

An hourglass-shaped graphic with a globe inside. The top bulb is dark blue, and the bottom bulb is light blue. The globe is centered in the narrow neck of the hourglass. The text is overlaid on the graphic.

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*Chinas Xinjiang-Uighur Autonomous Region: Developments
and U.S. Interests*

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Abstract. Since 1996, officials of the People's Republic of China (PRC) have grown concerned about the activities of minority nationalities in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region, in China's far northwest. Beijing perceives a threat to national security in these activities, and has increased police actions in the region as a result. Many human rights organizations allege that China's policies have resulted in increased human rights violations. Developments in Xinjiang have also attracted the attention of Members of Congress.

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China's Xinjiang-Uighur Autonomous Region: Developments and U.S. Interests

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Summary

Since 1996, officials of the People's Republic of China (PRC) have seen an increasing security threat in the activities of minority nationalities in its heavily Muslim Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR), in China's far northwest. The PRC has been the target of bombings, sabotage, and other terrorist attacks, primarily thought to be committed by small groups of XUAR extremists (largely Uighurs). As a result, Beijing has increased police actions in the region, which many human rights organizations and Members of Congress allege have resulted in gross and increasing human rights violations. In the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States, U.S. policymakers are faced with balancing these human rights concerns with what now appear to be common Sino-U.S. interests in combating fundamentalist global terrorism.

Background

The Xinjiang-Uighur Autonomous Region is China's northwesternmost territory, making up one-sixth of the country's area. In addition to sharing its 3,350-mile border with Afghanistan, it also borders Mongolia, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Pakistan, and India, including the disputed territory of Kashmir. Uighurs (pronounced *WEE-gurs*), who are Turkic Muslims, comprise the dominant ethnic group in the region at 47% of the total population of 16.6 million. Since the 1950s,

Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region



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the PRC has moved into the XUAR sizeable numbers of ethnic (Han) Chinese, who make up nearly 92% of the PRC's total population, settling many of them into communities known as "Production and Construction Corps." The percentage of ethnic Chinese in Xinjiang subsequently has increased from around 6% in 1949 to 38% in 1999. The XUAR is also home to smaller populations of Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Tajiks, Tatars, Uzbeks, Hui, Mongols, and other Turkic national minority groups.¹

Historical interpretations of Xinjiang's distant past are controversial.² Events of recent centuries are more widely documented but no less contentious. China established a military presence in the region in the eighteenth century and later named the area Xinjiang, "new territory." In the nineteenth century, as China became a battleground for competing European interests, Britain supported Chinese sovereignty over Xinjiang to forestall Russian efforts to dominate the region. Revolts in Xinjiang against Chinese rule took place in the 1860s and 1870s, leading to the declaration of an independent state. Parts of Xinjiang were briefly held by Russia until their return to Chinese control in the early 1880s.

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Chinese control of Xinjiang fluctuated in the first half of the twentieth century. Chinese warlords acknowledged the national Chinese government's sovereignty but maintained control over much of Xinjiang, while local non-Chinese residents established brief independent republics in the 1930s and 1940s.³ In 1949 the People's Liberation Army (PLA) entered Xinjiang and annexed it to the People's Republic of China (PRC). Xinjiang was designated as an autonomous region for ethnic minorities and became formally known as the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region in 1955.

Current Developments

Recent Ethnic Activities. The past decade has seen an increase in ethnic activities in the XUAR ranging from the more vigorous exercise of local cultural and religious practices, to expressions of discontent with the government, and to limited and at times violent efforts to establish an independent state or rebel against PRC rule. The PRC has been the target of bombings, sabotage, and other terrorist attacks, primarily

¹ Guo Weimin, ed., *China's Xinjiang*, Beijing: China Intercontinental Press, 1999; and Liz Sly, *The San Diego Union-Tribune*, November 11, 1999. The Hui are ethnic Chinese Muslims who constitute 4% of the population in Xinjiang. The Chinese government categorizes the Hui as a separate ethnic group from the Han Chinese.

² Chinese interpretations assert that Xinjiang has been a part of the Chinese empire since the second century BCE, while Uighur versions of history downplay Xinjiang's contact with China.

