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## Regional Outlook

China's 'War on Terror' in Xinjiang:
Human Security and the Causes of Violent
Uighur Separatism

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Michael Clarke recently received his doctorate from Griffith University, Brisbane, Australia. His dissertation entitled 'In the Eye of Power: China and Xinjiang from the Qing Conquest to the 'New Great Game' for Central Asia, 1759-2004' examined the expansion of Chinese state power in the 'Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region' since the 18th century and the implications of this complex process for China's foreign policy in Central Asia. He has also published a number of articles focused on the history and politics of Xinjiang, ethnic separatism in China and Central Asia, and China's foreign policy. He is currently a Research Fellow at the Griffith Asia Institute and can be reached at m.e.clarke@griffith.edu.au

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# 1. Introduction*

Since the events of 11 September 2001, the issue of Uighur separatism in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR) of the People's Republic of China (PRC) has been recast in the general media and in some scholarly observations about the region. These sources present the issue as being intimately connected to Islamist insurgencies or movements in neighbouring Central Asia and Afghanistan. Moreover, due to the diplomatic endeavours of the Chinese government, a number of allegedly terrorist Uighur organisations have been linked to Central Asian groups such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and Osama bin Laden's Al Qaeda network. In particular, the Bush Administration's decision of December 2002 to place the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) on its official list of international terrorist organisations has done much to obscure the picture of the developments in Xinjiang over the last decade and a half.

The Chinese government portrays the picture that in Xinjiang, China has faced, and continues to face, a concerted and violent Uighur terrorist threat to national security. The Chinese authorities put forward this scenario in the January 2002 report, East Turkistan Terrorist Forces Cannot Get Away with Impunity, which is the first official Chinese account of Uighur separatist terrorism in Xinjiang since 1990.[1] Since then China has consistently, in reference to both the development of Xinjiang and the wider War on Terror, asserted the ongoing threat of Uighur terrorism.[2]

The central concern of this paper is to determine whether there has been or continues to be a terrorist threat to the Chinese state in Xinjiang. Evidently, the Chinese and US governments assert (although with different degrees of enthusiasm) that there is a contemporary terrorist threat to China's security in Xinjiang. This paper aims to provide answers to three important questions stemming from this development:

1. What has been the extent of violent Uighur opposition to Chinese rule?
2. Can this opposition be defined as constituting terrorism and is there evidence of connections between Uighur organisations and such groups as Al Qaeda and the IMU?
3. Is the case of Xinjiang and the Uighur consistent with the human security theory of terrorism?

The case of China's purported War on Terror in Xinjiang and the identification and targeting of ETIM in particular present an interesting test for the recent body of scholarship that asserts the predominance of human security in determining the development of political violence including ethnic violence and terrorism.[3] Indeed, Callaway and Harrelson–Stephens, for example, argue that, 'When looking at the genesis of terrorism around the world it *always* occurs in conjunction with the denial of basic human rights'.[4] More specifically it is suggested that terrorism is more likely to occur when three major sets of rights – political and civil rights, security rights and subsistence rights – are systematically violated by the state in conjunction with the affect of international factors. This point is deemed to impinge upon the development of terrorism in two major ways: historically, in terms of political development, and contemporarily, in terms of the distribution of power in the international system.[5]

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* Throughout this paper I use a number of terms such as 'war on terror', 'terrorism' and so forth that have multiple meanings and are contentious. I ask readers to recognise that I use these terms as they are used tendentiously by those who articulate such terms. I have chosen not to signal the problematical usage with inverted commas since the resulting extensiveness of inverted commas would distract readers from the flow and meaning of the discussion I present here.

This study is presented in five parts. The first briefly outlines the theoretical framework of the human security perspective on terrorism that suggests a causal link between human rights violations and terrorism. The second section places the issue of Uighur terrorism into historical context by providing an account of the course of Chinese policy in the region since its incorporation into the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949. The third section provides an account of the known violent incidents of Uighur or other ethnic minority opposition to the Chinese state in Xinjiang and Central Asia since 1990, based on the Chinese government's 2002 account, media reports (both Chinese and international), and scholarly observations. The fourth section evaluates the alleged connections between ETIM and Osama bin Laden's Al Qaeda network in light of the available evidence. In the fifth section the paper concludes by assessing the veracity of the human security theory of terrorism in the context of Xinjiang.

This study argues that violent Uighur separatism/terrorism conforms in a number of important respects to the human security theory of terrorism, particularly in the realm of political and civil rights. However, I suggest that impetus has been given to the various separatist organisations in the region by the development of interconnections between the largely internal aspects of China's policy of integration in the region and the wider Central and South Asian dynamic of Islamic radicalism since 1990. As becomes evident in the following discussion, this does not imply that Uighur separatism/terrorism originates external to Xinjiang. Rather it is to suggest that international factors have converged at distinct points in the history of the region since 1990 to stimulate latent tensions generated by the state's integrationist approach to the governance of Xinjiang.

# 2. Human Security as a Determinant of Terrorism

In contrast with the Chinese government, for the various pro-independence Uighur émigré organisations the pre-eminent imperative has been to demonstrate not only the indigeneity of the Uighur to the region currently defined as Xinjiang but also to highlight their history of political independence from Chinese-based states. In the post-Cold War era, these efforts have been supplemented by a greater focus on portraying the image of a Uighur population repressed by an authoritarian, even totalitarian, Communist regime. Thus many Uighur émigré organisations have explicitly framed their struggle for an independent East Turkestan within a discourse of democracy and human rights.[6] This imperative has of course become more urgent for such groups in the wake of 11 September 2001 and China's endeavours to paint all Uighur pro-independence organisations as radical Islamists who seek to make Xinjiang an Islamic state a la the Taliban.[7] This is significant since, as noted in the introduction, some contemporary scholarship asserts a causal link between violations of human rights – understood as political and civil, security and subsistence rights – and ethnic conflict or terrorism.[8]

In particular, the work of the critical security studies scholars of the Copenhagen School has explored the relationship between human security, ethnic conflict and terrorism. For Buzan as a prominent theorist of this perspective, the notion or concept of security goes beyond the traditional concern with military security to encompass political, economic, societal and ecological security sectors.[9] Buzan has also suggested that although the individual is the irreducible base unit for exploring security, the state is the referent object for analysing international security.[10] The state remains the dominant referent object in this approach for three major reasons: it is the state that has to come to grips with the sub state–state–international problematic; the state is the primary agent for alleviating insecurity; and the state remains the dominant actor in the international system.[11] For other Copenhagen School scholars, in particular Waever, concerns about state sovereignty became increasingly embedded in the post-Cold War era in the realm of societal security.[12] Roe has built on this approach to suggest that while the state may be the primary agent for alleviating insecurity, the state can also play a role in undermining the security of some segments of its population.[13]

At this point the security dilemma commonly conceived of in International Relations theory as operating at the level of sovereign states in the international system is brought into the state to account for sub-state conflict. The security dilemma as it stands in IR theory rests on the notion that the actions of a state to enhance its security can produce reactions that make the state less secure by inducing insecurity in other states regarding its intentions, for example, in acquiring arms. The security dilemma is therefore concerned primarily with juxtaposing the actors' intentions – security – with the outcome of their policies/actions – insecurity. Waever et al., however, draw a distinction between state security and societal security: the concern of state security is generally conceived of as protecting the sovereignty of the state from external threats (hence a focus on military measures and so forth), while societal security is concerned with threats to identity.[14] Both threats, however, relate to survival: if a state loses its sovereignty it will not survive as a state, while if a society loses its identity it will not survive as a society. But a key question then arises: How is a given society's identity threatened? Roe, for instance, argues that societal security is threatened when a society believes that its 'we' identity is being put in danger, whether this is the case objectively or is simply perceived. He argues, 'Those means that can threaten societal identity range from the suppression of its expression to interference with its ability to reproduce itself across generations'.[15] A wide range of state action may threaten the reproduction of identity, from restrictions on the

use of language or dress, and control or closure of places of education and worship, to the deportation or killing of members of the community.

