



THE STATUS OF THE UYGHURS IN CHINA

AND THE INTERNATIONAL RESPONSE

Project Lead

Laraib Zehra

Research Analysts

Arjun Ray Gupta, Elizabeth
Theodore



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1. Xinjiang: An Introduction

Laraib Zehra

1.1 Economic and Strategic importance of the province

The Xinjiang province has a significant advantage regarding its geopolitical positioning. Hence, it plays a significant role in the Chinese government's decision-making processes, especially regarding economic policies. Also called the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR), Xinjiang mainly consists of two ethnicities- the Hans and the Uyghurs. The Han ethnicity is the majority of the Chinese population, while the Uyghur race is a minority Muslim group with Turkic origins. On a microscopic level, the tensions in the province may seem religious and ethnic, but a bird's eye view of the province's history shows that the region's conflict runs more profound.

Xinjiang is a [Mandarin word](#) for “new frontier” or “borderland.” It is spread over approximately 1.6 million kilometers and shares 5600 kilometers of borderland with eight countries. These include Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, India, Afghanistan, Mongolia, and Pakistan. The province's capital is Urumqi, the farthest point from any water source, such as sea or ocean, from all sides. It is also known as the “center point of Asia.” This region plays a significant economic role as the northern end of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), originating from Kashgar in Xinjiang. Additionally, it acts as the starting point for economic entry into Afghanistan, Iran, and Central Asia through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Because BRI is the brainchild of President Xi Jinping, particular economic emphasis is placed on the region.

Xinjiang is also considered an essential part of China's energy strategy. It has also been referred to as China's “[national energy strategy base](#).” A total of 20% of China's natural gas, coal, and other energy reserves are found in Xinjiang. Solar energy and wind power resources are ranked second, while hydropower reserves rank fourth in China. Xinjiang has twenty-four coal fields worth the production of 10 billion tons. Coal production alone has [increased](#) by 32.5% in 2022. Gas resources account for approximately 24% of onshore resources in China. Xinjiang's water bodies include a total of 270 mountain springs and 570 rivers which have the potential to generate around 6% of China's hydropower. However, hydropower production is currently at [risk](#) due to droughts damaging dams. The northern and eastern parts of Xinjiang have a concentration of wind production with the potential to produce 960,000 MW of energy. In terms of solar energy, Xinjiang gets approximately 25% higher annual solar radiation than the rest of China. In 2021, Xinjiang recorded [record-high](#) power generation from solar and wind resources, increasing 135% from 2015.

Moreover, Xinjiang hosts a range of [significant minerals](#) such as tungsten, copper, iron, zinc, nickel, molybdenum, and chromium. Despite enormous potential, exploiting these resources requires high levels of economic and social uplift in the province. Moreover, there is



an added layer of forced labor in the energy sector. Another barrier is the vast distance between mainland China and Xinjiang, which has made transportation and consumption of such energy resources a complicated matter.

Recently, Xinjiang has become a police state with troop deployment, checkpoints for security searches, and heightened regional surveillance. One primary [reason](#) for the militarization of the province is the suppression of Muslim culture and minorities. China hosts three military bases in the Xinjiang province in Kashgar, Ngari Gunsa, and Hotan. Due to these air bases, China has been able to deploy some of the most advanced fighter jets in the region. In Tibet and Xinjiang, China has been working on upgrading infrastructures such as building heliports and airports in the western frontier. This mainly became evident during China-India border tensions over the Ladakh region between 2017 and 2020. In Urumqi, Xinjiang Military Air Force District's headquarters are established. Such high military concentration in the province can be attributed to the BRI's six significant land routes passing through Xinjiang. The Chinese government has declared Xinjiang a special economic zone to shift it from a rural landscape to an urban one. Chinese leaders take particular interest in the security of the western region because of its distance from main cities, internal and external perceived threats, and because it accounts for 30% of China's territory. Along with the Ladakh dispute of 2020, which resulted in deaths on both sides, China also had border tensions over an 80 km territory between Bhutan and Nepal in 2017. Similarly, China has heightened military cooperation with Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan to avoid conflict spillover into China because of the growing Chinese economic influence in Central Asia. These perceived threats have pushed China into militarizing the western frontier and making massive investments in military infrastructure, ultimately making Xinjiang strategically significant for the country.

