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The repressive policies deployed by the Chinese party-state towards its Muslim population in the western region of Xinjiang has been at the forefront of international media attention. Beyond the sharp increase in the security presence in the region and the widespread use of technology-intensive policing, the extra-legal internment of 1 to 3 million Uyghurs and other Muslim minority groups has been the most notable of these repressive policies. The so-called "Xinjiang papers," a leak of internal Chinese documents revealed by the *New York Times* in 2019, have contributed to unveil the policy shift that has occurred in this region since early 2017.¹ This tightly-written article by Sheena Chestnut Greitens, Myunghee Lee, and Emir Yazici endeavors to explain this evolution. It also stresses the transnational security dimension of these policies and aims at situating the Chinese case in the broader literature on political violence and domestic repression.

The authors' argues that explanations focusing on domestic factors—including changes in local leadership, rising contention, or a shift towards a more assimilationist minority policy—that can currently be found both in the media and in scholarly works are not sufficient to explain the depth and timing of these changes.² The article therefore aims at complementing these approaches by putting forward the external security element of the story. It explains the Chinese party-state's strategy shift in Xinjiang based on changing threat perceptions in 2014-2016. In essence, China concluded that its Muslim population was vulnerable to infiltration from transnational jihadist networks. For the authors, the Chinese party-state repressive policies in Xinjiang hence chiefly result from its desire to prevent terrorist diffusion through transnational Uyghur networks in Southeast Asia and the Middle East. This, in turn, sheds light on the

¹ Austin Ramzy and Chris Buckley, "Absolutely No Mercy": Leaked Files Expose How China Organized Mass Detentions of Muslims," *The New York Times*, November 16, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/11/16/world/asia/china-xinjiang-documents.html>.

² Adrian Zenz and James Leibold, "Chen Quanguo: The Strongman behind Beijing's Securitization Strategy in Tibet and Xinjiang," *China Brief* 17:12 (September 2017), <https://jamestown.org/program/chen-quanguo-the-strongman-behind-beijings-securitization-strategy-in-tibet-and-xinjiang/>; Adrian Zenz, "'Thoroughly Reforming Them towards a Healthy Heart Attitude': China's Political Re-Education Campaign in Xinjiang," *Central Asian Survey* 38:1 (2019): 102-128, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02634937.2018.1507997>.

preventive nature of the repressive policies implemented in Xinjiang, especially the emphasis on collective detention and re-education as a means to protect or ‘inoculate’ the population from religious extremism and terrorist influence. It also explains the externalization of these repressive policies to the diaspora, in order to sever a vector through which terrorist networks could infiltrate China.

To support their argument, the authors trace the changes in the party-state’s external threat perception and highlight the turning point of 2014-2016. Since 2001, Chinese leaders have drawn connections between Uyghur and jihadist groups, stressing the terrorist nature of these organizations. However, the authors convincingly argue that this threat remained only theoretical until 2014, which saw the expansion of Uyghur-involved domestic attacks beyond Xinjiang, and in particular a deadly knife attack in Kunming. Evidence of active contacts between Uyghurs and jihadist groups also emerged. In 2014-2015, Uyghurs were arrested in various Southeast Asian countries for terrorist activities. These Southeast-Asian networks were perceived by the party-state as connected to developments in the Middle East since People’s Republic of China (PRC) citizens who were fighting with Islamic State had transited through the region. In 2015-2016, further evidence emerged of Uyghur fighters joining jihadist groups in Syria, with members of that movement explicitly indicating their willingness to bring the fight back to Xinjiang and China. The authors argue that these developments transformed the Chinese leaders’ threat perception regarding domestic security, but also their understanding of the vulnerability of China’s expanding overseas interests and population, as illustrated by the 2016 suicide bombing of the Chinese embassy in Bishkek, reportedly undertaken by Uyghurs.

Changes in the Chinese leadership’s threat perception translated into new policies. This included new national and local regulations on anti-terrorism and anti-extremism, drastic increases in domestic security spending and police recruitment, as well as increased pressure on the Uyghur diaspora. However, what is specific to the Xinjiang case is the mass detention of large segments of the population for ideological re-education purposes. One wonders, then, to what extent these policies are post-2016 developments? As stressed by the authors, securitization campaigns are not new in Xinjiang and “transformation through education” has been in operation since 2013.³ Yet the authors convincingly argue that the novelty here resides in the scale of the re-education as compared to former campaigns, and to what has been implemented in Tibet for example. By targeting large segments of the local population, the post-2016 Chinese party-state’s policies in Xinjiang aim at collective rather than individual repression.

