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The Chinese Communist Party and the Uyghurs: Securitization and How Ethnic Minorities are Oppressed in a Multi-Ethnic State

Justin Mascarin

Abstract: Since the beginning of the War on Terror in 2001, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has convinced its own populace as well as foreign countries that increasing security measures in the Xinjiang region are necessary. In 2014, in response to terror attacks, the Chinese Government announced the “Strike Hard Campaign Against Violent Terrorism” aimed at the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, and more specifically the Uyghur ethnic minority. This paper will analyze the oppression of the Uyghurs in China through securitization theory and the political and ethnic theories to construct a better understanding of how large multi-ethnic states legitimize oppressing minority groups within their own country. The findings are that through a combination of Han-ethnocentrism, internal political control and the redefinition of Uyghur resistance to cultural assimilation as a security issue of “Islamic extremism” the CCP can justify the incarceration and indoctrination of the Uyghurs. The international Community despite its acknowledgement of human rights abuses is ill equipped to confront ethnic oppression by big states such as China due to a lack of appropriate legal structures, concepts and definitions on the international level.

Description of The Issue

The ethno-culturally diverse residents of China’s Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region have been caught in the middle of political, economic, and ethnic influence and strife for thousands of years. The Uyghurs are an ethnic minority first politically designated by the Guomindang (GMD or Kuomintang, or the National Party) before 1949 and then after 1949 by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as the Turkic non-nomadic Muslim inhabitants of the region. Various

ethnic groups in Xinjiang have been subject to intermittent persecution by various Chinese governments and policies. The persecution of the Uyghurs by the CCP is the most recent such campaign wherein the CCP is exercising the full force of the Chinese state's surveillance system and incarcerating up to a million Uyghurs.

Much of what is known about the Xinjiang persecutions is from investigative journalism. This includes internal CCP cables and other documents released by the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ) and the New York Times (Ramzy & Buckley). These cables outline the internal goals and directives concerning the incarceration and "re-education" of the Uyghurs. There is little up to date political and demographic data on the region, due to information control by the CCP, making it difficult to conduct external quantitative analysis. Nevertheless, this paper will examine the Chinese political and ethnic philosophy and securitization within the context of China's current political objectives to understand why the persecution is happening with renewed strength.

The structure of the paper is as follows: the first section will outline the idea of Xinjiang as being subject to "centripetal forces" in its history and presently. The second section will develop China's philosophical approach to questions of ethnicity and where the Uyghurs fit within it. The third section will apply the securitization theory in the context of the CCP policies, the recent history of events regarding the securitization of the Uyghurs, and the referent ideals that the CCP claims are currently threatened. The final section will discuss the security actions leveraged

against the Uyghurs and implications of such actions for the relations of multi-ethnic states, the ethnic minorities within them, and the international community.

“Centrifugal and Centripetal forces” in Xinjiang’s History

Fredrick Starr introduced the idea of “centrifugal” (8) and “centripetal” (11) forces as an important aspect defining the Xinjiang-region. The centrifugal forces are all the powers that influenced Xinjiang throughout its history. Mainly, he references the nomads from the north, China’s various governments originating in the east, and various Islamic connections projecting their influence from the Indian subcontinent to the south (Starr 7-8). This characterization can be augmented with the former Russian influence from the north. At the same time there are also “centripetal” forces that characterize Xinjiang as resistant to occupation and control by any outside entity. This includes the geographic realities of the region: mainly its uninhabitable desert and mountain ranges which make Xinjiang difficult to control. Starr argued that the largest of the centripetal forces is “the rise of pan-Uyghur identity” (Starr 13). This centripetal force was aided unintentionally by the Chinese through their imitation of Soviet-style approaches to ethnic minorities. The creation of an ethnic identity under the GMD and later central communist state further fueled the Uyghur separatists’ desire to return to self-determination and autonomy.

This framework is helpful because China, through multiple governments, has tried to use these forces to control the region. For example, GMD leaders in Xinjiang actively encouraged political competition amongst ethnicities and religious sects (Millward & Tursun 68). The CCP, to effectively administer the Xinjiang region, worked with local leaders and gave them some

autonomy in their local governance. Now, the CCP desires to break many of these forces to bring Xinjiang closer to the rest of China. Since the breakdown of the Soviet Union the new Central Asian countries bordering China – Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan - act as the newest and most immediate centrifugal force pulling Xinjiang away from China and agitating the centripetal force of Uyghur separatism. Their independence and subsequent Islamic revival provide a model for Uyghur independence. Ethnic Uyghurs that reside in these countries also provide support for a separatist movement.

