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GEOPOLITICS OF RELIGIOUS SOFT POWER POLICY BRIEF #6

THE MYTH OF "FOREIGN FORCES" IN XINJIANG

By Eric Schluessel

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Officials of the Chinese Communist Party and state may genuinely believe that they are pursuing beneficial policies in Xinjiang while actually causing harm. They appear to exist in an information bubble or echo chamber, in which they are insulated from on-the-ground realities and instead reinforce inaccurate assumptions about the causes of unrest. This brief identifies some of the ways that party-state officials have created a persistent narrative that "foreign forces" infiltrate Xinjiang to cause disruption. This appealing narrative allows them to ignore proximal causes of violence.

This brief is a product of the Geopolitics of Religious Soft Power (GRSP) project, a multi-year, cross-disciplinary effort to systematically study state use of religion in foreign affairs.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The Chinese state has convinced itself that unrest in Xinjiang is caused to a large degree by external interference. This myth of "foreign forces" has deeper roots in Chinese political culture, but it has been a common trope in Xinjiang since the 1910s.
- Officials are incentivized to reproduce the "foreign forces" myth at every level of documentation, from grassroots reports to top-level speeches.
- Beijing's misidentification of the roots of unrest in Xinjiang leads to counterproductive policies. Symptoms of economic inequality and ethnoreligious discrimination are instead treated as the results of "spiritual pollution."
- Xinjiang's future stability depends on whether Beijing can give up deeply ingrained false narratives. Foreign interlocutors should emphasize proximal causes of unrest instead of supporting the "foreign forces" narrative.
- Similarly, policymakers should avoid a "malevolent center" narrative that oversimplifies the Chinese political process and reduces it to ill intent.

INTRODUCTION

China's Xinjiang policy is paradoxical. Since 2000 and the inauguration of the Open Up the West development program, the party-state has pursued a series of policies that aggressively target Uyghur culture and language, as well as, increasingly, Islamic practice. The inaugurations of such policies have clear and intuitive links to subsequent acts of protest, which have at times escalated into violence. Economic inequality, ecological destruction, and cultural and religious oppression offer well-documented and longstanding reasons for unrest. Nevertheless, the party-state has continually shifted blame for social frictions, anti-government feeling, and violence onto "foreign forces." The more discontent increases, the more the party-state intensifies the reasons for discontent.

I argue in this brief that the People's Republic of China (PRC) has successfully convinced itself of the narrative that Xinjiang's problems are caused by invasive ideas, rather than internal factors, and that this fantasy, for which there is little empirical evidence, distracts from identifying and implementing real solutions for social instability. This brief has three sections: First, it demonstrates how the treatment of Islam in Xinjiang as a "foreign" religion and source of popular unrest has deeper roots in Chinese political culture. Second, it shows that the Xi Jinping-era turn from religious discrimination to religious persecution is rooted more in narratives and aesthetics than in evidence, and how this orientation leads to misidentifications and perverse outcomes in the policymaking process in Xinjiang. Third, it enumerates more proximal causes of unrest to show how Chinese and other policymakers can better address social frictions without resorting to fantasy.

ISLAM AS A "FOREIGN RELIGION"

Because the idea of Islam as a "dangerous" and "foreign religion" is so deeply ingrained in Chinese political discourse, it is necessary to go into history to identify the moment when Chinese elites normalized that idea. A shift in perceptions in the 1700s fundamentally shapes the party-state's ideas of Islam in Xinjiang today.

Muslims have lived in China since the Tang (618–907), when Arab and Persian seamen arrived on China's southern coast, and merchants and soldiers came into China through Central Asian protectorates. The Muslim community grew over the following centuries, along with distinctly Chinese forms of Islamic practice. By the Ming (1368–1644), Muslims were fully integrated into Chinese society, as Islamic and Confucian scholars entered into an intense dialogue, and Muslim officials became increasingly common. Islamic mysticism (Sufism) in particular played—and continues to play—a central role in Chinese Islam.