This perspective is useful in the context of Xinjiang, given that a tendency has emerged within the Uighur émigré community to portray the Uighurs as experiencing a form of cultural genocide at the hands of the Chinese state. For example, Erkin Alptekin, the president of the World Uyghur Congress, has stated that, 'The Chinese want to replace us with their own people as colonists, and assimilate those of us who remain, *wiping out our culture*'.[16] Thus it can be said that the Uighur émigré community certainly perceives that the societal security of the Uighur in Xinjiang, in terms of its 'we' identity, is threatened by the actions of the Chinese state. Indeed, Callaway and Harrelson–Stephens suggest terrorism will most likely occur when a population's political/civil, security and subsistence rights are violated by the state. They hypothesise that:

> ... terrorism is likely to be carried out by individuals in states with medium levels of repression as these citizens feel justified in responding to state terror with terrorist acts. Further in states with medium levels of subsistence, citizens are more likely to feel deprived relative to others and that sense of injustice fosters terrorism. Finally, terrorism is likely to ferment in these areas particularly when individuals feel that other options of dissent are limited due to the relatively closed political system within the state.[17]

The question remains, then, as to whether these conditions prevail, and have any explanatory weight, in contemporary Xinjiang?

# 3. The Weight of History: Xinjiang under the People's Republic of China, 1949–2006

According to Martha Crenshaw, 'Both the phenomenon of terrorism and our conception of it depend on historical context – political, social and economic – and on how the groups and individuals who participate in or respond to the actions we call terrorism relate to the world in which they act'.[18] Any evaluation of Uighur separatist violence in Xinjiang must take into account the historical record of the region, particularly its relation to the current Chinese state. Although this paper focuses on the development of Xinjiang post-1949, and in particular post-1990, it must be recognised that resistance from the Uighur (and other ethnic groups) to the imperial, republican and communist Chinese states was evident from at least the eighteenth century onward.[19] Significantly, the precedent of an independent East Turkestan is fresh in the collective memory of both the ethnic minorities of Xinjiang and the Chinese state, with two such incipient states proclaimed by Uighur independence movements. One was claimed in 1933 at Kashgar and a more enduring one, supported by the Soviet Union, was claimed in Ili between 1944 and 1949.[20] The cause and evolution of Uighur separatism in the region has been shaped profoundly by these historical precedents, as has the Chinese state's perceptions of, and responses to, autonomist ethnic minority demands and movements.

In light of the Chinese state's contemporary struggle against Uighur terrorism in Xinjiang and the post-9/11 international political environment, the nature of these two independence movements weighs especially heavy on Chinese perceptions of the causes and potential outcomes of such movements. This is particularly so for the relationship between the separatists and external influence from Russian/Soviet Central Asia, and the role of Islam in the rebellions. It is therefore interesting to note the current Chinese government's account of the pre-1949 Uighur separatist movements. Instructively, the most germane aspect of the two East Turkistan Republics (ETRs) in China's 2003 'White Paper on the History and Development of Xinjiang' is the perceived connections between the separatist demands of Uighurs, external forces, and religious and nationalist ideologies. Here the view that such past, and by implication current and future, separatism in Xinjiang was generated by a combination of malevolent external forces and radical Islamist or nationalist ideologies is expressed clearly:

> *They incited all ethnic groups speaking Turki and believing in Islam to join hands to create a theocratic state*. They denied the history of the great motherland jointly built by all ethnic groups of China. *They clamored for opposition to all ethnic groups other than the Turks and for the annihilation of pagans*, asserting that China had been the enemy of the East Turkistan nation for 3000 years.[21]

This account of the development of Uighur separatism in Xinjiang very clearly projects into the past the Chinese state's contemporary concerns and fears regarding Uighur separatism in the region. Indeed, references to events since 1990 follow a similar trajectory connecting internal unrest with external forces and religious extremism:

> In the 1990s, *under the influence of extremism, separatism and international terrorism*, part of the *East Turkistan forces inside and outside Chinese territory* turned to splittist and sabotage activities with terrorist violence as the main means, even brazenly declaring that terrorist violence is the only way to achieve their aims.[22]

This discourse is but one element in continuation of the post-1949 Chinese state's attempt to portray Uighur separatism as moving against the tide of history through its opposition to the multi-ethnic, unitary state that is the PRC. Indeed, the theme evident throughout the documents cited above is that the very notion of a separate, independent East Turkestan is not only reactionary but has no historical basis, since from ancient times Xinjiang has been part of China and the Uighur have been members of the great family of the Chinese nation (*zhongua minzu*). As Gardner Bovingdon has remarked, 'How, other than by showing that Xinjiang had never separated from China, could it [China] demonstrate that it [Xinjiang] was inseparable?'.[23] This task has arguably underpinned China's approach to the region and its peoples since the so called peaceful liberation of Xinjiang by the Peoples Liberation Army in October 1949.

A brief survey of the development of Chinese rule in Xinjiang between 1949 and 1990 is necessary to contextualise the problematic relationship between the state and Xinjiang's major non-Han ethnic group, the Uighur. The following discussion makes it clear that the sources of Uighur dissent stem largely, although not exclusively, from the contours of Chinese policy in Xinjiang after 1949. Indeed, the intended and unintended consequences of Chinese policy toward the region since 1949 have played a major role in generating among the Uighur (and other ethnic groups) a perception that their ethnic and cultural identity is existentially threatened by the increasing dominance of Han Chinese within the bounds of these ethnic groups' own autonomous region.

Accomplishing an autonomous region in Xinjiang has been far from unproblematic given the historical and cultural linkages of the region's major ethnic groups with peoples and states to the west. But it has also been a contest over the authorship, content and form of Uighur identity between the party-state bent on solidifying the unitary, multi-ethnic state of the PRC and this ethnic group with unsurprisingly different aspirations. Tension was evident from the initial projection of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) power into Xinjiang. Key elements in the formation of modern Uighur ethnic identity – language, religion and culture – not only highlight the non-Chinese orientation of the region (implicitly challenging the state's claim to the exclusive loyalty of the Uighur) but also have been the subject of a program of state action.[24]

The task of making Xinjiang an inseparable part of China therefore goes beyond the Chinese state's historiographic project to encompass the nuts and bolts of Chinese administration in the region. The program of state action in Xinjiang since 1949 can be characterised as one of integration, albeit integration that theoretically ensures the autonomy of the officially recognised ethnic minorities.[25] From the absorption of Xinjiang into the PRC in October 1949, there have been sporadic episodes of overt ethnic minority opposition to Chinese rule. Yet the most intense periods of unrest in Xinjiang correlate with the fluctuating policies and actions of the state in the region.[26] This is particularly accurate with regard to the Maoist period (1949–76) in Xinjiang, where the policies, campaigns and crises induced by the ideological vicissitudes of national politics produced opposition from the region's ethnic minorities.

