Turkey's Multipolar Turn: Ankara and Beijing Come to Terms on Uyghurs Issue

China's relationship to its ethnic minority Uyghur population has been the central issue driving a wedge between China and the Muslim world in recent years. However, the situation is already beginning to change before our eyes – Pakistan, Turkey and many nations throughout the Middle East have suddenly stopped calling the Uyghur education centers in Xinjiang "concentration camps," while Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan recently said that the Uyghurs live "happily" in Xinjiang. These are all indications of large-scale changes on the geopolitical map and the formation of new poles of cooperation.

Context

The Uyghurs (the second largest Muslim population in China after the Hui (回族) who number around 11 million) live in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) in northwest China. The area became a part of the People's Republic of China in 1949, after Mao Zedong led the country's communist movement to victory over the Guomindang; Xinjiang has been a zone of political instability ever since.

The Uyghurs are indigenous Turkic people of Eastern Turkestan and Sunni Muslims. Western human rights organizations have recently been paying a great deal of attention to the Uyghurs in Xinjiang (e.g., Amnesty International's 2013 report, Human Rights Watch's 2018 report, reports from the Munich-based human rights organization World Uyghur Congress), while leading Western publications (CNN, BBC, Foreign Policy) have systematically criticized China's policies in relation to the ethnic minority group.

The emergence of a number of articles criticizing China's Xinjiang policies during the escalation of U.S.-China trade relations in 2018 can hardly be seen as a coincidence. For China, Xinjiang is a source of constant risk, since it has become a hub for radical Wahhabist strains of Islam [supported by foreign governments] which have begun to spread among the Muslim population. Most of the recent terrorist acts in China were committed by radicalized Uyghurs.

Assimilating the Uyghurs into Chinese society has been a very difficult process: their writing is based on the Arabic alphabet and their religion is rooted in Sunni Islam. While Sufism had traditionally been the central strain of Islam throughout Central Asia, in recent decades it has increasingly come under the influence of Salafist and Wahhabi tendencies under the influence of Saudi Arabia and in accordance with the USA's plans to destabilize the region. The efforts of these countries have created a breeding ground for extremism and terrorism.

During the Arab Spring, Chinese authorities were seriously concerned about the possibility of regional destabilzation in Xinjiang as a result of the spread of radical Islam – at that time,

Uyghur social networks were brought under direct control (This was accomplished via tools such as the [JingWang Weishi](#) app, which monitors photos, audio messagers and video materials online, and also has access to users private messages on WeChat). The Xinjiang region also has 20 million video cameras that can identify any person in the area in a remarkably short time (no more than 7 minutes). While all of this might seem draconian, such security policies are undoubtedly justified – over the past decade, a large number of Uyghurs have come under the influence of radical Islam, such as the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM).

To fight the spread of this dangerous ideology and to better integrate the Uyghurs into Chinese society, the Chinese authorities opened special education centres that teach the basics of Chinese political culture, Chinese language and conduct a course on the history of the People's Republic of China. The process is called "transformation through training" or "counterterrorism training."

The Western media, using an investigation by Human Rights Watch as a basis, has called the centers "concentration camps" (seemingly confusing them with prisons for offenders in the province). Moreover, the Western media and various human rights reports have accused the Chinese authorities of resorting to torture in these institutions, although there is no clear distinction between prisons for criminal offenders and the education centres in the reports. There is the information in these reports that Uyghurs in the education centres are allegedly being forced to renounce Islam. In September 2018, [the U.S. government was considering the possibility of imposing sanctions](#) against high-ranking Chinese officials and companies over the alleged violations of the Uygher's rights and the supposed detention and restriction of freedoms in the "camps."

More than 20 countries, including Japan and the United Kingdom, have recently issued a joint statement condemning China's mass detention of Uyghurs and other minorities in the Xinjiang region. In a letter to Michelle Bachelet, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, these 22 countries called for an end to "mass arbitrary detentions and related violations" and demanded Beijing grant UN experts access to the region.

