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Strategic Insight

Constituting the Uyghur in U.S.-China Relations: The Geopolitics of Identity Formation in the War on Terrorism

by [Gaye Christoffersen](#)

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September 2, 2002

Central Asia has been extraordinarily agitated since 9/11, which can be partly explained by a sense that a clash of Muslim and non-Muslim civilizations was spilling over into the region from Afghanistan, and partly explained by the U.S. military presence in the region. This agitation has overflowed into Xinjiang, with the Chinese PLA cracking down on Uyghur terrorists/freedom fighters. Western human rights groups have been rightly concerned that this crackdown is spreading a wide net, scooping up innocent Uyghurs in addition to the freedom fighters. China is accused of bandwagoning in the war on terrorism in a manner similar to Jakarta's effort to categorize Aceh separatists as al Qaeda-trained terrorists, and New Delhi's casting of Kashmir as part of the global terrorist threat.



Beijing expected the international community to accept its post-9/11 crackdown in Xinjiang as part of the global war on terrorism. The Chinese State Council in January 2002 issued a report *East Turkestan Terrorist Forces Cannot Get Away with Impunity* which detailed the extent of terrorist activities since 1990. The report listed more than 200 incidents that resulted in 162 deaths and 440 injuries, and included bombings, assassinations, armed assaults on government organizations, poison and arson, establishing training bases, and plotting riots such as the Yining incident in 1997.

In the past, Beijing had always publicly downplayed the level of violence in Xinjiang and tried to manage it discretely through state-to-state negotiations with Turkey and Pakistan, the two countries training Uyghur freedom fighters. For the past decade, Beijing has sought to quietly lobby Pakistan's secret service (ISI) to exercise some control on Xinjiang's Islamic activists who it was fully aware had received training and funding from ISI. Given this quiet approach, it is not surprising that Beijing's January 2002 report was met with disbelief by Western human rights organizations that accused Beijing of cracking down on peaceful demonstrators unconnected to terrorist organizations. The post-9/11 world moved beyond individual

government management of domestic terrorists, as a global coalition formed under the auspices of the United Nations to manage this transnational threat. This new situation required Beijing to adapt to managing terrorism more openly, with greater scrutiny by the outside world.

Beijing's estimates of the extent of al Qaeda influence were overstated, with claims that there were 300 Uyghurs in Afghanistan in late 2001 and that all Uyghur separatists in Xinjiang were linked to al Qaeda. Later this was reduced to claims of 100 Uyghurs in Afghanistan, and altogether 1000 Uyghurs in Xinjiang trained by al Qaeda and the Taliban. That claim is supported by the United National Revolutionary Front of East Turkestan (UNRF), which also claimed that there were more than 100 Uyghurs in Afghanistan at that time helping the Taliban. The UNRF stridently opposes Sinification of Xinjiang, and is known to assassinate imams with pro-China views.

Although Uyghurs have a history as freedom fighters in Xinjiang, the United States had initially refused to recognize any al Qaeda involvement in Xinjiang even though there were numerous pre-9/11 reports of Taliban activity in Xinjiang. For example, the December 25, 2000 Turkistan Newsletter carried a UPI article, "Pakistan, China collide over Islam," that was based on information obtained from U.S. administration officials. The UPI article claimed that Chinese security forces had arrested 200 Taliban and other Islamic militants near China's border with Pakistan. They were charged with arming and training Muslim separatists in Xinjiang. It was only post-9/11 that Uyghur involvement with the Taliban was questioned.

Uyghur freedom fighters hope for a Kosovo-style humanitarian intervention by a U.S.-led military force into Xinjiang. Uyghur interest in U.S. support stems from a loss of previous protectors. During the 20th century, the USSR had always served as a refuge for Uyghurs as they fled Chinese rule. This accounts for the approximately 500,000 people in the Uyghur diaspora in Central Asia. Today, Russia and the Central Asian states are less sympathetic and more concerned that the Uyghur exiles they host had become increasingly Islamicized and radicalized by forces from outside the region during the 1990s. Their high rate of unemployment and extreme alienation make young Uyghur men receptive to recruitment by Islamic groups.