³ In 1933, Chiang Kai-shek's nationalist government crushed Muslim forces seeking to establish an independent "East Turkestan Republic" in the region. A second attempt at independence in 1944 — the Ili Rebellion, supported by the Soviet Union — routed Chiang's military forces and forced him to negotiate a peace agreement. The Ili group declared the goals of the new republic to be freedom and democracy for the Islamic peoples and the ousting of all Chinese from Xinjiang.

thought to be committed by small groups of XUAR extremists. For years, there have been periodic unconfirmed reports that some Uighur activists may, in fact, be based in Afghanistan, receiving training from the Taliban.⁴ Beijing calls many of these activists “separatists,” and charges them with trying to wrest the XUAR and other heavily Muslim areas from Chinese rule. Beijing has responded to these perceived threats by enhancing security measures in the XUAR. Many international organizations reporting a significant upsurge of human rights violations in the region allege that PRC policies in the XUAR unjustly target the majority of XUAR residents whose expressions of ethnicity and culture do not carry separatist connotations or threaten national security.

Monitoring ethnic activities in the XUAR is complicated by conflicting descriptions of the region. Accounts from Uighur sources and international organizations identify human rights violations and unequal treatment as underlying causes of protest and turmoil in the region. The group Human Rights Watch notes that Communist Party officials, who tend to be ethnic Chinese, dominate local politics even though many top posts in the XUAR’s local government are held by members of minority groups. Central Asian specialist Dru Gladney suggests that Chinese immigration to the XUAR is a main cause of discontent. According to the human rights group Amnesty International, a number of protests, including a 1995 demonstration in Hetian (Khotan) and a 1997 demonstration in Yining (Ghulja), have been in response to China’s restrictions on religious activities and perceived discrimination against minority groups.⁵

Some ethnic movements in the XUAR are based strongly on nationalist ideas. Nationalist movements opposing PRC rule date back to 1949, when Uighur independence groups defeated by the PLA fled China and established an independence movement in Turkey. Activities with nationalist overtones have become more visible within the XUAR since the PRC began permitting greater freedom of expression in the 1980s, and in particular since the early 1990s, when Central Asian republics with ethnic ties to the XUAR’s indigenous population declared independence from the Soviet Union.

A number of organizations outside China support these nationalist aims. The Turkey-based East Turkistan Information Center states that it serves as an international association of Uighur groups located in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Germany, Sweden, Australia, and the United States. According to XUAR dissidents in Turkey, a Uighur group in Kazakhstan was responsible for a bomb explosion on a Beijing bus in 1997 that followed massive arrests by PRC security officials in the aftermath of demonstrations in Yining (Ghulja). Ties may also exist between Uighur separatist groups and Islamic fundamentalist organizations in both Pakistan and Afghanistan. Although the PRC government has identified internal separatist threats, the extent to which separatist movements are led by organizations within the XUAR and the immediate threat of these movements are unclear. According to one report in 1999 by the U.S. Central Intelligence

⁴ *New York Times*, “Taliban Enlisting Eager Recruits of Many Lands,” September 28, 2001.

⁵ See Human Rights Watch, “Xinjiang, China’s Restive Northwest,” 1998; *The San Diego Union-Tribune*, November 11, 1999; and Amnesty International, “People’s Republic of China. Gross Violations of Human Rights in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region,” April 1999.

Agency, CIA analysts at that point did not foresee ethnic separatism resulting in the breakup of the PRC.⁶

PRC Responses. Beijing stresses that the PRC's minority groups enjoy equal protection under the law. The PRC Constitution states:

All ethnic groups in the People's Republic of China are equal. The state protects the lawful rights and interests of the ethnic minorities and upholds and develops a relationship of equality, unity, and mutual assistance among all of China's ethnic groups. Discrimination against and oppression of any ethnic group are prohibited.⁷