1.2 Timeline of violence in Xinjiang region

Xinjiang has a protracted and vicious history of conflict. Not only has Xinjiang been a victim of Chinese hostility, but historically, it has also seen violent intervention from the Mongol Empire. Along with occupying different parts of Eurasia, the Mongol Empire formed the Yuan Dynasty. Until the last Qing dynasty, the emperors realized the importance of Xinjiang's geographic positioning, making it a site of vulnerability and highly sought after. Soon, the trade through the Silk Route attracted Arab traders, leading to the spread of Islamic influence in the region. People of Xinjiang shifted from Tengriism to Islam which led to the formation of a minority Muslim Uyghur group.

The invasion by the Mongol Empire was followed by an attack by the imperialist Tibetan Buddhists called the Zhungars. Then Xinjiang was also claimed by the Ottomans, Persians, Mughals, Tsarists, and, eventually, the expansionist Qing Dynasty of China. Soon after a Qing leader was appointed in the province, he went against the dynasty, attacking Qing forces and resources. As a result, the dynasty chose to massacre men, while enslaving women and children. This was coupled with the spread of diseases such as smallpox and starvation. In the mid-1800s, the Qing started attempting to integrate the locals of Xinjiang with the rest of China. This was



not an easy task as locals were reluctant to trust the dynasty after facing much aggression, and they also found consolation in Islamic values. This initial formation of the Uyghur identity was tied to resentment towards the Chinese administration.

In the 1900s, China saw two Uyghur-led independence movements encouraged by the Soviet Union. Substantial economic cooperation was established between the Soviet Union and the Xinjiang province due to its isolation from the rest of China. This led to cultural exchanges between the two Central Asian territories that surrounded the region. In an overwhelming isolated state, the locals of Xinjiang found solace in their cultural ties with their neighboring non-Chinese territories. Ultimately, this resulted in the Uyghurs' bitterness toward the Chinese government's integration policies of the Uyghur people. However, Uyghurs did not get a chance to enjoy these newfound ties for too long as their political leader Zengxin was assassinated, and the control of the province went into the hands of the leading Chinese Guomintang Party. Soon after, exploitation of the Uyghurs began, and agricultural lands were given to Chinese refugees who later got permanent residence in Xinjiang. This led to the unequal treatment of ethnic minorities while Han refugees enjoyed more rights and security from the Chinese government. 1931 saw Xinjiang's first rebellion, also called the [Kumul Rebellion](#), which started with the murder of a Chinese police officer who forcefully married an Uyghur woman. This movement led to the massacre of a hundred Chinese families as a symbol of anger towards Han Chinese migrations to Xinjiang. This revolt was eventually put to an end by a Guomintang Party warlord. In 1944, Soviet-trained Uyghur rebels attacked a small town which led to the arrest of hundreds of Uyghurs. Also called the [Ili Rebellion](#), the Muslim minorities took up arms and set up the independent Turkestan Republic with the support of the Soviet Union. As a result, it was believed that many Uyghurs were massacred, their mutilated bodies thrown outside Chinese police stations. Eventually, this rebellion reached a ceasefire. However, the movement's influence is still evident among Muslim minority groups in Xinjiang. In 1949, Xinjiang province was incorporated with the rest of China. Between 1950 and 1958, Xinjiang witnessed the [Kuomintang Islamic insurgency](#) rise of political Islam in response to China's Communist party, the Soviet Union, and Indian leader Nehru. It was a series of guerrilla attacks against Chinese troops, which eventually ended with the execution of the insurgent leader Han Yimu.

Some critical events during the 1990s began with the Baren Township armed conflict between Uyghur militants and Chinese armed forces in 1990. According to Chinese sources, the Uyghur group used homemade bombs transported from Kashgar to Baren, where 200 Uyghurs instigated the attacks. Chinese police forces and paramilitary were attacked, beheaded, and burned for three days till, finally, the militants were forced to surrender. According to Uyghur sources, this attack was a retaliation to forced abortions, Han migration, ban on Islamic practices such as the construction of mosques. It was [reported](#) that approximately 8000 people were detained in Xinjiang on "splittist" and extremist charges. In 1996, the Chinese government initiated the "Strike Hard" campaign against terrorism and separatism. This led to the detention and execution of thousands of suspected Uyghurs.

