

# Xinjiang

## China's Wild West?

Xinjiang, China's westernmost province, is one of the most remote and inhospitable territories of the world. It was a land that both fascinated and appalled Western ethnologists and explorers, such as the renowned early 20th century British explorer Sir Aurel Stein, who described the region as a "desolate wilderness, bearing everywhere the impress of death." Today, Xinjiang is the focus of a variety of national security concerns for the Chinese state.

by **Stuart Notholt**

*The Uyghur mosque, maintains the more traditional appearance.*

The history of the region is a complex tangle of invasion and counter-invasion between competing powers. China first asserted control in around 121 BC when it established a garrison acting both as a bridge to the Silk Route and to establish diplomatic and trading relations with other powers, most notably Persia. But Chinese control remained tentative, limited by the hostility of terrain and its inhabitants, as well as depending on the relative strengths of the Chinese state and its neighbours. In 751 AD, Chinese power in the Central Asian region was decisively truncated following their defeat at the hands of the Arabs at the Battle of Talas, northeast of Tashkent. In 840, the Turkic-speaking Uyghur people, having been driven out their ancestral homes by the Mongols, established kingdoms in the territory, and gradually adopted Islam. In 1884, Turkestan (as it then was) was incorporated into the Manchu Empire, and it was during

this period that the first small scale military colonies were established in the territory, a precursor to the huge military-industrial investment in modern Xinjiang.

### Ethnic Unrest

Between 1884 and 1949, over forty armed uprisings took place against the Chinese governors. Only after the creation of the People's Republic of China in 1949 was the area brought definitively under Chinese control. In subsequent purges, up to 40,000 'pro-Soviet' Muslims were forced to flee the country. The Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region was created in 1955 in an apparent response to local sensitivities, but in 1957, in a further move aimed at reducing Russian/Soviet influence, the Chinese authorities banned the use of Cyrillic script for the Turkic languages of Xinjiang. A second mass exodus of Muslims to the Soviet Union took place in 1962. Ethnic riots broke out in the 1980s and in 1997, when fighting broke out in Yining after the police broke up a peaceful demonstration. In 1998, Chinese



President Jiang Zemin visited the region and called for a “people’s war” against “separatist elements.”

‘Xinjiang’, a term first used in 1768, means ‘New Frontier’ in Chinese and the name is significant as emphasizing both that Xinjiang is not a core Chinese territory and its status as a buffer state between China and its neighbours. It is not the name used by the indigenous Uyghur, Kazakh, Tajiki and other populations of the territory amongst whom ‘East Turkestan’ (implicitly linking the region culturally to fellow Turkic peoples to the west) or ‘Uyghurstan’ are preferred.

Holding Xinjiang meets a number of Chinese geopolitical imperatives. The cardinal aim, for Chinese strategists, is preserving the integrity of the eastern Chinese heartland from attack and invasion. To this end, generations of Chinese leaders have sought the expansion of Chinese controlled territories to the north and west of the Pacific maritime and eastern provinces, creating immense buffer areas. Confronted with foreign encroachment, Chinese strategy could simply be to draw the enemy in and exhaust him. Chinese losses might be considerable under such a doctrine, but the Chinese have plenty of people, and the improbability of successfully advancing an army across hostile territory the thousands of miles necessary to penetrate the Chinese heartland renders it an unattractive prospect for any

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enemy general capable of basic map-reading.

### What if...

Only in the north east does this strategy have its weaknesses. It is geographically closer to the heartland, and as an invasion route is also capable of being supported by maritime incursions from the Pacific which the relatively weak Chinese navy might be unable to prevent. Indeed, it was from this direction that the Chinese suffered Japanese depredations in the 1930s including the bodily carving out of sizable chunks of Chinese territory to form client states such as Manchukuo. The north east was also, for that matter, the route by which the Russians, in their turn, displaced the Japanese in the closing hours of the Second World War – and the Chinese speculate that, had the Enola Gay not brought the war to a premature end, the Soviets could well have established a client state in post-war Manchuria, much as they did, in Chinese eyes at least, in Outer Mongolia. (Until 1945, atlases routinely showed Outer Mongolia as a part of China, notwithstanding the creation of a pro-Moscow Socialist state – a Soviet Republic in

all but name – in 1922.)

