

China's Changing Strategic Concerns:

The Impact on Human Rights in Xinjiang

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Room 480 of the Ford House Office Building

Statement of S. Frederick Starr

A visitor to Xinjiang today will find much to admire. The land is austere but beautiful, and the great oases that ring the Taklamakan desert are verdant. Thanks to oil and gas production it is a prosperous territory, at least in a statistical sense, with more production than any other non-coastal province of China. Oil wealth has turned the once somnolent Turkic town of Urumchi into a humming metropolis. The newly opened railroad to Kashgar will doubtless produce the same result in that historic center of Turkic and Muslim life.

The problem is that nine-tenths of the inhabitants of the new Urumchi are Han Chinese who have only recently settled in a province whose population was 98% Turkic only three generations ago. The same process is beginning in Kashgar, Xinjiang's second city. Meanwhile, the oases on which the majority Uyghur and other Turkic peoples live are very poor by comparison.

This is a common problem of development and has certain parallels in the expansion of Russia, Australia, Brazil, and the United States. What is noteworthy is how the Chinese government has dealt with it. For a generation and a half after 1949 Beijing took a hard line to impose its control, using tough top-down controls whenever necessary. After 1985 it shifted to a softer approach, focusing on economic incentives, affirmative action in education, and a respectful place for the Turkic Uyghur language in public life. Then in the late 1990s, concerned over what it terms "splittism" or separatism and radical Islam, China's government shifted back to a policy that is harsh to the point of brutality, as is implied by the very name of its campaign in the region, "Strike Hard, Maximum Pressure!"

This policy continues today, and with devastating consequences. Thousands have died in confrontations with the police, including some 300 young people in the northern town of Ili who, in 1997, dared to mount an independent campaign against alcohol abuse. In terms of nearly all the commonly accepted indexes of democracy and human rights, the situation in Xinjiang is lamentable.

Permit me to touch briefly on ten areas that should be of concern to your committee. I do so as the editor of a multi-year study of Xinjiang funded by the Luce Foundation and carried out by the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute at Johns Hopkins University's Nitze School of Advanced International Studies. Some eighteen scholars, most of whom know Uyghur and other local Turkic languages as well as Han Chinese and all of whom have carried out research in Xinjiang, contributed to the study, available as a book entitled Xinjiang: China's Muslim Borderland (M.E. Sharp). The comments that follow are based on research findings of this book but I take sole responsibility for their contents.

So, let us ask:

1. Are there free and fair elections in Xinjiang? No, any more than there are in other areas of China with the partial exception of Hong Kong.
2. Does there exist a parliamentary body or other form of representing public opinion at the governmental level? No. The Communist apparatus is alive and well in Xinjiang and is safely

controlled from above from Beijing. At its best, the Party is capable of discerning public discontent and even acting on it. But even this minimal form of responsiveness is done for the Turkic peoples and not by them.

3. Does the Turkic population, which is still a slight majority, enjoy equal rights with the Han Chinese? For a decade after 1985 something approaching this occurred, but by 2000 political, economic, social, and religious rights of the Turkic peoples were again being systematically repressed. The number of Uyghurs in top government posts has shrunk, the government has clamped down on Turkic entrepreneurship, health indicators are far better for urban Han Chinese than for Turkic peoples, and Muslim practice is severely restricted.
4. Is the court system free of governmental interference? No, any more than it was free in the USSR, from which Mao's China borrowed many of its judicial institutions and practices.
5. Does the government observe minimal international standards for the maintenance of persons held in jails and labor camps? No. Worse, Xinjiang's jails are subject to so powerful an information blackout that information on even the most egregious instances of brutality can take years to leak out, or may go totally unreported.
6. Do the Turkic peoples of Xinjiang have reasonable access to income-producing employment and social services? No. Nearly all the most remunerative employment in Xinjiang is in Han Chinese hands, and when Uyghur businesswoman Rebiya Kadeer became one of the most successful entrepreneurs in China she was jailed for eight years. Higher education is now conducted entirely in Han Chinese, and any Turkic parent wishing for younger children to get ahead will avoid placing them in those lower schools that teach in Uyghur.
7. Is the practice of religion free from governmental interference? No. The return to "hard" policies towards the Muslim majority in Xinjiang after 1985 gave rise to a very small but active strain of Islamic extremism in Xinjiang. Moreover, during the 1990s the province was subjected to influences from Taliban Afghanistan and fundamentalist areas in Pakistan. The effort to suppress these led to a general and indiscriminate crackdown on Islam in Xinjiang, including mainstream and traditionalist Sunni practice and the Sufi orders that once flourished there. One of the latter was suppressed only this August.
8. Are domestic or international NGOs able to function in Xinjiang? Nearly every attempt at self-organization and voluntarism by indigenous Uyghurs, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, and Tajiks has been suppressed, in some cases with the loss of hundreds of lives. Foreign NGOs do not operate on the territory of Xinjiang.
9. Are there free media in Xinjiang? No. Not only that, but Beijing, through its Shanghai Cooperation Organization and other forms of diplomatic pressure, has successfully stifled free expression on Xinjiang-related issues in the neighboring sovereign states of Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan.
10. Do citizens of Xinjiang have access to international travel and contacts through which they can air their concerns in relevant international media and forums? No. International travel and communications by Turkic citizens of Xinjiang is severely restricted. Even the border trade with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan is now largely in the hands of Han Chinese. Internet access in Turkic towns is extremely limited or nonexistent. As a result, Xinjiang's indigenous population has no way of projecting its voice to the world. The émigré community of Xinjiang Uyghurs, Kazakhs, etc. is active but the small number of its members and pressure from Beijing assure that its voice is barely audible.