Kyrgyzstan feels most threatened because of the activities of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) in the south. Kyrgyz consider Uyghur members of IMU to be mercenaries and terrorists. Both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have cracked down on Uyghur groups. The Kyrgyz Interior Ministry raided the Uyghur Liberation Organization, finding arms and ammunition, and evidence linking the organization to the March 2000 assassination of Nigmat Bazakov, leader of the Ittipak organization within the Uyghur diaspora. As a moderate, Bazakov had resisted a plan to assassinate Chinese Security Ministry officials visiting Bishkek. Uyghurs have been implicated in several assassinations and bombings in Kyrgyzstan, most recently a Chinese diplomat assassinated in Bishkek in June 2002. Bishkek handed over to Beijing the two Uyghurs charged with his killing.

The new geopolitical situation in Central Asia, the war on terrorism, the mixing of human rights issues with issues of terrorism, and the identity of "the Uyghur" have generated a debate in U.S.-China relations. Pro-Uyghur forces urge the U.S. government not to sacrifice Uyghur human rights in its cooperation with Beijing in the war on terrorism. Uyghur activists are hoping that, now that the U.S. military has established a presence in Central Asia, Uyghurs will receive U.S. support similar to that given to Tibetans in the past - military training and arms transfers that assisted Tibetan terrorism against Chinese in Tibet. Uyghurs have constituted their identity as closely parallel to Tibetan identity, and thus worthy of comparable assistance, in a search for new patronage because they have lost the old patrons -- the Soviet Union and Central Asian states, the Taliban and al Qaeda.

The question seems to revolve around whether China is victimizing the Uyghur minority, using the war on terrorism as an excuse to violate their human rights, or whether China itself is a victim of the al Qaeda network, which had trained Uyghurs in Afghanistan for terrorist activities in Xinjiang. As both Uyghurs and Chinese attempt to take advantage of the current global war on terrorism that has transformed current Central Asian geopolitics, Uyghur identity has become malleable in the U.S.-China-Uyghur debate.

Constituting Uyghur Identity

The identity of the Uyghur people has always been fragmented, and their unity fragile. The war on terrorism threatens to further fragment the Uyghur community. How the Uyghurs are defined depends on who is defining them. There is an international dimension to constituting the Uyghurs.

With weak national identities, Uyghurs have been easily incorporated into the visions of outside powers and transnational movements. Since Uyghurs only loosely coalesced into a "nation," there are many fissures and fractures. As a result, there are said to be 20 different separatist groups in Xinjiang. Different groups of Uyghurs are drawn to different visions, leaving Uyghurs more deeply divided than they might otherwise be.

The war on terrorism began for China after the collapse of the Soviet Union, which opened up the Central Asian region for proselytizing. The Taliban saw an opportunity to build a Pan-Islamic region. Pakistan saw an opportunity to encircle India with this Pan-Islamic arc. Turkey also revived its dream of a Pan-Turkic region, which would give it a seat on the U.N. Security Council. Each of these visions found Uyghur recruits.

Western and Chinese discourse on "the Uyghur" tends towards making essentializing arguments that assume there is a "Universal Uyghur" with an unchanging essence and fixed properties, whether living in Xinjiang, the Central Asian diaspora, Afghanistan, Turkey, Germany or the United States. Uyghur identity formation, difficult to begin with, is complicated further by outside forces attempting to construct a monolithic identity that would fit their particular vision. It is their essentializing imagery that victimizes Uyghurs by forcing them to assimilate to alien visions. The vast majority of Uyghurs in Xinjiang have no voice in world affairs, instead becoming the object of the politics of representation by outside forces.

Globalizing Visions From Afar

What is driving this social construction of "the Uyghur" by outside forces is an expectation that Uyghurs, with their fragmented and weak identities, could easily be incorporated into an alien vision of what the Uyghur should be. It is possible to discern four different alien/foreign visions that have attempted to colonize Uyghurs and reconstruct their identity. There are consequently perhaps four different identities available to Uyghurs that in part, but not entirely, correspond to an alien vision. Each vision has an emphasis on one type of human rights, a site for training Uyghurs, and a dark side of their project to transform the Uyghur.