It was only in the 1700s that violence among Muslim factions led the Qing (1644–1912) to enact laws that singled out Muslim communities for suspicion and punishment. One Chinese Sufi famously traveled to Yemen where he received what he called the "New Teaching." The introduction of the "New Teaching" to the provinces of Shaanxi and Gansu mapped onto an existing factional conflict, leading to violence. The Qing state ended this uprising, but it never understood its deeper social causes from a Muslim perspective. Instead, it blamed the "New Teaching."[1] Chinese officials thenceforth thought of the "New Teaching" as a dangerous and foreign idea that caused unrest and the so-called "Old Teaching" as a safe and domestic idea. Thanks in part to

this incident, the modern Chinese state continues to think of Islam in terms of "our/good/domestic Muslims" and "their/bad/foreign Muslims."[2]

Yet the idea of "dangerous foreign ideas" was not restricted to Muslims. There is a longstanding belief in Chinese political culture that the masses are always on the verge of panic and violence sparked by heterodox beliefs.[3] This "panic factor" was invoked many times in the Qing as violent incidents increased across China for reasons that officials could not understand, because they simply knew less and less about their increasingly complex country. Moreover, as Ho-fung Hung has argued, the trope of the "panic factor" helps reinforce the idea that popular violence is never due to actions by the benevolent center.[4]

Xinjiang, which the Qing conquered in the 1750s, therefore came to occupy a strange place in the modern Chinese imagination of China. To many Chinese, Xinjiang was a new and far-flung territory inhabited by people with a strange way of life and unfamiliar language. At the same time, many Chinese intellectual leaders saw Xinjiang as a frontier for settlement, and even part of a Chinese civilizational birthright, a place that ought to be transformed and domesticated. Xinjiang and Uyghurs seemed both "outside"—and therefore suspicious and dangerous—and "inside"—and thus familiar and destined to be assimilated. The same was true of Islam in Xinjiang. While Chinese writers mainly found Islam in inner China familiar and ordinary, they treated Islam in Xinjiang as a strange and alien phenomenon.

The key turning point was 1918, when the Xinjiang government misconstrued a local conflict between merchant groups as an attempt by the British Empire to disrupt Chinese sovereignty.[5] That interpretation was convenient for the province's politics, as it justified a crackdown on foreign trade. This incident was later enshrined as an example of foreign interference in the Mao era through the compilation of the *Concise History of Xinjiang* (Ch. *Xinjiang jianshi*), an official history that has since been highly influential on Party thought on Xinjiang.

The PRC had already begun framing local Muslim discontent as a product of "outside forces" in the 1950s. The 1959 Qoray Rebellion, which took place in Qumul (Ch. Hami), came to be characterized as "an armed rebellion plotted from afar" (Ch. *cong yaoyuan cedong de panluan*) almost immediately after it was put down.[6] Oral histories, however, demonstrate that the uprising was spurred by internal factors, including overenthusiastic collectivization of farmland, the same complaint that was a major factor in the contemporaneous uprising in Greater Tibet.[7] In both cases, local party-state officials knew about the proximal causes of unrest, which came from the Maoist land reform program. Nevertheless, they presented these uprisings as foreign attempts to disrupt Chinese sovereignty. The Mao era enshrined the concept of the "benevolent center," and the party-state came to believe its own narratives about unrest in minority areas.

The same analytical error led to a mischaracterization of the 1990 Barin Incident, an armed protest-turned-uprising that took place in Akto County near Kashgar and has cast a long shadow over Xinjiang policy ever since. According to interviews, the protest was related to family-planning restrictions—the same concern that had motivated the Qoray Rebellion, decades earlier and hundreds of miles away. How-

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ever, the party-state immediately characterized the incident as a conflict between foreign "Wahhabism" and local "traditional Islam," thus invoking the idea of "foreign forces" and distracting from any possibility of local causes.[8] Investigators were directed to identify a specific percentage of Barin's population as "extremists" who could then be punished. This analysis of the Barin Incident further informed the party-state's new approach to Islam. First, Xinjiang closed or tore down dozens of mosques deemed to harbor "extremism," and then tightened restrictions on religious practice in 1994. Thus, assumptions about malign foreign influences turned into social science conclusions, which then informed a policy that made the initial assumptions seem true.

Pressures on officials to support policy or face accusations of disloyalty have remained a problem for information-gathering and policymaking in Xinjiang. In 2004, for example, the regional government held listening sessions with local bureaus of education in order to judge the viability of replacing school instruction through Uyghur and other non-Chinese languages with all-Mandarin-medium education.[9] The plan was absurd in its scale and ambition, and it would obviously upset the majority of people in Xinjiang. Consequently, as one local non-Han bureau chief informed me, they supported this proposal unanimously under the assumption that it was more of a political test than a serious policy idea. The situation has only worsened since, especially under Xi Jinping.

