

# The Securitization of the Uyghur Question and Its Challenges

KILIÇ BUĞRA KANAT\*

**ABSTRACT** *The Crisis of the Uyghur problem has transformed into a key element of China's overall national politics, identity politics, international image, national security perception, and relations with the Islamic world. No effort has been undertaken toward discussion of the issue or recognition of the existence of a problem. The region and its population continue to be perceived as a threat to the Chinese State. Because of this, Uyghur communities have become alienated from the state, and tension between Uyghurs and Han Chinese has escalated. The Uyghur issue has begun to grow into a geopolitical and strategic problem for the emerging economic power and regional ambitions of China. The first step for the solution is only possible if China changes its approach to the issue and relieves its security based approach to the problem.*

Although, the Uyghur question in China dates back to hundreds of years, one of the critical turning points of the issue took place after the establishment of the East Turkestan Republics in the 1930s and 40s. These republics later were taken over by China. Founded under the name of Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR), the new regime assured the cultural, social and political rights of Uyghurs and other minorities living in the area. However, the totalitarian system subsequently established by the communist state suppressed the entire Chinese nation and its minority regions. The Mao regime adopted policies for the homogenization of the society, where Muslim Uyghurs and their cultural and social differences were perceived as counter-revolutionary threats. As religious and cultural pressures peaked, Uyghurs, along with millions of other citizens became victims of hunger and outright famine as a result of the problematic economic policies of the central authority.

Later, the Chinese regime chose XUAR as a pilot region for both nuclear tests and a search for natural resources. In the run up to the end of the Cold War, the

\* Penn State  
University, Erie

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the XUAR region and its people took advantage of the limited liberalization policies in these years.

With the adoption of repressive policies in the XUAR 1949 onwards, a Uyghur movement emerged amongst the group's diaspora population with the goal of establishing an independent Eastern Turkistan Republic for Uyghurs. Cabinet members from the Republic of East Turkistan, which was previously established in 1944, settled in Turkey and the Central Asian Republics during the Cold War years, giving birth to the first diaspora movements of Uyghurs. In particular, Uyghurs who gathered around the political leaders, such as İsa Yusuf Alptekin, laid the foundation for an organization that was to become a source of inspiration for subsequent diaspora movements. However, these diaspora organizations suffered from financial and operational difficulties because of their continued isolation and systemic constraints in international relations.

Things in China changed dramatically with Tiananmen Square, the end of the Cold War, and the corresponding wave of independence for the Central Asian Republics. Together with the shattering of the Eastern Bloc, the events in Tiananmen Square created a climate of insecurity and paranoia among the policymakers in Beijing. In the last years of the 1980s, under pressure from rising public unrest, the Beijing government approached every hint of dissent as a potential destabilizer and threat to the survival of the regime.

For most of this period, foreign journalists and researchers were largely denied access to the region. There was not much information available due to the strict travel regulations and controlled access to information. Outside of the region, the problems of Uyghurs were only reported through anecdotal evidence. The Uyghurs and their cultural traits were seldom discussed in terms of relations with the greater Turkic world. Historical studies about the region became more prominent than studies about the contemporary situation of Uyghurs. Even in Turkey, the situation was not that different, the Uyghur issue,

region was isolated from the world and Uyghurs existed under tremendous pressure and threat from the central authority. Temporary relief came alongside basic freedoms granted to the region in the early 1980s. These new freedoms were enacted as a result of major policy changes toward minority regions by the central authority. In fact as a result of changing policies in China as a whole, after the death of Mao,

other than the work of newly established foundations of Uyghurs, first came to prominence via a Japanese production, the *Silk Road Documentary*.

## The Internationalization of the Uyghur Question

The late 1980s were the years of transformation and change for much of the Eastern bloc. Communist regimes were overthrown or collapsed and new more democratic, liberal regimes began to be established. However, this trend did not expand to China; instead of liberalizing, the regime toughened existing policies toward Uyghurs during the late years of the Cold War. The changes in former communist countries spawned heightened fear of internal divisions and chaos in China. In order to prevent demands for political reform, the government increased its use of the repressive state apparatus and, especially in Uyghur populated regions, adopted micro-control policies towards minority communities. The Uyghur question became increasingly critical for the Chinese government. It was perceived as one of the priority issues for maintaining the security and stability of the regime and territorial integrity of the country. This change in perception of the Uyghur question in Xinjiang was the result of three realities:

The first was the end of the Cold War and collapse of the communism's role as the unifying ideology of the state of China. Both in XUAR and China in general, the legitimacy of the state had been dealt a major blow. This gave birth to an existential threat for the Chinese regime. The State tightened security measures and restricted freedoms for fear of a challenge to its legitimacy and losing its validity in the eyes of the Chinese public in general and among minorities in particular. Two issues accelerated the concerns of the state. Firstly, the fact that changes were taking place just across the border placed China in geographical proximity to the epicenter of a seismic earthquake in world politics and aggravated the establishment in Beijing. The XUAR felt extra pressure as a neighbor of the former Soviet Union and the newly established Central Asian republics. Additionally, Tiananmen Square remained a major trauma for Chinese state and society. It was perceived as an attempt to overthrow the government and spurred China's policy of zero-tolerance to dissents during this period. Moreover, the fact that one of the leaders of the student movement was a Uyghur only exacerbated sensitivity toward Uyghur-focused policies.

The second reason was the disintegration of the Soviet Union, which was successively followed by the declarations of independence from new Turkic Republics in Central Asia. The independence of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, both neighboring XUAR, deepened China's fear that a similar independence movement could occur within its own Uyghur population. The increasing social and cultural activities of a robust Uyghur diaspora living in the recently

Chinese troops divert traffic in a street of Urumqi, the capital of the Xinjiang Uyghur autonomous region, on September 5, 2009. Some Han Chinese residents have blamed the Uyghurs for the hundreds of reported syringe attacks in the city, but official reports have been vague about the identities of the alleged perpetrators, 21 of whom have been detained.

AFP PHOTO / PHILIPPE LOPEZ



declared countries further exacerbated the PRC's anxiety. In particular, Kazakhstan-based Uyghur diaspora groups tried to compensate for the years of suppression they suffered during the Soviet era by increasing cultural activities; China perceived these efforts as parts of the "separatist" and "divisive" uprisings on the other side of the border. This situation also raised the significance of the Uyghur question for the regional geopolitics and the security of China. From now on, the developments in the region started to be perceived from a wider regional perspective. What happened in XUAR was considered as part of a larger framework of developments taking place in Central Asia. This concern was in part responsible for the regionalization of the conflict and exaggerated and disproportional reaction of Chinese security forces to the demonstrations taking place in the Uyghur Autonomous Region.