Another constant of the pre-1990 history of Xinjiang was that the opposition thus produced was susceptible to manipulation by the Soviet Union, which as noted above had played a major role in the region's history prior to 1949. The constant instruments of Chinese rule between 1949 and 1990 were the establishment of military–agricultural colonies through the paramilitary Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps, encouragement of Han colonisation, state control and management of religious expression and institutions, and cooptation of ethnic minority elites. The intensity with which individual components of this strategy were pursued varied due to both internal political considerations, particularly during the ideological fluctuations of the Maoist era, and the dynamics of China's relations with the Soviet Union.[27]

As in the rest of China in the post-Mao era, Xinjiang experienced an initial liberalisation and reform dynamic in terms of the state's approach to the region. The CCP's policies

toward Xinjiang in the early 1980s were marked by increased liberalisation, particularly toward religion.[28] Yet implementation of these policies was hampered by conflict within the provincial leadership and the central government as to the political and security implications of such relatively liberal policies.[29] These implications primarily concerned the provincial leadership's conviction that increased economic and cultural autonomy for the region's ethnic minorities would generate demands for greater political autonomy. Furthermore, the provincial and central government's perception of Soviet and Islamic threats to Xinjiang were heightened significantly by the Soviet's continuing involvement in Afghanistan and the impact of Iran's Islamic revolution in 1979.[30] The remainder of the 1980s was punctuated by various social and ethnic disturbances, including protests against the use of Xinjiang for nuclear tests in November 1985, demonstrations in June 1988 against publication of a book allegedly containing racial slurs against Uighurs and Kazaks,[31] and the May–June 1989 student demonstrations in sympathy with those in Tiananmen Square.[32]

The state's reformist economic strategy, as in other regions of China, produced contradictory developments in Xinjiang. In particular, the de-centralisation of economic decision-making and the spatial differentiation of the Chinese economy through channelling central government investment toward the eastern coastal regions by the late 1980s, encouraged the development of a fledgling attempt to re-orient Xinjiang's economy toward Soviet Central Asia.[33] This period also witnessed the beginnings of the dynamics that would come to characterise Chinese rule of Xinjiang and China's relations with the neighbouring states into the 1990s. The provincial leadership's linkage of internal instability and external influences took on greater significance with China's involvement in supporting the *mujahideen* in Afghanistan against the Soviet Union.[34] The radicalised Islamic movements that Soviet defeat would spawn in Afghanistan and post-Soviet Central Asia proved to be of enduring importance, not only for such states as the US and Pakistan but also for China. These three factors would converge in the 1990s to make Chinese governance of Xinjiang and China's foreign relations with the region increasingly problematic.

China's strategy to manage these dynamics since 1990 has rested upon developing what has been termed a double-opening approach – to simultaneously integrate Xinjiang with Central Asia and China proper in economic terms, while establishing security and cooperation with China's Central Asian neighbours. Internally, this agenda has resulted in increased central government investment, particularly regarding construction and infrastructure projects (especially energy-related), and enhanced government control and management of ethnic minority religious and cultural practices.[35] Externally, China's foreign policy in Central Asia has reflected the ascendancy of this goal of integration for Xinjiang, with emphasis on the establishment of political, economic, and infrastructural links with the Central Asian states, particularly Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. The major challenge for Chinese policy in this respect has been to reconcile the perceived need for strengthened integration and security of the province with the economic and political opportunities accruing to China presented by the relative retreat of Russian power from Central Asia after 1991.[36] However, these opportunities to increase Chinese power and influence in Central Asia generated by the collapse of the Soviet Union also stimulated a resurgence of ethnic minority opposition to Chinese rule in Xinjiang.

Some observers have emphasised the importance of external developments in generating such opposition, but it is clear that Chinese policy has also played a key role in this regard.[37] In particular, the parameters of China's double-opening' strategy and economic reform program have interacted with the external dynamics of Central Asian independence and ethnic and religious renewal to pose challenges to Chinese control of Xinjiang. However, although the establishment of political, economic and cultural linkages with Central Asia is seen as vital to the success of the state's development and integration strategy for Xinjiang, these links are simultaneously viewed with suspicion as a potential source of threat to this very process, due to the region's recent history of trans-border ethno-religious movements such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and the

Taliban.[38] The contradictory nature of this position compelled China to seek a broader regional approach to issues of regional economic cooperation, ethnic separatism, drugs and weapons trafficking, radical Islam, and border security, culminating in the creation of the Shanghai Five in 1996 and its eventual transformation into the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) in June 2001.[39]

Chinese policy to address these challenges to its position in Xinjiang since 1990 has been characterised by five major strategies:

1.    recentralisation of economic decision making;
2.    Han in-migration;
3.    exploitation of Xinjiang's potential energy resources;
4.    greater political and economic links with Central Asia; and
5.    reinforced state control of ethnic minority religious and cultural expression/ practice.[40]

Key aspects of this agenda, particularly increased in-migration of Han and increased state control/management of ethnic minority religious and cultural expression, are often cited by external observers and Uighur émigré organisations as major sources of Uighur grievances against the state.[41] The issue of population transfers to ethnic minority regions has been particularly evident in ongoing controversies regarding Chinese policy towards Tibet, although recent research suggests that such claims have been overstated by Tibetan exile organisations.[42] In the context of Xinjiang, claims that the Uighur and other ethnic groups were being diluted by Han in-migration have been made for some decades. Although in Xinjiang the dynamic of Han in-migration to the region has undergone fluctuations, it has generally correlated to changing state policy. For example, with relaxing of the coercive population transfers of the Maoist period, during the 1980s the Han proportion of the population actually fell from 5.32 million or 40.45 per cent of the province's population of 13.16 million in 1982 to 5.69 million or 37.6 per cent of the population of 15.16 million in 1990. However, the Han proportion of the population rose over the following decade to 7.49 million or 40.6 per cent of the total provincial population of 18.45 million in 2000.[43] Significantly, Han in-migration during the 1990s was largely voluntary and prompted by the economic opportunities presented by the state's development strategy.[44]

The economic development strategy of the state has resulted in wider inter-ethnic and regional disparities within Xinjiang. The central government has invested much in Xinjiang since the 1990s, but this investment has been channelled into large infrastructure projects, with Beijing reporting in 2003 that 70 billion yuan (US$8.36 billion) had been invested in building highways, power plants and telecommunications.[45] One observer notes that these 'massive resource transfers' directed mostly to large-scale infrastructure or mineral extraction projects have had a mixed impact on the conditions of the region's ethnic minorities:

> Better communication and transport facilities confer genuine and broad benefits yet at the same time facilitate Han in-migration. This in turn provides economic stimulus but gives rise to competition over resources. Construction projects create jobs, yet often these go to Han immigrants rather than local minorities.[46]

A number of observers have also noted a rural–urban economic disparity, with the annual urban GDP per capita in 2003 at 14.3 per cent (7,300 yuan) compared to 8.8 per cent (1,861 yuan) in rural areas. Significantly, urban populations in Xinjiang are predominantly Han while the rural population remains predominantly ethnic minority, most particularly Uighur.[47]

The issue of the state's control and management of religious and cultural expression in Xinjiang is long standing and problematic. China under the rule of the explicitly atheist CCP has constantly exhibited a concern to manage the Islamic confession of the majority

of Xinjiang's ethnic minority populations, in particular the Uighur. Mackerras highlights the major problem for the state in this regard:

> Islam is intrinsic to Uygur identity. Many Uygurs believe they should be loyal Muslims simply because they are Uygurs, even though Islam is a universal religion that commands adherence among peoples of many nationalities, both in Xinjiang and worldwide. This link between Uygur ethnic identity and Islam is one of the reasons the Chinese state is suspicious of Islam.[48]

This concern has inspired the development of a cycle of what some observers have termed 'soft' and 'hard' policies toward religion in the region.[49] The soft approach has been taken when the state has perceived the need to gain the acquiescence of the Uighur population. This approach is characterised by relative tolerance and even encouragement of institutionalised Islam through such measures as state-funding for mosque construction and the activities of the state-controlled Chinese Islamic Association. The hard policies have been adopted when the state perceives Islam to be a threat to security and are characterised by campaigns against religious education outside state-sanctioned institutions, illegal mosque construction, and the re-education and reform of religious leaders. The close link between Islam and Uighur identity noted by Mackerras has meant that any attempt by the state to regulate religious practice and expression is ultimately a cause of resentment for the Uighur and is often perceived as an attempt to weaken Uighur identity. For the state, however, heightened Islamic consciousness, if not adequately managed, is perceived to be at the root of outbreaks of opposition and violence.[50] Rudelson's observation in the late 1990s highlighted the Catch-22 situation that this entails for the Chinese state:

> Government religious reforms were intended to quell Uyghur disaffection with Chinese rule and cause Uyghurs to develop more harmonious sentiments for the Han Chinese. However, the Chinese are caught in a dilemma: when they allow or encourage it, Uyghurs become more content with the government but their strengthened Islamic practice leads them to feel more separate from and apathetic towards Chinese society.[51]

This cycle was evident throughout the 1990s, with the authorities instituting regular Strike Hard campaigns in the region. In the rest of China, Strike Hard campaigns have focused on accelerating arrests, trials and sentencing of criminals but in Xinjiang these campaigns have been directed to a substantial degree against national separatists and illegal religious activities.[52] Moreover, the cycle has been continued into the early twenty-first century, with the hard approach and associated Strike Hard campaigns re-implemented from late 2001 onward after the events of 9/11.[53]

Another long-standing factor that has led to the dominance of the Han in Xinjiang and the increasing political marginalisation of the Uighur is the system known as national regional autonomy practiced in the region. In contrast to the Soviet Union that established a system based on federal republics with a theoretical right to secession for their national minorities, the PRC offered its ethnic minorities a system of limited territorial autonomy. Three levels of so-called autonomous government were established in the region between 1952 and 1955: the autonomous region (equivalent to provincial status), autonomous districts and autonomous counties/prefectures. Autonomous government could be established in a particular locality if the locality was:

1. inhabited by one national minority;
2. inhabited by one large national minority including certain areas inhabited by other smaller nationalities; or
3. jointly established by two or more areas each inhabited by a different national minority.

The second designation was applied to Xinjiang given that the region's population is constituted by 13 ethnic groups. The population of Xinjiang in 1955 (when regional autonomy was implemented) was estimated to stand at four and a half to five million, of which 70 to 75 per cent were Uighur and 5 per cent were Han.[54] Yet power and representation within the proposed autonomous government were divided among 13 constituent ethnic minorities even though the Uighur were evidently in the majority. Moreover, the titular ethnic group in 17 of the 27 so-called autonomous units established in Xinjiang after 1955 accounted for less than 50 per cent of the population of the autonomous unit.[55] Bovingdon has neatly identified the effect:

> The division of Xinjiang into a number of smaller autonomies was a stroke of administrative genius. In parcelling out various 'subautonomies', the CCP simultaneously satisfied two goals: to reinforce the idea that Xinjiang belonged to thirteen different *minzu* and to counterbalance the overwhelming political and demographic weight of the Uygurs.[56]

Furthermore, while the state's policy on regional autonomy explicitly states that the head of an autonomous region, prefecture or county must be a member of the ethnic group exercising autonomy, in reality it is the CCP that wields real power in the region. Mackerras, for example, observed in 2006 that ethnic minorities are under-represented in the CCP, comprising around 37 per cent of the 958,000 party members in Xinjiang.[57] The Han dominance of CCP apparatus in Xinjiang is suggested by the fact that not one of the first Party secretaries across the 124 prefectural, municipal and county levels of the Party in the region is from an ethnic minority.[58] As a strategic region that has a substantial ethnic minority population with a history of opposition to Chinese rule, Xinjiang thus experiences a much higher degree of central government control than other province-level units. The September 2002 promotion of Xinjiang's first Party secretary, Wang Lequan, to the Politburo in Beijing further illustrates this central control.[59]

# 4. The Extent of Uighur Terrorism in Xinjiang and Central Asia

An important starting point for exploring terrorism in any given socio-political and historical context is to establish a workable definition of the phenomenon. Thus, this section will briefly discuss some prominent definitions to establish one that is appropriate for evaluating the record of terrorist incidents that will be documented below. Terrorism is, of course, notoriously difficult to define largely because of the political consequences or affects of particular interpretations. Laquer has noted, perhaps over-simplifying the issue, that 'a comprehensive, generally accepted definition of terrorism does not exist and is unlikely to come into existence, if only because terrorists and their victims will not agree on the matter'.[60] Indeed, perhaps one of the greatest obstacles to formulating a definition of terrorism is that numerous observers have defined the term to encompass an array of violent actions by a wide variety of actors. For example, terrorism has been defined as politically motivated violence by small groups,[61] covert violence for political ends,[62] and premeditated violence aimed to 'create a climate of extreme fear or terror'.[63] Paul Wilkinson has identified five major characteristics of terrorism:

1.  It is premeditated and aims to create a climate of extreme fear or terror.
2.  It is directed at an audience or target wider than the immediate victims and violence.
3.  It inherently involves attacks on random and symbolic targets, including civilians.
4.  The society in which the acts of violence are committed sees the acts as extra-normal, in the literal sense that they breach the social norms and so cause outrage.
5.  Terrorism is generally used to try to influence political behaviour in some way.[64]

Thus it can be said, as Callaway and Harrelson-Stephens note, that the majority of definitions contain similar emphasis on a linkage between violence, political ends/motives and innocent victims.[65] Yet unacknowledged in many of these definitions is their general tendency to privilege the state in terms of establishing an almost one-way trajectory of culpability for political violence. That is, it is generally conceived that terrorism is nearly always perpetrated against the legitimate political community of the state by a small group of malcontents. Callaway and Harrelson-Stephens, for example, attempt to overcome this problem by using Bueno de Mesquita's definition of terrorism as, 'any act of violence undertaken for the purpose of altering a government's political policies or actions that targets those who do not actually have the personal authority to alter governmental policy'.[66] Callaway and Harrelson-Stephens maintain that this means 'terrorism can be distinguished from other forms of conflict by its target' and that terrorism thus 'involves conflict where non-governmental entities target civilians, as opposed to other forms of conflict where the targets are elements of the government'.[67] Cooper has noted that 'the definition of terrorism has been consistently plagued by an ever increasing need to justify the reprehensible', and proposes a more straightforward definition of terrorism as, 'the intentional generation of massive fear by human beings for the purpose of securing or maintaining control over other human beings'.[68] Cooper's thrust is that regardless of the target or indeed the nature of the perpetrator, it is the act itself that matters:

> It must be stressed that there is a basic antinomy here ... What is asserted is a difference in kind; *I* don't commit terrorism, *you* do ... From a definitional perspective, it ought not to matter who does what to whom. Terrorism should be defined solely by the nature of what is done.[69]

These particular definitions of terrorism, most particularly Callaway and Harrelson-Stephens', restrict applicability to non-governmental or sub-state actors, thus raising

the contentious point that sovereign states, or institutions thereof (e.g. Military/police), do not perpetrate acts of terror. This is significant in the context of exploring terrorism in Xinjiang given the accusations made by some Uighur émigré organisations of Chinese state terrorism in Xinjiang.[70] I raise this issue only tangentially here, as the central focus of this paper concerns first whether incidents of violent Uighur opposition in the region can be defined as terrorism, and second, whether the perpetrators of such acts have connections with such organisations as Al Qaeda and the IMU, as the Chinese government maintains. Given the circumstances of Xinjiang, I use Bueno de Mesquita's definition of terrorism as 'any act of violence undertaken for the purpose of altering a government's political policies or actions that targets those who do not actually have the personal authority to alter governmental policy', as it encompasses the linkages between violence, political ends/motives and the targeting of civilians that is common to most definitions of terrorism.