Beijing has often stated that current and past separatist incidents in the XUAR are isolated events initiated by foreign groups and abhorred by XUAR residents. The PRC government nonetheless has responded to events in the XUAR with heavy policing of the region, arrests and executions of alleged separatists, and, according to reports by human rights groups and exiled dissidents, torture of Uighur and other minority prisoners. A classified transcript of a March 19, 1996 meeting of the Standing Committee of the Chinese Communist Party Politburo, cited by Human Rights Watch, underscores PRC concerns with the XUAR. According to the transcript, the meeting identified "national separatism and illegal religious activity" as the "main threats to the stability of Xinjiang," and noted that counterrevolutionary organizations "led by the United States of America" are supporting separatist movements. The meeting also outlined a strategy for restricting illegal religious activity, encouraging immigration to the XUAR, regulating cultural exchanges with foreign countries, and tightening control of the media.⁸

In addition to taking strong measures domestically, PRC leaders appear particularly sensitive to the fact that Xinjiang's ethnic Muslim population have more in common with the populations of bordering states than with the rest of China. On April 26, 1996, coinciding with the beginning of China's anti-crime campaign and massive arrests in the XUAR, China signed a military confidence-building treaty with Russia and the Muslim states bordering Xinjiang – Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan – setting up a buffer zone between the signatory nations. On August 25, 1999, the five countries cosigned a declaration designed to decrease cross-border crime, separatism, and extremism. This groups now includes Uzbekistan and is known as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). On November 10, 1999, China and Uzbekistan agreed to a joint effort to fight

⁶ Information on the East Turkistan Information Center Web site is available at [<http://www.uyghur.org>]. Some Uighur organizations aim to establish an independent Uighuristan, a homeland for the Uighur diaspora. Other groups promote the establishment of an independent "East Turkistan," which denotes a separate state for the myriad ethnic minority groups that currently live in Xinjiang. Ahmed Rashid (*Far Eastern Economic Review*, August 5, 1999) describes possible links between Uighur groups and Osama bin Laden. P.B. Sinha Sinha (Institute for Defense Studies and Analyses, 1997) says that Islamic militancy among Uighurs has roots in the 1980s, when Afghani and Pakistani fundamentalists trained Uighur groups to fight against the Soviet Union. The CIA assessment was reported in *Inside China Today*, December 7, 1999.

⁷ "White Paper on National Minorities Policy and Its Practice in China," Information Office of the State Council of the PRC, 1999, as cited in Xinhua News Agency, September 27, 1999.

⁸ Human Rights Watch, "China: State Control of Religion, Update Number 1," 1998.

terrorism and Islamic activity, and on November 23, 1999, China and Kazakhstan again pledged mutual cooperation in fighting separatism, terrorism, and religious extremism.

Human Rights Issues. Although social and economic reforms in the late 1970s and 1980s allowed new freedoms in the PRC, human rights organizations maintain that these freedoms have been curtailed in the past decade. China has signed or ratified several international human rights declarations, but Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch both report that severe human rights violations occur in the XUAR.

Restrictions on religion and dissatisfaction with the government have helped fuel protest among XUAR residents. In 1996, the PRC initiated a “strike hard” campaign against crime which, in the XUAR, often focused on curbing ethnic and religious activities that are illegal under Chinese law.⁹ In an April 1999 report on human rights violations in the XUAR, Amnesty International described a pattern of arbitrary arrests, unfair trials, and summary executions, as well as reports of forced sterilization and abortions. The organization recorded 210 death sentences and 190 executions between 1997 and 1999, primarily of Uighurs charged with subversive activities.

Several human rights organizations have tracked the August 1999 arrest of a prominent and wealthy Uighur businesswoman, Rebiya Kadeer.¹⁰ Detained by police while on her way to meet with a friend from a visiting U.S. congressional staff delegation, Kadeer was held on charges of “providing information to foreigners” and was charged on September 2, 1999, for “illegally offering state secrets across the border.”¹¹ According to the Information Center of Human Rights and Democratic Movements in China, in November 1999, Kadeer’s son was sentenced without trial to two years in a labor camp on charges of aiding separatists.¹² On March 9, 2000, the XUAR’s Urumqi Intermediate Court sentenced Kadeer herself to 8 years for providing state secrets to foreigners.