A third factor was the ethnic conflicts and struggles for independence unfolding in different parts of the world in early 1990s. The Chinese administration had, for years, tried to keep the Uyghur problem separate from ethnic and minority problems in other parts of the world; and denied the existence of an ethnic dispute in XUAR. However, the dramatic increase in the number of ethnic conflicts in different parts of the world turned the attention of some to this ongoing crisis in Uyghur Autonomous region. Increasing international scrutiny of the conflict in the region discomfited Beijing. Also, there was increasing concern that a spillover of ethnic conflicts into China could pave the way to the aforementioned division of the whole country. For the Chinese state, the way to pre-empt the emergence of these problems was through the implementation of oppressive policies.

In particular, ethnic clashes amongst different groups in former Yugoslavia generated major concerns for China, which is comprised of 56 minority groups. Also the conflict in Chechnya suggested to the Chinese administration that a minority ethnic group –regardless of the proportion of its demographic dimension to the general population- was capable of creating countrywide de-

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stabilization. These conflicts were occurring among Muslim minority groups living under the rule of a non-Muslim majority controlled state, just as Uyghur populations were a Muslim minority in China. Furthermore, the government, which had for so long tried to isolate its Uyghur region, felt threatened by the Islamic world's public support for the forces in the Balkans and the Caucasus. For the Chinese authorities, such an escalation might connect the problem in the Uyghur Autonomous region to the whole Islamic world.

China paid great attention to the ethnic conflicts –particularly in the Balkans– at this point partly because of international reactions and interventions into these conflicts. China was deeply concerned by foreign intervention in Kosovo. Despite objections from Russia and China at the UN Security Council, the military intervention by an international force into a region experiencing ethnic conflict and its paving the way for the creation of new independent states, was a serious problem for both Russia and China that were similarly concerned for their own territorial integrity. According to the Chinese administration, the operation in the Balkans was setting a precedent in international norms, and substantially undermining the principles of territorial integrity and non-intervention. This new norm was seen as a potential trigger for unrest among minorities against the PRC state apparatus. The meaning of this crisis and of the international intervention in Kosovo dramatically changed for China with the accidental bombing of the PRC Embassy in Belgrade by the coalition forces during the Kosovo operation, resulting in the death of several Chinese diplomats.

In brief, following the Cold War, the Uyghur problem and unrest in the region surrounding the PRC generated disintegration and division anxiety in the Chinese bureaucracy. This implied a perception of threat referred to as the “fear of Balkanization” of China. As a result the Uyghur question was increasingly securitized during this period. Any form of dissent and demand by the Uyghur people was perceived as a security issue and security forces started to play a major role in the handling of the ethnic conflict file. It also seriously impacted the discourse of the government in regards to the Uyghur question. The words and the tone that the regime utilized started to have more security orientation.

This being the case, the PRC preferred to apply the same harsh measures it had used in the past despite the changing geopolitical balances and world order and increasing opening of China to trade and economic relations. In return, Uyghurs living in XUAR, who had become more exposed to the world, especially after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, had opportunities to access information and found the courage to react more strongly against the oppressive policies of the Chinese administration. As the number of demonstrations significantly increased, China began to implement tougher measures, which paved the way for the emergence of a spiral of demonstrations, crackdowns and violence in the region.

The securitization of the Uyghur question did not bring any solution to the problem in early 1990s; instead it paved the way for more violent repression and persecution, which led to the further alienation of the Uyghur society from the Chinese state. The Chinese government approached all of the problems in the region, regardless of their root causes and consequences, as one of security and accused separatists of the unrest, so disconnecting from the reality on the ground and leading to the rise of a generation of marginalized Uyghur youth. While it was possible in the early 1990s, to contain and control the crisis, the Chinese government preferred to adopt harsher measures and missed an important opportunity to reconcile differences and resolve problems with the Uyghur people in the region.

Beginning in the mid-1990s, the Chinese administration adopted a series of strict measures against political demands and protests of Uyghurs in XUAR. These “strike hard” campaigns were frequently applied and had had a serious negative impact on interethnic relations in XUAR and on State-Uyghurs relations. First, a new category was added to this repressive campaign, designating crimes of “separatism.” The concept and scope of “separatism,” similarly to “illegal religious activities,” were excessively broad in scope. In order to gain public support for these policies, the PRC launched a new campaign under the name of “people’s war against separatism and illegal religious activities.” The name of the campaign and the methods that were implemented during this period were reminiscent of political purge campaigns that had been implemented in China during the Cold War years, such as the Cultural Revolution. In fact, for many the “strike hard” campaigns, which started to include a “fight against terrorism” rhetoric, were the reincarnation of the former political purge campaigns.<sup>1</sup>

In the late 1990s, economic developments in China and rapid rise of the Chinese economy added a new dimension to the ethnic conflict in Xinjiang. Despite record growth in GDP and the rate of poverty reduction, inequalities in China were exacerbated among some populations. The winners of this new found economic growth were enjoying an era of relative wealth and prosperity

but many others started to experience deprivation and discrimination in a harsher tone. The ethnic minorities especially felt relative social and economic deprivation to a greater degree than before. Later, studies have also demonstrated that Uyghurs in Xinjiang became the most disadvantaged group in comparison to local Hans and those who had migrated to the region in recent years with the encouragement and sponsorship of the government. For example, a study by Wu and Song revealed that Uyghur people were “left behind, as Han locals and migrants from other provinces disproportionately took advantage of the increasing opportunities created by China’s booming economy.”<sup>2</sup> They also argued that “as far as the ethnic minorities are concerned, the Chinese government’s economic policies merely focused on natural resource extraction and the Han Chinese (including migrants from other provinces) were the main beneficiaries.”<sup>3</sup>

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Similar studies in regards to the impact of economic developments in the region demonstrated that Uyghur youth experienced one high rates of unemployment while the region itself was among the greatest migrant receiving areas of China, despite this already high unemployment.<sup>4</sup> This relative deprivation has led to a series of social problems, such as high drug and alcohol abuse, very high levels of HIV and lack of education.<sup>5</sup> Another significant indicator of inequality was in regards to the health and life expectancy of Uyghurs. According to Cappelletti, the XUAR region was “the fifth worst in China, following Tibet, Guizhou, Qinghai and Yunnan”<sup>6</sup> for infant mortality.<sup>7</sup> These emerging inequalities have generated tensions amongst ethnic groups, particularly between Uyghurs and Hans, whose relations deteriorated significantly throughout 1990s. These social and economic problems resulted in further protest and unrest in the region. However, once again the security perspective and approach of the Chinese government interpreted most of these developments as a security crisis resulting from demands for further political rights that might endanger territorial integrity and national unity of the Chinese state. For instance, the scope of the strike hard campaigns was gradually broadened to contain all kind of dissident voices in XUAR. Any expression against ethnic, economic, religious, political and social policies was severely suppressed. This zero tolerance policy against the XUAR and the resulting state of constant unrest is what first brought the region to the attention of the Chinese population and subsequently generated increasing attention from the international community.