In the remainder of this section I present the available evidence on incidents of violence in Xinjiang, first from Chinese government sources and second from international media reports, émigré sources and scholarly observations. The first official Chinese account of terrorism in Xinjiang, titled 'East Turkistan Terrorist Forces Cannot Get Away with Impunity' and released on 21 January 2002, stated that East Turkistan terrorist forces were responsible for over 200 terrorist incidents between 1990 and 2001, taking the lives of 162 people and injuring 440.[71] The report claims that these terrorist forces carried out explosions, assassinations, attacks on police and government officials and crimes of poison and arson, and established secret training bases in order to create an atmosphere of terror in Xinjiang.[72] The cases outlined in this official document are presented under headings describing the type of terrorist action undertaken. Thus, as noted above, there are six such categories: explosions, assassinations, attacks on police and government institutions, crimes of poison and arson, establishment of secret training bases and plotting and organising disturbances. This report is the sole source of material regarding incidents of assassinations and attacks involving poison and arson. In all of the following tables (1 to 7), data are from the January 2002 first official Chinese account of Uighur separatist terrorism in Xinjiang, 'East Turkistan Terrorist Forces Cannot Get Away with Impunity'.[73]

## Table 1: Explosions

| Target(s) | Group identified | Date and location | Casualties |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Bombing of a video theatre | East Turkistan terrorist organisation | 28.2.1991 Kuqa County/Aksu | Deaths: 1 Injuries: 13 |
| 2. Bombing of 2 buses | terrorists | 5.2.1992 Urumqi | Deaths: 3 Injuries: 23 |
| 3. 10 explosions at department stores, markets, hotels and places for cultural activities | East Turkistan terrorist organisation | 17.6.1993–5.9.1993 southern Xinjiang: Kashgar and Khotan specified | Deaths: 2 Injuries: 36 |
| 4. Bombing of 3 buses | East Turkistan terrorist organisation | 25.2.1997 Urumqi | Deaths: 9 Injuries: 68 |
| 5. 6 explosions | East Turkistan terrorists | 22.2.1998–30.3.1998 Yecheng County/Kashi [Kashgar] Prefecture | Deaths: 0 Injuries: 3 |
| 6. 8 explosions – targets included home of the Director of the Public Security Bureau | East Turkistan terrorists | 7.4.1998 Yecheng County/ Kashi [Kashgar] Prefecture | Deaths: 0 Injuries: 8 |

**Table 2: Assassinations/Attempted Assassinations**

| Target(s) | Group identified | Date and location | Casualties |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Abliz Damolla: executive committee member of county CPPCC and Imam | East Turkistan terrorists | 24.8.1993 Yecheng County, Kashi [Kashgar] Prefecture | Deaths: 0[a] <br> Injuries: 1 |
| 2. Hakimsidiq Haji: vice-chairman of Islamic Association of Xinhe County | terrorists | 22.3.1996 Xinhe County, Aksu Prefecture | Deaths: 1[b] <br> Injuries: 0 |
| 3. Qavul Toqa and family: member of CPPCC National Committee and deputy of XUAR People's Congress | terrorists | 29.4.1996 Qunas village, Alaqagha township, Kuqa County | Deaths: 5[b] <br> Injuries: 1 |
| 4. Arunhan Aji and son: executive committee member of the Islamic Association of China, vice-chairman of the CPPCC Xinjiang Regional Committee and chairman of Kashi [Kashgar] Islamic Association | East Turkistan terrorist organisation | 12.5.1996 Kashi [Kashgar] | Deaths: 0[a] <br> Injuries: 2 |
| 5. Omarjan and wife: manager of a reclamation area | terrorists | 23.3.1997 Jinyinchuan, Aksu Prefecture | Deaths: 2[c] <br> Injuries: 0 |
| 6. Turdi Niyaz: village official | terrorists | 3.7.1997 Bashereq, Avat County | Deaths: 2[c] <br> Injuries: 0 |
| 7. Yunus Sidiq Damolla: member of the Islamic Association of China and Xinjiang, chairman of Islamic Association of Aksu and Imam of Baicheng mosque | terrorist group acting on the orders of East Turkistan organisation abroad | 6.11.1997 Baicheng, Aksu Prefecture | Deaths: 1[b] <br> Injuries: 0 |
| 8. Muhammat Rozi Muhammat: village official | terrorists | 4.6.1997 Huangdi village, Aqik township, Moyu County, Khotan Prefecture | Deaths: 1[a] <br> Injuries: 0 |
| 9. Abliz Haji: executive committee member of the CPPCC Yecheng County committee and Imam | terrorist group acting on the orders of East Turkistan organisation abroad | 27.1.1998 Yecheng, Kashi [Kashgar] Prefecture | Deaths: 1[b] <br> Injuries: 0 |
| 10. Hudaberdi Tohti and family: political instructor | terrorists | 23.8.1999 Bosikem township, Zepu County, Kashi [Kashgar] Prefecture | Deaths: 2[b] <br> Injuries: 1 |
| 11. Muhammatjan Yaqup: official of a People's Court | gang of terrorists | 3.2.2001 Shufu county, Kashi [Kashgar] Prefecture | Deaths: 1[a] <br> Injuries: 0 |

*Notes:*

[a] Denotes attack with knives (4 incidents)

[b] Denotes attack with knives and small arms (5 incidents)

[c] Denotes unknown form of attack (2 incidents)

**Table 3: Attacks on Police and Government Institutions**

| Target(s) | Group Identified | Date and Location | Casualties |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. People's Government office building | terrorists | 27.8.1996 Yecheng County, Kashi [Kashgar] Prefecture | Deaths: 6 Injuries: 0 |
| 2. Police station | terrorists | 24.11.1999 Saili township, Zepu County | Deaths: 2 Injuries: 2 |

**Table 4: Crimes of Poison and Arson**

| Act and target | Group identified | Date and location | Casualties |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. 23 cases of poisoning: domestic animals | East Turkistan Liberation Organisation (ETLO) | 30.1.1998–8.2.1998 Kashi [Kasghar] city | Deaths: 1 Injuries: 4 |
| 2. 15 cases of arson: Huada Plaza, Daximen, two clothing and one timber market, Urumqi Hotel and Business and Trade Centre | ETLO | 23.5.1998 Urumqi | Deaths: 0 Injuries: 0 |
| 3. 3 cases of arson: cotton purchasing station of the Khotan City Cotton and Hemp Company | terrorists | 11.11.1999 Khotan city | Deaths: 0 Injuries: 0 |

**Table 5: Training/Arms Manufacturing Bases**

| Group | Base location | Purpose(s) | Date |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Shock Brigade of the Islamic Reformist Party | Basheriq township, Yecheng County | Terrorist training | 1990 to 1993 |
| 2. East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) | Dozens throughout Xinjiang | Terrorist training, weapons manufacture and storage | 1998 onward |
| 3. Unidentified | Poskam township, Zepu County | Underground hideout, weapons manufacture and storage | Discovered by police, 30.12.1999 |
| 4. Unidentified | Kachung township, Shache County | Underground bunker: weapons and explosive storage | Discovered by police and 7 terrorists arrested 25.2.2000 |
| 5. Unidentified | Seriqsoghet village, Uzun township, Kuqa County | Weapons manufacture and explosive storage | Discovered by police August 2001 |

**Table 6: Plotting and Organising Disturbances/Riots and Creating Terror**

| Group | Date and location | Action(s) | Casualties |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. East Turkistan Islamic Party | 5.4.1990 Baren township, Akto County | Declared jihad and advocated establishment of a East Turkistan Republic; took 10 people hostage and besieged government functionaries | Deaths: 6 policemen |
| 2. East Turkistan Islamic Party of Allah | 5.2.1997–8.2.1997 Yining [Kulja] | Instigated a serious riot during which they called for the establishment of an Islamic kingdom; attacked/destroyed stores and vehicles | Deaths: 7 Injuries: more than 200 |