1. Chinese (and Russian) Communist Vision. Spans most of the 20th century; parallel Soviet and Chinese projects of Russification or Sinification of Central Asians, to encourage them in goals of modernity: economic development, industrialization, and secularization. Both socialist countries hoped to create socialist men and women out of Turkish minorities. China's recent Western Development program is the latest effort.

- *Human Rights:* Economic rights are given priority over all other rights.
- *Site for Training Uyghurs:* Han Chinese universities. The Islamic Institute of China, a national religious college that trains Islamic scholars who support the Chinese Communist Party.
- *Projected World Order:* Central Asia maintains stability through secular, modernizing governments linked through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Established in 1996 in Shanghai, and originally called the Shanghai Five, the regional organization has from the beginning been a means for governments to cooperate in cracking down on separatist and religious terrorism.

Russification in the Central Asian Uyghur diaspora, and Sinification in Xinjiang, has made more progress than is usually acknowledged by Uyghur radicals. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, many Central Asians retained identities from the Soviet legacy while some looked towards Afghanistan. A lament of Turkic activists is the ease with which Uyghurs assimilate either in China

or in the Central Asian diasporas after migrating there. Within the Central Asian diaspora, Uyghurs identify themselves as being "Russian" (50% of the diaspora has Russified), or even state that they have "no nationality." These assimilated Uyghurs are criticized for not having a "Turkic" national identity, and are sometimes assassinated by radical Islamists.

- *Dark Side of the Vision:* Uyghur loss of cultural identity and second class citizenship in a Sinified or Russified society. Uyghur government employees are discouraged from entering Mosques, and threatened with losing their jobs if they do. Uyghur military officers and soldiers feel less trusted.

Beijing holds fast to the vision of economic development and modernization, secularization, and Sinification. The problem with the Chinese vision is that it benefits very few Uyghurs. It is estimated that 90% of the unemployed are Uyghur. Southern Xinjiang's economy where Uyghurs are concentrated needs to be better integrated with the relatively prosperous Northern Xinjiang economy where Han concentrate in Urumqi. Beijing resents other outside powers impinging on this Sinified modernization with their alternative visions.

2. Pan-Turkish Vision. Has endured since collapse of the Ottoman Empire; revived after collapse of Soviet Union during the 1990s -- a Turkic empire stretching from Northern Cyprus to Northwestern China, populated by Turkic people and led by Ankara. With this kind of Pan-Turkic territory under its leadership, Turkey would be able to assume a seat on the U.N. Security Council. By the end of the 1990s, most Turks abandoned the Pan-Turkish vision as unrealistic due to Central Asian "nationalisms."

- *Human Rights:* Emphasizes the right to self-determination for Turks in a Turkestan homeland that stretches across Central Asia into Xinjiang.
- *Organizations:*
 - *Radical Wing:* The Xinjiang Liberation Organization/Uyghur Liberation Organization (ULO) based in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, dispersed throughout the Uyghur diaspora in Central Asia. The ULO claims responsibility for assassinations of "Uyghur collaborators" in China and Central Asia. Also the Home of East Turkestan Youth radical youth group with 2000 members, training in Afghanistan and operating in Xinjiang. The United Revolutionary Front of Eastern Turkestan, based in Kazakhstan and originally moderate, claims it was radicalized in 1997 as a result of the Chinese crackdown called "Operation Strike Hard" following the Yining Incident. Although most of the Central Asia Uyghur diaspora had always been considered more Pan-Turkic than Pan-Islamic, violent tactics have made the two movements indistinguishable.
 - *Moderate Wing:* Non-violent East Turkestan groups based in Turkey and Germany such as the East Turkestan Information Center. Human Rights Watch argues that increasing restiveness of Uyghurs in Xinjiang is motivated by this Pan-Turkic movement rather than by the Pan-Islamic movement.
- *Site for Training Uyghurs:* A retired Turkish colonel, former NATO officer, runs a military training camp for Uyghurs in Turkey.
- *Projected World Order:* Turkey accepts the current world order but wants more of a leadership position in this order, which it would only get with all of Central Asia as its sphere of influence. Ankara would represent Turkic people's interests against European and East Asian dominance.
- *Dark Side of the Vision:* Violence acted out on assimilated and Sinified Uyghurs including assassinations, which further fragments Uyghurs. Instigating violence for the purpose of mobilizing the quiescent Uyghur majority.