Therefore, the identification of violence or protest as foreign-directed Islamic extremism or "terrorism" should give observers pause when assessing the party-state's claims. As Gardner Bovingdon already pointed out in 2010, it is extremely difficult when examining violence in Xinjiang to find evidence for demands derived from Islamic fundamentalism or actions one would normally associate with "terrorism."[10]

Xinjiang did in fact witness a rise in violence from 2013 onward, including a series of violent incidents in and outside of the region in 2014 that indeed bore the hallmarks of terrorist attacks.[11] These ultimately led to Xi Jinping's declaration of a "People's War on Terror." During this period, violent incidents were consistently attributed to foreign interference in official media outlets. Nevertheless, an examination of those incidents documented in news media leads to a similar conclusion to Bovingdon's: it is all-but-impossible to identify evidence of foreign interference in or even religious motivations for violence. Rather, the vast majority of reported "terrorist" incidents appear to be violent protests against local police;[12] police violence against random civilians, such as a young man who ran a red light in Kashgar;[13] or bizarre outliers that may be better explained by mental illness, such as the car bombing of Tiananmen by an Uyghur man and his family.[14] Incidents of mass popular in rural areas—such as the attacks in Yarkand in July 2014 that resulted in the deaths of dozens of people at the hands of police, including 59 so-called "thugs" or "terrorists"[15]—are difficult to square with definitions of terrorism used outside of China, which emphasize violent acts meant to frighten ordinary people. While we must remain open to the possibility that the Chinese party-state knows something that the rest of the world does not, it has not credibly attributed violence to specific foreign groups and usually declines even to identify an instigator.

The September 18, 2015, attack on a coalmine in Bay County is a salient example, since it later served heavily to support Chinese official narratives about terrorism. According to official media, local Uyghurs attacked a mine, killing either 10 or 16 people.[16] Later, police pursued an alleged terrorist group into the nearby mountains, resulting in the "elimination" of 28 "terrorist group members." While reporting was delayed for months, media eventually reported that the attacked "directly coordinated" by an unnamed "foreign extremist organization" (*jingwai jiduan zuzhi zhijie zhihui*). Captured individuals confessed on television to being fooled by the alleged terrorist group's leaders, who supposedly claimed that they were to carry out "holy war." Indeed, this incident served as a vehicle for state media, including in a slickly produced documentary report that used English extensively to extend its reach to the outside world, to warn of a "new kind of terrorism" "incited from outside." Chinese television warned of "foreign enemy forces" (*jingwai duidi shili*), "foreign ethnic splittist forces" (*jingwai minzu fenlie shili*), and "foreign extremism and terrorism" (*jingwai jiduanzhuyi, kongbuzhuyi*).[17] Nevertheless, no organization claimed responsibility for this attack.

Thus, in the official narrative, the Bay County attack was characterized in terms of the popular "panic factor," the influence of "foreign forces," and a resolution brought about by the "benevolent center." While this narrative is politically convenient, it does not hold up to scrutiny. Without those tropes, what is left is an unexplained and seemingly random attack by civilians on civilians, followed by a police assault on very poorly armed civilians. Occam's Razor ought to apply: Rather than search for a shadowy conspiracy to harm China, we ought to look for proximal local causes for violence.

FANTASY AND ETHNIC POLICY IN CHINA

Chinese policy in Xinjiang is not being guided by expertise in local cultures or in Islam, but by a kind of internal Orientalism advanced by people who are accustomed to treating Islam as something inherently alien. This represents a new iteration of a longstanding problem: Policy discourse on ethnic issues in China frequently relies on deeply engrained Han Chinese narratives about "exotic" ethnic minorities. As much is demonstrated by the party-state's internal messaging, propaganda within Xinjiang, and presentations of the region to foreigners.

The party-state's 2001 adoption of the Global War on Terror rhetoric was a turning-point in the Chinese imagination of Xinjiang.[18] An American paranoid fantasy of global conspiracy against Western values, which other countries saw clearly as a flimsy pretext for intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq, easily became an excuse for the Chinese government to characterize Uyghur dissent as a threat to global freedom, with the outright support of both the United States and the UN. While actual unrest in Xinjiang remained rare, the 2009 protests, which turned into waves of violence by both Uyghurs and Han settlers, provided a pretext to crack down on the region. Meanwhile, the "panic factor" became a major theme of Chinese discourse on Xinjiang: Uyghurs became associated with mysterious diseases, supposedly transmitted by kebab skewers or hidden hypodermic needles.[19] Uyghurs were increasingly excluded from work or travel through informal discrimi-

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nation, which later turned into a matter of formal policy.