> Chinese officials have repeatedly termed the criticism of their treatment of Uyghurs in Xinjiang region as Western media politicising the issue.
>
> 37 countries, including Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, UAE, seem to agree with China's position. https://t.co/UQ0gxM74Om
>
> — The Conversation (@ConversationUK) [July 20, 2019](#)

The mass media has devoted numerous articles to the issue, describing how the Chinese authorities do not allow Uughurs to perform religious pilgrimage ([hajj](#)), and preventing them from fulfilling their obligations during Ramadan.

Concentration camp, prisons or education centers?

The training has only one purpose: to learn laws and regulations…to eradicate from the mind thoughts about religious extremism and violent terrorism, and to cure ideological diseases. If the education is not going well, we will continue to provide free education, until

the students achieve satisfactory results and graduate smoothly.
—Speech by Chinese Communist Youth League Xinjiang Branch, March 2017

Human Rights Watch's report of 9 September 2018 published a report entitled "Eradicating Ideological Viruses', which describes the Chinese authorities' policy on Uyghurs as a policy of destoying the and violating 'fundamental rights to freedom of expression, religion, and privacy', practicing 'torture and unfair trials'. HRW note that China's policy is a violation of international law prohibiting discrimination.

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«It is also evident that China does not foresee a significant political cost to its abusive Xinjiang campaign. Its global influence has largely spared it from public criticism. And its position as a permanent member of the UN Security Council means that it can deflect international action, whether sanctions imposed by the council or criminal prosecutions brought at the International Criminal Court, to which China is not a party»

Human Rights Watch's report

The Human Rights Organization report recommends western governments impose sanctions against the secretary of the party, Chen Quango, and other high-ranking officials. *"Party Secretary Chen Quanguo and other senior officials responsible for the Strike Hard Campaign should face targeted sanctions – through tools such as the US Global Magnitsky Act and visa protocols."*   The organization also concludes that in order to address the situation in Xinjiang, countries should tighten export control regimes to prevent the development of Chinese technology.

It is important to note that the materials devoted to the issue of the Uyghur population in China began to be actively published in Western media during the escalation of the ongoing trade war between China and the United States. Interestingly, Trump's protectionist policy against the PRC was joined by globalist corporations and influence groups, which, unlike Trump, see China as a threat not only to the U.S. economy, but also to the liberal globalist doctrine. This has become particularly evident over the past two years as the relationship between Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin grows closer, while Beijing's "Belt and Road" initiative has increasingly shown China's commitment to multipolarism.

It should be noted that, for China, the main goal in building education centers for the Uyghurs is to prevent the emergence of a domestic strain of radical Islam. China is in many ways an excellent breeding ground for the development of radical Islamic ideology, which is useful for China's enemies who want to weaken China by fermenting internal destabilization. According to Chinese authorities, the East Turkestan Islamic Movement in China is responsible for more than 200 terrorist attacks which have killed more than 160 people and injured more than 400.

In the absence of countermeasures such as education centres, radical Wahhabi ideas could easily spread among the Uyghur population, gradually creating a situation in China similar to the one which tore apart Syria.

With the trade war between the U.S. and China raging for more than a year, such a development would undoubtedly play into the hands of globalists opposed to China's rising power and influence. New geopolitical strategies have emerged that pose a serious threat to globalism's enemies without the need to resort to outright military conflict, such as using proxies to destabilize regions. It is no coincidence that Syria, a country that had no external debt before the war, became a target for terrorism.

What is really China's policy?

Assimilation of the Uyghurs into Chinese society is gradually taking place on a large scale – for the majority of Uyghurs – Chinese has become a second or even first/native language. The Uyghurs have been granted privileges when it comes to entering universities and Chinese schools, as well as in starting up private businesses.

Uyghur children: "The population that is not there."

One of the peculiarities of Xinjiang's demographic picture is the conflict between China's birth control measures (until the end of 2015/beginning of 2016, the "one family, one child" demographic law was in force, today it is the "one family, two children" demographic law) and Islamic tradition, especially in regard to polygamy which is practiced among Uyghurs and the simplicity of divorce measures, which also do not restrict women from remarriage and having more children.

This has resulted in a significant proportion of Xinjiang's population not having official registration, i.e. citizenship, which naturally severely restricts their rights, access to education, medicine, legal earnings and travel both within and outside China. This environment of an illegal and unrecorded population deprived of legal status has become the basis for recruiting terrorists, Salafist jamaats and the spread of extremist ideology.

