closely aligned with it. India too, may come to nourish ambitions in Central Asia, where it sees the possibility of outflanking Pakistan, undercutting the forces of radical Islam, and constraining or blocking Chinese power. Xinjiang would be a natural theater for the extension of these interests in the event that it feels challenged by China’s growing reach beyond traditional Han regions of China, or threatened by Chinese assertiveness on its border, in South Asia, or on the major sea lanes affecting India’s global trade.

A Radicalized Islamic Pakistan

Pakistan has recently achieved an impressive macro-economic stabilization and is making progress in other areas, including education. However, its future course is by no means certain. If Pakistan’s economy slips backwards and the current government weakens, local and foreign Islamists groups based there could use the territory of Pakistan as a base for uncontrolled initiatives directed towards Greater Central Asia, including Afghanistan, its northern neighbors, Kashmir, and also Xinjiang. A more dire if less likely possibility would envision the replacement of the current leadership by explicitly Islamist forces that could lend official support to Islamist movements in those same areas.

Counterbalancing these prospects are Pakistan's long-term strategic ties with China, which are essential not only to the development of Pakistan's transport and port system but, more important, to its ability to constrain India's greater power on its border. Even an overtly Islamist regime in Islamabad would weigh soberly the tradeoffs involved in allowing any activities from its territory that would challenge Chinese rule in Xinjiang.

The Longer Range Impact Of The US-Led War Against Terrorism

The US-led Global War against Terrorism has already exerted a major impact upon Greater Central Asia with the overthrow of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, the presence of United States troops in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, and demands for Pakistan's close collaboration in that struggle. To this list might also be added Russia's new military bases at Kant in Kyrgyzstan and in Tajikistan.

The outcome of these developments, which have already brought a major American footprint and deepened Russian presence in this Muslim region, is still an open question. On the one hand, it could result in the elimination of organized forms of terrorism throughout the new states of Central Asia and beyond. It could also lay the basis for more stable and self-confident governments in the area, enhance the prospects for reform, and open borders to increased trade and cooperation. On the other hand, it could serve over the longer term to identify the U.S. with harsh, failing, and unpopular regimes in Central Asia, exacerbating and inflaming popular feelings against the United States, the West, and even against Russia as a non-Muslim state. The US declaration of the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) as a terrorist organization in 2001 was welcomed by Beijing but received very negatively by the Uyghurs, who also

shared with China and the rest of the Muslim world an antipathy to the US war in Iraq in spring 2003. The US' popularity has diminished among Uyghurs, who believe that Washington, once virtually their sole hope for leverage against Beijing, has sacrificed their cause in order to gain Beijing's support for the "War on Terrorism." This may cause some of them to conclude that they have no alternative but to embrace more radical philosophies to promote their national struggle. If the forces of Islamic radicalism thus gain strength across the region, it will obviously affect the Uyghur national struggle in Xinjiang and beyond.

As of this writing both the character and duration of the United States' commitment to the Central Asian region remain in question. Nonetheless, it cannot be doubted that the character of the United States' presence will have a decisive impact, whether positive or negative, on the effectiveness of the local regimes' struggle against Islamist opposition and hence on the geopolitical equation in Xinjiang.

Stability, Progress And Reform—Or Their Absence -- In Other Parts Of Central Asia

We have noted the extent to which Xinjiang's proximity to a region already under great stress has directly impacted the Xinjiang problem itself. It is important to reiterate, however, that one cannot lay responsibility for the creation of the basic problem in Xinjiang on external influences, notwithstanding occasional self-serving Chinese claims to that effect. External forces exacerbate but do not create the basic problem.

Nor are all external influences negative. Developmental assistance to the new states of Central Asia will help ameliorate the conditions which Islamist movements (and others) play. Economic development led by a new and talented generation could lift even those states lacking in natural resources. With economic and social development will come a new readiness to cooperate with one another and with all neighbors, which will in turn further the cause of development throughout the region. At the same time, regimes, especially Uzbekistan, will need to be reminded that domestic policies that do not effectively address the causes of discontent can be a major stimulus to the creation of a radical religious opposition, as states from Algeria to Indonesia have discovered to their regret.