## **The administration tried both to obstruct political interaction between Uyghurs in XUAR and the Central Asian Republics, and to increase economic and social relations between these countries and China**

International attention to the region in the mid-1990s came despite strong control over access to the region and the information flow on regional developments. The opening up of China economically and increasing global integration prevented the country from maintaining its previous privacy in dealing with domestic problems. During this period, policies implemented by China in XUAR negatively affected the country's international image, and thus wreaked havoc on the discourse of the "peaceful rise" envisioned and propagated by Beijing. The constant securitization, increasing use of security measures and disproportionate use of force against demonstrations generated an unfavorable image of China around the world. For a country that was so willing to use its soft power, cultural influence and

public diplomacy in order to gain super power recognition, status and international prestige, the Uyghur question became a significant pothole on China's path to reach its goals. In order to prevent this, Chinese foreign policy makers and public diplomacy officials launched information campaigns to change the discourse of the Uyghur question in the international sphere.

### **Uyghur Question in China's Foreign Policy**

Although China sought to keep the Uyghur question as a "domestic matter" and opposed any form of involvement or interference from outside forces, outside influence on the issue gradually began to occur alongside China's foreign policy. The failure of the government to "handle" the issue and the use of force and emergency measures was blamed on the existence of active outside forces that support the "separatist" movements. However, with the absence of a direct link, it was hard for the Chinese government to put the blame on a specific state or country. Still, an ambiguous "external force" discourse was constantly utilized by the administration. Thus the Uyghur question began to influence the foreign policy of the PRC. The Chinese foreign policy file on the Uyghur problem began with accusations and scapegoating of the external forces, later extending to include bilateral diplomatic relations with other countries. Instead of establishing a constructive dialogue with the Uyghur community, and making a concerted effort to understand the source of grievances of the Uyghur people, the Chinese government interpreted the conflict as the result of foreign actors and preferred to look for a solution outside of its borders. The diplomatic offensive tried to crackdown Uyghur movements abroad as a method of halting unrest in the XUAR. The first targets in this sense were the countries with a sizable Uyghur diaspora. In the bilateral relations between

China, Turkey and the Central Asian Republics, both the developments in the XUAR as well as the activities of the Uyghur diaspora in these countries became a serious issue for bilateral relations. In these years, neither Turkey nor the Central Asian Republics had a foreign policy agenda regarding the situation of Uyghurs, however interestingly it was China that brought these issues to the agenda of the diplomatic meetings.

These “strike hard” policies of the 1990s generated major debates on human rights violations in China against Uyghurs. The international community, particularly the human rights NGOs became more sensitive to human rights violations in the XUAR. A significant turning point for the Uyghur question took place in February 1997 when a series of protests for Uyghur rights broke out in the town of Ghulja, XUAR during the month of Ramadan. Chinese authorities responded to the protests by firing tear gas and shots, as well as by deploying water cannons and tear gas against protesters. Over 100 people were killed in the crackdown and an additional 1,600 arrested for “counterrevolutionary activities.” The inconsistency of the official explanations about the incidents raised question marks in international community. As James Millward expressed in his report about the conflict, there were serious contradictions about the cause and nature of this event -ranging from denials that it happened, to calling it a case of “beating, smashing, and looting” by “drug addicts, looters, and social garbage” and then blaming it on separatists and religious elements bent on stirring up a holy war.<sup>8</sup> Eventually, reports released on the massacre by human rights organizations, including Amnesty International, revealed cases of torture and police brutality perpetrated by Chinese security forces against Uyghur demonstrators.<sup>9</sup> During this period the international media’s attention was drawn to the region and they also started to report on the incidents from the city.<sup>10</sup> The Ghulja events thrust the Uyghur problem into world attention as a human rights issue. Mass detentions, rapidly spreading torture claims, and frequent executions in the region became increasingly visible to the international community. The incidents and its aftermath also led to an exodus of refugees from Xinjiang. In Ghulja province, young Uyghur activists who joined the protests first migrated into neighboring countries, then into Turkey and eventually Europe. There they revitalized the existing Uyghur organizations and increased the power and influence of the Uyghur diaspora.<sup>11</sup>

China then took several steps that would contribute further to the internationalization of the Uyghur question. The administration considered both the movement of Uyghurs, who escaped to different countries at the end of the 1990s, and the broader cultural awakening of Uyghurs living in the Central Asian Republics, as serious threats to its security and reputation in the international arena. The PRC sought to promote relations with Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan in the face of increasing numbers of Uyghur organizations and movements in these countries. It was hoped that stronger economic relations would

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increase the leverage of the Chinese government in the domestic affairs of these countries and thus hinder the activities of Uyghurs and potential cross-border movements. China's first goal was to nullify the influence of the diaspora into XUAR and to stop the activities of such organizations abroad. It increased border controls, signed border agreements with Central Asian Republics, and worked to protect border security in order to achieve this. The admin-

istration tried both to obstruct political interaction between Uyghurs in XUAR and the Central Asian Republics, and to increase economic and social relations between these countries and China.

Worried that its actions would not be enough, the Chinese government launched a campaign of "linkage politics" for the XUAR. China developed a repressive model for Central Asian countries where Uyghur movements were based. This necessitated the export of policies implemented against Uyghur dissidents in XUAR to other countries; but it was possible only through more aggressive and preventive diplomatic traffic between the Chinese government and the regional governments. To accomplish this, the PRC began to promote bilateral relations, making the Uyghur problem a priority item in bilateral talks and negotiations with its Central Asian neighbors. China demanded that Central Asian Republics limit the activities of their Uyghur population and used economic relations in a "carrot and stick" strategy to entice their compliance with this strategy. Trade relations and foreign aid to the same countries became linked to their positions on the Uyghur issue. In addition, China took another step to bring the Uyghur problem as a key element of threat against regional security by trying to project its "strike hard" policies into other Central Asian Republics. Perhaps the most critical of such attempts was the formation of the Shanghai Five, the backbone of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and its efforts to spread the "three evil forces" (separatism, extremism and terrorism) security concept throughout region.<sup>12</sup>

