

China's "Uyghur Problem" and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization

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Dru C. Gladney

In early 2006, the U.S. released to Albania five Chinese citizens, all of them Uyghur Muslim detainees, formerly held in the Guantánamo detention center in Cuba, whom they had determined to be “non-combatants” among at least 22 other Uyghurs from China’s Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. Prior to this release, Chinese citizens were the fourth largest group held in detention (after Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and Afghanistan). The holding of Chinese citizens who are Muslim Uyghurs is directly related to Sino-U.S. cooperation on the war on terrorism, and it will be argued in this testimony, entirely responsible for the shifting role of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in the late 1990s from a trade and border resolution organization to a security coordination organization. In the summer of 2002, both the United States and the United Nations supported China’s claim that an organization known as the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) should be recognized as an international terrorist organization. China, we know, makes little distinction between separatists, terrorists, and civil rights activists – whether they are Uyghurs, Tibetans, Taiwanese, or Falun Gong members. Are the restive Uyghurs of Xinjiang terrorists, separatists, or freedom fighters? How does fundamentalist or radical Islam play into the organizations active inside and outside the region (in Central Asia, Europe, and the U.S.)? What role does the Shanghai Cooperation Organization play in resolving China’s “Uyghur problem” and other wider unrest in Central Asia? What is the role of the SCO in counter-terrorism, how should the U.S. view the SCO in the region, and what should its policy be toward the organization?

Xinjiang and China's "Uyghur Problem"

In 2004, a collaboration of mainly U.S. scholars published a collection of academic articles that has been banned in China (in English and Chinese translations) for addressing a taboo subject, that of China's "Xinjiang problem" (see Frederisk S. Starr, Editor, *Xinjiang: China's Muslim Frontier*, M.E. Sharpe, 2004). This testimony will further refine that analysis and examine the role of the SCO in addressing anti-terrorism, what for China might be called it's "Uyghur problem."

After denying the problem for decades and stressing instead China's "national unity," official reports and the state-run media began in early 2001 to detail terrorist activities in the province officially known as the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. Prior to the release of this document by the State Council, and the subsequent media reports, the term "Eastern Turkestan" was not allowed to be used in the official media, and anyone found using the term or referring to Xinjiang as Eastern Turkestan could be arrested, even though this is the term most often used outside China to refer to the region by Uyghurs and other Turkic-speaking people. A brief look at a map of the region (see Figure 1) and its bordering states will immediately reveal the strategic location of the region and the clear source of its problems. Since the dissolution of the former USSR in 1991, Xinjiang became the only province in China bordered by 8 countries, 5 of them mostly Muslim.