International Efforts To Lessen Support To Islamist Movements In The Greater Central Asian Region

While negative political, social and economic conditions in Central Asia directly stimulate the emergence of radical Islamist movements, external support, especially financial, to these movements also helps to strengthen and entrench them in the region. This financial support has historically come primarily from the wealthy countries on the Arabian Peninsula, especially Saudi Arabia. The new states of Central Asia have complained for a decade of the well-financed activities of Saudi missionaries and activists --even if non-violent--in their countries but their criticism has fallen on deaf ears.

It is true that Saudi Arabia has not supported pro-Wahhabi currents in the region with the specific aim of encouraging political radicalism--it is all too aware that such radicalism can, and has, turned on the Kingdom itself. Rather, it lends its support to radical Islamists in part for defensive reasons: to deny control of these potentially dangerous

movements to others who might use them against the Kingdom. The Saudis sought to preempt any possible Iranian or Iraqi influence over these movements in past decades. While this tactic may have prevented some actions against Saudi Arabia, in larger terms the policy has proven a failure for Saudi Arabia and, in the eyes of the new Central Asian states, a disaster for the region.

In the post 11 September period the political cost to the governments of the Gulf region of supporting radical Islamic groups abroad, whether violent or non-violent ones, has gone up. It has called forth both unwelcome United States pressure on them and also terrorist incidents within their own countries. If the U.S., Europe and other countries can help reduce the flow of external funds to these movements in the Central Asian region, it would help to lower the overall political temperature. Such an effort must target Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates and Turkey, in particular.

In recent years most of this funding has come not from state sources but from wealthy private donors who sympathize with “Islamic causes.” States in the region need to investigate these financial connections more seriously and seek to dry them up. If funding for radical Islamist movements in the region can be reduced, it will have a beneficial effect on Xinjiang itself in reducing the religious element in the equation, even if the Uyghur issue will not go away without attention to the underlying social and economic factors that are the main source of local grievances. China, too, would do well to redouble its long-standing effort to exert diplomatic pressure on potential foreign donor states, cooperating with the U.S. and other countries to that end.

The Development of Pan-Turkic Trends in the Region

We have already noted that pan-Turkist currents of various sorts have a long history in the region, going back over a century. These should not necessarily be seen as reactionary in character, and they could in fact be a positive force if they lead to greater regional cooperation in such issues as trade, border security, social and economic development, water, ecology, education and communications. But the intensification of regionalism or pan-Turkist trends, even at their most positive, will complicate Beijing's task in Xinjiang, since the Uyghurs logically seek to be part of such a broad movement.

Beijing's best defense under such conditions might be to seek for itself a larger role in a grand Central Asian development program that links not only Xinjiang but all China with the process. In its reconstituted form this is the avowed purpose of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. By engaging other non-Turkic states in the process, including the U.S., Pakistan, India, etc., China can insulate the region against any possible excesses of pan-Turkism while at the same time promoting regional cooperation. In this instance, as in other cases, the impact of the rest of Central Asia on Xinjiang will be as negative or positive for China as Beijing chooses to make it.

VII. Why the Situation May Get Worse

As problematic as the Xinjiang issue is today, it has the potential of growing worse over time. The following issues should be monitored with particular care, as they may serve as warning indicators to all parties of worsening trends.

The Paradox of Development

As we noted in Section V of this analysis, a key paradox of the situation is that the Xinjiang problem could worsen under either of two quite opposite scenarios: one that leads to successful Chinese development in Xinjiang, or one that ends in thwarted development. As long as Beijing fails to address the Uyghurs' core political-cultural grievances all roads lead to failure.

As we regretfully noted earlier, there is at present little or no evidence that Beijing's strategy in any way seeks to address fundamental Uyghur fears and aspirations.

Chinese Partition of Xinjiang

China, in an effort to break the back of the Uyghur nationalist movement, could conceivably decide to partition Xinjiang, relinquishing the southern Uyghur-dominated oases to a more autonomous Uyghur administration, while leaving the rest of Xinjiang and its other Muslim minorities under direct Han administration. While Uyghur control over this historic Uyghur heartland in the south would help calm some of the Uyghurs' deepest existential fears, it would leave other problems unaddressed, e.g., the exclusion of the important Uyghurs center in the Ili (Yining) area in

the west and in the north, and Uyghur loss of the energy resources and most of the water resources of Xinjiang. The capital of the southern oasis culture, Kashgar, is already beset with heavy Han immigration and may already be deeply into a process of demographic encirclement by new Han arrivals in the old city.