**Table 7: Violent East Turkistan Terrorist Incidents Outside China, 1997–2000**

| Group | Date and Location | Action(s) | Casualties |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. East Turkistan terrorists | March 1997 Istanbul, Turkey | Fired gunshots at the Chinese embassy and attacked the consulate-general, burning the Chinese flag | None specified |
| 2. East Turkistan terrorists | 5.3.1998 Istanbul, Turkey | Launched a bomb attack against the Chinese consulate-general | None specified |
| 3. East Turkistan Liberation Organisation (ETLO) | March 2000 Kyrgyzstan [presumably in the capital Bishkek] | Assassination of Nigmat Bazakov, president of the Uygur Youth Alliance based in Kyrgyzstan | Deaths: 1 |
| 4. Uygur Liberation Organisation (ULO) | May 2000 Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan | Kidnap of a Xinjiang businessman, murder of his nephew and arson of Market of Chinese Commodities | Deaths: 1 ULO extorted US$100,000 in ransom |
| 5. ULO | 25.5.2000 to September 2000 | Attack representatives of XUAR government in Kyrgyzstan; flee to Kazakhstan where they kill 2 Kazakh policemen | Deaths: 2 |

The enumeration of the terrorist incidents outlined in this document and tabulated above indicate a number of discrepancies regarding the number of incidents and the number of deaths and injuries for which evidence is provided. Moreover, the nature and method of some of the incidents detailed raise questions as to whether these incidents can indeed by defined as constituting a terrorist, as opposed to merely a criminal, act. For example, from the data supplied in this document, the total number of deaths directly attributed to terrorism in Xinjiang between 1990 and 2001 is 56, while the number injured is 362. These figures are substantially less than those in the introduction to the report. It is also interesting to note that the report takes pains to state that the victims of terrorism in Xinjiang have come from all ethnic groups, as well as government officials:

> ... from 1990 to 2001, the East Turkistan terrorist forces inside and outside Chinese territory were responsible for over 200 terrorist incidents in Xinjiang, resulting in the deaths of 162 people of *all ethnic groups*, including *grass-roots officials and religious personnel*, and injuries to more than 440 people.[74]

As outlined in Tables 1 to 7, the report details 39 incidents of terrorist activity, which is well below the figure of over 200 in the comments cited above. Moreover, the document leaves the relatively substantial number of 106 deaths and 78 injuries unaccounted for. It should also be noted that the injury figure of 362 from data in Tables 1 to 7 is significantly bolstered by the inclusion of the more than 200 injured in the February 1997 incident in Yining (Kulja) as recorded in Table 6. If this figure is removed, the report details only 162 injuries. Does this mean that the remaining deaths and injuries for which evidence is not supplied, but nonetheless claimed as the result of terrorist actions, were not deemed to be politically significant? Interestingly, the Chinese report also omits the May and June 1998 bus bombings in Osh, Kyrgyzstan, that killed five people, even though the Kyrgyz authorities subsequently arrested and sentenced a Turk, a Russian and two Uighurs (Chinese citizens) in connection with these attacks.[75]

A number of events and incidents linked to Uighur separatism have taken place outside Xinjiang in the neighbouring Central Asian states of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, and these bear upon the discussion of Uighur terrorism and its impact on China's relations with the Central Asian states. On 9 June 2001, the body of Dilbirim Samasakova, a prominent Uighur activist, was found near a reservoir outside Almaty, Kazakhstan.[76] An Amnesty International report claims that Samasakova was head of the charitable Nuzugum Foundation that provided assistance to Uighur refugees from Xinjiang, and suggests that her death was politically motivated.[77] In Kyrgyzstan in March 2001, two Uighurs were

sentenced to death after being accused of taking part in the May and June 1998 bus bombings in the town of Osh, noted above.[78] In June the following year, two gunmen killed the Chinese ambassador to Kyrgyzstan, Wang Jianping, his driver and a prominent Uighur businessman, Umar Nurmukhamedov, in the capital Bishkek.[79] According to eyewitness accounts, the two gunmen approached the diplomat's stationary Mercedes and opened fire at close range with handguns.[80] Although there was immediate speculation that Nurmukhamedov was the real target of the attack, Kyrgyz and Chinese authorities linked it to Uighur terrorism, with the two suspects subsequently arrested and eventually extradited to China in August 2002 over the attack identified as members of ETLO.[81] An explosion at a Bishkek market on 27 December 2002 and the bombing of a bank in Osh in May 2003 were also blamed on Uighur terrorists.[82] Although the first of these was initially reported to be the result of a container of fireworks,[83] Uzbek and Kyrgyz authorities subsequently apprehended a number of suspects, including three Uighurs, who were said to be members of the IMU.[84] Finally, in March 2003, a bus en route from Bishkek to Kashgar in Xinjiang was attacked by a group of armed men with 21 passengers, including 19 Chinese citizens, killed.[85] The Kyrgyz Interior Ministry subsequently identified two of the attackers as members of ETLO, although they were said to have subsequently escaped to Turkey.

Significantly, there were no violent incidents in Xinjiang or Central Asia between 2003 and 2006 that have been attributed, by media reports or official Chinese government statements, to any of the above named Uighur terrorist groups.[86] During this period, however, there were a number of developments related to China's ongoing campaign against Uighur terrorism in the region. Significantly, Pakistani authorities reported in October 2003 that Pakistani troops had killed ETIM's leader, Hasan Mahsum, during an anti-Al Qaeda operation in South Waziristan. Subsequently, in October 2005 authorities in Xinjiang stated that they had arrested 19 foreign militants who, according to Xinjiang Party Secretary Wang Lequan, were sent to Xinjiang for violent sabotage, although no further information regarding the origin of these militants has since become available.[87] However, Chinese authorities officially stated on 9 January 2007 that People's Armed Police (PAP) had engaged in a fierce battle with alleged ETIM fighters at a secret training camp on 5 January 2007 in Akto County in the remote Pamir mountain region of Xinjiang. Xinjiang authorities asserted that they had also captured significant amounts of weaponry and explosives at the training camp that had been smuggled into the region from Central Asia.[88] Although this was subsequently reported in western media reports, no further information regarding this clash has come to light.[89] If the camp and militants are in fact established as having clear links to ETIM, it will be the first major ETIM-related incident since the reported death of the group's leader Hasan Mahsum late in 2003. Moreover, given Mahsum's death, this development may also be the first confirmation that ETIM is operational within Xinjiang.

Regarding the method, nature and identity of the perpetrators of the incidents detailed above in section two, it is difficult to ascertain whether some had any political purpose, are simply acts of crime, or are linked to an identifiable terrorist organisation. This is evident, for example, in Table 4's Crimes of Poison or Arson, where two of the three cited cases involve arson of such targets as a department store and a cotton purchasing station. Moreover, the details of incidents 3 and 4 in Table 7's Violent East Turkistan Terrorist Incidents Outside China are not particularly convincing as acts of terror against China, its citizens or interests. Just as significant in light of China's explicit targeting of ETIM is the fact that of the incidents detailed, only one – regarding the development of terrorist bases and weapons manufacture – is directly labelled as the result of the machinations of this organisation.