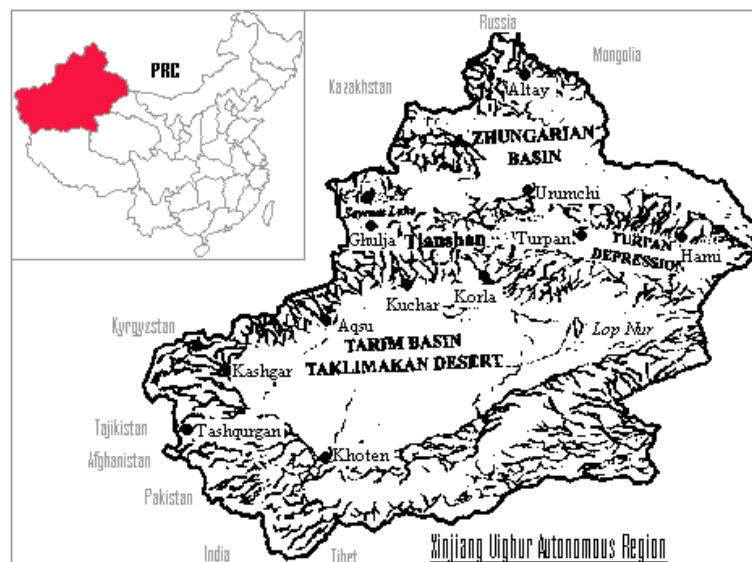


Figure 1: Countries Bordering Xinjiang

In the northwestern Uyghur Autonomous Region of Xinjiang, China's State Council and the official media have detailed an on-going series of incidents of terrorism and separatism since the large riot in the Xinjiang town of Yining of February 1997, with multiple crackdowns and arrests that have rounded up thousands of terrorist suspects, large weapons caches, and printed documents allegedly outlining future public acts of violence. Amnesty International has claimed that these round-ups have led to hurried public trials and immediate, summary executions of possibly thousands of locals. One estimate suggested that in a country known for its frequent executions, Xinjiang had the highest number, averaging 1.8 per week, most of them Uyghur.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization and Xinjiang

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) can be seen to have its origins in China's "Xinjiang problem" in its inception as the "Shanghai 5" in 1996, the same year China launched its "Strike Hard" campaign against "splittests" in Xinjiang. International campaigns for Uyghur rights and possible independence have become increasingly vocal and well organized, especially on the internet. International organizations are increasingly including Uyghur indigenous voices from the expatriate Uyghur community. Notably, the 1995 elected chair of the Unrepresented Nations and People's Organization (UNPO) based in the Hague is a Uyghur, Erkin Alptekin, son of the separatist leader, Isa Yusuf Alptekin, who is buried in Istanbul where there is a park dedicated to his memory. The elected leader of the Washington based, Uyghur American Association, is now Ms. Rebiya Kadeer, who until last year languished in a Chinese prison but was released due to U.S. and other human rights organizations pressure. Supporting primarily an audience of mostly expatriate Uyghurs, there are nearly 50 international organizations and web sites working for the independence of "Eastern Turkestan," and based in Amsterdam, Munich, Istanbul, Melbourne, Washington, DC and New York. Following 11 September 2001, the vast majority of these organizations disclaimed any support for violence or terrorism, pressing for a peaceful resolution of on-going conflicts in the region. Nevertheless, the growing influence of "cyber-separatism" is of increasing concern to Chinese authorities seeking to convince the world that the Uyghurs do pose a real domestic and international terrorist threat.

After examining the available evidence regarding incidents in the region related to Uyghur separatism and violence, the Starr volume concluded:

A further error that easily arises from the correct recognition of Xinjiang's importance to Beijing concerns the sources of the separatist and Islamist currents it seeks to extirpate. Many analysts, including senior officials in Beijing, assume that these tendencies have arisen either from cultural or ethnic diehards among the local Uyghurs who pine for a past that never was, or from the efforts of subversive forces from abroad, whether from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, or from neighboring states in Central Asia. Such an assumption excludes from consideration what is arguably the main driver, namely, Chinese policies themselves. Dru Gladney's review of Chinese policies of development and control in Chapter III advances precisely this thesis, as does Linda Benson's analysis of educational policy in Chapter VI, and Stan Toops' discussion of ecology in Chapter IX (Starr 2004: 6).

In a separate independent review of the violence in the region that has tapered off considerably since the late 1990s when it reached its apex, the Oxford Analytical concluded:

Distinguishing between genuine counter-terrorism and repression of minority rights is difficult and the Uighur case points to a lack of international guidelines for doing so. In any case, *Chinese policies, not* foreign-sponsored terrorism, are the cause of Uighur unrest. China's development and control policy in Xinjiang is unlikely to stabilize the region as long as development benefits remain so unevenly distributed (Oxford Analytica 20 December 2002: 2).

The SCO and Counter-Terrorism

Little has changed in the region with respect to the Uyghur since these earlier studies. The main transformations have been economic and political in the wider Central Asian region, and the rising importance of the SCO is related to these changes. The transformation of the SCO from its origins as a trade and border resolution organization into its current organization directly concerned with security cooperation can be seen in the outline below. While China faced 5 new countries on its borders in the early 1990s, by mid-2000, it had resolved all of its border agreements and delineation with every country on its western border except for India. The Indian border dispute dates from the Sino-India war in 1965, and does not appear to be resolvable in the near future. The following Figure 2 illustrating the shifting role of the SCO in the region.