3. Pan-Islamic Vision. al Qaeda and Pakistani funded. A dream that Central Asia could break away from non-Muslim Russian, Indian, and Chinese domination. The hope is to establish an autonomous Islamic identity in an alliance spanning the Middle East and Central Asia into Xinjiang and Southeast Asia. Uyghur participation in the Islamic vision was strengthened when the Karakorum Highway opened in 1986, combined with Beijing's liberalized policies on religious practices. The route of the Haj would always include a stop-over in Pakistani religious schools (madrassas) on the way to Saudi Arabia. In this manner, thousands of Uyghur men developed connections with Pakistani religious schools and

organizations. The exact number of Uyghurs, and other Chinese muslims, that have gone on the Haj is uncertain.

- *Human Rights*: Emphasizes religious rights; the right to practice Islam under sharia within an Islamic state.
- *Organizations*: The Free Turkestan Movement is Islamic fundamentalist and claims responsibility for organizing the Baren uprising in April 1990, which initiated the cycle during the 1990s of violent Uyghur uprising and violent Chinese crackdown. Although there had been violent clashes before, Baren is considered different because of the amount of weapons and explosives, and the foreign money and backers. The purpose of Baren was to provoke Chinese repression and polarize Xinjiang, mobilizing Uyghurs from passivity. Led by Zahideen Yusuf, smuggled weapons had been stockpiled, and organizers had been spreading the message of jihad beforehand. The Baren riots began with the organization's mobilizing efforts in a mosque, followed by a mass protest. At Baren, 50 Uyghurs and several Chinese police were killed, initiating a process of increasing radicalization of Uyghurs, which was the intention of the Free Turkestan Movement. Zahideen was killed but songs are still dedicated to him. Afterwards, 1000 Uyghurs were rounded up in Xinjiang by Chinese forces, and imprisoned. Freedom fighters report that in prison, identities were strengthened and Islamic education continued. Baren became a symbol of the liberation struggle. Bombings began in 1992 in Urumqi, and continued thereafter, reaching Beijing in 1997 when two buses were bombed.
The most important Islamic organization for influencing and recruiting Uyghurs within the Central Asian Uyghur diaspora is probably the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). Its roots go back to 1991 but it was formally founded in 1996 by the Taliban as an armed auxiliary to itself. The IMU obtained financial support and training in al Qaeda camps, and operated in the Ferghana Valley. Most financing comes from control of heroin and opium trade in Central Asia. The IMU links most directly in Xinjiang with the Islamic Movement of Eastern Turkestan, providing military and financial assistance.
The IMU changed its name to the Islamic Party of Turkestan (Hezb-e Islami Turkestan) in June 2001, in Dehdadi, near Mazar-e Sharif, northwest of Kabul in Afghanistan. The original goal of the IMU was to overthrow the Uzbek government and install an Islamic state in Uzbekistan. When the IMU changed its name to the Islamic Party of Turkestan, its goal expanded to creating an Islamic state for all of Central Asia and Xinjiang, which led to increased recruits of Uzbek, Uyghur, Chechen, Arab, and Pakistani members. The IMU subsequently broadened its activities beyond Uzbekistan to attacks on surrounding countries. The total size of the IMU is estimated to be about 5,000 serving in the armed wing. The Uyghur component is unknown but small.
- *Site for Training Uyghurs*: al Qaeda funded IMU camps in Afghanistan, as well as Islamic schools throughout Central Asian republics and Xinjiang (both underground and above ground). In Urumqi, Chinese Public Security reported that in 2001 it had closed down 357 underground organizations, unauthorized madrassas and mosques, but it is uncertain how many had links to radical organizations. Post 9/11, Uyghurs captured in Afghanistan confirmed the East Turkestan Islamic Movement's links to al Qaeda.
- *Projected World Order*: Expansion of an Islamic world order with Islamic states, Islamic law, Islamic economies, and Islamic education that stretch from North Africa, Middle East, Central Asia into maritime Southeast Asia, including Xinjiang.
- *Dark Side of the Vision*: The 1990s in Xinjiang were extremely violent as Uyghurs trained in Afghanistan returned to wage jihad in China. The year 1997 witnessed several bombings, riots, and assassinations in Xinjiang. An interview with a Uyghur freedom fighter at that time indicated he knew the terror campaign had no chance of success. His purpose was bound up with his own identity formation. The cycle of violence that continued from 1998-2002 became a vortex that sucked in many others.

