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Uighurs and China's Xinjiang Region

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Introduction

The Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR), a territory in western China, accounts for one-sixth of China's land and is home to about 20 million people from thirteen major ethnic groups. The largest of these groups is the Uighurs [PRON: WEE-gurs], a predominantly Muslim community with ties to Central Asia. Some Uighurs call China's presence in Xinjiang a form of imperialism, and they stepped up calls for independence -- sometimes violently -- in the 1990s through separatist groups like the [East Turkestan Islamic Movement](#) (ETIM). The Chinese government has reacted by promoting the migration of China's ethnic majority, the Han, to Xinjiang. Beijing has also strengthened economic ties with the area and tried to cut off potential sources of separatist support from neighboring states that are linguistically and ethnically linked with the Uighurs.

Intermittent Independence

Since the collapse of the Qing Dynasty in 1912, Xinjiang has enjoyed varying degrees of autonomy. Turkic rebels in Xinjiang declared independence in October 1933 and created the Islamic Republic of East Turkestan (also known as the Republic of Uighuristan or the First East Turkistan Republic). The following year, the Republic of China reabsorbed the region. In 1944, factions within Xinjiang again declared independence, this time under the auspices of the Soviet Union, and created the Second East Turkistan Republic. But in 1949, the Chinese Communist Party took over the territory and declared it a Chinese province. In October 1955, Xinjiang became classified as an "autonomous region" of the People's Republic of China.

Some Uighurs, nostalgic for Xinjiang's intermittent periods of independence, call for the recreation of a Uighur state. "The Central Asian Uighurs know a great deal about the two East Turkestan periods of sovereign rule, and they reflect on that quite frequently," says [Dru C. Gladney](#), president of the [Pacific Basin Institute](#) at Pomona College. Many of these Uighurs say China colonized the area in 1949. But in its first white paper on Xinjiang, the Chinese government said Xinjiang had been an "[inseparable part](#) of the unitary multi-ethnic Chinese nation" since the Western Han Dynasty, which ruled from 206 BC to 24 AD.

Economic Development

Xinjiang's wealth hinges on its vast mineral and oil deposits. In the early 1990s, Beijing decided to spur Xinjiang's growth by giving it special economic zones, subsidizing local cotton farmers, and overhauling its tax system. In August 1991, the Xinjiang government launched the [Tarim Basin Project \(World Bank\)](#) to increase agricultural output. During this period, Beijing invested in the region's infrastructure, building massive projects like the Tarim Desert Highway and a rail link to western Xinjiang. In an article for *The China Quarterly*, Nicholas Bequelin of [Human Rights Watch](#) says these projects were designed to literally "bind Xinjiang more closely to the rest of the PRC."

Since 1954, China has also used the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (XPCC) to build agricultural settlements in China's western periphery. Locally known as the *Bingtuan*, the XPCC is charged with [cultivating and guarding](#) the Chinese frontier. To achieve this mission, the corps has its own security organs, including an armed police force and militia. Over the past fifty years, the XPCC has attracted a steady stream of migrant workers to Xinjiang.

Beijing continues to develop Xinjiang in campaigns called "Open up the West" and "Go West." These economic programs have been relatively successful: Xinjiang has become one of the wealthiest parts of China. "If you look at the general per capita income of Xinjiang as a region, it's higher than all of China's except for the southeast coast," says Gladney. International development bodies like the [Asian Development Bank](#) say that despite Xinjiang's growth, there are [high levels of inequality \(PDF\)](#) in the area. But the Chinese government has launched a series of programs to alleviate poverty in Xinjiang, and in March 2008, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao emphasized [harmonious development](#) of the region in a government report.