Possible solutions

To address the problem, the PRC needs to establish Confucian schools to integrate Uyghurs into PRC culture. In addition, an important step would be to establish Islamic education schools for the Uyghurs, where mullahs would teach the basics of Islam, which could be an important step in China's fight against international terrorism.

The creation of Uighur integration centres into Chinese society in the Uyghur language could also be extremely effective. Such centres could be a cultural bridge to establishing a dialogue between two cultures with centuries-old histories.

It is crucial to counter Salafi and Wahhabi teachings with traditional Islam, and Sufism in particular. Chinese leadership has so far failed to significantly utilize this approach, despite that these traditional Islamic structures have already helped to stabilize some regions outside China, such as Turkey, Iraq, Syria and the Northern Caucasus in the Russian Federation.

Between Turkey and China

Turkey had heavily criticized China's Uyghur policy until February 2019. In 2009, during the Uyghur riots in Urumqi in July, the Turkish government stated its disagreement with the Chinese authorities' assessment of the situation: a member of the Justice and Development Party resigned from his post in the China-Turkey Interparliamentary Friendship Group, and the Minister of Industry and Trade called for a boycott on Chinese goods as a result. After a series of protests in Ankara and Istanbul, Erdoğan himself condemned China's policy towards the Uyghurs, calling it "genocide". The situation was resolved some time later, but tensions between Turkey and China on the Uyghur issue remained until this year.

Interestingly, Turkey's Kemalist faction, who are close to the Turkish military, have condemned the anti-Chinese position of the Turkish leadership for years. During a speech in Ürümqi (Xinjiang), Doğu Perinçek, the leader of the Vatan Partisi, argued that "the propaganda and lies aimed at China over the Xinjiang-Uyghur Autonomous Region target Turkey as well, because China's friendship with Turkey is necessary to both our security and economy. Clearly conscious of this fact, we immediately took a decisive stance against the torrent of lies concerning the Xinjiang-Uyghur Autonomous Region."

In July 2019, during his official visit to China, Erdogan admitted that the Uyghurs live happily in China. This was a radical change of position for the Muslim leader who had long criticized China's policies. Erdogan, who is known for his support of some rather radical Islamic movements, in particular the Muslim Brotherhood, described Erdogan's unexpected change of heart as a "betrayal." However, only representatives of the Western media seemed to agree, as Erdoğan's approval was quickly mirrored by other representatives of the Muslim world.

"Turkey firmly opposes extremism and is willing to increase mutual political trust with China and strengthen security cooperation. Turkey does not permit any person to incite disharmony in the Turkey-China relationship"

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan

The globalist mass media has claimed that the reason Erdogan changed his position on the issue was predominantly economic.

In the period from 2013 to 2018, China invested 186.3 billion dollars in the framework of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). According to Morgan Stanley, Chinese investments in the BRI project will reach $1.3 billion by 2027. It is important to note that Turkey's participation in the BRI is not only economic, but also ideological, as the country also increasingly orients itself toward a multipolar outlook.

Chinese political scientist Eric Li, in an article in [Foreign Affairs](#), noted that the death of "globalism does not mean the end of globalization." Today, China is developing and offering its partners a new vision of globalization – dialogue and partnership. This vision of globalization is devoid of the liberal dimension of a hegemon mediating between different cultures and states.

Turkey is moving away from its historic cooperation with the U.S., in part due to their support of Muhammed Fethullah Gülen's anti government putsch [three years ago](#). Turkey is joining the fight against globalism, a movement which is predominantly led by China. This reorientation is vividly demonstrated in Turkey's deal with the Russian Federation to buy S-400 missile defense systems against Washington's will. Die Welt called Ankara's acquisition of the S-400s a de facto "refusal to support their allies in the West." The publication notes that Turkey is currently reaching a "point of no return", which may result in sanctions from the EU and the U.S., as well as the impossibility of purchasing F-35 fighter jets from the U.S. as planned.

Today, Turkey has the prospect to become a key player in the Chinese Belt and Road project, which has become the primary movement fighting globalist hegemony. Their participation could represent a significant step forward in the creation of a new, multipolar world.

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