4. Western Liberal Vision. Essentially an American vision that views Central Asian republics as transitional economies and polities moving toward some form of market economy and liberal democracy. This vision promises to give Central Asians autonomy from Russian, Chinese, and Islamic influence.

- *Human Rights*: Support for the rights of the individual, political and religious rights, with emphasis on the right to peacefully demonstrate.
- *Organizations*: Many of the Pan-Turkic groups in the Uyghur diaspora, which advocate non-violent means and are based in Germany, the United States, and Turkey, may well be candidates for recruitment into the liberal vision. This includes the East Turkestan National Congress, Uyghur American Association, and others.
- *Site for Training Uyghurs*: Projects for encouraging community activists and civil society in Central Asia combined with a liberal education in American and German universities; pluralist democracy learned through participation in forming and running a transnational network of interest groups in the US and Germany advocating the rights of Uyghurs. The Uyghur American Association (UAA) renounces the use of violence to achieve political ends. The UAA claims that Beijing's military approach to terrorism in Xinjiang is state terrorism, and is burying the seeds for future violence among young Uyghurs. As a lobbying group in the US, UAA has constituted the identity of "Uyghur" to be almost identical to "Tibetan" and encouraged American NGOs and government agencies to think of Uyghurs with the same amount of sympathy they accord Tibetans.
- *Projected World Order*: A democratic peace in Central Asia and a human rights regime that extends across Eurasia. Europe would essentially expand its civilization into the region.
- *Dark Side of the Vision*: Promoting the right to national self-determination in Wilsonian terms, and expansion of NATO into Central Asia to defend these emerging democracies from Russian or Chinese hegemony. The Uyghur diaspora supporting this western liberal vision understands its realization in realpolitik terms, viewing the balance of power shifting in Central Asia from Russia and China to American military and economic power. They believe that the United States had unsuccessfully sought access to this Central Asian region for the past decade, and only after Sept. 11 could realize its strategic plans for Central Asia's and Xinjiang's resources. This has presented an opportunity to the Uyghur diaspora to align itself with this American strategy. They believe that the United States condones Uyghur armed struggle within Xinjiang, and hoped Uyghurs would be enlisted by the U.S. military as partners in a war in Central Asia against Han Chinese that would culminate in a humanitarian intervention by a U.S.-led force into Xinjiang. The United States has not encouraged these hopes, which are not an integral part of the liberal vision.

5. Uyghurstan Autonomy Vision. This is actually not the product of a foreign globalizing vision so it does not have foreign financial assistance or arms suppliers, nor sites for training Uyghurs. Yet it is the vision that would attract the Uyghur Quiescent Majority, Everyday Resisters much more than any of the other alien visions.

- *Organizations*: Erkin Alptekin's East Turkestan Information Center is generally considered Pan-Turkic but it claims to work for a peaceful solution to constructing a Uyghurstan within the Chinese state, a negotiated settlement between Beijing and Uyghurs that would create a federated system with a more autonomous Xinjiang.
- *Human Rights*: The right of indigenous people to develop autonomously.

The Impact of Alien Visions

Uyghur society is deeply divided as to how Uyghurs should relate to outside influences and to the dominant Han culture in Xinjiang. The impact of these alien visions has produced at least four different Uyghur identities:

1. Pan-Turkist. Freedom fighters who prefer to die heroically rather than from abuse. They believe assimilation into the dominant Han culture would mean surrendering soul, blood and body to the enemy. This freedom fighter identity glorifies violence; they are not likely to engage in peaceful demonstrations but rather to act as provocateurs to incite violence and polarize the situation, as a means to mobilizing the Quiescent Majority. There is a post-colonial discourse that romanticizes violence, that views violence as a means to cleanse oneself, achieve Uyghur identity, and attain self-respect.

