

Committee: SPECPOL 1

Topic: The question of the Uighurs in China

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Summary

There are about 12 million Uyghurs (also spelt Uighurs), mostly Muslim, living in Xinjiang – officially called the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR). The Uyghurs speak their own language, which is similar to Turkish, and align culturally and ethnically closely to Central Asian nations. They make up approximately 40% of the Xinjiang population, due to an influx of Han Chinese (the ethnic majority) in recent years into Xinjiang – reportedly in an effort by the government to dilute the minority population there. China has also been accused of targeting Muslim religious figures and banning religious practices in the region, as well as destroying mosques and tombs. There is a fear that the group's culture is under threat of erasure. There are also accusations of crimes against humanity and possibly genocide against the Uyghur population and other minority ethnic groups in the north-western region of Xinjiang. Human rights groups believe China has detained more than one million Uyghurs against their will over the past few years in a large network of what the state calls "re-education camps", and sentenced hundreds of thousands to prison terms.

Definition of Key Terms

Uighur/Uyghur/Uygur/Uigur Muslims: The Uighurs are a Turkic-speaking ethnic group. Most live in the Xinjiang region of northwestern China, while other communities reside in Central Asian nations, e.g. Kazakhstan. They are mostly Muslim, and the practice of Islam has been part of the group's traditions and identity for centuries. According to China's 2020 census, there were 11 million Uighurs in the XUAR – 45% of the region's overall population of 25 million.

Genocide: Genocide is defined as acts committed "intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group". These acts are divided into five categories: "killing members of the group, causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group, and forcibly transferring children of the group to another group".

The term first emerged in 1944, when it was created by Polish-Jewish lawyer Raphael Lemkin, to describe the Nazis' methods of systematic murder of European Jews during the Holocaust. Genocide became an internationally recognised crime on 9th December 1948, in the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.

The Xinjiang Papers: This is a 400-page collection of internal Chinese government documents, detailing China's policies towards the Uyghur Muslim minority group in the Xinjiang region. The documents were originally leaked by a source within the Chinese Communist Party to the New York Times, who broke the story in November 2019. The documents contain speeches from General Secretary Xi Jinping and other senior officials, and reports on surveillance and population control of Uyghurs. China has called this "sheer, pure fabrication".

Background Information

The US, UK, Canada and the Netherlands, have accused China of committing genocide. This follows reports that, as well as internment of Uyghurs in camps, China has been forcibly mass sterilising Uyghur women to suppress the population, separating children from their families, and attempting to break the cultural traditions of the group. A UN human rights committee in 2018 said it had credible reports that China was holding up to a million people in "counter-extremism centres" in Xinjiang.

In addition, analysis of data contained in recent police documents, called the Xinjiang Police Files, showed that almost 23,000 residents - or more than 12% of the adult population of one county - were in a camp or prison in the years 2017 and 2018. If applied to Xinjiang as a whole, the figures would mean the detention of more than 1.2 million Uyghur and other Turkic minority adults.

Furthermore, leaked documents known as the China Cables made clear that the camps were intended to be run as high security prisons, with strict discipline and punishments. Those lucky enough to have escaped the camps have reported physical, mental and sexual torture. Women have spoken of mass rape and sexual violence.

Anti-Han and separatist sentiment rose in Xinjiang from the 1990s, somewhat influenced by other Central Asian nations gaining independence following the fall of the Soviet Union. At times, this movement flared into violence. Then, in 2009 about 200 people died in clashes in Xinjiang, which the Chinese blamed on Uyghurs who wanted their own state. This event marked the beginning of the intense security crackdown in Xinjiang. Xinjiang is now covered by a network of surveillance, composed of police, checkpoints, and cameras that scan everything from number plates to individual faces. According

to Human Rights Watch, police are also using a mobile app to monitor people's behaviour, like how much electricity they are using and how often they use their front door.

In 2017, President Xi Jinping issued an order saying all religions in China should be Chinese in orientation and focus. Campaigners claim this is another justification for China's erasure of Uyghur culture.

China denies all allegations of human rights abuses in Xinjiang. Regarding the Xinjiang Police Files, China's foreign ministry spokesman said that the documents were "the latest example of anti-China voices trying to smear China". He said Xinjiang enjoyed stability and prosperity and residents were living happy, fulfilled lives. According to China, the crackdown in Xinjiang is necessary to prevent terrorism and stop Islamist extremism. The purpose of the camps is to re-educate inmates in the fight against terrorism. China has dismissed claims it is trying to reduce the Uyghur population through mass sterilisations as "baseless".

Furthermore, there have been allegations of forced labour in this region also. Xinjiang is a mostly desert region which produces approx. 20% of the world's cotton. Human rights groups are concerned that much of that cotton export is picked by forced labour, often by Uyghurs. In 2021 some Western brands removed Xinjiang cotton from their supply chains. This caused a backlash against the brands from Chinese celebrities. China says that allegations of forced labour are "completely fabricated".

Major Countries and Organizations Involved

China

China has been accused of committing genocide against the Uighur population. The government's campaign against Xinjiang's Uighurs is complex and multi-layered. In addition to encouraging Han Chinese to move to Xinjiang to alter the area's demographic, there is also evidence of identity-based persecution, mass surveillance, mass detention, forced labour, forced sterilizations, and forced assimilation. Furthermore, there are instances of family separation, with parents being detained in so-called 're-education camps', or 'vocational training centres', while children are held in adoption centres run by the government.