The article’s main argument regarding changes in threat perception raises another fundamental question: do the authors take the Chinese party-state’s discourse at face value? It is clear that the official discourse on Xinjiang changed after 2014,⁴ but to what extent is this linked to changes in perception or rather the illustration of the party-state’s most recent legitimization tactics? The authors themselves stress that they cannot definitively identify the party-state’s true intentions, as it may be using a counterterrorism discourse to reduce international criticism of its policies. They note, however, that official documents, including the internal documents leaked by the *New York Times*, appear to confirm that Chinese leaders are highly concerned with external terrorist threats and that they perceive a vast section of the Xinjiang population to be vulnerable to external influence. This article is limited by the small number of available sources; a study based primarily on official documents and analyses by Chinese security experts will inevitably fuse discourse and perception.

The issue of the sincerity of the party-state’s discourse raises two other major questions. First, the question of the actual level of external threat remains, even if this issue lies beyond the scope of this article, which focuses on perceptions.

³ Adrian Zenz, “Thoroughly Reforming Them towards a Healthy Heart Attitude’: China’s Political Re-Education Campaign in Xinjiang,” *Central Asian Survey* 38:1 (2019): 102-128, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02634937.2018.1507997>.

⁴ Jérôme Doyon, “Counter-extremism’ in Xinjiang: Understanding China’s Community-focused Counter-terrorism Tactics,” *War on the Rocks*, 14 January 2019, <https://warontherocks.com/2019/01/counter-extremism-in-xinjiang-understanding-chinas-community-focused-counter-terrorism-tactics/>.

There is research that provides a first step in answering that question, such as Mathieu Duchâtel's work on foreign fighters,⁵ or the ongoing research by Remi Castets on Uyghur nationalist movements in China and abroad.⁶ Second, what form of transnational influence over the Uyghur population is the Chinese party-state's chief concern? The article mostly refers to religious influence, but in that case one wonders why the authorities would also detain cultural and intellectual figures who are remote from religious circles?⁷ The threat-perception argument put forward by the authors thus cannot be separated from an analysis of these policies' assimilationist tendencies,⁸ which are in line with wider changes in China's policies towards its minority populations.⁹

This article is overall an excellent addition to the current debate on China's changing policy in Xinjiang. It provides non-experts with an accessible and comprehensive overview of the securitization measures implemented in the region, as well as towards the Uyghur diaspora, since 2014. While stressing the uniqueness of these policies, both when compared to previous repression campaigns and to what has been implemented in other regions such as Tibet, it situates the Xinjiang case in the broader political violence literature. In that regard, the article by Greitens, Lee, and Yazici invites further research and discussion on how the study of developments in Xinjiang may enrich this literature, but also how research based on other cases may help us to better understand the preventive repression measures being implemented by the Chinese state. How effective can such measure be in practice? To what extent could they lead to more, rather than less, anti-Chinese sentiment on the long run? Finally, what kind of international engagement could affect the Chinese party-state's threat perception and lead to a decrease in securitization?

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⁵ Mathieu Duchâtel, "China's Foreign Fighters Problem," *War on the Rocks*, 25 January 2019, <https://warontherocks.com/2019/01/chinas-foreign-fighters-problem/>.

⁶ For example: Rémi Castets, "The Uyghurs in Xinjiang—The Malaise Grows," *China Perspectives* 5 (2003), <https://doi.org/10.4000/chinaperspectives.648>.

⁷ Rachel Harris, "Cultural Genocide in Xinjiang: How China Targets Uyghur Artists, Academics, and Writers," *The Globe Post*, 17 January 2019.

⁸ James Leibold, "Surveillance in China's Xinjiang Region: Ethnic Sorting, Coercion, and Inducement," *Journal of Contemporary China* 29:121 (January 2, 2020): 46-60, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2019.1621529>.

⁹ Taotao Zhao and James Leibold, "Ethnic Governance under Xi Jinping: The Centrality of the United Front Work Department & Its Implications," *Journal of Contemporary China*, October 13, 2019, 1-16, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2019.1677359>.