A Uyghur “Bantustan”

Beijing’s actions may also lead *de facto* to what might be called a “Bantustan policy” towards the Uyghurs, in which Uyghurs are gradually confined to certain traditionally Uyghur oases and oasis centers, where they are allowed to exercise autonomous local rule while remaining islands in a sea of Han- controlled territory. It is not inconceivable that Beijing could even adopt such a policy *de jure*. This approach might diminish some of the most popular anti-Han sentiment, especially in the countryside, but it would still leave most Uyghurs resenting their fate and creating problems for the long-term.

Divide and Rule

Yet a third variation would be for Beijing to seek to dilute Uyghur claims for broader control of Xinjiang by expanding and empowering existing small “autonomous ethnic regions” within Xinjiang, such as the Tajik and Kyrgyz areas in the south and Kazak and Mongol areas in the north. Such a “divide and rule” policy would aim at playing off Xinjiang’s non-Uyghur minorities against the Uyghurs, who today no longer quite constitute a majority. Such a strategy might well reduce the Uyghurs’ ability to raise a region-wide nationalist movement but it would also fan Uyghur resentment and foster irredentism based on the belief that “all of Xinjiang” is Uyghur territory.

Worsening Crises over Water

Severely limited and diminishing water resources set clear limits on the size of population that Xinjiang can support. All regions of Xinjiang—mountainous, high pasture, or oasis—show signs of ecological stress and environmental degradation. Chinese plans to “Develop the West” are built on the twin strategy of cotton and oil production, both of which will only intensify competition for diminishing water resources. However, Beijing seems unwilling to sacrifice its strategic need for energy development in Xinjiang to the “softer” demands of ecological caution. The situation is heading toward major ecological crisis if the basic problem—rising population and demands for water in the face of shrinking aquifers – is not addressed. Yet in-migration shows no signs of abating. Stated differently, we are witnessing, as Stanley Tops expresses it in his study for The Xinjiang Project, “a collision between highly localized traditional systems and new forms of regional development being driven by powerful national and international forces.”

The struggle for control and use of water will be central to the political struggle in Xinjiang, will lie at the heart of Uyghur grievances in the oasis regions, and is a key determinant in its own right between conciliation or confrontation in the coming years.

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As a result of harsh Chinese security measures, the number of incidents of political violence in recent years has somewhat diminished but this situation does not reflect any increased

acquiescence by the Uyghurs to the status quo. On the contrary, emotions have risen as Beijing intensified its pressure. As a result of these various factors, we do not at all exclude a further radicalization of the Uyghur population that will find further expression through nationalist or Islamist ideologies and political violence. Nationalist and religious vehicles of expression are by no means mutually exclusive and indeed will more likely merge over time, as has occurred in Kashmir, Palestine, and other areas of crisis for Muslim minorities. Islam is already a principal rallying point and ideological vehicle of anti-state resistance in the new states of Central Asia.

VIII. Prognoses and Conclusions

The Uyghur problem will not go away under present circumstances as long as its basic roots—cultural and existential threats to the Uyghur community remain unattended. Indeed, ethnic issues almost never fade away under conditions of neglect, nor are they “bought off” through economic development alone.

We see no indications of significant movement toward solutions to the most burning Uyghur grievances in Xinjiang. Indeed we believe the problem is growing worse, not better. In the mid-term we therefore foresee the likely exacerbation and even escalation of the problem as political, social, cultural, economic, and international factors intensify the social pressures within Xinjiang.

Given the power of the Chinese state, however, we believe Beijing will be able to contain the problem for the foreseeable future, if necessary through increasing application of force—possibly at a considerable price. Such costs would be incurred in terms of regional instability, economic loss, mounting incidents of violence, general social instability, and increasing complications in pursuing present developmental strategies, as well as international criticism that Beijing would determinedly ignore.