The situation created a stifling anti-Uyghur atmosphere and led to the Central Asian Republics' adoption of a more liberal economy model together with the authoritarian political structure— which was labeled the "Beijing Consensus."<sup>13</sup> The model strengthened authoritarian endurance and continuity in the Central Asian Republics. Later on, a significant part of the meetings of the organization, which was eventually named "the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)", was allocated to the discussion of the Uyghur problem.<sup>14</sup> This

paved the way for China's foreign policy towards Central Asia to concentrate on the Uyghur issue as a priority agenda and proved to be very successful, achieving Beijing's desired outcome that regional Uyghur movements become largely limited in their actions. A group of Uyghur dissidents, who were under suppression both in XUAR and in Central Asia, moved to Europe and began to organize while others, who were unable to access Western countries, fled to Afghanistan, which was suffering under the Taliban administration. Both the policy of escalating the profile of the conflict in Central Asia and the migration of Uyghurs to different areas contributed to the internationalization of the issue.<sup>15</sup>

### **Uyghurs as an Instrument for Identity**

As the Uyghur issue has grown into both a regional and international problem, it has gained yet another dimension. Tiananmen Square and the collapse of communist regimes in rapid succession inflicted a grave legitimacy crisis upon the PRC. The end of communism, in the Soviet Union, Central and Eastern European countries in particular, led China to suffer an existential crisis. The Communist ideology, which serves as the crucial connection between the people and the State, lost validity. During this period, the Chinese administration needed an instrument to help the State regain legitimacy and reestablish the connection with its people. Thus, it preferred to consolidate the country under the tenant of Chinese nationalism. A new generation of nationalist ideology was cultivated with the launch of the "Patriotic Education Campaign."<sup>16</sup> The number one target of this nationalist wave was the West and Japan. In both literature and popular culture, China was depicted as a country and society exploited and victimized by both the West and Japan for decades.<sup>17</sup>

In the mid-1990s, with the reinforcement of nationalist emotions, the reaction of Chinese society to the Western world and Japan began to threaten the country's economy and international image, which had already been damaged by Tiananmen Square. First, with anti-Western protests during Beijing's candidacy for the 2000 Olympic Games and later during the Kosovo operation, the state-backed nationalist wave gradually lost control. It reached its peak during the EP-3 airplane crash incident in 2001 when, after a mid-air collision between a U.S. surveillance plane and a Chinese fighter jet, the U.S. EP-3 made an emergency landing on the Hainan Island.<sup>18</sup> During the incident, the Chinese pilot died and the U.S. plane was forced to make an unauthorized landing, which led to an anti-American nationalist wave that Chinese State media encouraged. This nationalism exploited by the State during the negotiations with the U.S. quickly backfired. The demonstrators soon began to target the Chinese administration, blaming it for not responding sufficiently against the U.S.



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MEYDANI'NDA  
CUMA NAMAZI  
CIKISI BIR GRUP,  
CIN'IN SINCAN  
UYGUR OZERK  
BOLGESI'NDE  
CIKAN OLAYLAR  
NEDENIYLE CIN'I  
PROTESTO ETTI.

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SALIH ZEKİ FAZLIOĞLU

Moving forward, the Beijing administration sought a different method to legitimize national unity and integrity as the political and economic cost of the state-supported nationalism increased. Although the perception of external threat fully existed in the security structure, the elements of internal threat were pushed to the forefront in order to maintain people's allegiance to the State. In those years, the State targeted minorities in the country –Uyghur “separatists” in particular– in line with the policy of “three evil powers.”<sup>19</sup> The Chinese administration adopted a new strategy based on the premise that any kind of disruption in XUAR is a threat to the government and therefore requires a public reaction that enhances the legitimacy of the State. Compared with the previous anti-Western and anti-Japanese nationalism, this new state of affairs provided a highly controllable and low-cost method of nationalism with a limited boomerang effect.

## September 11 and Afterwards

One of the most important turning points in the state of the Uyghur Question in China was the September 11, 2001 attacks and international atmosphere that emerged in their aftermath. Just before the attacks, the party leaders in the region asserted the enduring stability and security of the region.<sup>20</sup> However, on the heels of the attacks, the Chinese government announced its support for the U.S.-led global fight against terrorism, claiming that China had long been vic-

## **The state-sponsored wave of nationalism and anti-Uyghur sentiments launched after the Cold War, combined with the Islamophobic atmosphere following 9/11, resulted in the intense isolation of Uyghur communities**

tim, itself, to terrorist activities. The U.S. administration, in return, labeled the East Turkistan Islamic Movement, a Uyghur group that developed in China, as a terrorist organization.<sup>21</sup> In those days, the Chinese administration successively released reports describing the actions of Uyghur organizations abroad as terrorist activities. Through the PRC's new campaign, the Uyghur community began to experience a more securitized dimension of the "otherization" policies that had been implemented in the 1990s. Now, Uyghurs were not only considered as "others," but were also increasingly associated with different forms of terrorist and criminal activity against the PRC. Although the Chinese government preferred to use the label "Eastern Turkistani Terrorist Forces" instead of the ethnic name Uyghurs, it was common knowledge that the primary targets of these propaganda materials were the Uyghur Muslims from XUAR.<sup>22</sup>

Through launching a more aggressive anti-terror campaign, the PRC attempted to "resolve" the Uyghur problem with its own methods. However these anti-terrorism campaigns, which included an iron-fist policy towards domestic dissent and a global PR campaign to legitimize authoritative measures, largely backfired. In terms of the domestic situation, the increasing repression towards the "separatists, fundamentalists and terrorists" extended to include people from all walks of life that had different grievances with the administration, which in turn further marginalized the Uyghur community. The campaign's rounding up of more moderate Uyghur voices paved the way for the increasing radicalization among Uyghur youth. In fact, this crackdown increased the number of violent incidents in the country.

In the years following 9/11, the international community criticized terror reports released by the Chinese administration for discrepancies and the arbitrary use of "terrorism" as a concept. The reports were questioned particularly for listing Uyghur organizations and human rights groups in Western countries as terrorist organizations.<sup>23</sup> Despite their unintended consequences, China continued to adopt these "anti-terrorism" campaigns and effectively ignored the presence of a multitude of problems that could fuel uprisings in the region. The administration widely circulated propaganda materials that encouraged fighting against terrorism throughout China. State television stations

broadcasted documentaries vilifying the East Turkistan Terrorist Forces, and their producers made films based on the struggle of Chinese security forces against the organization in XUAR. Furthermore, some criminal cases of the 1990s were revisited and branded as terrorist attacks.<sup>24</sup> In the meantime, the Chinese administration expedited harsh military and security measures under the name of the “War on Terror” in XUAR. During this period, any form of Uyghur political activity and dissent was criminalized within the context of the war on terror.