Post 9/11 attacks, the Chinese government had been pushing [the narrative](#) that the Uyghurs were involved with terrorism and extremism. In 2008, [Mutallip Hajim](#), a prominent



Uyghur businessman, was taken into custody for his alleged involvement with Muslim schools (Madrassahs). He died after two months in possession of the police; his body was returned to his family, and the authorities instructed the family to bury Mutallip's body immediately while keeping it a secret. Two weeks later, riots broke out against the Chinese administration. The protestors demanded an end to the ban on headscarves and various religious expressions and to release of political prisoners. In Kashgar, 70 people were arrested as a precautionary step in interfering in the path of the Olympic torch while it made its way to Beijing for the Games. Although the riot died in 2009, another deadly streak of demonstrations broke out when a rumor of sexual harassment of Han women at the hands of Uyghur workers was spread on an online site. This resulted in a brawl between Han and Uyghur workers, leading to two deaths. The following month, peaceful student-led protests were seen across the region, which soon turned violent when the Uyghur men started attacking Hans and their businesses. As a result, Han mobs attacked Uyghurs with unconventional weapons such as metal bars. Soon after, the disappearances of Uyghurs began. These events are considered pivotal in terms of ethnic tensions spewing in Xinjiang. In April 2010, the Chinese administration forced a complete internet shutdown in Xinjiang. The 2009 events led to the Chinese government making simple everyday activities for the Uyghurs difficult, such as applying for a passport or driver's license or using social media networks. In 2010, Chinese authorities shut down text messaging in the province for spreading "[splittist](#)" messages while doubling the province's military budget from 1.5 billion yuan to 2.89 billion yuan.

In January 2010, the World Uyghur Congress released a [report](#) of the forceful repatriation of 20 Uyghurs who had fled to Cambodia during the 2009 riots, despite opposition from the UN. Upon return, this group "[disappeared into a black hole.](#)" according to Human Rights Watch. Similarly, in 2011, [Pakistan](#) forcefully expedited five Uyghur refugees, where they were expected to face trials, eventually leading to harsh punishments. In 2012, six Uyghurs attempted [hijacking](#) a plane from Hotan to Urumqi, which was made unsuccessful by the efforts of the crew and the passengers. In 2013, a new series of investigations opened in the Xinjiang province after the [Tiananmen Square attack](#), which left five dead and 40 injured. The people in the car that crashed into the Square were Uyghurs, making all the suspects residents of Xinjiang. Chinese authorities intensified security in Xinjiang, inspecting households connected to religious activities. The same year, in Shanshan County, police opened fire on Uyghurs who were allegedly attacking government buildings. In 2014, in another "suicide attack," two cars crashed into a Urumqi market, followed by another bomb attack in Urumqi's railway station, which killed three and injured 79. The same year, a mob attacked a police station and government offices in Yarkant, killing 96. A few days later, the imam/congregation head of China's largest mosque was stabbed. In 2015, 17 people were killed in the Aksu region of Xinjiang during a [knife attack](#) while the police were inspecting homes. Although China is home to over 50 ethnic minority groups, all these events ultimately led to Chinese authorities blaming Muslim minorities who had been facing unnecessary treatment for decades. In 2017, the first reports of Chinese "vocational" camps surged in international media, alarming the international community and human rights organizations as a series of new human rights violations emerged from the Xinjiang province.



