China's Changing Strategic Concerns:

The Impact on Human Rights in Xinjiang

Wednesday, November 16, from 10:00 - 11:30 PM

Room 480 of the Ford House Office Building

Statement of James A. Millward

One of the many international repercussions of the events of 11 September 2001, was a shift in the official PRC public position with regard to separatism in Xinjiang. From a stance generally playing down the threat of violent unrest in the region (no doubt in the interest of encouraging foreign investment), PRC and Xinjiang authorities instead chose to highlight possible linkages between Uyghur separatism and international Islamist movements and Al Qa'ida. While this shift has been widely seen as an attempt to seek "cover" for a crackdown on Uyghurs in Xinjiang that has resulted in many human rights abuses, in fact, that crackdown had been ongoing for several years before 9-11. Less often noted is the fact that the shift occurred at the precise moment when the US inaugurated a robust and unprecedented military presence in former-Soviet Central Asia—and China's backyard. Though the official Chinese reaction to the advent of US military bases in Central Asia was muted, Beijing and Urumchi almost certainly greeted this development with great alarm.

Outside of China, many scholars and observers of Xinjiang believe that the PRC has exaggerated the extent of the current terrorist threat in Xinjiang and mischaracterized the nature of Uyghur separatist dissent as exclusively Islamist and terrorist. I myself have argued that while several violent separatist incidents and demonstrations that turned violent occurred between 1990 and 1997, the situation since then has been calmer, probably due to the effectiveness of security operations in Xinjiang. Likewise, while some Uyghur groups organized and publicized their cause from Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan in the 1980s and 1990s, the formation of the SCO and China's growing trade, diplomatic and security arrangements with the Central Asian states have largely curtailed Uyghur freedom of organization in the region, and effectively eliminated the threat of cross-border separatist enclaves.

Nevertheless, the PRC remains extremely concerned over the region, ratcheting up restrictions on the practice of Islam in Xinjiang (but not elsewhere in China), policing Uyghur cultural expression, prohibiting even peaceful expression of dissent, and in other ways continuing a crackdown that produces obvious disaffection among Uyghur and other non-Han ethnic groups in the region, not to mention continuing criticism from abroad.

The question, then, is why, given robust economic growth and ostensible stability in Xinjiang, the PRC remains so worried about it that its policies there invite international opprobrium and exacerbate the very ethnic tensions it hopes to diffuse? One answer may be that the threat of a militant separatist or terrorist campaign is actually greater than it appears. There may be secret information shedding light on this, but from the open source materials available to me, it does not seem to be the case.

Here I wish to focus on another possible answer. Chinese insecurity about Xinjiang is based on a 200-year history of outside involvement and intervention in this frontier region. The Chinese view of the region's history stresses foreign interference above all else as the source of trouble in Xinjiang from the 18th century to the present. Against this background, and viewing Xinjiang's past as they do, Chinese see both the US military presence in Central and South Asia, and the precedent of the "color revolutions," as a real threat to security in Xinjiang.

Historical review: a focus on foreign involvement in Xinjiang

The modern epoch of Chinese control over the Xinjiang region began in the mid-eighteenth century with the Manchu Qing dynasty's conquest of the region. At the time, the Qianlong emperor justified Xinjiang conquest as a defensive necessity arising from a decades-long war with the Zunghar Mongols. Following the conquest, the Qing established an administration in Xinjiang and encouraged settlement and agricultural reclamation by Han and Hui Chinese. In this respect, Beijing's approach to Xinjiang in the 18th and 19th centuries more resembles Russian eastward expansion into Siberia, or even the westward expansion of European settlers across North America, than it does the episodes of Chinese projection of power into the Xinjiang region from over a millennium earlier.

Though it is often stated in western writings that the Muslim occupants of Xinjiang chafed under and frequently rebelled against Qing rule, troubles in the region in imperial times resulted more often from invasion than from local rebellion. From the early through mid-nineteenth century, Qing rule in Xinjiang was disrupted several times by invasions from Khokand (in modern Uzbekistan). The spark for a major rebellion in the 1860s-1870s was domestic and ethno-religious; but this movement by local Chinese Muslims (Hui) and Uyghurs was soon taken over by Yaqub Beg, an adventurer from Khokand, who imposed a regime largely with his own Central Asian troops. The Ottoman empire and British empire opened contacts with Yaqub Beg's emirate, and London attempted to broker an agreement between the Qing and Yaqub Beg's representatives to establish an independent buffer state under Yaqub Beg's rule in Xinjiang. Meanwhile, Tsarist Russia took advantage of the disruption to annex much of northern Xinjiang.