2. Pan-Islamist. This second category is very close to the first, except that Islam is the source of Uyghur identity; Islam is the motive force rather than Turkism and jihad is the means for finding one's identity. This identity seeks Islamic education secretly in Xinjiang in the underground schools rather than in the approved mosques. Because of its Deobandist anti-modern, anti-western, anti-colonial stance, this movement rejects Han education as a means to modernity. Chinese programs for economic development would generate greater hostility.

3. Everyday Resisters, Quiescent Majority with angry hearts. The majority of Uyghurs are in this category. These Uyghurs carry out a "silent battle" to maintain their Uyghur identity, deeming it useless to sacrifice themselves in the manner of jihad. Uyghur identity is that of the strong silent resister. This form of resistance is the most difficult for Hans to respond to since there is no opportunity to claim criminality in their actions. Freedom fighters often instigate a violent incident, expecting a violent Chinese reaction, in the hope of polarizing the situation sufficiently to mobilize members of this "Quiescent Majority." The majority supports a Uyghurstan which is not the product of any alien vision.

The East Turkestan activist is frustrated by, and has no explanation for why most Uyghurs belong to, the "Quiescent Majority;" or why Uyghurs in the Central Asian diaspora have such weak identities that they often Russify, or claim to have "no nationality."

4. Assimilated Uyghurs. This category contains Uyghurs assimilated to Han society, Sinified "collaborators," those who have "sold out" to the Han administration of Xinjiang. Assimilated Uyghurs are viewed as easily controlled by economic incentives -- jobs, a rising standard of living. They would respond favorably to Beijing's economic development plan for Xinjiang, and consequently will be given roles within Han development strategies. This group has often been the target of assassinations and violence by Uyghur freedom fighters that want to block Sinification.

Of these four groups, there is a clear divide between those Uyghurs who use violence and consider it a legitimate means of expressing their identity (Turkist and Islamist), and those who are either the targets of violence (Assimilated Uyghurs), or are meant to be mobilized by the violence (Quiescent Majority). There are also generational differences, urban-rural differences, and gender differences. There is a north-south difference over whether there should be a Uyghurstan (supported by the north), or an East Turkestan (supported by the south). Uyghur groups in the diaspora are also known to be divided over whether they want a Uyghurstan or an East Turkestan.

The one foreign vision that has not yet had any discernible impact on Uyghur identity is the Western liberal vision. The Uyghur activists who hope to make the United States their patron in a manner similar to previous patrons will in all probability engage in illiberal activities. It is a stretch to imagine the liberal vision attracting the Quiescent Majority, which will probably continue to resist outside influence and promote the vision of Uyghurstan autonomy.

The consequences of Uyghur identity fragmentation are:

- No Uyghur or East Turkestan group speaks for all Uyghurs, although it might claim to.
- Intra-Uyghur violence reflects the fragility of Uyghurs as an ethnicity and reflects diverse outside influences that attempt to use one fragment of the Uyghurs against another fragment.
- The Pan-Turkic movement seeks and receives support from the West, with one fragment of the movement using the language of human rights and presenting themselves as "the Uyghur." Other fragments are violent freedom fighters.
- The Pan-Islamic movement in its Deobandist form remains vehemently anti-Western.
- Despite these differences, before 9/11, the Pan-Islamists and Pan-Turkists appeared to be merging. They both glorified freedom fighters and the need for violent struggle. In operational terms, their behavior was hard to distinguish.
- Post-9/11, the relationship between the Pan-Turkists and Pan-Islamists must have been contentious. Turkish military forces were originally designated by the United States to head up a

Peacekeeping Operation in Afghanistan, while many Islamist Uyghurs remained under attack there or incarcerated.

The Pan-Turkic/Pan-Islamic convergence shattered after 9/11 as the Pan-Turkic movement scrambled to distance itself from Deobandism, the Taliban, al Qaeda, and the Pan-Islamic freedom fighters in Xinjiang. There in fact seemed to be a tactical re-alignment in some of the statements by Pan-Turkic representatives after 9/11 to encourage Uyghurs to shed their anti-American Taliban image for a more pro-American image, and to explain away the East Turkestan Islamic Movement's links to the IMU. And it was recognized that Uyghurs needed to have better public relations strategies for constituting Uyghur identity.