1.3 Chinese state security practices were implemented in response to the tensions

Often termed [“preventive counterterrorism,”](#) the Chinese authorities make billions of dollars worth of investments in surveillance and security every year. The government has adopted highly advanced [military cyber systems](#) that break into data from individuals to analyze their behavior to identify potential risks of criminal activity, aggression, or dissent. The system then generates information that advises the government on which force to deploy. These systems of advanced surveillance are mainly reserved for the ethnic minorities in the province, so they get used to the idea of authorities monitoring their daily lives without complaining. This type of surveillance does not apply to Hans. Furthermore, this type of system helps the authorities determine who to send to the vocational camps, and upon release, it allows authorities to keep up with ex-detainees. Video recording equipment from companies like Hikvision is installed all across Xinjiang, within the camps, mosques, and public spaces where Muslim minorities are in higher concentration.

In 2017, it was revealed that the surveillance system in Kashgar has a database of 68 billion records compared to the FBI’s 2018 system of [19 million records](#). According to Human Rights Watch, Chinese officials have set up a “virtual fence” in Xinjiang- a mobile app used by Xinjiang police that tracks potential suspects’ activity, such as movement in and out of neighborhoods and public spaces. In 2017, the security budget for Xinjiang was six times more than in 2012. Along with tightening security measures, the Chinese authorities also focused on the “re-education” of Muslim minorities, such as banning Arabic greetings and Islamic phrases. More than 90,000 police contractors were also hired during 2016-2017. Other acts also included collecting biometric data such as facial scans, DNA, and voice recordings of all Xinjiang locals. Every 200 meters across the province, 7700 police stations were constructed. For Turkic Muslims, the housing societies are built within the police grids, and each house has facial scanners. The police grids have a command center responsible for face-to-face surveillance and making recommendations for detention. The authorities have also installed high-speed cameras to detect car number plates and drivers’ faces.

While counterterrorism measures are vindictive, the Chinese authorities also aim for these measures to change the cultural and religious landscape of the province, making the counterterrorism efforts “educational.” It is an attempt to transform the spiritual and moral attributes of the locals.



2. Treatment of Uyghur minorities

Elizabeth Theodore

2.1 What has been happening to Uyghurs and why?

As of late March 2022, an estimated [1.5 million](#) Uyghur Muslims are detained in the Xinjiang region of China. The Chinese government has referred to the internment facilities as “vocational education and training centers”. Worldwide media had referred to these camps as “reeducation camps, internment camps, detention camps and concentration camps”. This detainment has been ongoing since around April 2017, with the Uyghurs being placed into ‘reeducation’ camps as well as being subjected to ‘intense labor, involuntary sterilizations’, along with other human rights abuses. Re-education efforts of the Uyghurs have been estimated to start around 2014 and become more prominent by 2017. Reuters has kept track of the expansion of the camps between April 2017 and August 2018; claimed to have covered the size of 140 soccer fields. Xinjiang expert Adrian Zenz also found that construction costs for these camp expansions have increased by [20 billion yuan](#) (\$2.96 billion USD) in 2017. This expansion appears to have been done through ‘refashioning lower-security reeducation camps into formal detention centers or prisons; expanded existing detention centers; and constructed new, high-security detention centers throughout Xinjiang.

Most Uyghurs that were placed in the internment camps were never charged formally with a crime and have no legal advantage when it comes to challenging their detainment. There has been superficial reasoning when it comes to targeting the detainees such as, traveling to “sensitive” countries such as Turkey or Afghanistan, attending mosque services, and having more than three children. According to various human rights groups, the only “crime” committed was them being Muslims and being labeled as ‘extremists’ for simply practicing their religion. As China is an atheist communist nation, the Uyghurs serve as an antithesis to the rest of the country, holding great value in their ethnicity and religion.

When first discovered, China denied the existence of these camps before later on defending them as a “measure against terrorism”, when it came to separatist violence in Xinjiang. The Associated Press [reported](#) that in Xinjiang alone, 1 in 25 people have been sentenced to prison on terrorism charges, all of them being Uyghurs. The United Nations’ Deputy Assistant Secretary Scott Busby, stated that between 800,000 to 2 million Uyghurs along with other Muslim minorities including ethnic Kazakhs and Uzbeks have been detained since 2017. This is known to be [the largest mass internment](#) of an ethnic religious minority group since World War II.