Han Migration

Growing job opportunities in Xinjiang have lured a steady stream of [migrant workers](#) to the region, many of whom are ethnically Han. The Chinese government does not count the number of workers that travel to Xinjiang, but experts say the local Han population has risen from approximately 5 percent in the 1940s to approximately 40 percent today. These migrants work in a variety of industries, both low tech and high tech, and have transformed Xinjiang's landscape. In June 2008, the BBC produced a photo report called *Life in Urumqi*, which said Xinjiang's capital had recently witnessed "the [arrival of shopping centres](#), tower blocks, department stores and highways."

In its 2007 annual report to the U.S. Congress, the [Congressional-Executive Commission on China](#) said the Chinese government "provides incentives for migration to the region from elsewhere in China, in the name of recruiting talent and [promoting stability](#)" (PDF). Since imperial times, the Chinese government has tried to settle Han on the outskirts of China to integrate the Chinese periphery. But the Communist Party says its policies in Xinjiang are designed to promote economic development, not demographic change. Xinjiang's influx of migrants has fueled Uighur discontent as Han and Uighurs compete over limited jobs and natural resources.

Ethnic Tension

The Chinese government says Xinjiang is home to [thirteen major ethnic groups](#). The largest of these groups is the Uighurs, who comprise 45 percent of Xinjiang's population, according to a 2003 census. Like many of these groups, the Uighurs are predominantly Muslim and have cultural ties to Central Asia.

As Han migrants pour into Xinjiang, many Uighurs resent the strain they place on limited resources like land and water. "Uighurs feel like this is their homeland, that these resources should be more devoted to them," says

Gladney. In 2006, [Human Rights in China](#) said population growth in Xinjiang had transformed the local environment, leading to "[reduced human access to clean water \(PDF\)](#) and fertile soil for drinking, irrigation and agriculture."

Ethnic tension is fanned by economic disparity: the Han tend to be wealthier than the Uighurs in Xinjiang. Some experts say the wage gap is the result of discriminatory hiring practices. The Congressional-Executive Commission on China reports that in 2006, the XPCC reserved approximately 800 of 840 civil servant job openings for Han. Local officials say they would like to hire Uighurs, but have trouble finding qualified candidates. "One common problem of the western region is that the education and [cultural level of the people here is quite low](#)," said Wang Lequan, Xinjiang's Communist Party secretary, in an interview with the BBC. Gladney says Han applicants tend to have better professional networks because they are more often "influential, children of elite Party members and government leaders."

According to Bequelin, Uighurs are also upset by what they consider Chinese attempts to "refashion their cultural and religious identity." In an op-ed for the *Washington Post*, Rebiyah Kadeer, a prominent exiled Uighur, condemns China for its "[fierce repression of religious expression](#)," and "its intolerance for any expression of discontent." Beijing officials respond to these accusations by saying they respect China's ethnic minorities, and have [improved the quality of life](#) for Uighurs by raising economic, public health, and education levels in Xinjiang.

Terrorism and Counterterrorism

During the 1990s, separatist groups in Xinjiang began frequent attacks against the Chinese government. The most famous of these groups was the [East Turkestan Islamic Movement](#) (ETIM). China, the United States, and the UN Security Council have all labeled ETIM a terrorist organization, and Chinese officials have said the group has ties to al-Qaeda. Concern about Uighur terrorism flared in July 2008 -- two weeks before the Beijing Olympics -- when a group calling itself the Turkistan Islamic Party took [credit for a series of terrorist attacks \(Xinhua\)](#), including two bus explosions in Yunnan province.

The Chinese government has taken steps to combat both separatists and terrorists in its western province. According to the U.S. State Department, Chinese authorities [raided an alleged ETIM camp](#) in January 2007, killing eighteen and arresting seventeen. China also monitors [religious activity](#) in the region to keep religious leaders from spreading separatist views. Since September 11, 2001, China has raised international awareness of Uighur-related terrorism and linked its actions to the Bush administration's so-called war on terror.