The Pan-Turkic movement, having better linkages to the Western world than any other group of Uyghurs, used all its contacts to establish its distinctiveness from the Islamic movement. A Human Rights Watch report, issued in October 2001, stressed this very point -- that the Uyghur activists are Pan-Turkic, not Pan-Islamic. The report constructed Uyghur identity as similar to Tibetan, struggling for cultural survival and non-violent. Amnesty International also issued a report critical of China's anti-terrorism legislation and denied there was Uyghur participation in Pan-Islamic movements.

Despite the recent divergence of the two movements, the Chinese have failed to differentiate between them. This in part is due to a widely distributed book published by the Xinjiang Academy of Social Sciences in 1994, Pan-Turkism and Pan-Islamism in Xinjiang, that reified and mingled both "isms" in Chinese thinking so that no distinction would be drawn between those Uyghurs who were Pan-Turkic in orientation and those who were Pan-Islamic -- i.e., no distinction between those trained in Turkey and those trained in Afghanistan; no distinction between those advocating Deobandism and those advocating modernity. Both were labeled as feudal and anti-modern. This reification of identity facilitates the military approach to terrorism, on which Beijing continues to rely in conjunction with the economic development approach.

U.S.-China Dialogue on Uyghur Human Rights

The possibility of a U.S.-China human rights dialogue over Uyghur freedom fighters' religious rights would require some careful consideration of how human rights and terrorism intersect. The U.S. State Department experience with the Uzbek IMU is indicative of how policies on human rights and policies on terrorism coexist. The State Department's 2000 Uzbekistan Country Report on Human Rights criticized the Uzbek government for denying religious freedom to the IMU. The report was critical of the Uzbek government for treating the IMU as an issue of terrorism rather than an issue of religious freedom. Although the State Department had put the IMU on the list of Foreign Terrorist Organizations in September 2000, the wording of the 2001 Human Rights Country Report for Uzbekistan, issued in February, 2002, was almost identical to the 2000 Human Rights Report.

Given the extent to which Uyghur freedom fighters have been involved with the IMU, and that it was the IMU that recruited and trained Uyghurs and housed them in Uzbek camps in Afghanistan, U.S. policy towards these Uyghur freedom fighters should be consistent with U.S. policy towards the IMU.

The U.S.-China dialogue on Uyghur human rights in the war on terrorism began with reified, essentialized concepts of "the Uyghur" -- China labeling all activists as linked to al Qaeda, and many Americans claiming that all Uyghurs were peaceful demonstrators, denying any al Qaeda link with Xinjiang activists. These reified categories hindered progress in the dialogue.

However, on August 26, 2002, while visiting Beijing, U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage stated that Washington recognized one Uyghur organization, the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, as a terrorist organization and had placed it on the list of terrorist organizations because it had committed acts of violence against unarmed civilians. The group was not placed on the top priority list of terrorist organizations but rather on the broader list of groups subject to financial sanctions. Nevertheless, U.S.

recognition that some but not all Uyghur groups merited terrorist designation moved the dialogue away from reified concepts of "the Uyghur." Armitage's discussions with Chinese leaders included the need for Beijing to respect the rights of Uyghurs.

In future dialogues, Beijing and Washington could both attempt to advance their respective visions for Uyghurs, further fragmenting the Uyghur community. Alternatively, both powers might recognize that the weak and fragmented identity of Uyghurs leaves them vulnerable to alien, globalizing visions such as that which al Qaeda offered. The best defense against al Qaeda-type forces making inroads into Uyghur society is to strengthen Uyghur identity. This would create Uyghurs who are not so easily recruited by movements promising them an identity. Thus the Uyghur autonomy vision, currently supported by neither Beijing nor Washington, might actually be the best for stability in Xinjiang and should be seriously considered.

For more topical analysis from the CCC, see our [Strategic Insights](#) section.

For related links, see our [East Asia Resources](#) and [Homeland Security & Terrorism Resources](#).

Suggested Further Reading

Gardner Bovingdon, "The not-so-silent majority: Uyghur resistance to Han Rule in Xinjiang," *Modern China*, Beverly Hills; Jan 2002; Vol. 28, Issue 1; pg. 39, 40 pgs.

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