In late nineteenth-century Qing court debates over whether to reconquer Xinjiang, advocates of reconquest echoed the earlier arguments of the Qianlong emperor that control of the Xinjiang was vital to the security of the capital. This point of view won the day, bolstered by the growing threat from Russia, which had expanded into Manchuria and only returned northern Xinjiang to the Qing after concerted diplomatic efforts backed up by a Qing threat of force. Russia nonetheless extracted many commercial concessions, and over subsequent decades aggressively expanded its economic interests in Xinjiang.

The transition from Qing imperial to Chinese republican rule was accompanied in Xinjiang, as elsewhere in China, by devolution to warlord control after 1911. Two decades of misrule led to rebellion in the 1930s and the formation in 1933 of the short-lived Eastern Turkestan Republic in Kashgar (southwestern Xinjiang). This was a local, largely secularist republican movement, the culmination of years of Uyghur intellectual ferment inspired by Islamic modernist trends emanating from Russia and Turkey and disseminated through new schools in Xinjiang. Turkey expressed solidarity with the new ETR, but provided no tangible aid. Still, this Turkish connection has led Chinese scholars ever since to brand Uyghur separatist movements "pan-Turkic."

Other states likewise took interest in Xinjiang during the tumultuous 1930s. Japan followed events there closely, and its Kwantung Army even drew up a personnel roster for the puppet government it hoped to establish in Xinjiang. This was mere fantasy, but Soviet intervention was very real: Soviet air power, advisers and troops helped quell the various warring factions in Xinjiang and establish a client, Sheng Shicai, in the governor's office in Urumchi. Soviet ties with Xinjiang continued to expand, especially in the north, which grew increasingly integrated economically with the Soviet Union.

The Nationalist (Guomindang) Chinese government managed to reestablish some influence in Xinjiang in the early 1940s. However, northern Xinjiang was soon roiled by an anti-Chinese rebellion that gave birth to another separatist government. This movement began Islamic and strongly anti-Chinese; however, it soon fell under Soviet influence if not outright control, and turned secular and socialist and scaled back its initial anti-Chinese vitriol. This new government, initially also known as the Eastern Turkestan Republic, governed northern Xinjiang from 1944 until 1949. PRC scholars and ideologues officially treat this "Three Districts

Revolution," as it is known, as a chapter in the Chinese revolution, and represent the Soviet role as fraternal and secondary to the efforts of Chinese revolutionaries. Privately, however, Chinese who know about it regard this second ETR as a Soviet effort to collude with separatists to carve a pro-Soviet client state much like the Republic of Mongolia out of China's Xinjiang flank.

Communist Chinese assumption of power in Xinjiang in 1949 was uncontested, as the ETR in the north was a socialist ally, and the Guomindang general in charge of southern Xinjiang opted to surrender the region and his troops. The one group that did openly resist, however, were Kazakhs under Osman Batur. Chinese scholars and politicians make much of the fact that the last US official in the Ti-hwa (Urumchi) consulate, CIA agent Douglas MacKiernan, met with Osman before the Communist takeover and fled to Osman's camp on the eve of the PLA arrival in Urumchi. Though the PLA easily defeated Osman, MacKiernan's involvement is seen as a US plot to support an anti-Communist guerilla resistance in Xinjiang similar to the later CIA-sponsored resistance in Tibet.

> During the 1950s, PRC minority nationality policies in Xinjiang were remarkably liberal and in theory culturally pluralistic. During the Great Leap and Cultural Revolution eras, however, and especially following the Sino-Soviet split, pluralistic policies gave way to a wave of Han chauvinism and the lurch towards radical Maoism. Even as Uyghur and other ethnic cadres were being purged for alleged Soviet sympathies, the USSR seemed to lend credence to those charges by massing troops and sponsoring a "Xinjiang Minority Refugee Army" to engage in maneuvers along the Sino-Soviet frontier. There were nearly continuous skirmishes, and some serious clashes, on the Xinjiang border from the late 1960s through the early 1970s.