The Uyghurs and Ethnic Politics

To understand the separatism situation in Xinjiang and the security solutions enacted by the CCP, it is important to first review the history of ethnic politics in modern China. Each political entity needs to create an argument for their existence. No claim of statehood, even the Uyghur claim, is a natural one. To some extent statehood and political classifications of ethnicity within the state are socially constructed (Collins & Cottey). Under GMD rule, Sun Yat-sen put forth the “five races of china” theory which includes the Han, Hui, Manchus, Mongolians and Tibetans. Sheng Shicai, a GMD ruler of Xinjiang from 1933-1944, instead took an ethnic survey of the region and identified 14 ethnicities. This was the first time that Uyghur entered official use. Taking this official category, modern Uyghur separatists linked this categorization to an argument for nationhood. Sheng Shicai’s process of identifying ethnicities was influenced heavily by the Soviet model and these classifications would be solidified when the CCP came into power.

The CCP worked to downplay the ethnic differentiations which included the “five races” theory and the specific regional classifications. It must be noted though that Xinjiang also was declared as an autonomous region in 1955. The CCP merged the Marxist social theory of progress with the underlying view of Han ethnocentricity (Gladney). The Han ethnicity is the largest and most politically powerful in China. What agitated the rise of Han led organizations like the GMD and the CCP was the reaction to foreign intervention by the Western powers and Manchu rulers of the Qing dynasty (1644-1912). Mao Zedong, the leader of the CCP, was hardly a cultural relativist by saying that, “Why tour the four continents’ when China itself contains so much” (Spence 136) During this period China, through the CCP, became a Sinocentric state to the rest of the world. Internally Mao tried to separate ethnicity and politics. In doing so he made the Han majority the center of politics through his policies allowing Han-ethnocentrism to continue.

The CCP’s current policy to promote nationalism in the multi-ethnic state is constructed off the Chinese term *Zhonghua Minzu* or “Chinese Ethnicities.” It shares similarities with other multi-ethnic (imperial) identity projects such as the former Ottoman Empire wherein the ethnic differences are respected but an overarching nation-building project is driven by the idea of proudly partaking in the unity of the political state. The CCP creates propaganda claiming to celebrate ethnic diversity and autonomy. They hold these beliefs about ethnic diversity within the purview of a Han ethno-centric view of ethnicity (Bulag). Therefore, ethnicities and other “Han” cultures are seen as backwards and therefore it is the responsibility of the Han majority to modernize the “backwards” ethnicities (Gladney). These beliefs were what motivated much of the state sponsored modernization projects which required Han migration from the 1940s to the 1980s to various frontiers (Hansen 81). Xinjiang has been subject to governmental policies

encouraging Han migration since the Qing Dynasty (Millward & Tursen 63). The purpose has always been to change the ethnic makeup of the region and make it more politically stable for the ruling government. From the perspective of the CCP, the Uyghurs, as an ethnicity in China, only receive and will continue to receive the economic progress through continued connection with the Han majority (Hansen).

Securitization Theory and The Social Construction of Security and Threats in Xinjiang

Securitization theory is a recently developed approach in International Relations, heavily driven by Social Constructivists, which assumes that there are no naturally existing threats. Instead, state actors “must label existential threats as a security problem and convince a relevant audience to allow them to take extraordinary action.” (Waever). The CCP is adept at labeling threats and convincing relevant audiences even despite the authoritarian nature of the regime. Balzacq, in explaining the basis of securitization, says that “something becomes a security problem through discursive politics (Balzacq 1). Therefore, at some level of politics there is a communicative and discussion-based process of what constitutes a security threat. This paper will focus on the sociological and structural aspects of securitization as opposed to the linguistic aspects. Still, language is a key to the securitization process because it is in the rhetoric of the CCP that one can parse the referent object; things or ideals that are at stake for the populace due to the security threat (Waever).