This evolution of anti-Uyghur discourse resulted in dramatic domestic repercussions. The state-sponsored wave of nationalism and anti-Uyghur sentiments launched after the Cold War, combined with the Islamophobic atmosphere following 9/11, resulted in the intense isolation of Uyghur communities. Additionally, increasing securitization of the Uyghur question made the resolution of the problem even more difficult. The crackdowns against Uyghur dissent had become a way for local party cadres and administrators to demonstrate patriotism and allegiance to the Communist party. In this challenging period, Uyghurs experienced intense crackdowns and discrimination, manifesting in forms such as hotels refusing to allow Uyghur customers to book rooms during the Beijing Olympic Games. On the eve of the Olympic Games, the PRC accused some Uyghurs, including those who were living in Western countries, of planning acts of terrorism targeting the Olympics. In the run-up to the Games, Chinese security forces announced that they had foiled a terrorist plot, though the claim was not confirmed by independent observers, as was the case with many other claims of planned terror attacks during this period.<sup>25</sup>

One of the most significant outcomes of the post 9/11 atmosphere in China in regards to the Uyghur question was that the securitization of the Uyghur question and the criminalization of Uyghur dissent in the country started to be accepted by some segments of Chinese society. The Beijing administration, somehow, had managed to transform the conflict between the State and an ethnic minority into an existential threat to the Chinese state and society. The constant propaganda of the Chinese state and state-controlled media generated a significant fear factor which spread to different segments of the society. This policy has led to the marginalization of the Uyghur communities and further alienation of Uyghurs from the State. More dangerously, this combination of fear and marginalization has also paved the way for ethnic tension between the minority Uyghur and majority Han Chinese populations.

Another very significant impact of the 9/11 attacks and subsequent global war on terror was the implementation of increasing restrictions and limitations for the freedom of religion. In part, what helped China’s attempt to associate Uyghur dissent in the country with the global war on terror was religion. Religion had long been considered by the government as a potential barrier between

the Han Chinese and Uyghurs and a significant impediment to the assimilation of Uyghurs in China. In the early 1990s, religious restrictions were imposed in the region, but they took a more serious turn with the 2005 Religious Affair Regulations, which significantly affected the religious lives of the Uyghur people. In a report on the repression of Uyghur religious freedom, the Uyghur Human Rights Project argued that “the regulations... have had the effect of criminalizing peaceful religious practices among Uyghurs on par with illicit and violent activity. Chinese local and central authorities have implemented policies that have progressively narrowed the definition of lawful activity. As a result many Uyghurs find that even traditional religious customs are restricted by the government.”<sup>26</sup> What made things worse for the Uyghurs was the strict interpretation of these regulations in XUAR. The local administration implemented them in a way that further curbed religious activities.<sup>27</sup> Already criminalized “illegal religious activities” were considered and perceived as a major national security threats by the state. This led to the further securitization in the field of religious activity and excessive applications of religious regulations. Examples of the ridiculous interpretation of religious regulations by overzealous local officials include the prohibition of fasting<sup>28</sup> and the forcing of imams to dance in the streets.<sup>29</sup>

**The outcome of these “securitized” policies adopted by the Chinese government to “protect and preserve” national unity started to endanger the same “harmonious society” that the Chinese government was aspiring to build**

Religious restriction was not the only outcome of the China’s participation in the global war on terror. Following the implementation of this anti-terror campaign was the adoption of some social and economic policies that further deteriorated the situation for the Uyghurs in the region. The Chinese government did not take necessary steps to eradicate the inequality of Uyghurs that escalated in the 1990s. Studies conducted in recent years about the social and economic situation of Uyghurs demonstrate these increasing inequalities. For example, according to Brenda Schuster, “the Han and Uyghur populations of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region of China differ in all major health indicators. In life expectancy, infant mortality, maternal mortality and morbidity Uyghur people are much worse off than Han.”<sup>30</sup> In another study, cited by Cappelletti, scholars and scientists of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences reported that XUAR region was the fifth worst in terms of environmental and health indices in China.<sup>31</sup> Researchers also found that in addition to the high level of HIV, the region also witnessed some serious health outbreaks, such as polio.<sup>32</sup>

The Chinese government also adopted policies during this period in order to “integrate” Uyghurs to the Chinese society. One of the most controversial of

these policies was the relocation of the unmarried “Uyghur girls, aged from 16 to 22 years old, from their villages in the Xinjiang countryside to big cities in Inner and South-Eastern coastal China, where they usually got a temporary employment in textile factories.”<sup>33</sup> Most of these relocations were not conducted voluntarily but were planned and compulsory.<sup>34</sup> It was considered as a serious attack on the family values and traditional way of life of the Uyghur people. The relocation of young Uyghur girls was not only a form of negative intervention to the cultural norms and traditions of the Uyghurs, but also generated major concerns about the safety and fate of these young girls in the larger cities. This new policy significantly increased the Uyghur community’s grievances with the policies of the state.

This led to a serious paradox for the regime. The government had run a campaign of “otherization” in a bid to foster social unity, but in effect had turned all Uyghurs in China into “usual suspects.” The outcome of these “securitized” policies adopted by the Chinese government to “protect and preserve” national unity started to endanger the same “harmonious society” that the Chinese government was aspiring to build. The lack of any attention to the Uyghur people’s grievances led to the worsening of relations between the State and Uyghur people. The first signs of danger became visible when a melee among workers in Shaoguan led to the lynching of Uyghurs and a subsequent ethnic clash.<sup>35</sup> Following the incident, Uyghurs in the city of Urumqi protested against the negligence of the State towards violence and the lynching of Uyghurs. Police brutality targeting Uyghur protesters only intensified these protests. Mass arrests and disappearances followed, and the clashes turned into communal violence.<sup>36</sup>

Instead of finding a way to provide ethnic reconciliation and a peaceful resolution of the disputes between different parties, the security forces employed harsh measures targeting mostly the Uyghur demonstrators. The excessive use of force and disappearances of Uyghurs following the demonstrations deteriorated the situation in the region. The demonstrations showed the total elimination of inter-group trust between different parties. In addition, the extraordinary security measures taken by the government, including the deployment of the troops, the shutdown of the internet and cell phone reception, and the massive men hunt, demonstrated that the Chinese government was not willing to address the root causes of the problem but instead approached it with a policy of securitization. In its official explanation of the incidents to the international community, Beijing once again preferred to use security focused language. The PRC government resorted to old methods rather than trying to take control of the situation and preventing further escalation of the inter-ethnic clashes. The State pointed to the provocations of external forces - particularly the “separatist activities” of the World Uyghur Congress - as motivation for the Urumqi incident.<sup>37</sup> The description of the events in the People’s Daily demonstrated the government’s viewpoint. As cited by Zhang and McGhee, the

People's Daily stated that "7.5 riots have a complicated political background. It is a serious violent crime involving collusion of internal and external hostile forces with organized characteristics. Their aim was to foment troubles and cause the separation of the country... Therefore we should together move swiftly towards maintaining social stability with forceful measures and tactics, and strictly combat these violent crimes."<sup>38</sup> Following the Urumqi incident, the Chinese government further increased the degree of securitization in the region. Chinese authorities tried to create the impression that "all unrest in the region was associated with nationalist movements and all nationalist movements are associated with Islamic fundamentalism."<sup>39</sup>

