

China's Repression and Internment of Uyghurs: U.S. Policy Responses

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Chairman Yoho, Ranking Member Sherman, and distinguished members of the committee, thank you for holding this hearing on China's policies in Xinjiang and for inviting me to testify.

For the past fifteen years, China has been gradually intensifying its policies of coercive assimilation, intrusive surveillance, and unlawful detention of the Uyghur ethnic group in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. From 1949 to 2001, the Chinese Communist Party generally regarded the mostly Muslim population of Xinjiang as deserving of some form of cultural autonomy within China. The Uyghurs were designated as one of the largest of China's fifty-six officially recognized ethnic groups, with various social, economic, and educational benefits made available to its members in order to help reinforce this autonomy. Using multiculturalist policies adapted from the Soviet Union, China went to great lengths both to institutionalize and to celebrate the inclusion of a distinct Uyghur ethnic group within the modern Chinese state. It was widely acknowledged that the Uyghurs were a Turkic-speaking Muslim people, and that the preservation of their cultural identities constituted evidence of a tolerant and progressive Chinese leadership.

These longstanding views have come under sustained assault over the past fifteen years, with a devastating intensification of the more coercive aspects of Beijing's new approach in the past two to three years. Since 2001, Beijing has been able to take advantage of the U.S. "global war on terrorism" to conduct its own parallel "war" on any group of people it chooses to associate with terrorism in China. Chief among these groups are the Uyghurs, whom Beijing often identifies with various "East Turkestan" independence movements. Because China's suppression of "East Turkestan" groups has been largely focused on Muslim peoples within Xinjiang, it has long escaped close international scrutiny.

This lack of international scrutiny changed in 2009, when an attempt by the Chinese police in Urumchi to break up the peaceful demonstrations of Uyghur demonstrators prompted riots and bloodshed between Uyghurs and Han. Then, from 2013 to 2015, a series of violent insurrections broke out in cities throughout Xinjiang and China, including a car attack at Tiananmen Square and a mass knifing incident in Kunming. Taken together, these incidents appear to have convinced the Chinese Communist leadership that the "Uyghur problem" in Xinjiang must be solved once and for all.

The result is the oppressive security apparatus, arbitrary system of indefinite detention, and coercive assimilationist measures now on display in Xinjiang, all of which have been institutionalized and normalized in the past two to three years. Ever since the appointment of Chen Quanguo as Party Secretary of Xinjiang in 2016, surveillance and assimilationist policies previously tested in Chen's prior posting to Tibet have been greatly expanded and intensified in Xinjiang.

With regard to cultural assimilation, the elimination of bilingual education in minority languages such as Uyghur, a policy previously applied only at the university level, has now been instituted in primary and secondary schools as well. The state also provides new financial incentives for Han men to marry Uyghur women, and Uyghurs who wish to sell their property must apply for government permission to do so. (If they live in a complex where Han are few, they will be required to sell their property to Han buyers.) Mosques are frequently closed down without explanation, and Islamic insignia, such as the crescent moon, have been removed from those that remain open. Muslim restaurants have been required to remove references to "halal" food and are not allowed to advertise their establishments as "Muslim."

With regard to intrusive surveillance and unlawful detention, the euphemistic "political re-education schools" are now believed to be responsible for the arbitrary and indefinite incarceration of anywhere from several hundred thousand up to a million Uyghurs. (There are approximately ten million Uyghurs in Xinjiang today, meaning that those who have been detained may represent up to 10% of the entire Uyghur population.) Only Uyghurs and other Muslim minority groups in Xinjiang are being put into these camps, with the reasons for incarceration ranging from anything as simple as receiving an international phone call to growing a beard.

It is clear that the entire Uyghur population is being considered for mass internment in these camps: leaked documents and press reports reveal the existence of mandatory quotas for internment, and some Han officials even go so far as to describe the utility of these camps as similar to spraying herbicide indiscriminately over an entire plot of grass in order to kill just the weeds. And it is not only the camps that are tasked with this mission: major cities in Xinjiang are now saturated with police inspection kiosks every several hundred meters, while the regular prison system has also admitted a disproportionately large number of Uyghurs. These aggressive and extralegal detentions have created deep trauma within Uyghur communities. Nearly every Uyghur knows someone who has been sent to one of these camps, a realization that has prompted the repetition of a chilling phrase throughout the region: *adem yoq* ("everybody's gone").