The Chinese are also acutely aware of other historical ‘what ifs’. Had the putative Soviet republics established in 1930s East Turkestan endured, what is today the Chinese province of Xinjiang would presumably be the ‘sixth stan’ in the Central Asian constellation of post-Soviet states – bringing potential hostile influences, be they Russian, American, or jihadist, a thousand miles closer to Xian, Beijing and Shanghai.

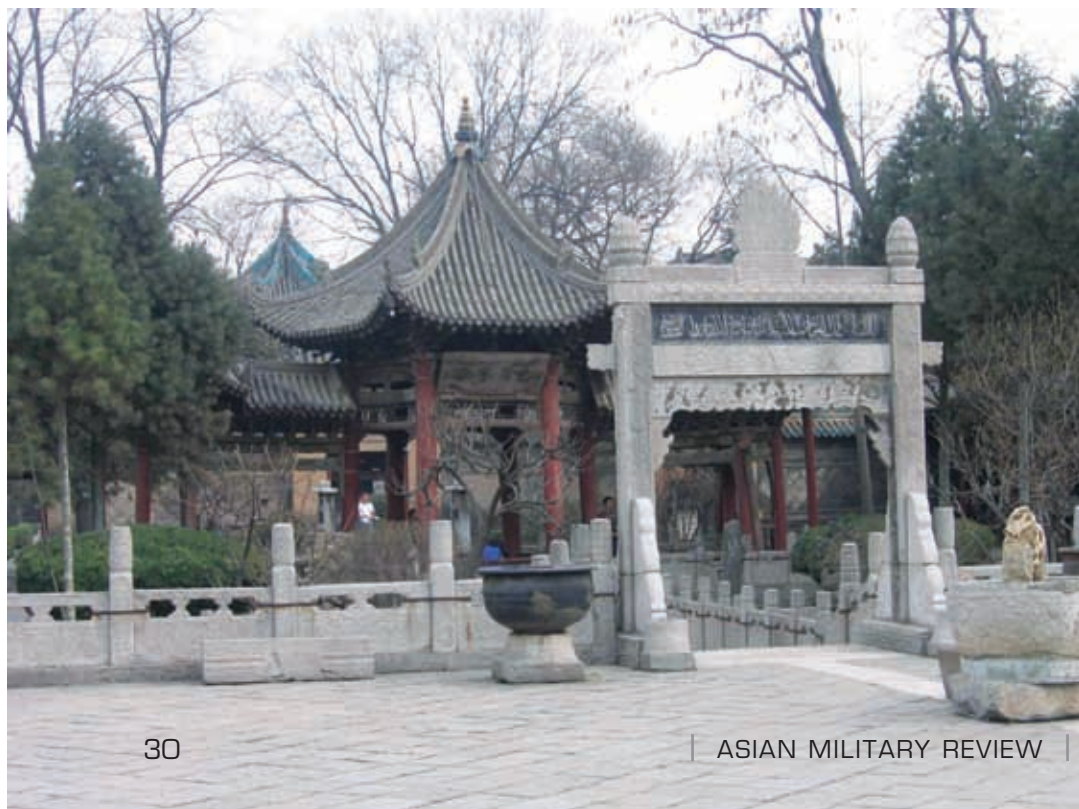
With its 3,500 miles of border with eight neighboring countries, Xinjiang is militarily important as the western arm of China’s territorial force multiplier, and this is therefore one reason Beijing needs to retain control. But there are other factors too. Xinjiang is economically crucial for fuelling the growth of the Chinese core regions. It accounts for a sixth of China’s territory, is an important oil producer – having the largest remaining reserves in China – and is home to China’s nuclear weapons test sites.

A broader psychological reason is bound up with the ethnic politics of the Chinese state, politics that are further tempered by what remains of its Communist official ideology. How the Chinese view themselves, and others, is crucial to understanding Chinese strategic imperatives in outposts of empire such as Tibet or Xinjiang.

Superficially, Chinese government policy towards ethnic minorities appears confused or contradictory. Over 80% of the population is of one ethnic origin – the Han Chinese – but over 50 minorities, some of them numbering several million individuals, are recognized in the Chinese constitution. The ethnic distinctiveness of these groups is publicly lauded and supported, especially in tourist brochures. ‘Folksy’ manifestations of ethnicity, such as wearing quaint dress or performing strange and colorful floorshows for the benefit of both domestic and international tourists, are actively encouraged. Uyghur dances were scheduled in the opening sequence of the Beijing Olympics, but are akin, as the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples’ Organization website acidly puts it, to “a Chinese equivalent of the Black and White Minstrel Show.” On the other hand, repression of ethnic and religious civil liberties is routine, systematic, and often brutal.