The unrest stemming from Urumqi exposed for the first time the ramifications of China's "otherization" policies. Tension in Xinjiang had transformed into a dispute not between Uyghurs and the PRC, but between Uyghurs and the Han Chinese. Among those arrested, sentenced to prison, or executed, a great majority of them were Uyghurs. These incidents created serious questions about China's approach to the problem. For the PRC, the Uyghur issue had taken a turn toward further securitization. The Ghulja incident in 1997, the Urumqi events in 2009, and the resulting crackdowns by security forces led to an exodus of Uyghurs from XUAR as young Uyghurs in particular looked for ways to flee the region. In their quest to leave China, the fleeing populations were often victimized by human traffickers. Others who remained in XUAR found themselves entrenched in a cycle of mounting violence and human rights violations.<sup>40</sup>



**Xinjiang became critical because in addition to its own energy resources, it lies on the route of vital pipelines, railroads and highways that can transport energy resources from Central Asian countries to China proper**

## **The Uyghur Problem as a Geopolitical Pivot**

In the aftermath of the Urumqi incidents, the effect of the propaganda on ethnic harmony and accord began to fade away, while economic and political dimensions of XUAR for China came to the foreground. With its energy resources and critical location on important energy routes, XUAR had always been valuable for China. However, with the opening of the Chinese economy to the outside world and subsequent rapid rise in its volume of trade, the Chinese government started to explore the real value of the region after the 1990s. While economists were discovering the significance of XUAR beyond natural resource extraction, the central administration considered it a troublesome border territory. Even before the end of the Cold War, the Chinese government

considered the region an Achilles' heel geopolitically with the threat of Soviet intervention during those years. These fears survived in the aftermath of the Cold War as well. Starting in the mid-2000s, however, perception of the region shifted. With China's increasing trade volumes, improving relations with Central Asian countries and Pakistan, and the increasing demand for oil in 1990s, the XUAR region began to be considered as a possible bridge between China and Central Asia. The region is now viewed as a critical geopolitical power center for China. Such a transformation in China's approach to the territory and its meaning for China's strategic goals have shaped the country's approach to the Uyghur problem and became a key reason why the Beijing administration was keen to implement micro control policies in XUAR.

Owing to economic initiatives launched in the 1990s, the PRC administration projected enormous political and economic power. This was particularly true in Southeast Asia. Private economic zones and free-trade areas formed in China's southern states became the trade arteries in the region. These areas served as an economic, political and demographic spring board for the country in the following years. Thus, China embraced a new geopolitical model that aimed to develop the geopolitical advantage provided by these border regions by transforming them into engines of the state economy.

Starting in the early 2000s, the Chinese administration sought to extend this model in XUAR in order project power and influence, this time against Central Asia. However, during this period, Uyghurs, disturbed by the deterioration of their situation in terms of basic freedoms and liberties and increasing disadvantages in economic and social realms, began to express their discomfort more frequently, initiating a number of riots and protests. Due to the potential role of the XUAR region to China's Central Asia policy, the uprisings and increasing instability was perceived as a major potential obstacle for China's future geopolitical aspirations in the region. In order to resolve this problem and strengthen its foothold in its potential spring board, the Chinese government could have launched new initiatives to resolve the interethnic disputes and develop confidence-building measures that would have counteracted the increasing alienation between the state and the Uyghur community. However, yet again, the securitization discourse and policies prevailed, and the Chinese government preferred to adopt harsher methods and implement counter-productive policies to eliminate possible hurdles to their Central Asia policies.

At the end of the Cold War, China's policy towards Central Asia was greatly shaped by its policies in Xinjiang. Chinese authorities tried to export the strike hard campaigns and their crusade against the "three evil forces" to the other side of the border in order to secure their control in the region. However, in the 1990s, the area also started to be considered as a possible asset instead of a burden or risk for China in its economic relations with Central Asia. The



A demonstrator holds a child and a controversial picture released by the Uyghur American association that apparently shows victims of the violence of the deadly riots in China's northwestern region of Xinjiang during a protest in front of the Chinese Embassy in Ankara on July 7, 2009.

EDS NOTE: The picture might also be related to a car accident.

AFP PHOTO / ADEM ALTAN

“Great Development of the West”<sup>41</sup> project was developed by the central administration in these years to increase Xinjiang’s economic appeal and in part to increase the economic impact of China over Central Asian Republics. Central Asia provided not only a significant market for the Chinese goods and products, but it was also a great source of energy that the burgeoning Chinese economy so urgently required. For China, which had been dependent on external energy sources since 1993, energy security was a top priority. Xinjiang became critical because in addition to its own energy resources, it lies on the route of vital pipelines, railroads and highways that can transport energy resources from Central Asian countries to China proper.

Xinjiang also gained an important role in the transfer of natural resources from other oil rich regions, such as Middle East and Africa, to China. Transporting energy from these two regions was risky for China, considering that the main marine transportation routes –the Strait of Malacca and Spratly Islands in the South China Sea in particular– were not adequately secure and could be easily blocked by other countries in case of a crisis. These waterways are narrow passes with limited space for maneuvering, and continental waters in the region are controlled by different countries. Factoring in this reality, the Chinese administration set off in search of alternative routes. The only route providing access to the above energy sources for China involved passing through XUAR. The Chinese government therefore commissioned the Gwa-

## Today, through much evolution, the Uyghur problem in XUAR has gained a key dimension in the PRC's perception of target and threat, and has morphed into a critical part of Chinese foreign policy

dar Port Project in order to move energy resources through the region and avoid the more precarious water-routes. XUAR was to offer a significant opening out not only as an energy transit route but also as a trade route which involved constructing railways and roads connecting to Central Asia.

These new projects gave body to China's second geopolitical goal. The PRC developed a strategy to transform XUAR into a spring board for its growing economic and demographic influence in Central Asia. As the CCP secretary Zhang Chunxian stated "Xinjiang will quickly become an economic and commercial hub in Central Asia, and its population will have the privilege to live in the new Dubai of Central Asia."<sup>42</sup> As U.S. foreign and security policy underwent a "pivot to Asia," China felt both trapped and surrounded. To its north was the world's second largest nuclear power, the Russian Federation of Vladimir Putin, who regards the disintegration of the Soviet Union as the biggest geopolitical catastrophe of 20<sup>th</sup> century. To its east, China felt pressure from Japan which, despite economic stagnation, maintained its position as one of the world's most powerful economies. Notably, under Shinzō Abe's leadership, the country started to follow a line of decisive and tough foreign and security policies. In the south, there existed yet another major power, India, along with other states in various alliances aimed at limiting China's regional influence. These countries had been encouraged by the U.S.'s "pivot to Asia" which, alongside its initiative in Myanmar (Burma), clearly showed that the U.S. is involved in the border problems and disputes in the South China Sea.