Originally in China, Mao Zedong was adept at being able to overstep the CCP establishment and convince the people of threats to the Chinese nation. This can be seen in the Cultural Revolution

(1966-1974) where much of the Party was under threat from Mao and the Red Guard. After Mao's death in 1976, the desire for stability caused a consolidation of CCP power. Then following the Tiananmen square massacre in 1989, Deng Xiaoping further hampered the process in which citizens could assemble and protest (Saich 89). The current CCP uses classical tactics plus innovative strategies to inhibit discourse in the twenty first century. This includes state political and historical education which are a mainstay of building Chinese nationalism and communist loyalty. The CCP also censors public discourse through strong integration of the Chinese Internet to specific apps and an aggressive firewall system shielding China from outside influence. Regardless, the Chinese government still must maintain legitimacy amongst its citizens and all the ethnicities. This requires a careful balance to ensure that any action and situation does not initiate a breakdown of CCP influence. Extraordinary security infrastructures, from a Western perspective, already exist within China that most Chinese citizens, regardless of ethnicity, deal with daily. The average Chinese citizen took no part in the discussion of these security measures which include social credit scores, facial recognition, and intense monitoring of the Internet (Zhou). While the security infrastructure is used in the whole country the CCP must make securitization arguments to other relevant audiences to legitimize the complete usage of such infrastructures. In this situation the relevant audience mainly includes other CCP-members in the Party Congress and regional party elites. While the workings of the CCP minimize as much dissent as possible there are still factions and division in the party. The average Chinese citizen plays no part in the discursive part of the securitization process and is informed of a threat through central media. The CCP must also make the case for securitization to other countries which will be discussed later in the paper.

In 1992, Deng Xiaoping “hypothesized continued economic reform was vital for the party’s legitimacy” (Saich 86). This has become a strong tenant of the CCP and an impromptu social contract with its citizens (West). Corruption, environmental degradation, and economic injustices are recognized by the central government as threats to this economic growth. Threats to economic growth are threats to legitimacy and labelled in some sense as security threats. The central government allows for political participation in these areas at the local level. In essence, protests against threats to economic growth involve protections that were given to citizens from the central government but denied by local cadres (O’Brien 8-9). Resolution of these security issues maintains legitimacy of the central government and also strengthens local administration. Other major threats to legitimacy are separatism threats from the Uyghurs, Tibet, or the recent Hong Kong events have no approved avenue of political participation. Devolution historically is a threat to many states across the world. Losing territory claimed by an ethnic group can have significant strategic or economic losses as exemplified in Catalonia in Spain. These issues differ from other protests in China because they are aimed at the central government and self-determination is not recognized by the central party (O’Brien 114).

Securitizing Events

In 2001, when the United States announced the “Global War on Terror” in response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the CCP took the opportunity to close its border with Pakistan. It declared a military emergency in the region and conducted military exercises with 50,000 troops (Shicor 121). Furthermore, the CCP in the midst of this, announced that these actions were necessary to “safeguard the peace and stability of China’s border areas,” and linked the fight against “East Turkistan” forces to that of international terrorism (Eckholm). China’s struggle with Uyghur

separatism had been ongoing as a militant group named the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) had been active for several years at the point. They got their namesake of East Turkistan from two short-lived states in the Xinjiang region from 1933-1934 and 1944-1949. Since 1949, there was cyclical oppression of the Uyghurs based on Beijing's policy towards Xinjiang. Still, the "War on Terror" was an appeal to convince the rest of the world, especially the West and the United States, to condone its actions against the Uyghurs.

Since then, the CCP's issues with the Uyghurs have remained alive in uprisings, most notably in 2009, during which Uyghur demonstrations in Xinjiang turned violent by targeting the Han and Hui ethnic groups. This event was extensively filmed by the police of Urumqi, the capital of Xinjiang, and broadcasted widely on Chinese Central Television (CCTV) showing the tense threat of civic unrest. These riots prompted then president Hu Jintao to leave a G8 summit early to travel to Urumqi (Gladney). Then in 2013, an ambitious but poorly executed attack occurred at Tiananmen Square, the center of Chinese politics. Five people were killed, three of which were the perpetrators who had Uyghur names. A Uyghur terrorist group named the Turkistan Islamic Party (possibly the same organization as the ETIM) agitating for Uyghur separatism claimed responsibility for the attack. This, as well as the Kunming knife attack, where 31 died, were the triggering events of the most recent wave of pressure against the Uyghurs. "The Strike Hard Campaign against violent terrorism" launched only two months after the Kunming attacks in May of 2014. Since these attacks the legal distinctions between a separatist, a critic, and a simple ethnic Uyghur have been completely blurred.

Referent Object

The referent object in securitization theory are the physical objects, institutions, or values which are threatened by a security threat. The state actors need to make an argument to the relevant audience to grant them the power to take extraordinary security measures (Waeber). The CCP's response to the events of 9/11, and domestic terror attacks in 2013 and 2014 shows the values that are under attack from the Uyghur separatist threat. This also needs to be augmented with a few economic and strategic factors to understand the securitizing actions.