The Chinese view of race relations is closely informed by the traditional ‘Great Han’ school of thought that maintains that all Chinese are ultimately of one ethnicity and that differences in religion, cultural and lan-

***A Hui Mosque is visibly different from the traditional that most people are aware of. The Hui follow Chinese folkways in language; architecture etc and so fit the ‘Great Han’ ethnic model.***



guage are essentially incidental. The implication, and one that aligns nicely with Communist ideology, is that these differences need to be overcome or actively suppressed in the name of national unity. Recalling the disunity that facilitated every foreign invasion from the Mongols to the Europeans and Japanese, Chinese leaders have a paranoia of anything that might 'split' or diminish national solidarity.

## Religions

The Hui Muslims, who, their Islam aside, are barely distinguishable from their Han neighbours, can be incorporated fairly readily into this model. Others, such as the Uyghurs, Kazakhs and Tibetans are more problematic, diverging from the Chinese 'norm' not only in religion, but language, race, and, most crucially, national aspiration.

This difficulty arises, of course, because for the most part China's 'acquisition' of minorities has largely taken place through territorial annexation rather than migration or internal divergence. This means that the regional national groups are not part of the Chinese 'demos' (and have little desire to be), are geographically concentrated within defined territories, and have both actual and perceived historical and contemporary grievances against Beijing – all the ingredients, in other words, for fermenting the type of regional/secessionist ethnic conflicts we see elsewhere in the world.

Domestically, the Chinese security response to this perceived threat has been unobvious. Religious minorities suffered disproportionately – even when compared to the immense hardships borne by the population at large – during China's 'Cultural Revolution' and 'Great Leap Forward'. A toxic combination of Communist ideology, zealotry and outright racism – Madame Mao for one was notorious for despising minority peoples – led to widespread imprisonments, executions, and calculated examples of religious offensiveness, as when Red Guards converted Mosques into pigsties and forced imams to clean them.

The modern Chinese government has denounced such excesses as 'mistakes' and sought to demonstrate its religious tolerance – but the fact remains that all religious observance in China, whether Buddhist, Muslim or Christian, is tolerated only within very narrow parameters defined by the state. Since 1998, religious leaders (and civic groups) have been required to register with

the government, and a condition of registration is unambiguous support for the territorial integrity of the Chinese state and support for the Communist government. Even after registration, groups may be subject to 'rectification drives' if they are deemed to be straying from the government line. Observers report the routine arrest, torture and imprisonment of religious and other dissidents in Xinjiang, as elsewhere in the country, with Amnesty International claiming up to 100 executions of political prisoners in Xinjiang each year. Repression is not confined to Muslims: in

April 2008 the Xinjiang authorities detained dozens of 'House Church' Christians in a move likened to the clamp-down against Buddhist monks in Tibet a few weeks earlier. Forty-eight Christians were reportedly arrested for holding a Bible class and worship in a private house without official sanction. Most were released after agreeing to study the government's Handbook on Religious Policy and report back to the authorities to recite what they had learnt.

## The Closed Loop

Another important but curious facet of Beijing's ethnic/regional policy is that military and political leaders – operating as they do in a 'closed loop' information environment of their own creation – for the most part genuinely believe their own propaganda. The reluctance of regional minorities to accept the manifest civilizing and progres-

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**The Chinese maintain a heavy police presence**

sive benefits of Chinese Communist rule are held, at least in private, to be further evidence of the minorities' backwardness and general recalcitrance. In a slightly more benign interpretation, Beijing's policy towards regional minorities is the same dual strategy applied to the population as a whole – win them over with economic growth while crushing political opposition and, especially, separatism.

In practical terms, effective internal repression means that domestic Muslim dissent in Xinjiang is, at best, muted, and easily contained to such minor incidents as the March 2008 demonstrators in Hotan who, in an action said to have been inspired by the turmoil in Tibet, unfurled banners calling for the creation of an independent state in Xianjiang. (Or, as the official police statement put it "a small group trying to trick the masses into an uprising".) Even the Chinese state – notorious for its heavy-handedness and tendency to over-react (as demonstrated in Tibet) – can safely afford to ignore such annoyances, at least for the present. Indeed, one difficulty for Beijing has long been in persuading external observers that Muslim dissidence in Xinjiang poses any kind of genuine security threat. In this context, the 9/11 Islamist attacks on the United States came as a public relations godsend to the authorities.