The UN Human Rights Office released a [report](#) in 2022, consisting of dozens of interviews that described harsh conditions in the internment camps including “[patterns of torture or other forms of cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment](#)”. This UN report affirmed previous reports from various international outlets and organizations that showed that China is relying on a system of



long-term incarceration to keep the Uyghurs in check, wielding the law as a weapon of repression.

2.2 Re-education in Xinjiang

In 2017, Xinjiang passed a Regulation on De-extremification as China's National Counter-Terrorism Law of 2016 defined extremism as the ["ideological basis for terrorism."](#) This was the Chinese government's way toward the educational remodeling of individuals exhibiting extremist attitudes. Under [Regulation's](#) Article 4, the de-extremification efforts include "making religion more Chinese and under the law" and making religions "compatible with a socialist society." Under Article 9, fifteen items were outlined under the definition of "extremism." These included wearing head and face coverings, having a beard, wearing gowns, having extremist names, interfering in state family planning policies, and spreading extremist thinking, among others. The government released another [white paper](#) in 2019, which detailed vocational education and training in Xinjiang. The document defines Xinjiang as the "key battlefield in the fight against terrorism and extremism in China" and "plagued with religious extremism." It outlines that extremism was easily spread across the many regions of Xinjiang because of the majority religious population who had "limited means of communication outside their communities, limited employment opportunities in farming and animal husbandry, limited sources of information, and limited knowledge of modern science." The paper establishes that the practices in these vocational centers follow the National Security Law of the People's Republic of China, Criminal Law of the People's Republic of China, Criminal Procedure Law of the People's Republic of China, and Regulations of Religious Affairs respectively, allowing extremist groups to learn new skills and have a chance at employment, increased incomes which would result in long-term peace in Xinjiang.

The paper outlines three categories in which the trainees of the vocational center are enrolled: the first category includes people who were forced into participating in terrorist acts. The second category includes people who were coerced into terrorist acts, but their actions did not cause any actual harm. They acknowledged their mistakes and hence were exempted from punishment. The final category includes convicts who completed their prison sentences but still pose a threat to society. People in the first and third categories would receive training that would equip them for employment. In contrast, people in the second category would either face severe punishment, while some may receive rehabilitation. The paper calls this "balancing compassion and severity."

The 2019 white paper also summarizes the contents of these educational and vocational camps. Foremost, the paper outlines a need to make trainees proficient in written and spoken Chinese. The centers also provide legal courses, so trainees learn about Chinese law for legal awareness. These centers promise vocational training in skills that are based on local demand, such as "assembly of electronic products, printing, hairdressing and beauty services, e-commerce, auto maintenance and repair, interior design and decoration, livestock breeding,



pomiculture, therapeutic massage, household services, handicrafts, flower arrangement, rug weaving, painting, and performing arts such as music and dance.” To counter extremist mindsets, these centers incorporate courses focused on deradicalization, such as teaching them about the national policy of freedom of religious beliefs.

2.3 Forced Labor in Xinjiang

In September 2020, a [white paper](#) on Employment and Labor Rights in Xinjiang was released. Some figures highlighted in this paper related to industrial development and employment for the locals of Xinjiang include

- Xinjiang Zhundong, Economic and Technological Development Zone, was established in 2012, and by the end of 2019, it was providing jobs to 80,000 people.
- The textile industry of Xinjiang created 350,000 new jobs between 2017-2019.
- By the end of 2019, the Kashgar region had 210 agricultural product processing companies providing 16,700 jobs and 1406 industrial enterprises providing approximately 84000 jobs.
- Through vocational centers in the Aksu region, 32,400 people were employed.
- “Poverty alleviation workshops” and “satellite factories” were established for rural workers.
- Because of poor local conditions, laborers from regions of Kashgar and Hotan were given three-year assistance for relocation to find better employment opportunities.
- Between 2014-2019, Xinjiang provided jobs to approximately 335,000 urban residents.
- In 2019, the employment rate for university graduates from Xinjiang was 90.4%.
- Entrepreneurs are provided tax breaks, interest subsidies, and ease of accessing the market.