We cannot envision a scenario in which rising Uyghur dissatisfaction or even recourse to violence could force China to retreat from a policy of domination over Xinjiang, all other things being equal. However, we have offered above several variables and alternative scenarios that could seriously affect Beijing’s presence in Xinjiang – nearly all of them in the context of issues unrelated to Xinjiang itself, but directly

related instead to the success or failure of the Chinese state in handling its broader national agenda.

We do not absolutely rule out the possibility of a basic change of heart and policy on Beijing's part. Any such decision to address Uyghur demands, especially for limitations on Han in-migration, would have to be based on an enlightened but realistic assessment of Beijing's own long-term self-interests. Indeed, given the seemingly inevitable cost of Han in-migration policy in terms of social conflict, there is no rational reason even now for China to continue that policy other than the deliberate goal of drastically shifting the demographic balance against the Uyghurs.

A policy of conciliation would at a minimum require the granting of real autonomy to the Uyghurs within the Chinese state and some limitation on Han in-migration.

Some form of administrative decentralization and devolution that would provide meaningful autonomy to all regions, including Xinjiang, would lie at the heart of any workable long-term solution. Maximally, it could one day even embrace a new federal vision for China. However, we do not consider any of these prospects remotely compatible with the Chinese Communist Party's present monopoly of political power.

We believe, given the possibility of continuing instability in the surrounding region of Greater Central Asia in the next decade, that the Uyghur issue is likely to affect, and be affected by, external events in negative ways that are not fully foreseeable. At worst, this prognosis could envision religious, ethnic, or even interstate conflict in Central Asia, the effects of which would quite possibly spill over into Xinjiang; the spread of radical Islamist ideologies across the

region; and the United States' abandonment of its strategic presence and involvement there.

At present the Uyghur problem poses no serious direct threat to the U.S. or its key global interests, but it can have a significantly destabilizing impact on regional stability in a broad territory ringed with nuclear powers, a development to which Washington, as well as other interested states, could not be expected to turn a blind eye.

IX. What Should Be Done?

What Beijing Should Do

- ?? Maintain zero tolerance of clear perpetrators of violent acts of terrorism.
- ?? Join with the United States and other countries in opposing support for all forms of religious extremism by countries or groups in the Gulf region and elsewhere.
- ?? Distinguish between violent acts of terrorism and non-violent political radicalism; the world cannot support a Chinese “war on terror” in Xinjiang if the actual political violence there is employed only rarely and at very low levels.
- ?? Extend genuine autonomy to the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region as provided for in the PRC constitution, along with cultural and linguistic freedom (Article 4).
- ?? Limit in-migration to Xinjiang, first by eliminating obvious subsidies, second by bringing wages offered migrants into line with existing wages for local peoples, and third, if necessary, through more direct administrative means.
- ?? Recognize that wise and effective economic and social development in Xinjiang must take into full consideration the special ethnic aspects and requirements of the region over and above “mere” developmental imperatives. (In this respect the Xinjiang problem resembles that of Tibet.) Successful and stable development in Xinjiang requires Uyghur cultural security and acknowledgment of the special demographic, social, ecological, and hydrological characteristics of the region.

What Uyghurs Should Do

- ?? Recognize that the full independence of Xinjiang under their control is extremely unlikely, could only come about at the price of great bloodshed, and would have little if any international support at the official level.
- ?? Recognize that the problems of Xinjiang, while predominantly affecting the Uyghurs, also involve the political rights of other minorities in the region, and that even a genuinely autonomous Xinjiang would have to address these.
- ?? Focus on attaining meaningful autonomy for the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region within the People's Republic of China, and in such a way as to provide cultural security and preservation of the Uyghur homeland and a major local voice in all policies affecting the region.
- ?? Continue to make the case for genuine autonomy in international fora in the context of the peaceful resolution of issues. Uyghurs should continue to link their own concerns for cultural security and autonomy with the analogous aspirations of other minority groups both within the PRC and elsewhere.
- ?? Engage directly, actively, and positively with other states, including the U.S., European countries, and Japan, that are actively fostering economic and social development throughout the greater Central Asian region, on the grounds that such development, pursued in an equitable manner, is the best hope for stability in the region of which Xinjiang is a part.