Beijing believes that its "Strike Hard, Maximum Pressure" campaign is a prudent response to a genuine threat of religious extremism and separatism and only this August has reaffirmed it. Let us recognize that Islamic radicalism does exist in Xinjiang and the government of China would be irresponsible if it were to ignore it. Two radical Islamist groups in Xinjiang were recognized by the US and UN as terrorist organizations. But Beijing's uncompromising response is rendered counterproductive when it coincides with such harsh measures against the mainstream population as those outlined above.

These in turn are rationalized in terms of the campaign against separatism. Yet the "Strike Hard" campaign has long since wiped out whatever separatist currents may have existed in Xinjiang a decade ago. Those few voices still calling for Xinjiang's independence arise from abroad and are audible mainly on the Internet.

Today, the overwhelming majority of Xinjiang Uyghurs, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, and Tajiks would be quite content with a greater degree of autonomy, as opposed to outright independence. Their plea is simply for the current Chinese government to fulfill the expectations that Mao Zedong himself generated when, after conquering the province, named it the "Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region" (emphasis mine).

The US government, other western countries, and the EU have rightly been concerned with the state of democracy, human rights, and religious freedoms in the Caucasus and Central Asia. With the collapse of Soviet imperial rule eight new states were created in these regions. At independence, all of them were weak and poor, with small populations ranging from four to 24 million. They were inaccessible to trade and those lacking oil and gas were poor in resources. None had any real experience with democracy and the rights that citizenship should confer. Our efforts in behalf of democracy, human rights, and religious freedom have concentrated above all on these eight states.

However, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia constitute only a part of the Caucasus. The rest of the region---Dagestan, Ingushetia, North Ossetia, Chechnya, and Kabardino-Balkaria -- remains under Russian rule. Similarly, Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan are only part of Central Asia, the rest being Afghanistan and Xinjiang.

Merely to mention this raises an obvious point. It cannot be denied that the independent countries I just listed are guilty of many and at times serious lapses in the areas of democracy, human rights, and religious freedom. So, of course, were the newly independent United States of America. But even at their worst, their record in all three areas of concern to your committee is far better than is the record of Russia's rule in Chechnya, Dagestan, and Ingushetia, and of China's rule in Tibet and in Xinjiang.

And yet how different is our response to the two situations! When the small, weak, relatively poor, but independent states stumble in the area of democracy, human rights, and religious freedom we editorialize against them, pass censure motions, heap public abuse on their leaders, threaten to suspend aid, and decertify them even for humanitarian assistance. But when large, rich and powerful states impose their rule over other parts of the same region with brutal and primitive force---in the process assaulting the principles of democracy, human rights, and religious freedom---we continue to receive their leaders as honored guests and otherwise remain silent.

By the act of its founding the United States placed itself on the side of national self-determination and those seeking freedom from imperial rule. Recently, however, it appears that we have reversed this age-old stance. We seem to acquiesce in serious abuses committed by those who are the heirs of empires acquired by force, and instead focus narrowly on the shortcomings of independent states that have no understanding of how to apply the values we hold high.

The word "engagement" is a resonant term in this city's discussion of foreign affairs. Applied to the Caucasus and Central Asia, we seem more willing to *engage* with those in Moscow who rule the North Caucasus and

with those in Beijing who rule Xinjiang, than we are with those in the eight newly independent states who are trying, against formidable odds, to govern their countries under conditions of great insecurity and to build their still fragile economies in a globalized world with which they had little or no direct contact until very recently.

Let me be clear: I am *not* arguing against engagement with the Peoples Republic of China, nor am I proposing that we "*give a pass*" to governments in Central Asia and the Caucasus when they commit abuses in the area of democratization, human rights, and religious freedom. Instead, I am suggesting that it is time that we take our finger off the scales, and start acting on our values in a *consistent* manner. At the very least, we must stop allocating rewards and punishments, engagement and rebuke, on the basis of whether a country is large or small, secure or vulnerable, powerful or weak. Removing what appears to many as a *double standard* will go far towards promoting the noble ends we seek to promote.