Meanwhile other groups such as the Uighur Liberation Organisation (ULO), East Turkistan Islamic Party, East Turkistan Islamic Party of Allah and the East Turkistan Liberation Organisation (ETLO) are also directly labelled as responsible for only a handful of incidents both in Xinjiang and Central Asia. For example, as presented in Table 7, Violent East Turkistan Terrorist Incidents Outside China, 1997–2000, ETLO has been held responsible

for the murder of Nigmat Bazakov, head of the Uighur cultural organisation Ittipaq, based in Bishkek (Kyrgyzstan) in March 2000, for refusing to contribute financially to the group's operations.[90] Meanwhile, the ULO was identified as being behind a number of incidents in Kyrgyzstan in April and May 2000. These included two alleged arson attacks on the Tour Bazaar in Bishkek, which specialised in Chinese commodities, and an attack on a Chinese delegation that had been sent to investigate the first arson attack.[91] Moreover, the East Turkistan Islamic Party and the East Turkistan Islamic Party of Allah were credited with only one act of terrorism each, with the former held responsible for the 1990 Baren Incident and the latter for the February 1997 Yining (Kulja) Incident.[92]

As we have seen, both the incidents identified as being connected to East Turkestan terrorist forces in both Xinjiang and Central Asia, and the groups that have allegedly carried them out, do not resemble a coherent and focused campaign against Chinese interests. Moreover, although a number of these events (most notably attacks on government officials) could be deemed to constitute terrorism in relation to Bueno de Mesquita's definition of terrorism outlined above, many also resemble either ordinary criminal acts or spontaneous acts of dissidence. For example, we know from other sources that the Yining Incident of February 1997, which the Chinese government charges as being the work of the East Turkistan Islamic Party of Allah, was largely a spontaneous protest against contemporary government restrictions on certain cultural practices.[93] Another prominent problem with the Chinese government's account, as noted by James Millward, is its tendency to group together all incidences of violence or opposition as the work of East Turkestan terrorist forces, rather than identifying specific groups as perpetrators.[94] Indeed, the Chinese government's report, 'East Turkestan Terrorists Exposed', asserts that, 'most of the explosions, assassinations, and other terrorist incidents that have taken place in Xinjiang in recent years are *related* to these organizations'.[95]

The evidence for a clear link between such organisations as ETIM and the incidents of violence documented in the Chinese government's account is also belied by the fact that such incidents occurred in distinct clusters. For example, of the 39 incidents documented, 26 or some 66 per cent of these incidents occurred between 1996 and 2000, with only two incidents documented for the 2001–02 period. It will be recalled from section two that from 1996 onward, the authorities instituted regular Strike Hard campaigns against what were termed 'national separatists' and 'illegal religious activities'.

This period between 1996 and 2000 is also significant in terms of region-wide Central Asian developments and dynamics. The geopolitical competition and cooperation among the Central Asian states, Russia, China, Iran and the US for Central Asia's oil and gas, as previously noted, developed simultaneously with the emergence of the cross-border phenomena of weapons and drugs trafficking, and Islamic insurgency. The epicentre of these phenomena was Afghanistan that had, since the Taliban's capture of Kabul in 1996 and a subsequent offensive against the Northern Alliance the following year, become a haven for political opponents of the regions' secular, and often authoritarian, regimes.[96] By 1997 the regimes of the Central Asian presidents – Islam Karimov (Uzbekistan), Sapuramat Niyazov (Turkmenistan), Immomali Rahmonov (Tajikistan), Askar Akaev (Kyrgyzstan) and Nursultan Nazarbayev (Kazakhstan) – had systematically silenced secular and moderate political opposition.[97] The generally parlous socio-economic conditions in the region combined with this political climate to create conditions conducive to the spread of radical or fundamentalist Islamic movements. By the late 1990s living standards throughout the region remained below pre-1991 levels, with the majority of the population living in relative poverty. This socio-economic situation was exacerbated by endemic governmental corruption, and a lack of economic and political reform.[98] This was particularly the case in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan which shared the strategic Ferghana valley, the historic heartland of Central Asia.[99]

These regional developments provided the primary impetus for the transformation of the Shanghai Five into the nascent Shanghai Cooperation Organisation by June 2001. China, along with Russia, played a leading role in shifting the forum's original focus on

confidence building measures and border demarcation toward issues of trans-national security threats that affected all participants, such as Islamic radicalism, terrorism, arms and drug trafficking.[100] For China this was in significant measure due to its concerns about the security of Xinjiang, and the potential for cross-border linkages between Uighur separatists and other Islamist forces in Central Asia. Most significantly, through the emerging SCO process, China succeeded in the late 1990s in obtaining assurances and cooperation from the Central Asian states that share borders with Xinjiang, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, concerning China's struggle with separatism.

# 5. The East Turkestan Islamic Movement: Al Qaeda's China Connection?

*Q:      Why did you receive rifle training?*
*A:      We have one billion enemies, we need to be ready.*
*Q:      When you say enemies, you are referring to the Chinese?*
*A:      Yes.[101]*

The government report identifies ten Uighur groups as being linked with violence in Xinjiang and Central Asia – ETIM, ETLO, ULO, the United Revolutionary Front of East Turkestan (URFET), the East Turkestan Party of Allah, the Shock Brigade of the Islamic Reformist Party, the East Turkestan Opposition Party, the Islamic Holy Warriors and the East Turkestan International Committee. However it relates only nine actions documented in its report to just five of these groups: ULO, ETLO, ETIM, the East Turkestan Party of Allah, and the Shock Brigade of the Islamic Reformist Party.[102] Most significantly in the context of the post–11 September 2001 environment, however, it is ETIM that has been singled out as having links to Central Asian groups such as the IMU and the international Al Qaeda terrorist network. Accordingly, the Chinese government asserts that:

> The East Turkistan Islamic Movement headed by Hasan Mahsum is supported and directed by bin Laden. Since the formation of the East Turkistan Islamic Movement, bin Laden has schemed with the heads of the Central and West Asian terrorist organizations many times to help the East Turkistan terrorist forces in Xinjiang launch a holy war, with the aim of setting up a theocratic Islam state in Xinjiang.[103]

This document subsequently claims that Mahsum met personally with Osama bin Laden in 1999 and 2001 in Kandahar and Kabul to received instructions and financial assistance, but no corroborating evidence is provided.[104] Whether and to what extent ETIM has connections with such groups as the IMU and Al Qaeda is problematic since there is little available information about the organisation, its development and goals beyond that provided by the Chinese government. This has not, however, prevented a number of observers accepting Chinese claims wholesale. Articles by Gunaratna and Pereire and by Wang are based almost entirely on an uncritical reading of China's 2002 report and other Chinese media releases.[105] In particular, Gunaratna and Pereire inaccurately assert that ETIM was responsible for numerous incidents from 1996 onward, including assassinations and explosions. They base their claim on 'East Turkistan Terrorist Forces Cannot Get Away with Impunity', even though this document identifies ETIM as responsible only for establishing training bases from *1998* onward.[106] They also assert that Chinese reports of capturing large quantities of explosives and weaponry in February 1996 is 'illustrative of ETIM's rather sophisticated capability to access financing and a logistics network and indicative of closely cemented ties with Al Qaeda'.[107] Furthermore, they also imply that ETIM was behind the Yining (Kulja) Incident of February 1997, even though, as noted above, a number of other reputable sources indicate clearly that it was a mass demonstration that then deteriorated into a riot as a result of a heavy-handed response by Chinese security forces.[108]