What Neighboring States Should Do

- ?? As they already do, neighbors must recognize the extreme sensitivity of the Uyghur issue and Beijing's concerns regarding it.
- ?? Distance themselves both from ethnic and religious radicalism in Xinjiang but at the same time to use confidential bilateral links and relevant international forums to urge Beijing to consider the urgent need to implement genuine autonomy in order to avoid deepening the crisis.
- ?? Foster involvement with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization but expand its agenda to include Chinese policies in Xinjiang that could reverberate beyond Xinjiang's and China's borders, as well as Kazak, Kyrgyz, and Tajik policies that could have the reverse effect.
- ?? Expand the definition of the tasks undertaken by the Shanghai group and the CIS anti-terrorism center in Bishkek to include rigorous and dispassionate study of the social and cultural causes of terrorism.
- ?? Forge other forms of regional cooperation to include the five new states of Central Asia as well as Afghanistan, in order to address common economic, social, and regional issues that will ensure the dynamic development of the region, including Chinese, Russian, Iranian, Pakistani, Indian, Turkish and other interests there.
- ?? Recognize that regional states have the right to express concern over any possible steps that might perpetuate hegemonic policies by either of the regional great powers – China or Russia – as occurred in the past.
- ?? Decisively adopt the principal strategic goal of sharply reducing and thereafter limiting all foreign arms on their

territories, with the proposal to China to do likewise in adjacent areas of Xinjiang. Such a reduction must affect all states, including Russia and the United States.

- ?? Urgently enlist the international community as a whole to interest itself in addressing the issues enumerated above, especially as they involve regional states.

What the United States Should Do

- ?? Washington should condemn without qualification all acts of clear-cut terrorism undertaken by Uyghurs or other groups. But it must focus not only on manifestations of violence and terrorism but also on the grievances underlying them, calling on a range of international bodies to study and report on the connection. This involves the complex but necessary process of drawing distinctions between struggles for national autonomy and other forms of action.
- ?? American consistency in treating issues of minority rights is imperative, and must not be seen as an instrument by which to “punish” or pressure China during periods of rocky bilateral relations or to reward it in periods of good relations.
- ?? Washington must demonstrate interest in the broader resolution of minority discontent as a global issue whose non-resolution presents a continuing threat to stability and a source of terrorist activities. The same policy guidelines must apply to Russian policy in Chechnya and to Indian policy in Kashmir, among other regions.
- ?? Washington must view the Xinjiang problem not simply as a security issue but in the larger context of Chinese political liberalization and the need for the emergence of civil society in China.

- ?? Insist that Beijing, in its legitimate effort to counter violence in Xinjiang, observe norms of human rights, including religious and cultural rights for minorities. Washington must continue to insist that Beijing's campaign against terrorism not be used as an excuse to deny normal political rights, which can only exacerbate existing problems.
- ?? To the extent that events in Xinjiang impinge on regional security, put them on the agenda of international bodies. Freedom of religious expression and destabilizing levels of migration should be among these issues, as should manifestations of religious extremism.
- ?? Working with authorities in Beijing and Urumchi, use OPIC and other instruments to expand international direct investment in Xinjiang, and require that international investors there practice fair employment practices for ethnic minorities.
- ?? It is open to question whether the Shanghai Cooperation Organization can evolve into something more international and more open to legal and human rights norms. Beijing to date has sought largely to use the SCO as an instrument for its own security rather than as a more open-ended vehicle for examining all threats to regional stability, including the Xinjiang problem. Expansion of its membership – at least at the observer level – could facilitate a positive outcome. The United States should therefore seek observer status and promote a similar status for nearby countries affected by developments in Xinjiang and affecting issues there, e.g., Pakistan, Afghanistan, India, etc.
- ?? If the SCO comes to serve as a an important and responsible international organization in the region and one willing to consider *all* regional developments affecting peace, stability, and development, then Washington should support it and seek

a larger role there. If the SCO does not evolve in this direction, however, then the US should encourage the foundation of a Greater Central Asian Cooperation Organization involving all regional states and with a role for interested outside parties, such as Europe, India, Japan, Korea, and the US. Either way, it is important that the US exert its influence to assure that regional organizations not become instruments for imposing an unstable status quo in the region, since such a policy could result in general long-term destabilization, beginning in Xinjiang.

In Lieu of a Bibliography

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