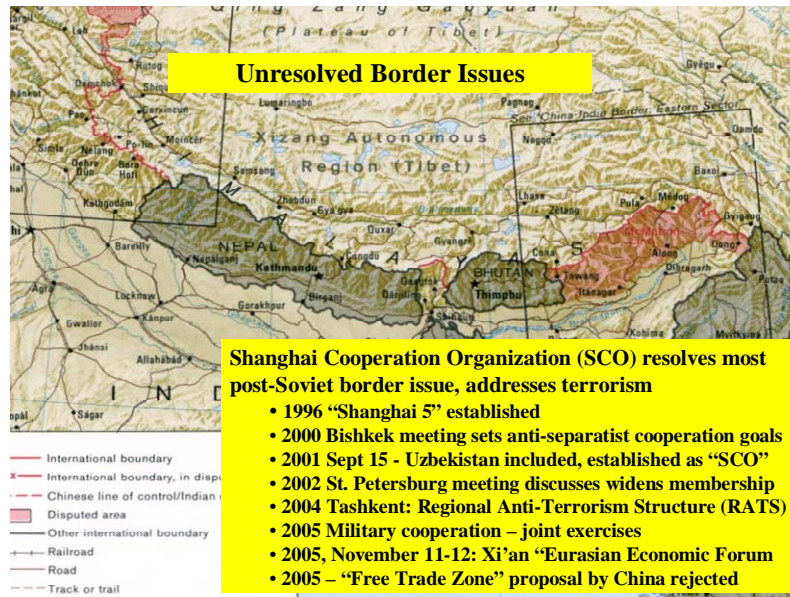


Figure 2: Overview of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization

The real question is, what changes in the region have the events of September 11th wrought in terms of local response to Chinese rule? It is clear that the so-called separatist activities are not new and that China is taking advantage of the international war on terrorism to attempt to eradicate a domestic problem. The Istanbul-based groups have existed since the 1950s, the Central Asian Uyghurs under Soviet rule received tremendous support in their anti-China rhetoric regarding policies in Xinjiang, and the Uyghurs have been increasingly vocal since the independence of the Central Asian Republics in 1991 led many to hope for an independent Uyghuristan would have followed on the heels of the other newly independent -stans. Separatist actions have taken place on a small but regular basis since the expansion of market and trade policies in China, and with the opening of six overland gateways to Xinjiang in addition to the trans-Eurasian railway, and China’s Western development campaign, there seems to be no chance of closing up shop. The Chinese government itself in a landmark 1999 white paper, admitted serious economic shortfalls in the region despite 50 years of state investment in the development of the region: “The Chinese government is well aware of the fact that...central and western China where most minority people live, lags far behind the eastern coastal areas in development.”

Uyghur Yearnings and the SCO

History has not been kind to the Uyghur over the last two millennia. Like the Kurds and Chechens, their legacies of earlier empire and kingdom never produced viable nations or states. After initially welcoming the PRC as “liberators” in the 1950s, the region gradually lost any real autonomy as Beijing tightened its control. It was clear that the post-Cultural Revolution period in the region was welcomed by most Xinjiang residents due to the harsh treatment of minorities and religious practitioners between 1966 and 1976. Indeed, many Muslims point to the 20 years of discrimination against religious practice since the initiation of the Religious System Reform Campaign in 1958, which led throughout the country to the further consolidation and restriction of religious practice. It was during this period that most of the mosques in the region were built or reopened, Islamic training of young Imams permitted, and pilgrimages to Mecca resumed. Indeed, there are many residents of Xinjiang, Uyghurs included, who continue to strongly support the Deng Xiaoping reforms as they have been continued under Jiang Zemin and now Hu Jintao. As loyal citizens, they see the dramatic progress made since the end of the Cultural Revolution and generally share in the government’s vision of a modernized, developed Xinjiang region. Working not only in the state sector as cadres, teachers, production corps farmers, and factory workers, but also in the growing private sector in private and semi-private small businesses, these supporters of the state’s development program are generally quite unwilling to listen to any criticism of state policies, especially from outsiders or disgruntled minorities. Given the lack of public polling or uncensored media in the region, it is difficult to ascertain if these supporters are a silent majority or a tiny minority, speaking out in support of state policies because it serves their interest. Nevertheless, the Deng reform era in general can be characterized as a period of heightened loyalty to the state and new-found optimism after the previous 20 years of internal chaos and repression, similar in many respects to the period of relative loyalty when Xinjiang was first brought into the PRC and established as an Autonomous Region.