Economic Issues. The XUAR has abundant resources, including cotton and oil, but lags behind many other regions in China in economic output. Xinjiang’s half-year GDP growth rate for 1999 (6.8%) made it the fourth lowest region for GDP growth in China, 0.8 percentage point behind the national average and 5.1 percentage points behind Beijing. Chinese sources note, however, that the XUAR ranks second in China for border trade and is home to 699 enterprises funded by foreign sources. In recent years, Beijing has launched a “Go West” campaign to concentrate economic development efforts in central and western China.¹³ The government has announced a five-year development plan for Xinjiang that will focus on improving infrastructure in the region. A cornerstone of this effort is a plan to build a 4,212-kilometer pipeline from the XUAR to Shanghai. Beijing also announced plans to open a branch of the China Development Bank in

⁹ China requires Muslim organizations to register with the central government. Unapproved religious activities such as home prayer meetings and private Koran lessons are considered illegal, and parties involved are subject to arrest and prosecution.

¹⁰ Chen, Kathy. “Rebiya Kader (sic) Tears Up Silk Road with Determination to Succeed,” *Asian Wall Street Journal*, September 22, 1994, p. 1.

¹¹ Amnesty International, August 7, 1999; and September 3, 1999.

¹² Associated Press, December 2, 1999.

¹³ See CRS Report RL31104, China’s western development drive, by D.L. McNeal.

Xinjiang's capital, Urumqi. According to the state-sponsored Xinjiang People's Broadcasting Station, Communist Party officials have encouraged local media to help create "a public opinion fav[or]able to the implementation of the strategy on grand [economic] development of the western region."¹⁴

Some, however, fear that these and other western development projects may exacerbate ethnic tensions by bringing more ethnic Chinese into the region. According to some human rights groups, Chinese migration and economic disparities between Chinese and ethnic minorities in the XUAR have been a primary factor fueling discontent among minority groups. Critics of PRC development plans assert that Chinese, and not ethnic minorities, tend to reap the benefits of economic improvements in minority regions. Development projects funded by foreign groups, including the World Bank, have been controversial because of perceived advantages the projects give to Chinese. (See CRS Report RL30786, *World Bank Lending: Issues Raised by China's Qinghai Resettlement Project*.)

U.S. Policy Implications

Events in the XUAR have far-reaching implications for U.S. policymakers, who in the past have had to juggle efforts to persuade the PRC to improve its human rights record – efforts the PRC government has strongly criticized – with attempts to uphold and enhance economic cooperation with China. In its September 2000 "Annual Report on International Religious Freedom for 2000: China," the U.S. Department of State referred to PRC police crackdowns on Muslim religious activity after an ongoing series of violent incidents in the XUAR beginning in 1997, including reported bombings in Xinjiang and other parts of the PRC attributed to Uighur activists. According to the report, the PRC continues to maintain restrictions on Muslim religious activity, particularly among the Uighur nationality. In the wake of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks against the United States, the potential for Sino-U.S. cooperation against global terrorism may bring changes in the policy calculations of U.S. officials, who may seek to downplay traditional U.S. concerns in the interest of assuring PRC cooperation.

Despite shared Sino-U.S. interests against terrorism, it is not yet clear how much actual support the PRC will be willing or able to give the U.S.-led effort. A key problem for U.S. policymakers is that the PRC commonly makes no distinction between terrorists who perform violent acts and "separatists," even those advocates that are entirely peaceful. Also, the PRC strongly prefers that global efforts such as the anti-terrorism campaign be conducted through the auspices of the U.N. Security Council, where it has a voice, and not purely through a U.S. unilateral effort or a coalition of U.S. allies. Beijing officials also may be cautious about appearing too "pro-American," a political problem that working through U.N. auspices could mitigate. Also, PRC officials in the past have attempted to exact policy concessions from the United States – such as on Taiwan or Tibet – in exchange for their support for U.S. initiatives. The PRC may attempt to condition its future support for the global anti-terrorism campaign through these and other mechanisms – a linkage that would complicate U.S. policies toward Taiwan and the Dalai Lama's Tibetan community-in-exile.

¹⁴ South China Morning Post, Sept. 8, 1999; Xinhua News Agency, October 20, 1999; and Xinhua News Agency, December 14, 1999.