The official response to perceived Islamization was, strangely, ethnicization. The authorities have attempted to transform Xinjiang into a "museum" of cultures for the benefit of Han tourists.[20] The party-state claims to have preserved Uyghur culture and respected Islam, even as mosques have been turned into bars. Journalists and others taken on official tours to Xinjiang since 2018 have reported being treated to highly choreographed performances of essentialized Uyghur dance as "evidence" that the party-state is "preserving and respecting Uyghur culture."[21] It is clear that officials do not see the irony in their actions.

Instead of assuming duplicity on the part of Chinese authorities, it is simpler and more logical to assume that they in fact understand themselves to be preserving, defending, and saving Uyghurs. The museum project extends to internal propaganda, as well: In the ill-fated "Project Beauty," launched in 2013, Xinjiang authorities enjoined women to cast off dark, modest clothing and "show their beauty to the world" by wearing colorful and revealing ethnic dress.[22] Propaganda artwork showed women in modest dress being manipulated and oppressed by shadowy male figures in stereotypical Middle Eastern dress. Indeed, the Xinjiang government has continued to police Uyghurs' outward appearances under the incorrect assumption that aspects of dress, such as growing a beard or wearing a veil, transparently reflect religious beliefs.

Meanwhile, the Global War on Terror discourse dovetailed with the post-Barin Chinese approach to Islam in Xinjiang. Where officials once saw the "New Teaching" as a dangerous version of foreign Islam, now they raised concerns about an ill-defined "extremism" or "Wahhabism." Chinese government publications nevertheless demonstrate an extremely superficial understanding of Islam. Much as any Arabic writing, even pro-party slogans, is being removed from public view, ordinary Arabic terminology, which any actual expert on Islam would know, is interpreted entirely through the lens of suspicion.[23]

Those ideas were supported by junk research from the Chinese academy. For example, in 2013, a scholar from China's leading Renmin University leading a well-funded research team on Islamic extremism proudly informed me that, according to their discoveries, wearing a *jilbab*—a long, loose-fitting women's garment—is proof of contact with Saudi Arabia, and thus with "extremism."[24] This kind of "veilology," typically a sign of superficial and inexpert Western analyses of Muslim societies, became common in Chinese discourse around Xinjiang, especially in the vacuum of empirically driven research on Xinjiang society since the mass internment and silencing of scholars in 2017.

The insider/outsider framing, "panic factor" and "benevolent center" concepts, and "foreign forces" narrative all coincide in contemporary party-state messaging on Xinjiang. For example, in 2019, the State Council Information Office released a white paper entitled *Historical Matters Concerning Xinjiang*, which states that "Islam is neither an indigenous nor the sole belief system of the Uygurs [*sic*]."[25] It emphasizes that "The introduction of Islam into Xinjiang was related to the emergence of the Arab Empire and the eastward expansion of Islam. The Uighur [*sic*] conversion to Islam was not a voluntary choice made by the common people, but a result of religious wars and

imposition by the ruling class." The purpose of this simplistic narrative is clearly to denaturalize Islam's presence in Xinjiang and to separate religious and ethnic identities, posing Islam instead as a foreign imposition on Uyghurs.

Indeed, aesthetics have become official benchmarks for the "Chineseness" or "foreignness" of Islam. The white paper cherry-picks two architectural examples to claim that Xinjiang's Islam is actually distinctly Chinese and thus domestic. Islamic buildings or practices that do not aesthetically resemble an essentialized idea of Chinese culture must, according to this assumption, be "foreign" and therefore dangerous.

This sets up the white paper's claim that "… since the end of the Cold War, the surge in religious extremism around the world has caused a rise in religious extremism in Xinjiang." As many scholars have demonstrated, "religious extremism" is very broadly construed in the Xinjiang case, and it encompasses not only most unrest by Uyghurs and other non-Han, but also nearly any behavior that seems to fall outside of essentialized Chinese norms or expectations for Uyghurs. The white paper locates the causes of both unrest and of cultural change in malign foreign influence.

Internal propaganda in Xinjiang demonstrates the party-state's commitment to the "foreign forces" and "spiritual pollution" narratives. For example, signs painted on walls in Kashgar's Old Town and in Ürümchi have included repeated injunctions to avoid contact with Ḥizb ut-Taḥrir, which emerged as a specter in the region around 2008 but has never been tied to any specific action there.[26] Meanwhile, leaked speeches and internal documents similarly show a credulousness of the "foreign forces" narrative.[27] Consequently, it is clear that the myth of foreign forces is not simply a means to obscure the discontents brought about by the party-state's program of ethnic assimilation and economic development. Rather, it is a fundamental part of the party-state's beliefs about Xinjiang, and one that has consequences for policy design and implementation.