Despite these figures provided by the Chinese authorities over the years, the world was taken aback after the disturbing [satellite images](#) of Chinese “vocational camps” surfaced in 2018. The images compared the years 2015, 2018, and 2020. The camps had dramatically spread over a larger area over the years. Along with political “re-education,” forced disappearances, forced detainment, and mass sterilization of Uyghur women, this ethnic minority group has been forced into labor for the past several years. China was added to the “List of Goods Produced by Child Labor and Forced Labor” ([TVPR List](#)) in 2009, which included 12 goods. In 2020, further [addition of five goods produced through forced labor](#) and child labor was added by the International Labor Affairs (ILAB) to the TVPRA list. For the most part, it has been concluded



that most of the forced labor is done through Muslim minorities in Xinjiang province, but [some Muslim groups have also been sent to camps around different parts of China](#). However, despite growing evidence of these camps, it is hard to identify forced labor in Xinjiang. This is because most of the released detainees cannot share information due to fear of harassment, forced detention, disappearance, and in some cases, death at the hands of the Chinese government. Since they are detention camps, labor audits are far from becoming a reality. Secondly, time and again, the Chinese government has been defending such forms of employment under the guise of their “rural poverty alleviation” program.

As a response to the recent document released by the UN, the Chinese government released a [139-page rebuttal document](#) titled “Fight against Terrorism and Extremism in Xinjiang: Truth and Facts,” supporting their country’s policies for ethnic minorities. According to the document, the Chinese government has condemned the UN response, highlighted their efforts to curb extremism and terrorism in the region, and accused the international community of slandering the Chinese image and interfering in internal matters of China. Further, under the fifth heading of the document, the Chinese government has stated that employment is protected by Chinese laws and laws codified under international conventions such as the Constitution of the Labor Organization. It also highlights equal employment opportunities for all minority groups, including labor contracts based on equal rights and consent. The Chinese government has also highlighted alleviating 1.058 million people out of poverty in 2020 (pg. 107), along with a per capita income of 30,000 yuan (per capita income of other regions in China is 40,000 yuan).

However, these “facts” are hard to justify. According to a [report](#) released by CSIS in 2019, their interviews with ex-detainees indicate that when they work in the factories, they are often threatened with being returned to detention facilities. The report also concluded that victims of forced labor were paid below the minimum wage (roughly \$42 per month, \$181 per year), while they spent an average of 3-6 months working in these factories. In a recent [report](#) released by the Jamestown Foundation (June 2022), it is stated that Xinjiang’s current Five-Year Plan (2021-2025) does not allow individuals forced into factory work are not allowed to leave and are placed under higher surveillance. So, the Chinese government's focus on employment has shifted from mobilization to coercion since 2017.

2.4 Growing International Outcry

Keeping the above information in view, the international community has vigorously responded to trade with China which involves forced labor practices. Since 2019, the US Department of Homeland Security’s Customs and Border Protection has [released 10 Withhold Release Orders](#) against goods and companies linked with Xinjiang forced labor. On June 21, 2022, the US Department of State released a [press statement](#) announcing the implementation of the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act. This Act includes “visa restrictions, financial sanctions under Global Magnitsky, export controls, Withhold Release Orders and import restrictions, as well as the release of a multi-agency business advisory which will help US companies to discontinue business with companies that support child labor, forced labor or any forms of



human rights abuses.” Furthermore, the [European Commission](#) is set to ban forced labor products, as announced in September 2022. Despite being a detailed proposal, it lacks certain aspects, especially outlining state-imposed forced labor, such as Xinjiang. This has [raised concerns](#), especially among human rights activists. Instead, it is a generic proposal outlining worldwide products, including those made within the EU. The other criticism this proposal has met is its lengthy process until its adoption and implementation, especially since all 27 states of the EU might be implementing during differing timelines.

While proposals may have raised some criticism, they are an essential step towards building economic pressure on China, ultimately dismantling government malpractices against its citizens. This is an effective approach to tackling human rights abuses considering the Chinese government’s [triadic](#) (“informal, fast-paced, multilayered”) diplomatic activities to increase friendships worldwide since 2014. The Chinese government has mainly cast its net via the Belt and Road Initiative, which includes government institutions, private companies, and the military. This has proven fruitful for China as it is now on its way to becoming the next economic giant. With the adoption of Acts against forced labor, they would also ensure that in the future, companies don’t become complacent in these mistreatments. There is strong push-back against the horrors of Xinjiang, which makes the international community hopeful that the global standards of labor will be met fully by not just the Chinese government but also serve as a lesson for abusive governments globally.