However, in the late 1980s and mid-1990s, this period of “loyalty” gave way to increasing expressions of dissent, not only among Uyghur but also among a wide cross-section of local residents that felt the northwest was not keeping pace with the rapid development of the rest of the country. Whether there were smaller, unreported expressions of voice in the past, the mid-1990s witnessed a number of public expressions of contrary views and dissatisfaction with state policies in the region.

In the late 1990s, the government responded with a host of arrests and new policy announcements. In Spring 1998, the National Peoples Congress passed a New Criminal Law that redefined “counter-revolutionary” crimes to be “crimes against the state,” liable to severe prison terms and even execution. Included in “crimes against the state” were any actions considered to involve “ethnic discrimination” or “stirring up anti-ethnic sentiment.” Despite on-going tensions and frequent reports of isolated terrorist acts, there has been no evidence that any of these actions have been aimed at disrupting the economic development of the region. Most confirmed incidents have been directed against Han Chinese security forces, recent Han Chinese émigrés to the region, and even Uyghur Muslims perceived to be too closely collaborating with the Chinese Government. Two exceptions include a reported derailment of a Xinjiang train due to a bombing on February 12, 1997 and an attack on a power station in Hejing on July 10, 1999. These incidents, and the Beijing and Urumqi bus bombings of 1997, represent the only examples of well-organized terrorist activities directed against civilians. If one were to examine all incidents of civil unrest, assassinations, and bombings in China since 1990, very few would be actually traceable to Uyghur separatist groups or events in Xinjiang. One unpublished report revealed that of 140 publicly reported “terrorist” incidents in China between 1990-2000, only 25 can be connected to political causes or separatism, and only 17 events can be connected to Xinjiang or Uyghur separatists. The vast majority of incidents are best described as isolated cases of worker discontent and civil unrest, in a country that reported nearly 84,000 incidents of civil unrest in 2005 alone.

Since the high-point of the late 1990s expressions of voice and ethnic violence, there has been a gradual decline in the scale and number of incidents. Documented separatist and violent incidents in Xinjiang have dropped off dramatically since the late 1990s. China's Uyghur separatists are small in number, poorly equipped, loosely linked, and vastly out-gunned by the People's Liberation Army and People's Police. Though many of them find solace and some support in radical Islam, most are concerned more with issues of sovereignty, land rights, and fair treatment by the government in a land they regard as an occupied region. Indeed, some of the most active Uyghur “separatists” have been urban-based secularists and nationalists, not radical Islamicists.

Nevertheless, the government has consistently rounded up any Uyghur suspected of being “too” religious, especially those identified as Sufis or the so-called Wahabbis (a euphemism in the region for

strict Muslim, not an organized Islamic school). These periodic roundups, detentions, and public condemnations of terrorism and separatism have not erased the problem, but have forced it underground, or at least out of the public's eye, and increased the possibility of alienating Uyghur Muslims even further from mainstream Chinese society. It is also important to note, that while the Uyghur Muslims are less than half of China's 21 million Muslims, as reported in the year 2000 census, the majority of China's other Muslims, especially the Chinese-speaking Hui Muslims, are completely unsympathetic to Uyghur calls for independence. This is especially true of the Kazakh, Kyrgyz, and Tajik populations, all of whom live almost entirely in Xinjiang. Many fear an independent "Eastern Turkestan" would be for the Uyghurs primarily and have no place for them, just we see taking place in Central Asia.