Under these circumstances, China's only possible option for a geopolitical opening was towards its West. At this critical juncture, China picked Central Asia as the focus of its strategic geopolitical pivot. According to Sun, "Still under construction, "March West" ... would center on enhancing China's presence, resources, diplomatic efforts and engagement in Central Asia, South Asia and the Middle East. Beijing will speed up the construction of a "New Silk Road" led by China to ensure the smooth flow of energy supplies and commodities through Eurasia into western China and enhance economic cooperation with the region. To turn China's economic muscles into political strength and soft power, China will allocate more resources into forging closer ties with countries in the region through diplomatic engagements, human exchanges, foreign assistance, and academic research projects. Furthermore, given the grave security conditions in Xinjiang and Tibet, China will also design comprehensive social, religious and foreign policies to reinforce its national secu-

riety and improve relations with the ethnic minorities.”<sup>43</sup> This “March West,” however, in part depended on the situation in XUAR. Here existed the potential to transform the territory into a geopolitical spring board as was the case in the PRC’s southern states in the early 1990s.

Of course, in order for China to maintain firm control of this spring board, it was necessary to resolve Uyghur dissension. Totally securing this territory served a strategic purpose beyond national security. One of the most effective steps to reach this strategic goal was a demographic intervention in the region. In an attempt at population engineering, the Chinese government increased the flow of Chinese immigrants. The wave of migration began in the early periods of Chinese control over XUAR and the Western development project contributed to this process significantly. Regardless of China’s public statements, Uyghurs’ perception of this wave of migration was that it was an attempt to demographically assimilate Uyghurs. This social intervention had, of course, economic implications. Such an influx of population led to increased levels of Uyghur unemployment as jobs were transferred to the new Chinese labor force in the region. This burden was particularly felt amongst Uyghur youth, who were already adversely affected by socio-economic grievances and political pressure.

The complexity and severity of the situation was also reflected in restrictions on freedom of expression. Uyghur intellectuals who raised their voices were closely followed by the State and seriously punished for their works. Uyghur websites were strictly controlled and social media users and bloggers were subjected to detentions. These detentions were particularly prevalent during and after the Urumqi incidents during which dissenters faced long term prison sentences.<sup>44</sup> State crackdowns on Uyghur freedoms and culture did not stop there. In the same period, the State allowed the bulldozing of Kashgar, a culturally important city for Uyghurs, in the name of urban transformation, further increasing the tension between the Uyghur population and the State.<sup>45</sup>

These tensions ultimately compounded and produced an uncontrollable cycle of violence in XUAR. Protests became routine and often resulted in the disproportionate use of force by security units. Any remaining shreds of mutual trust between the Uyghur community and the State quickly dissipated. In the face of such use of force, some Uyghurs themselves began to discuss resolving the conflict through the use of force, triggering new acts of violence. Though the region did not succumb to total armed struggle, Chinese policies, which had been implemented to gain control, had instead made the Xinjiang less controllable and less secure.

Today, through much evolution, the Uyghur problem in XUAR has gained a key dimension in the PRC’s perception of target and threat, and has morphed

into a critical part of Chinese foreign policy. The region has felt the effects of the Chinese authoritarian regime's pressures and chosen resistance to them. The threat of spreading clashes, the security of energy routes, relations between China and the Islamic world, and the international image of the State all substantially impact Beijing's strategy in Central Asia and its national security doctrine. The Chinese administration's problematic policies have led to increasing tension in XUAR, despite being implemented in the name of eliminating the very problems that they have in fact promoted.

Current policies regarding the Uyghur problem push China deeper into a strategic pit. Acts of violence in the region, increasing numbers of Uyghur refugees fleeing from XUAR and increasing international attention have internationalized the problem just as they have deepened the gap between Uyghurs and the Chinese administration. Denying the problem, writing it off as terrorism, ignoring the dispute's social, economic and cultural dimensions, and looking for scapegoats to the escalation of the problem may come back to haunt the emerging global power, which is clearly nowhere near healing this deep ethnic wound.

This paper has focused on the dynamics of the Uyghur problem as well as the many different variables and actors involved on a day-to-day basis. At this juncture, the task of the conclusion is to determine possible solutions to the Uyghur problem and discuss the problem as an ethnic question. This task becomes increasingly difficult as China continues to emerge as a global power, complicating its foreign and security policies, escalating ethnic tension in XUAR, and changing its approach to its Uyghur population in the face of increasing international attention. The last part of this analysis concentrates on whether there is a chance of solution, and if there is, what the starting point could be.

## **Is There a Solution to the Uyghur Problem?**

Recent developments in XUAR suggest that serious contemplation of how to tackle the ongoing crisis is needed. As is the case in all ethnic problems, the addressee, State, and international community all incur responsibility. As mentioned above, the dispute is, on one hand, a human rights issue and on the other an economic and strategic issue. Violations of rights and escalating violence in XUAR deepen the ethnic problem as its strategic dimension gradually transforms. Despite different actors and elements involved in this transformation, the one that needs to take the first step toward a solution is China. It must make the first move because it holds the key position in terms of political ownership and power. The most critical step to begin a resolution process is for the PRC to acknowledge the problem, show an intention to settle it and un-

derstand the reasons behind it. The next step is for China to abandon the policies that have facilitated these problems in the past and understand that a dialogue with the addressee is the only way to resolve the issue.

The Chinese administration needs to acknowledge the seriousness of the on-going crisis between an ethnic minority and the State. This will be a critical threshold to achieving a solution to the problem, as it is in the resolution of so many ethnic conflicts. So far, the government in China has either denied the existence of its Uyghur problem or utilized limited factions within the population as scapegoats. The Beijing administration has not acknowledged economic and social problems in the Uyghur community in XUAR or the difficulties they face due to identity pressures. The administration legitimizes its policies of political and religious repression, and Uyghurs who address these policies have been silenced, arrested or forced to flee the country.

As the crises of the East China Sea and the South China Sea islands have intensified, China has increased the tone of the pro-security approach to problems countrywide. Reading the problem in XUAR completely through a pro-security perspective has turned it into an open wound in recent years. By releasing footage of happy Uyghur faces to the world, the Chinese administration tries to portray Uyghurs as a minority content with their lives; however, all those who are interested in XUAR are aware that there is a problem. The Chinese government has not been able to successfully respond to activist efforts abroad or to accusations about the human right violations it commits. Despite strict military and police measures against legitimate political and cultural demands of Uyghurs and an unannounced state of emergency, the government has not been able to eliminate its Uyghur problem. To the contrary, they have only deepened ethnic and identity clashes in XUAR. These clashes have received a lot of press coverage as the cycle of violence has begun to substantially threaten China's internal stability.