Chen Quanguo and Beijing appear to be committed to the permanent institutionalization and further expansion of these re-education camps, with evidence of massive construction projects continuing to leak to the outside world. Not only that, but the state has also succeeded in integrating large numbers of Uyghurs into the very same security apparatus that has detained up to ten percent of the rest of the Uyghur population. In other words, many Uyghur families have become perversely dependent upon the existence of the

camps and the security forces associated with the new policy environment. In tandem with the cultural assimilationist policies outlined above, the Chinese state has apparently managed to “naturalize” the application of its coercive power in Xinjiang, to the extent that many Uyghur families now obtain a portion of their household income from the same system that deprives them of their least pliable members.

Chinese leaders believe that their approach in Xinjiang is working. Unlike the West, which is viewed as stumbling from one Muslim-associated political disaster to the next, Chinese policymakers have issued statements declaring their belief that by such means China has managed to avoid its own “Libya” or “Syria.” The official line, which many of China’s top politicians and scholars seem to have genuinely embraced, is that the problems in Xinjiang stem directly from the same “global exportation of radical Islam” that has long afflicted Western states. Beijing’s heavy-handed and authoritarian approach to the situation in Xinjiang is viewed as a policymaking innovation that has already achieved more effective results than anything Western democracies have tried.

Precisely because Xi Jinping and Chen Quanguo believe that their approach in Xinjiang is working, we should not expect any voluntary retrenchment or scaling back of the new measures on the part of Beijing. The coercive security state currently entrenched in Xinjiang did not originate in Xinjiang—it was first tested out on a smaller scale in Tibet, and then exported and further developed in Xinjiang. Indeed, reliable evidence suggests that China has already begun to expand on its “success” in Xinjiang and is currently implementing similar policies among Chinese-speaking Muslims in the neighboring provinces of Gansu and Ningxia. Beijing has even passed newly restrictive regulations that are applicable to the practice of all religions anywhere in China, policies that are described as facilitating the “sinification” of religion.

Outside of China, the same technology used to intrude on the lives of Xinjiang’s Uyghurs has already been exported to Zimbabwe and Ecuador. We can reasonably expect that other countries will soon join this list. Few of them, however, will be capable of maintaining the same degree of oversight and indoctrination that has allowed China to implement these measures so effectively. As a result, it is likely that the exportation of the technological and ideological foundation for China’s repressive policies in Xinjiang elsewhere will lead not to terrified compliance, as seems to be the case in Xinjiang, but rather to increased resistance and political instability among the targeted population in other parts of the world.

The United States is uniquely positioned to take on a global leadership role concerning the human rights crisis currently unfolding in Xinjiang. Not only have the major global powers mostly failed to confront China on its treatment of the Uyghur people, but even the leaders of majority Muslim countries have until recently tended to shy away from raising the issue with Beijing. No Middle Eastern country has taken up the cause of the Muslims in China, nor have any of the Central Asian republics situated along Xinjiang’s western border attempted to lobby publicly on behalf of their Turkic-speaking cousins. The reason is simple: most of the world’s countries are grossly dependent on maintaining

a positive economic and trade relationship with China, and to speak up on Xinjiang is to risk endangering that relationship.

As such, the United States is one of the few countries capable of calling sustained global attention to what is happening in Xinjiang. As China plunges headlong into a cynical retrenchment and betrayal of its own prior policies of multicultural and multi-confessional tolerance, the United States can take the opportunity to champion the integrity and importance of these values and position itself as a defender of the rights of religious minorities. The conviction of many Chinese leaders that their policies in Xinjiang represent an unmitigated success story may waver if they begin to encounter a global backlash. Though growing media attention to the situation in Xinjiang has finally forced some of these same leaders to issue defensive statements about the situation in Xinjiang, Beijing has yet to be forced to reckon with the consequences of its actions.

Historians of the future will pass a harsh judgment upon the Communist leadership of China for its current policies toward the Uyghurs in Xinjiang. The following policy recommendations may help to ameliorate a few of the worst abuses of the system and encourage Beijing to re-evaluate its role in perpetuating a human rights crisis of a scale not seen in China since the days of Mao Zedong:

- In accordance with the Magnitsky Act, the United States should consider the adoption of sanctions against key members of the Chinese Communist Party associated with the implementation of the excessive and indiscriminate policies in Xinjiang.
- The United States should call for the release of the hundreds of thousands of Uyghurs who have been unlawfully and arbitrarily detained in the so-called “political re-education schools” and other extra-legal facilities in Xinjiang.
- The United States should urge the Chinese Communist leadership to avoid excessive and indiscriminate incarceration and surveillance measures that target entire religious and ethnic groups within China.
- The United States should encourage China to uphold the provisions in its own constitution that provide for the cultural, linguistic, and religious autonomy of its minority groups.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and committee members, for your attention and consideration.