But many experts say China is exaggerating the danger posed by Uighur terrorists. China has accused the Uighurs of plotting thousands of attacks, but **Andrew J. Nathan, chair of the political science department at Columbia University**, says, "You have to be very suspicious of those numbers." Gladney notes that many of the "terrorist incidents" that China attributes to ETIM are actually "spontaneous and rather disorganized" forms of civil unrest. Most experts say ETIM has no effective ties to al-Qaeda, and Bequelin goes so far as to say, "ETIM is probably defunct by now, as far as we know." In a 2008 report, [Amnesty International](#) accused Chinese officials of using the war on terror to justify "[harsh repression](#) of ethnic Uighurs." But in *Xinhua*, a state-run newspaper, Chinese rights organizations refuted the Amnesty report, saying it was designed to [slander China under the pretense of human rights](#).

Experts disagree on the efficacy of China's counterterrorism measures. Some, including Bequelin, say China's anti-separatist campaign actually provokes more resentment, which can lead to more terrorism. But other Western

outlets say China's counterterrorism measures have been relatively successful. A review of U.S. State Department documents shows a decrease in Uighur-related terrorism since the end of the 1990s.

Tough Neighborhood

Xinjiang shares a border with Mongolia, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, and the [Tibet Autonomous Region](#). Because of the Uighurs' cultural ties to its neighbors, China has been concerned that Central Asian states may back a separatist movement in Xinjiang. According to Nathan, these fears are fueled by the fact that the Soviet Union successfully backed a Uighur separatist movement in the 1940s. To keep Central Asian states from fomenting trouble in Xinjiang, China has cultivated close diplomatic ties with its neighbors, most notably through the [Shanghai Cooperation Organization](#). According to Bequelin, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization was created "to ensure the support of Central Asian states," and to "prevent any emergence of linkages between Uighur communities in these countries and Xinjiang."

Many experts believe China's diplomatic efforts have been successful. [Adam Segal](#), senior fellow for China studies at the Council on Foreign Relations, says China's neighbors "are now fighting their own Muslim fundamentalist groups," which makes them more sympathetic to China's plight. According to the U.S. State Department, Uzbekistan extradited a Canadian citizen of Uighur ethnicity to China in August 2006, where he was convicted for alleged involvement in ETIM activities. Nathan says cases like these are evidence that China's neighbors are cooperating with China's anti-secessionist policies. In contrast, the United States refused to hand over five Uighurs who had been captured by U.S. forces in Pakistan in 2001, despite Chinese calls to do so. After their release from Guantanamo Bay in May 2006, the Uighurs were instead transferred to Albania.

None of China's neighbors have expressed official support for the Uighurs, but the region's porous borders still worry Chinese officials. In the 1980s and 1990s, many Uighurs traveled into Pakistan and Afghanistan, where they were exposed to Islamic extremism. "Some enrolled in madrassas, some enrolled with [the anti-Taliban opposition force] the Northern Alliance, some enrolled with the Taliban, some enrolled with the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan," says Bequelin. Chinese officials worry that militants who slip in and out of Xinjiang can promote anti-state activity.

International Disinterest

In the run-up to the [Beijing Olympics](#) in 2008, protests in Tibet reaped international attention. But [protests in Xinjiang \(IHT\)](#) went relatively unnoticed. "People aren't threatening to boycott the Olympic opening ceremony for the Uighurs," says Segal. Because Tibet gets more global attention than Xinjiang, some reporters have referred to Xinjiang as "[China's other Tibet](#)" ([al-Jazeera](#)).

International interest in Xinjiang is muted for a variety of reasons. According to Nathan, the Uighur community lacks an effective leader. "For the Uighurs, their most prominent spokesperson is Rebiya Kadeer in Washington, who really doesn't have the infrastructure and the Nobel Prize that the Dalai Lama has," he says. Bequelin adds that the Chinese government has effectively branded Uighur separatists as terrorists, which has reduced international sympathy for their mission. Amidst international apathy, most experts say the human rights situation in Xinjiang is likely to get worse before it gets better. "There's no international pressure to change policy in Xinjiang right now," says Segal. "So why would China make any changes?"