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*Xinjiang is subject to intense 'Sinoization' as seen in the bannerage here.*

Since 9/11 China has launched a concerted, and largely successful, public relations campaign aimed at aligning her fears over Xinjiang with the broader 'war on terror.' Just a year after 9/11, Beijing achieved a significant diplomatic coup when it persuaded Washington to place the so-called 'East Turkistan Islamic Movement' – a group which many in the intelligence community doubt even exists – on its list of international terrorist organizations.

### Planned Terror

In March 2008, Wang Lequan, the Communist Party chief in Xinjiang, revealed that the security forces had 'smashed' a major East Turkistan Islamic Movement terrorist cell. The supporters of the "three evil forces" of terrorism, sabotage and separatism (terms largely interchangeable in the Chinese official lexicon) had, Wang said, been plotting suicide bombings in the Xinjiang capital, Urumqi, in Shanghai, and specifically against the Beijing Olympics. The authorities claimed to have confiscated detonators, poisons, explosives, and Islamic propaganda calling for a jihad against China. In what may have been a separate incident, two people were also reported as having been killed in a gun battle with police in Urumqi.

Several among the 45 suspects arrested subsequently confessed to planning attacks against military, government and civilian targets, and to receiving training abroad.

In the same month, the state Xinghua media reported that air marshals had foiled an attempt to destroy a China Southern Airlines flight to Beijing from Urumqi. A 19-year old woman, presumably a would-be suicide bomber, was arrested with a can of

gasoline which she had allegedly intended detonating on board. Congratulating the security forces on their prompt action against the terrorists, Nur Bekri, Chairman of the Xinjiang regional government, accused Uyghur Muslim separatists of trying to "create an air disaster."

The coincidental timing of the airline plot and the release of additional details from the January raid raised some suspicions as to their veracity. Sporadic incidents have continued to be reported throughout 2008. In July, police shot dead five Uyghur militants caught with ten others in a Urumqi apartment. The Muslims were purportedly wielding knives, and shouting 'sacrifice for Allah!', when they were cornered.

In general, however, the fact that the dissidents are Muslims means that they have been given short shrift by the United States, which has, as in other parts of the world, been woefully slow to recognize varying shades of green within the very broad Islamic spectrum. However, some commentators have speculated that, given China's rising thirst for oil, diplomatic pressure might be put on Beijing by Muslim oil producing states. This

*"desolate wilderness, bearing everywhere the impress of death."*



seems optimistic. As long as Beijing is able to maintain the perception of a Islamist threat, and while the main Middle Eastern suppliers remain, at least nominally, anti-Islamist allies of the United States, significant Arab criticism of Beijing's activities in an obscure corner of its own territory is improbable, even if the victims are fellow Muslims. For the Gulf States, as for Washington and Moscow, turning a blind eye to any inconsistencies in China's claims of Islamic militancy in Xinjiang currently remains expedient. Similarly, Sudan, China's key oil supplying partner in Africa, is unlikely, given its own treatment of minorities, to raise many qualms over China's internal policies. Khartoum is in any case dependent on Chinese diplomatic support, through Beijing's permanent membership of the UN Security Council, for vetoing international criticism over Darfur and South Sudan. China's other main oil supplier, Iran, is unlikely to rock the boat either. It is already an informal ally of Beijing and, moreover, most of the Uyghurs are Sunni Muslims rather than adherents to the Shia orthodoxy practiced in Tehran.

### The Security Agenda

As for Xinjiang's immediate neighbours in Central Asia, they have required very little persuasion concerning the security advantages of agreeing with Beijing that Islamic extremists pose a real and present regional danger. The spectre of Islamist insurgency is, after all, an argument they have deployed themselves in order to maintain support in Washington for otherwise unsavoury regimes.