2.5 Forced Conversions

According to the Washington Post, former inmates have reported these camps being filled with “[brainwashing and torture](#),” such as pledging allegiance to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) while renouncing Islam, having any aspect of religious expression such as the banning of [long beards and wearing veils](#) and being placed under constant surveillance through [installing spyware](#) on their phones which allow authorities to monitor their activity online.

Suppression towards the Uyghur people has been present since the 9/11 terror attacks in the United States. With the United States declaring a “War on Terror”, resulting in the conflation of Islam with terrorism, this, in turn, allowed China to conduct a relentless strike on the Uyghurs through the facade of “fighting against terrorism”. This involved criminalizing and policing Islam values and traditions, such as [restricting](#) Uyghur Muslim students, teachers, and other civil servants from observing Ramadan, [close surveillance of mosques](#), and restriction on communication with family members or friends outside of China.



2.6 Mass sterilization / reproductive and sexual violence

Uyghur women detained in these camps have been [systematically raped, sexually abused, and tortured](#). There has been documentation from scholar Adrian Zenz that [reports](#) that Uyghur women are being forced to abort pregnancies that exceed birth quotas, involuntarily fitted with intrauterine devices (IUDs), or even coerced into receiving sterilization surgery as a way to suppress the Uyghur population. There were also direct reports from former detainees, such as Tursunay Ziawudun, that claimed that [“women were removed from the cells every night and raped by one or more masked Chinese men.”](#)

2.7 “Political camps for indoctrination” - UN

Gay McDougall, a member of the U.N. Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, cited estimates that 2 million Uighurs and Muslim minorities were forced into [“political camps for indoctrination”](#) in the western Xinjiang autonomous region.

- China has changed the Uyghur autonomous region into “something that resembles a massive internment camp that is shrouded in secrecy, a sort of “no rights zone”.
- China claims that in Xinjiang, some Islamist militants and separatists are creating tensions and plotting attacks between [the Uyghur minority and Han Chinese majority](#), considering it a “threat to peace in the country”.
- “Cultural cleansing” in Xinjiang is a last effort attempt from Beijing to find a final solution to the Xinjiang problem. This is leading to a possible cultural revolution in the region that will leave [“long-term, psychological effects”](#) and will create a [“multigenerational trauma from which many people will never recover”](#).



3. Coalitions and Oppositions

Arjun Ray Gupta

Global reaction to the violation of the human rights of the Uyghur community in China has been varied. Several countries have formed coalitions either in support of or against China's Xinjiang internment camps.

In 2019, [22 countries signed a letter](#) addressed to the 41st Session of the UN Human Rights Council, expressing concern over China's alleged surveillance and oppressive detention of Uyghurs in Xinjiang. The letter dated [July 8, 2019](#) was signed by ambassadors of Australia, Canada, Japan, Britain, France, Germany, and Switzerland amongst others. It marked the first unified statement of many, stating that China "[refrain from the arbitrary detention and restrictions on freedom of movement of Uighurs, and other Muslim and minority communities in Xinjiang.](#)" In response, [37 countries including Russia and Saudi Arabia issued a joint](#) statement just 2 days after, in support of China, expressing their firm opposition to the supposed 'politicization of human rights' by the former states. In a sharp condemnation of the statement made by opposers of China, the letter called on the UN to remain objective and impartial, and refrain from leveling baseless, unfounded charges on China. Their letter hailed China's achievement of "[protecting and promoting human rights through development.](#)" Their justification for China's actions was on the grounds that it was a counter-terrorism and deradicalization move aimed at vocational education and training. Interestingly, this group includes several Islamic-majority states, signaling China's ability to mobilize and sustain a voting block referred to as the [Like-Minded Group of Developing Countries](#) to support their actions, particularly with regard to human rights issues. On the other hand, countries that opposed China's actions were predominantly Western states. A notable absentee to both coalitions in 2019 was the United States, which has previously been criticized for being selective in their condemnation of China's actions, particularly under the erstwhile President Trump's tenure.