The referent ideals that appear in CCP responses pertaining to the securitization of Xinjiang are “Stability, Development, and (Ethnic) Unity” (Quackenbush). Each are vague and not expounded upon within the immediate context. This was said by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson Hua Chunying when she was denying human rights abuses in Xinjiang. Each value contains strong implicit implications for fellow party members, Chinese citizens, and other countries. First, and with regard to stability, Central Asia and the “Middle East” have been the genesis for instability for much of the world and was the primary target of the “Global War on Terror.” The CCP marked the centrifugal forces from Central Asia early on and portrays Xinjiang with the potential as being a possible source instability. The riots and terror attacks also point to this potential to the Chinese citizens and the aftermath of these events got widely broadcast on CCTV to exacerbate fear. The common citizens are not included in the securitization discussion but the CCP still wants to provide evidence to validate their actions. Otherwise, a successful separatist campaign in one region of China would cause other groups to reframe their dealings with China (O'Brien). If the CCP were to face an ethnic breakdown it

could create a geographic and political instability within China which could ultimately diffuse to the international community.

Second, the threat to “development” is twofold: one is the aforementioned development of acculturating ethnicities of Xinjiang into the Han majority. The other threat is to Chinese economic and political hegemony as a superpower throughout the world. With the introduction of the “China Dream” upon Xi Jinping’s ascendance to the presidency of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) the aim has been to make China a superpower as opposed to the “lay low” strategies of previous presidents (Lowsen). Much like the ideal of “development”, the “China Dream” is also extremely vague. The tangible aspect for the “China Dream” is the “One Belt One Road Initiative”, which utilizes Xinjiang as a key transit route. To complete the land route into Europe, China needs to project power into neighboring Central Asian countries such as Kazakhstan, which cannot be achieved without a developed and stable center. The economic belt and the acculturation of the Uyghurs are seen as a necessity to continue Deng’s theory of economic growth.

Thirdly, the final ideal is ethnic unity. In CCP’s philosophy a devolution would not only hurt the Han but other ethnicities as well. Xi Jinping stated that with the violence, “social stability will suffer shocks, the general unity of people of every ethnicity will be damaged, and the broad outlook for reform, development and stability will be affected” (Ramzy & Buckley). To Xi, all the referent objects are interrelated. In the case of Xinjiang, it is resource rich and strategically important. The ability to truly develop these resources would only come from the central

government. Therefore, ethnic unity is not only patriotic but necessary so that everyone, including the Han, can reap the benefits of development. Each value is necessary to achieve the “China Dream” and become a global superpower. It is important not to disregard these ideals as empty rhetoric since words have implications regardless of their veracity.

Securitizing Measures

Xi Jinping stated internally that he believes the root cause is “Islamic Extremism” and that “economic development does not automatically bring lasting order and security” (Ramzy & Buckley). Firstly, Xi Jinping’s statements predicate that the problem is indeed a cultural one and the prescription for which was indoctrination away from extremism. Secondly the CCP theory of accruing legitimacy from the Uyghurs through economic development has been negated. While Xi originally did not propose a detailed solution to the Uyghur situation he did believe that it would require a widescale “period of painful, interventionary treatment” (Ramzy & Buckley).

In response to the 2013 and 2014 terror attacks the CCP passed the “Counter Terrorism Law of the People’s Republic of China” on December 27, 2015. It is a 97-article long law which outlines the directives, definitions, and responsibilities to combat terror. This law broadened the legal scope of terrorist behavior (ChineseLawTranslate). At the same time the CCP started to inhibit Uyghur culture by changing education. Freedom House found that indoctrination is more prevalent in Xinjiang for Muslim minority students (Cook). and in 2014 education of the Uyghur language was banned (Chao & Henderson).

Xi Jinping prescribed indoctrination but it was not carried out widescale in the form of physical camps until 2016 with the new party secretary of Xinjiang, Chen Quanguo. He was the party secretary of Tibet (Xizang), which had its own ethnic separatist struggle, and had a reputation for being a hardliner by increasing surveillance and cracking down on separatism. At first the camps were held secret. In the leaked telegram released by the ICIJ it calls for “strict secrecy” (ICIJ) at the end the directive not allowing cameras into the camps. The camps were uncovered when satellite imagery revealed their existence. The Chinese government responded that these centers were for “vocational training” and that the Uyghurs had entered of their own volition. At the same time stories of Uyghurs who were discharged from the camps and fled China made claims of human rights abuses and torture (Chao and Henderson).