In fairness, the Central Asian states have seen significant post-independence violence, in which jihadists have played either a direct or an opportunistic role. In Tajikistan, weak civil institutions, religious, regional and tribal animosities, and factional conflicts within the ruling elite, all contributed to a rapid descent into full-scale civil war in the early 1990s. With the aid of Russian and Uzbeki

troops, the Tajiki government gained the upper hand and in December 1992 a new government was formed under Emomali Rahmonov, who was heavily dependent on militia support from his home Kulyab region. These militias launched an at times ferocious attack on opposition factions, including militants from the Islamic Renaissance Party. Defeated in Tajikistan, rebel elements later became aligned with the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, while others re-armed with the aid of Islamist militants from groups such as Jamait-I-Islami. In fighting in 1996 (which spread as far as the capital) Afghan militants were encountered amongst the combatants. In Uzbekistan troops opened fire in May 2005 on Islamist demonstrators in the town of Andijan, killing around 1,000. In a particularly severe clampdown on Muslim activity, since partially rescinded, local officials restricted public prayers, insisted that all restaurants sell alcohol, and banned mosques from broadcasting their traditional calls to prayer.

It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that regional forums such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (linking China with the Central Asian republics and Russia) have made an easy transition from economic cooperation into the security arena, seeing the establishment, in Bishkek, of an 'anti-terrorist centre' with the aim of preventing cross-border terrorism. Central Asia benefits from Chinese diplomatic (and, possibly, practical) support for their own internal clampdowns, while Beijing benefits from the effective extinction of Uyghur dissent in bordering states. Currently, the chances of any Uyghur insurgents maintaining a rear supply base in Central Asia are remote. As a result the Chinese have succeeded in moving visible Uyghur dissent well away from the region and the prying eyes of any Western camera crews, particularly in Olympic year. The notorious factionalism of the various Uyghur and other ethnic groups has also helped China, although ironically a certain solidarity has been achieved through the focus of the Beijing games. Several hundred Uyghur protesters came together, for example, for a March 2008 demonstration in Istanbul, in a rare display of unity,

The Russians, too - with an eye on Chechnya - have embraced the Chinese security agenda, although neither Moscow and Beijing are exactly enthusiastic about one of the main post-9/11 consequences for the region, the stationing in the Central



**The PLA maintain a highly visible presence as well.**

Asian republics of American troops and intelligence assets in what is, to both China and Russia, their own backyard.

### The PLA Factor

A further reason the Chinese military are determined to keep a hold on Xinjiang is more venal. As in other parts of the Chinese periphery, as indeed for the Chinese 'mainland', there are significant links between the Peoples' Liberation Army and parastatal regional bodies. In the north west, the Xinjiang Production & Construction Corps fuses Chinese government and military authority, as well as representing a massive commercial investment. Even viewed purely as a commercial venture, the figures for the Production & Construction Corps are extraordinary. A business network with a turnover of \$6.2 billion in 2007, the Corps produces half of Xinjiang's cotton output, is a leading stakeholder in regional construction and transportation, publishes 17 newspapers, runs its own TV and radio stations, and operates 1,400 commercial enterprises, including 13 publicly traded companies. Roughly 2.3 million Han now live in semi-colonial settlements established by the Corps.

As direct outgrowth of the PLA - and one in which many Army officers doubtless have

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a personal vested interest - the scale and profitability of the Corps' commercial activities make any military retrenchment all the more unlikely. Furthermore, the Corps has a direct security role. As an isolated and dependent client population in a potentially hostile land, the Corps' Han settlers have no less an interest than the Army in defending Beijing's stakeholding in Xinjiang. Corps settlers act as a militia in times of crisis, alongside Army and security forces, and as Zhao Guangyong, the Corps Vice Secretary General, puts it, the Corps plays a "very important role in promoting national unity ... The battle against ethnic separatism and invasion has never stopped."

Zhao's use of the word 'invasion' is telling. The Chinese earnestly believe that if they dropped their guard the outlying regions would be flooded by immigrants - Indians in the case of Tibet and, presumably, jihadist Muslims in the case of Xinjiang. At one level, the Chinese view of Xinjiang has a disarmingly simple logic. Modern Xinjiang has a Muslim population. Therefore it must have been invaded by Muslims at some stage in its history. If it is capable of being so occupied once, it is conceivable that history could repeat itself, placing a hostile community astride a highway straight into the heart of China: Xinjiang may be 2,000 miles from Beijing, but it is only 300 miles from potential troublespots like Kabul or Islamabad. The defense of the Chinese capital thus begins at the 'New Frontier'. Meanwhile, depending on its immediate commercial and political needs, the Chinese government alternatively presents Xinjiang as a stable area for investment, or as a hotbed of Islamic fundamentalism. ■