In recent times however, the US has shifted its stance on the issue, choosing to unite with other countries that oppose China's actions. This is evident from The Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act and The Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act passed by the US Congress in 2020 and 2021 respectively.

The Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act affirmed the United States commitment to investigating and reporting human rights abuses committed by the Chinese Communist Party against Uyghurs in Xinjiang. It also called for targeted sanctions on members of the CCP. The passage of the act was supported by the Uyghur community represented by the World Uyghur Congress, who deemed it to be an important step in countering "[China's continued push of extreme persecution](#)".



While the Act played an important role in defining US foreign policy toward China, the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act which was signed into law on December 23, 2021 and came into force in June 2022 provided a substantial framework for action against goods produced using forced Uyghur labor. The Act, which received [unanimous consent](#) in the US House Of Representatives, aims to prevent all goods produced in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region from entering US markets under the assumption that they are made using state-sponsored forced labor. It also expanded the role of the [Forced Labor Enforcement Task Force](#), an interagency collaboration established by the United States, Mexico, and Canada in 2020.

The European Union too, has imposed sanctions on China as a consequence of the alleged mistreatment of Uyghurs. For the first time in over 30 years, it [imposed sanctions](#) on 4 Chinese officials and 1 entity who supposedly played a role in the human rights violations.

Although increased global attention and credible reports supporting allegations of abuse against Uyghur Muslims have strengthened the coalition against China's actions, several states have continued to lend China its support. On October 6, 2020, the German Ambassador to the UN, Christoph Heugens [issued a statement](#) at the United Nations General Assembly Third Committee on behalf of 39 countries, denouncing China's treatment of the Uyghur population. All 22 countries that were party to the 2019 statement renewed their support for the Uyghur community, with another 17 predominantly western states joining in 2020. Unlike in 2019, the United States was also a signatory to this statement. Shortly after, the Cuban Ambassador Ana Silvia Rodríguez Abascal issued a resounding rebuttal on behalf of 45 nations that continued to defend China's 're-educational' policies, hailing the remarkable progress made by the Chinese government in reducing violence and terrorism, maintaining peace and security, ["advancing economic and social sustainable development, and promoting and protecting human rights"](#) in Xinjiang. Joining Cuba were Russia, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Palestine, Iran, Iraq, and others. However, not all of the 37 countries that supported China's actions in 2019 remained on, with notable absentees being Oman, the Philippines, and Qatar. The significant increase in the number of states joining the opposing coalitions indicates growing tension regarding the issue; In 2021, the trend continued, with [another 4 countries joining the coalition](#) against China- Turkey, Eswatini, Portugal and the Czech Republic, bringing the size of the coalition to 43. This unusual and remarkable rebuke of China indicates the seriousness of the matter, and also points to the global community's commitment to holding China accountable despite threats of retaliation against them. Most recently, at the 50th session of the HRC in 2022, [a total of 47 countries issued a collective statement](#) as they had done so in previous years. The fact remains however, that China has successfully been able to gather stronger support in defense of their actions; in 2022, the pro-china joint statement gathered [signatures from 70 states, with another 20 issuing independent statements](#) to voice their support for the CCP. What is especially worrying is countries that previously held a neutral stance on the matter later joined forces with China.



The events of the past 3 years culminated in a long-awaited report published by the UN Human Rights Office in August 2022, which concluded that “serious human rights violations have been committed in XUAR in the context of the Government’s application of counter-terrorism and counter-“extremism” strategies.” However, despite this, the UN currently appears to be unwilling to even debate on the matter. On October 6, 2022, 19 states voted against a motion accepted by 17 nations to conduct formal debates on the issue. The rejection was only the second time in over 15 years that such a motion suffered a defeat. While Western states remain united in their resolve to hold China accountable, the loss highlights the vast power and influence the nation exerts over nations, and as pointed out by Marc Limon, the Executive Director of the Universal Rights Group, marks a departure from the West’s “predominance in the U.N. human rights system.”