The academic priorities of the “education camps” in Xinjiang are “Language (Mandarin), law, and skills, make remedial mandarin studies the top priority” (ICIJ). The CCP imposes their ethnocentric view upon the Uyghurs and other ethnicities. By mandating ethnicities to learn the Mandarin language and Han culture they hope to achieve “de-extremification” (ICIJ). This is also accompanied with more extensive technological and physical surveillance in Xinjiang. These systems are used to determine extremists, locate, and incarcerate them.

Discussion

The ethical problem with the Chinese ethnocentric ideology being applied to solve an extremist issue is that the act of determining who is a true separatist and a member of a “backwards” culture is irrelevant. While Xi Jinping does not call for the eradication of the Islamic Uyghurs,

his diagnosis of the situation as a cultural-religious problem requires Uyghur culture to be aggressively opposed (Ramzy & Buckley). The incarceration camps and the policies of the CCP are meant to weaken and destroy cultural practices of the Uyghurs. If the culture deemed the problem exists in any manner outside of state, then the process of “de-extremification” will not end until that culture is virtually cleansed of values and traditions that the state deems harmful. The Office of The United Nations High Commissioner of Human Rights (OHCHR) has criticized the new counterterrorism law, stating that it is vague, and allowing for the “conflat(ion of) ‘terrorism’ with ‘extremism’ linked to religious belief and practice, giving scope for the penalization of peaceful expression of... Uyghur identity or manifestation of religious identity” (Aoláin 5). They have not recognized that what is happening to the Uyghurs could be considered cultural genocide, which is “the purposeful weakening and ultimate destruction of cultural practices and values of feared out-groups” (Davidson 18-19). An adoption of this framework would be beneficial to understanding the more frequent methods of ethnic oppression in China and other multi-ethnic states.

In the case of China there are no options for ethnicities like the Uyghurs to express civic dissent. Due to the counterterrorism law forms of nonviolent dissent are legally indistinguishable from violent ones and are met with incarceration. It includes individuals who are religious or culturally expressive who are not fundamentalists, separatists, or violent. It even includes Uyghurs with political capital in administering Xinjiang (Regencia). Leveraging structural violence against innocent members of an ethnic group increase the potential for extremization. Much like the Israel-Palestine conflict, or Kashmir, the securitizing actions made by the central government in attempt to alter the circumstances for civil unrest and terrorism only make them

more likely (Clarke). When David Chao talked to a community of exiled Uyghurs living in Turkey, they were overwhelmingly in favor of separatism from China stating they had “no other option” (Chao & Henderson).

The international response, despite the OHCHR letter and leaked documents, has been minimal. Historically the international community is hesitant to respond substantially to a human rights violation and there is no precedent against a superpower like China. The traditional methods of intervention such as through the UN’s “Responsibility to Protect” or economic sanctions appear unlikely. Pakistan, which uphold the value of Islamic brotherhood, when asked about the Uyghur situation either deflect to or agree with the CCP (Khan). States like Pakistan have become dependent on foreign investment from China. Western powers that may use economic sanctions are so economically intertwined with China that there would be serious consequences with losing a trade partner. A former Canadian diplomat shows the apprehensions to sanctions saying “They can probably hurt us more than we can hurt them. I sense we won't win that game” (Mayberry). There is no functional process for the international community to respond to the human rights abuses against the Uyghurs or any other ethnic minority. The economic and political power that China wields is enough of a deterrent from any result producing policing of human rights at the international level.

Conclusion

China regards the Yugoslavic breakdown and end of the Soviet Union as an example for what to avoid (Ramzy & Buckley). The CCP wants to avoid a situation like that from happening in

China and no longer believes economic prosperity will be the solution. Therefore, they must turn to other methods of insuring unity. Large states like China are faced with limited traditional options of controlling ethnicities agitating for independence because of the quick and instantaneous flow of information. The Chinese government and other multi-ethnic states will more likely focus on forms of oppression that will be aggressive, but not lethal. These methods will have more considerations for secrecy in the information age and be more effective than traditional methods.

For the Uyghurs specifically the current response by the OHCHR and the leaked documents aid their case against the CCP in the international community. Still, the international community will need to develop new frameworks with legal ramifications to stop human rights abuses. New research will need to be done about the situation in Xinjiang as more information gets leaked and published concerning the technological ramifications of China's security system. Similar studies with this approach should also be done in other multi-ethnic states which oppress ethnic minorities. Current rhetoric about China in the international community states that as a new superpower they are acting as an alternative model to the West. Unfortunately, it seems possible that more states under China's influence will see such securitization methods as viable to handling ethnic separatism.

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