Conclusion

It is a cliché, but nonetheless true, that the Chinese pay more attention to history than we do in the United States. The narrative I have presented above is factual, if one-sided (a more nuanced version of Xinjiang's past, one that includes a Uyghur perspective, would of course be more accurate). It represents how Chinese view the region's history, and in China more polemical versions of this narrative, stressing ceaseless foreign efforts to "split Xinjiang from the great family of the motherland," are staple fare in history texts, on websites, and in the speeches of political leaders. Through the 1980s and 1990s Chinese officials routinely insinuated that US machinations underlay Uyghur separatist sentiment. Many Chinese believe this. Chinese scholars writing on contemporary Xinjiang regularly reference the NATO intervention in Kosovo and, now, the "color revolutions," in discussing the international context of Xinjiang separatism. I have no reason to doubt their sincerity on this point either.

I do not intend to justify draconian policies in Xinjiang by saying they derive from a skewed understanding of history. Nevertheless, if we recognize the long history of foreign involvement in the Xinjiang region, and understand that many Chinese leaders believe their own propagandistic polemics of foreign threat, we may better understand what seems like intransigence with regard to Xinjiang. Moreover, we may see how the advent of US military bases in Central Asia and Afghanistan, enhanced US military cooperation with Pakistan and India, together with the example of American involvement in the "color revolutions" in former Soviet lands, could exacerbate Chinese anxieties. Finally, by understanding how Chinese view Xinjiang security against this historical background of foreign involvement and intervention, we may learn to shape our expressions of concern in more effective ways.

> What might some of those ways be?

•*Human rights*: Continued vocal, high-level expressions of concern over human rights, civil rights, religious rights and cultural autonomy for Uyghurs and other groups in Xinjiang, such as those expressed in the reports of the Congressional Executive Commission, are important and effective. Efforts by the US State Department and NGOs have achieved real successes both in helping individual prisoners of conscience (Rabiya Kadeer) and in informing an international public about Xinjiang conditions. Tursunjan Emet, who

has recently been imprisoned for ten years for writing a story about a blue pigeon, might be a good next candidate for special attention. Literature is not terrorism.

•*Development*: Uyghurs in Xinjiang and their supporters abroad frequently complain about inequalities arising from the rapid development of Xinjiang, in particular regarding allocation of jobs and resources to Han versus other ethnic groups and the urban renewal efforts. Many of these problems involve racial discrimination and local corruption, and are deplorable, if not alien to our own experience in the United States. By treating them as part of a master plan emanating from Beijing, however, we do not help the situation. The US posture here should be constructive: sharing experience in local development initiatives, minority business grants and other state programs to defend minority and ethnic civil rights will be more effective than broad accusations.

•*Chinese migration into Xinjiang*: reports by human rights groups and by this Commission have pointed out examples of the recruitment of Han laborers and settlers to move to Xinjiang. Insofar as these are official policies, they merit criticism as counterproductive to the very goals of development and raised standards of living for all Xinjiang residents that the PRC espouses. But expressions of outrage at the very fact that Han Chinese are moving into Xinjiang may be misplaced. It is common to cite the statistic that Han now represent over 40% of the Xinjiang population, compared to only 5% in 1949. However, Uyghurs are not dying out. While their relative proportion of the Xinjiang population has declined, in absolute numbers they have nearly tripled since 1949. The US supports the lifting of Chinese controls on residence, the rights to internal travel, and the creation of a free labor market. In the United States, we would not now advocate or create exclusive ethnic or racial territorial enclaves—would we suggest that the PRC do so in Xinjiang? We cannot reasonably insist that Han be excluded from a province comprising a sixth of PRC territory. There are, however, severe environmental restraints on development in many parts of Xinjiang, and on these grounds we could suggest that a rational development strategy would not involve massive in-migration to a desertifying, water-poor region.

•*Security*: It is not constructive to accuse the PRC of a lack of transparency or excessive military budgets while the US is simultaneously expanding its military presence in Central and South Asia. We must recognize that from China's point of view, the US appears to have been working since 9-11 to build a new arc of bases and allies in their backyard, and that this seems consistent with a policy to "contain" China. If the US wishes to collaborate on terrorism, reassure China of our intentions and simultaneously reduce perceived threats in Xinjiang, it would be wise to engage with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization as a body, rather than pursuing a series of bilateral arrangements with its members.

Notes:

1. James Millward, Violent Separatism in Xinjiang: A Critical Assessment, Policy Studies # 6 (Washington: East-West Center, 2004).