China has perpetually read the issue from the perspectives of territorial integrity and national security. Relying on police measures rather than paying attention to the community's social and economic demands, launching propaganda campaigns for the indivisible unity of the country rather than addressing identity issues, and identifying the Uyghur problem with fundamentalism and terrorism rather than as an issue in regards to the religious freedom have



**The tension that has surfaced in the last couple of years may lead to an uncontrollable ethnic clash to spread over the region between Uyghurs and Han Chinese, leading to a never ending cycle of revenge attacks**

## **It is necessary to open a channel for communication between Uyghurs in XUAR and the State in order to voice the problems and meet the demands of Uyghurs**

addressing the problem in a more civil and solution-oriented manner. Although it seems difficult, adopting a new perspective will open a critical window for both parties. In short, admitting that Uyghurs experience problems that cannot be solved through existing policies is of key importance for the settlement of the issue.

This new paradigm for XUAR will be possible only if China admits the failure of its current policies. All military and security measures taken by the central administration have contributed to the complexity of the problem rather than to its resolution. The implementation of “strike hard” operations since the mid-1990s have been the number one reason behind the transformation of this problem into an ethnic gangrene. As Uyghurs try to express in different ways the grievances they hold with Chinese policies, dissident movements either move out of the country or retreat underground. Forcing imams to dance in squares or take loyalty oaths has not helped the recovery of the relations between Uyghurs and the State.

Considering the last 25 years of relations between the Uyghurs and the PRC, the frequency of protests and demonstrations in XUAR has constantly increased and spread in the country despite all efforts to suppress them. The province of Urumqi, the population of which is 90 percent Chinese and is expectedly to be the most successful in terms of ethnic integration, has been a scene for conflict since July 2009, indicating that the PRC-Uyghur relations continue to be very problematic. Despite bans, crackdowns, the use of force and blackouts in communication, protests and demonstrations have continued to increase. Police violence in cities rapidly triggers demonstrations in different parts of the region. In order to exit this cycle of violence, China should resign from these policies.

Another reason for the escalating crisis in XUAR is that the dispute has gradually evolved into a clash between ethnic groups. When this was initially observed in Urumqi, it had become more or less evident that the issue has reached a new dimension. Due to the problematic policies of the State, groups that had previously set symbolic lines between themselves and tried to tolerate each other, have now begun to confront each other. The tension that has surfaced

all put distance between Uyghurs and the State. Pressures have led to social explosions, underground networking and acts of violence. At this point, the taboo about XUAR in the Chinese security structure and iron-fist approach of the local bureaucracy has prevented China from shifting its paradigm and ad-

in the last couple of years may lead to an uncontrollable ethnic clash to spread over the region between Uyghurs and Han Chinese, leading to a never ending cycle of revenge attacks. To prevent this, China should end its nationalist and population engineering policies. The tensions these policies inspire, and the use of Han Chinese groups as a proxy by security forces against Uyghur demonstrators not only pave the path for a bloody conflict but also completely eliminate China's dream of a future with the 56 minority communities living in peace and harmony. The Chinese administration should acknowledge that an anti-minority nationalism may cause threats to XUAR and so China's stability as a whole.

Finally, it is necessary to open a channel for communication between Uyghurs in XUAR and the State in order to voice the problems and meet the demands of Uyghurs. Such a channel would allow for the creation of a platform for dialogue that would lead to finding a peaceful solution. At this point in time, communication channels that should exist between the Uyghur people and the State of China are fully blocked. Moreover, the serious problem of mutual trust is undeniable, as it presently appears impossible for the Beijing administration to rebuild confidence in relations with Uyghurs in the short-term. The fates of people who make straightforward criticisms and suggestions about opening policies implemented in both XUAR and the rest of China have already created an auto-censorship mechanism amongst Uyghurs. Thus, it currently seems unrealistic to expect an effective result from direct interaction between the State and Uyghurs. In addition to this, previous mistreatment of Uyghur opinion leaders does not create a positive picture. The fate of Uyghur economy professor Tohti in Beijing, who was very well integrated with the Chinese society, is a warning for all intellectuals who might otherwise make positive contributions to the issue in XUAR.

The detention of Ilham Tohti, his indictment on charges of separatism and cooperation with terrorist organizations, and his sentence of life in prison after writing articles that argue that the problems in XUAR cannot be reduced to terrorism, have seriously damaged relations between Uyghur intellectuals and Chinese government. Considering the difficulty of dialogue with Uyghurs in the region and their lack of political representation, Uyghur organizations active abroad and human rights organizations can be the key actors in helping to overcome the crisis of confidence between the Uyghur people and the Chinese administration and should serve as a starting point for dialogue to address Uyghur demands. In order to develop a channel of interaction with the Uyghur people, it is critical for the State of China to engage with organizations representing the Uyghurs. The international community and interested countries should work, either directly or indirectly, with the NGOs to have their role and contributions acknowledged by China so that a mutual trust between the parties can begin to form.

The resolution process can only begin after the Chinese administration takes these steps and this will be possible through the efforts of sympathetic Chinese citizens, interested groups, and courageous politicians and bureaucrats. As previously mentioned, although every group that takes part in this conflict plays an important role, the greatest responsibility rests with the Beijing administration which should confront the problem and begin to discuss its source.

If China does not take these steps, Uyghurs will continue to suffer under repressive policies, and the cycle of violence will turn into an ethnic gangrene in XUAR. Although Uyghurs will be the party most affected by such violence, the Chinese administration, an aspiring candidate for power on the international stage, will also pay a heavy price. As long as China regards minority communities living in the country as a threat, it will be very hard for the country to project any power. Furthermore, the “Chinese Dream,” which is a personal interest of Xi Jinping, and the soft power that China has been trying to mirror for so long, will not be achieved by an administration that pressures and persecutes its own community and citizens. No one will benefit from a reality in which people flee China and seek shelter in other countries while the Chinese government tries to bring them back by exerting diplomatic and military efforts. Unless a harmony of social texture, as the complementary of economic power, is reached, China will be destined to remain a fragmented society; and the artificial the images of harmony China tries to portray will stand out in every incident that occurs in XUAR. At this juncture, positive steps towards the Uyghur problem will lead to a win-win situation and create an opportunity for China to fix her damaged international image. To waste this opportunity by intensifying the policies that China has tried and failed before will mean a strategic blunder for a global power. If China continues to spend her energy to deny the problem rather than to acknowledge and settle it, the problem will only endure. ■

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