The shift of the SCO from mainly a trade and border resolution in the late 1990s – something that it accomplished quite effectively – into an anti-terrorist security cooperation organization after 2001, has met with mixed success. While the incidents of violence in Xinjiang have decreased precipitously, most visitors to the region report that anger and resentment continues to simmer, even as the government continues to report frequent arrests. In Central Asia, groups like the *hizbut-tahrir*, which call for an independent Islamic Caliphate, continue to proliferate and grow in popularity despite concerted efforts by each government to stamp them out. The SCO has been responsible for greater security cooperation between China and its neighbor states, yet it is not clear if this cooperation has produced more than the occasional repatriation of suspected separatists (by some accounts, China has had over 100 Uyghurs repatriated from Central Asia back to Xinjiang, including the celebrated case from this March of Huseyn Celil a Canadian citizen who was detained in Tashkent, and then forced to return from Uzbekistan back to China against his will). While this paper is not concerned with the economic dimensions of the SCO, it is clear that economic, political, and military cooperation has been almost completely bilateral. Thus, even in the area of anti-terrorism cooperation, most actions have been bilateral in nature, rather than any widespread coordinated effort at anti-terrorism cooperation through military actions, intelligence pooling, or resolution of challenges. Growing political instability and protests, most notably in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, has signaled the increasing importance of the SCO in security enforcement, rather than trade or economic exchange.

Clearly, China needs a new approach to resolve tensions in Xinjiang; purely Marxist and Keynesian economic development strategies are not enough. The “Develop the West” campaign launched in the late 1990s, has slowed considerably since September 11, 2001, and international tourism has slowed dramatically in the region. The state’s economic investment plan has proven not to be a panacea for resolving on-going ethnic and problems in the region, that are based on more than just poverty. Although organized resistance and violent actions have declined precipitously since their highpoint in the late 1990s, it is clear that tensions remain and many problems are unresolved. While some travelers to the region report almost no obvious incidents of protest or dissent, those who stray from the group, speak local languages, or have long-term friendships or relatives in the region report very different experiences. It is clear that the “real” public opinion lies somewhere in the middle, and until greater access to the region or media liberalization takes place, tensions will continue to simmer below the surface. In a July-August 2002 Foreign Affairs article, Chien-Peng Chung of the Singaporean Institute of Defense and Strategic Studies, called for a immediate political changes in the region to avoid further deterioration in ethnic relations. Few listened to this call or other criticisms of Beijing’s policies in the region.

China is a sovereign state, and like all modern nations in the era of globalization faces tremendous challenges from migration, economic imbalance, ethnic unrest, and cyber-separatism. The future of this vastly important region, which Owen Lattimore once called the “pivot of Asia,” depends upon it. The sources of discontent for Uyghur opposition groups, as Oxford Analytica outlines, remain the same: massive unrestricted Han migration to the region, dramatically increasing gap between the wealthy and mainly Uyghur poor, decreasing educational opportunities for poorer residents related to the market economy, higher mortality rates among Uyghur, unresolved health problems due to nuclear testing in the region, and increased restriction on religious and cultural practices.

The SCO: An Early Demise?

The SCO remains as a forum for mainly bilateral cooperation between China and its member states. The fact that it has not expanded beyond its 2001 inclusion of Uzbekistan to include other neighboring countries, such as Mongolia, Pakistan, India, and Nepal, suggest that the organization will remain focused on Central Asia and serve primarily in bilateral trade, economic, and security cooperation.

Its early success as a border delineation organization, which was also bilateral in process and nature, has not been followed by strengthened multi-lateral cooperation or resolution of on-going security, economic, and trade challenges facing its member states. Though it may be too early to pronounce its pre-adolescent demise, after 6 years the SCO can report very few major regional initiatives. Ongoing disputes affecting the entire region, such as energy, water, trade, terrorism, environmental degradation, migration, smuggling, and the rapidly expanding drug trade, have not significantly diminished nor has the SCO played any measurable multi-lateral role in addressing the issues. Despite great fanfare, the SCO has produced little evidence of growing into a fully-fledged regional cooperation organization.

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