The extent and timing of ETIM's connection to Al Qaeda is, however, not as straightforward as such accounts would have us believe. According to a CCTV documentary televised in Xinjiang in August 2002 titled, 'On the Spot Report: The Crimes of Eastern Turkestan Terrorist Power', Hasan Mahsum left Xinjiang in 1997 and then joined or established ETIM *thereafter*.[109] Moreover, the alleged vice-chairman of ETIM, Abdullah Kariaji,[110]

interviewed by the *Wall Street Journal* in 2004, claimed that he joined ETIM in 1997 after he had been released from a two-year prison term for operating a secret Quranic school in Kashgar during the early 1990s.[111] More importantly, the accounts of ETIM's subsequent development provided by the Chinese 'On the Spot' documentary and by Abdullah Kariaji appear to confirm some links with both the Taliban and Al Qaeda. According to the Chinese documentary, Hasan Mahsum found refuge in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan after leaving Xinjiang in 1997 and established a training camp and began to recruit Uighurs to carry out a *jihad* in Xinjiang.[112] Abdullah Kariaji stated that he met a Muslim cleric who had formed ETIM in 1997, and he was told that this man had opened camps in Afghanistan to train Uighurs to fight China. Moreover, he claims that members of ETIM had met bin Laden earlier in 1997 and received his permission to open a camp near Khost. According to this account, ETIM, with the cooperation of the Taliban and Al Qaeda, established three Uighur camps in Afghanistan between 1997 and 2001. These camps sheltered up to 500 Uighur families.[113] Moreover, Kariaji claims that ETIM has sent Uighurs trained in small arms and explosives back to Xinjiang to carry out attacks against the Chinese in the future.[114] Yet according to Kariaji, the relationship between bin Laden, the Taliban and ETIM was not particularly close:

> Mr Kariaji says the relationship between his group and al Qaeda was never close as the US and China claim. There were tensions over ETIM's focus on attacking China, he says. In 1999, Mr Kariaji says he and a half-dozen others went to Kandahar for an audience with Mr bin Laden. In a lengthy speech, the Saudi militant spoke about the oppression of Muslims in Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Chechnya. He didn't mention Xinjiang, Mr Kariaji recalls.[115]

This lack of support for the Uighur cause apparently greatly disappointed Mr Kariaji and his compatriots.[116] However, Kariaji's admitted membership of ETIM and his time spent in Afghanistan would suggest that his account should be treated with caution.

Yet the known information on Hasan Mahsum, involving persecution in Xinjiang prior to his flight to neighbouring countries such as Afghanistan and active participation in such groups as ETIM, is a common thread in the testimony of the majority of the 22 Uighurs held by US authorities at the US military prison at Guantanomo Bay.[117] So too are the general contours of Mr Kariaji's story. The Chinese government has made much of its reports that 22 Uighurs were captured in Afghanistan and Pakistan late in 2001. However the subsequent interrogation and trials of the Uighur prisoners by US military authorities at Guantanomo has not, in the majority of detainee cases, revealed evidence that corroborates China's allegations. Five of these men were subsequently released and transferred by the US to Albania in May 2006 after the US military determined that they were not enemy combatants.[118] Lawyers from the New York-based Center for Constitutional Rights also appealed to the US Circuit Court in Washington in September 2006 on behalf of a further ten of the Uighur detainees held in Guantanomo concerning their ultimate destination after their release.[119] Thus it appears, as of February 2007, that the fate of only seven of the original 22 detainees is yet to be decided by the US government.

# 6. Human Security as a Determinant of Uighur Terrorism?

> I travelled there because I had two reasons. Number one was to escape from the torturing, darkness and suffering of the Chinese government. Lately, the Chinese government was putting too much pressure on Uighurs. We wanted to go to some other country to live in peace.[120]

Overall the available evidence suggesting clear and significant links between ETIM, Al Qaeda and the Taliban is circumstantial and fragmentary. Many of the Uighur detainees' testimony during their Combatant Status Review Tribunals (CSRT) suggested that:

1. most had not heard of ETIM's existence prior to being brought to Guantanomo Bay;
2. most had arrived in Afghanistan via Kyrgyzstan and Pakistan in 2000 and 2001;
3. most had stayed at a Uighur camp outside Jalalabad with up to 50 Uighur families according to one detainee;
4. most received minimal training with small arms; and
5. the Uighurs received little or no assistance from Al Qaeda or the Taliban.[121]

The primary motivations stated by the detainees for being in Afghanistan in 2001 almost uniformly stress fleeing from repression or persecution by the Chinese authorities in Xinjiang and the desire to fight for East Turkestan's independence.[122] It also appears from the testimony of some of the Uighur detainees that it was the increasing cooperation of the Central Asian states, particularly Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, with the Chinese authorities by the late 1990s, that prompted many of these detainees to travel to Afghanistan. One detainee's testimony, for example, highlighted the pressure placed on Uighurs who left Xinjiang for Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan:

> If you go to Kazakhstan, they will not let us get property, training or anything. They will not let us in; as soon as they know we are in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, they will return us back to the Chinese. That is the reason we went to Afghanistan.[123]

Thus it is possible that the Uighurs apprehended in Afghanistan by US and coalition forces in late 2001 were simply in transit from either Kazakhstan or Kyrgyzstan. The evidence I have presented in the last two sections makes it possible to suggest that while there appears to have been a limited connection between ETIM and Al Qaeda and the Taliban, this connection has been greatly amplified by the Chinese government. Furthermore, violent incidents recorded since the 1996 to 2000 period have evidently decreased, due to the convergence of three factors. First, Uighur separatist organisations evidently have limited capabilities to actively threaten Chinese rule in Xinjiang. Second, ETIM, if indeed it remains operational after the reported death of its leader, Hasan Mahsum, is not the sophisticated, Al Qaeda surrogate organisation that the Chinese government has portrayed. Third, Chinese efforts in security and intelligence cooperation with the Central Asian states have been successful in clamping down on overt Uighur opposition.

Let us return here to Callaway and Harrelson–Stephens' hypothesis that states where terrorism is carried out by individuals are likely to have medium levels of both repression and subsistence, and avenues for political participation or dissent rendered unavailable by the closed political system within the state.[124] As the preceding discussion has highlighted, the contemporary situation in Xinjiang is arguably characterised by medium levels of repression of *overt* acts of dissent and a relatively closed system of political participation. While there are also identifiable economic disparities between ethnic minorities such

as the Uighur and the Han, there is certainly no evidence of under-nourishment of the population.[125] However, as highlighted in the comments noted above of a Uighur detainee held at Guantanomo military prison, perception is certainly apparent among Uigher that they are threatened by the Han who now dominate Xinjiang politically, economically and increasingly demographically.

# 7. Conclusion

On the basis of the examination discussed in this study, I conclude that the extent or intensity of China's violation of the three sets of rights identified by Callaway and Harrelson-Stephens does not generate widespread anti-China terrorist activity in Xinjiang. The Chinese violations are neither strong enough nor felt consistently across all three sets of rights to produce this outcome. Indeed, there are some reasons to suggest that the situation in Xinjiang, and for the Uighur, is neither as dire as certain Uighur émigré organisations would present in terms of Chinese domination, nor as fraught with terrorism as the Chinese government would argue. Yitzhak Shicor, a long-term scholar of Xinjiang, has recently suggested a similar assessment of the situation in the region in relation to the issues of terrorism and Uighur separatism. As he claims:

> In sharp contrast to war zones or real separatist conflicts – such as northern Iraq, the Palestinian West Bank, Kosovo, Sudan and Chechnya – Xinjiang looks peaceful and quiet to the occasional visitor. Traveling from one place to another, military units can hardly be seen, although one can feel the tension between Uyghurs and Han. Yet this tension is not necessarily or directly related to separatism. It is a typical relationship in any colonial situation. Xinjiang is no exception. While there have been a number of violent confrontations, there is no real threat to Chinese rule in Xinjiang. And while those who try to undermine Chinese rule in Xinjiang are not only Uyghurs but also Muslim, Islamic radicalism is a marginal phenomenon at best.[126]

# Notes

1 Information Office of the State Council of the PRC, 'East Turkistan terrorist forces cannot get away with impunity', *People's Daily*, 21 January 2002, available at <http://www.peopledaily. com.cn/200201/21/ print200020121_89078.htm>. Accessed 2 February 2002.

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