PROXIMAL CAUSES OF UNREST

Chinese and other scholars and policymakers have long been aware that the major causes of unrest in Xinjiang are related to economic inequality, ecological destruction, and the government's encouragement of ethnoreligious discrimination.

Economic and educational inequalities have been sources of discontent for decades, but the availability of a native-language educational track for Uyghurs especially helped alleviate the sense that non-Han were being left out of China's industrialization and internationalization. The reality of Open Up the West, however, is that, even as overall prosperity in Xinjiang has increased, Han migrants are the primary beneficiaries, and Uyghurs in particular have been excluded both through formal and informal racial discrimination. Uyghur economist Ilham Tohti famously detailed these problems prior to his imprisonment in 2014.

Economic inequality is closely tied to ecological destruction, especially the overexploitation of Xinjiang's limited water resources, which is closely tied to Chinese in-migration. Chinese scholars long ago demonstrated that the official development strategy was leading to the destruction of Uyghur agrarian life, leading to the creation of a dispossessed Uyghur urban poor.

Meanwhile, urban Uyghurs who once enjoyed state support for their language and culture find the space for independent Uyghur culture rapidly dwindling, leading naturally to a sense of abandonment and criminalization.

The "self-fulfilling prophecy" of the Chinese state's search for Islamic extremism has led to the targeting of ordinary Islamic practices such as crying at funerals or holding religious weddings as "extremism." Intellectuals caught up in the detention and reeducation system since 2016 include many who were once tasked by the Chinese state with pursuing Islamic scholarship, and now have been punished for precisely the same acts. It should be obvious that the securitization of Islam has led the party-state to engage in acts that alienate their own people.

In sum, policymakers in China should consider the calculus of discontent in Xinjiang according to the empirically verifiable facts at their fingertips. It is possible to design good policy without resorting to conspiracy theories about foreign intrigue or to self-congratulatory narratives about the benevolent state and its easily panicked flock. It would be difficult, however, for the party-state to abandon its "thought work" apparatus. Foreign commentators and interlocutors would do well to emphasize these dimensions of discontent, as well, and so take an approach to Xinjiang more firmly rooted in the perspectives of economic justice, pluralism, and the importance of the social contract.

CONCLUSIONS

The People's Republic of China's party-state has consistently misidentified social frictions caused by the internal factors of corruption, economic inequality, and ethnic discrimination as violence directed by shadowy anti-China foreign forces.

There is very little room for diplomatic or second-track engagement with China on the Xinjiang issue, in no small part because the "foreign forces" narrative has become a matter of creed. Consequently, so has the idea that high levels of securitization are necessary to maintain social stability. The "panic factor" and "benevolent center" narratives minimize the potential to criticize Beijing's policymaking or to consider dissenting perspectives.

Meanwhile, Western critics of Xinjiang policy, especially politicians, tend to reduce the region's problems to simple prejudice or even "genocidal" intent on the part of Chinese leadership. They advance a "malevolent center" narrative in a way that makes little sense to Chinese officials. As one representative of the PRC recently put it to me, "Why would we make policies that anger our own citizens?" The obvious answer is that all countries do, because the policymaking process is messy and imprecise, and it depends on human beings who interpret the world primarily through narratives and metaphors. For example, efforts to bring economic development to China's West are executed out of a sincere belief that this will be received with gratitude. In reality, such development leads to inequality, displacement, and dispossession, harming non-Han people both economically and culturally.[28] The state expects "gratitude" while causing harm.

We therefore need to acknowledge those narratives and metaphors—the frames through which people articulate their worlds—in two ways. First, external interlocutors must understand that China takes these matters with a genuine seriousness, and that any discussion of Xinjiang issues will need to take that into account. Second, the Chinese government itself ought to consider how its deeply ingrained ideas about panic and Islam are blinding it to other possible analyses and solutions.

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ABOUT THE GEOPOLITICS OF RELIGIOUS SOFT POWER PROJECT

The Geopolitics of Religious Soft Power (GRSP) project represents a multi-year, cross-disciplinary effort to systematically study state use of religion in foreign affairs. Through a global comparison of varying motivations, strategies, and practices associated with the deployment of religious soft power, project research aims to reveal patterns, trends, and outcomes that will enhance our understanding of religion's role in contemporary geopolitics. This working paper arises from a partnership between the project and the United States Institute of Peace focused on understanding how the geopolitics of religion shapes peace and conflict dynamics in particular regional and country settings.

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