Türkiye

As home to the largest Uighur diaspora in the world, Türkiye holds a special position in this international issue. The Uighurs view their relationship with Türkiye and Turks almost as 'cousins', due to the many historical, linguistic and cultural shared connections. Currently, the Uighur minority and their cause are supported by the İy Parti, while the ruling party, AKP, has remained quiet on the issue for strategic

issues. In 2009, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan stated that China was committing “a kind of genocide”, following its swift suppression of an uprising in Xinjiang. Now, Erdogan is much more cautious, remaining largely silent on the human rights abuses, as Türkiye becomes more economically reliant on China. In 2016, Uighur activist Abdulkadir Yapcan was extradited to Beijing from Ankara. Although a readmission agreement was signed between the countries the following year, it has not been ratified by the Turkish parliament – most likely due to fears of a backlash from nationalist politicians and members of the public.

Uyghur Human Rights Project

The Uyghur Human Rights Project is an independent nonprofit organisation, originally founded in 2004 as a project of the Uyghur American Association. It aims to “promote the rights of Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslim peoples” and raise awareness about the atrocities being committed against them in Xinjiang, or East Turkistan, as many in the community call it. The organisation works towards achieving its aims through “research-based advocacy”. It publishes reports to defend the civil, political, cultural, and economic rights as per international law. It also regularly submits reports and policy recommendations to national governments and international organisations, including the EU and the UN. Their findings have also been published in the New York Times, Associated Press, Radio Free Asia, Reuters, BBC and CNN.

Timeline of Events

Date	Description
12th November 1933	In the Kashgar region Uighur separatists declare the short-lived and self-proclaimed East Turkestan Republic (ETR): "East Turkestan".
5th January 1945	Uighur rebels in China's southwest Xinjiang declared the Eastern Turkestan Republic. The republic ends in 1949 when Chinese Communists came to power.
1949	Uighur rebels in parts of Xinjiang set up an independent republic, but it is quickly crushed by China's Communist Party. ETR is dismantled. By 2014 Han Chinese made up more than 40% of the province's 22 million people.
1955	Mao Zedong establishes the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (New Colony Uyghur Autonomous Region), breaking his previous promise to the region regarding self-determination.
1958	

China's collectivisation policy commences, forcing the Uighurs to abandon their traditional customs in favour of Chinese culture.

1966-76

Hundreds of thousands of Uighurs are killed during China's 'Cultural Revolution', supposedly because they were "pan Turkic, counter-revolutionary, and nationalist". As part of the efforts to erase Uighur culture and history, the regime states that "Xinjiang has always been a part of China since ancient times, and the Uyghurs are part of the larger Chinese family"

1990s

After the introduction of a birth control policy, an armed uprising was undertaken by the Uighurs of Xinjiang. It was crushed by security forces. Further protests in the region take place during this decade, influenced by the new independence of other Central Asian countries.

2000s

China begins its own 'War on Terror' campaign. As part of this, the teaching of the Uighur's language is banned, and religious and cultural practices are limited, supposedly to prevent "terrorism and extremism".

2014

The 'Strike Hard Campaign against Violent Terrorism' begins. According to the Chinese government, it is combatting against the "Three Evils": separatism, extremism, and terrorism. By now, Han Chinese made up more than 40% of the province's 22 million people, due to policies encouraging settlement here.

2016

Hundreds of so-called "re-educations camps" are built across Xinjiang. Inside, there are not only Uighurs but also Kazakhs, Uzbeks, Tatar, Kirghiz, and Mongolians. Reports state that detainees experience cultural and political indoctrination, forced medication and sterilisation, organ harvesting, rape, and death.

2019

2021

China's National Defense Strategy outlines its goal to "prevent the creation of East Turkestan". According to government documents leaked by the New York Times, Chinese officials have ordered for "no mercy" to be given to Uighurs.

The USA is the first country to call the atrocities against the Uighurs of Xinjiang genocide. Canada, the Netherlands, France, and the UK soon follow suit.

Relevant UN Treaties and Events

UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide

Was written in 1948; It outlines the criteria required for acts against a particular group to be considered 'genocide'. Reports from human rights organisations as well as the UN prove that China's actions against the Uighurs qualify as genocide.

Assessment of human rights concerns in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, People's Republic of China

In August 2022, the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) released its report; It detailed the plethora of human rights violations and genocidal acts carried out against the Uighurs and other Turkic minorities in Xinjiang, saying that collectively they may amount to “crimes against humanity”.

Previous Attempts to solve the Issue

July 2019

22 Ambassadors to the UN co-signed a letter condemning China’s actions against Uighurs and other ethnic minorities in the XUAR. The letter was sent to the Human Rights Council president and the High Commissioner for Human Rights and was signed by ambassadors representing countries such as Canada, France, Germany, Japan, and the UK, among others. They detailed their concern “about credible reports of arbitrary detention ... as well as widespread surveillance and restrictions, particularly targeting Uighurs and other minorities in Xinjiang”. Furthermore, it called for “freedom of movement of Uighurs and other minorities in Xinjiang”.

October 2021

During the UN Third Committee on 21st October 2021, 43 countries delivered a joint statement on the human rights situation in Xinjiang. It requested “immediate, meaningful and unfettered access” for independent observers, in addition to welcoming the High Commissioner’s assessment of the situation.

November 2022

The UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) called on China to investigate possible human rights violations in Xinjiang, such as but not limited to: torture, sexual violence, forced labour, enforced disappearances and death during custody. It also stated the China should release “all individuals arbitrarily deprived of their liberty in the XUAR, whether in so-called Vocational Education and Training Centres (VETCs) or other detention facilities”.

Possible Solutions

Evidently, the question of the Uighurs is serious and urgent. Each day that passes where no proper action is taken is another day where Xinjiang’s Uighurs face repression as well as cultural and religious erasure.

International Coalition

One possible solution includes the creation of an international coalition, with the purpose of putting pressure on China regarding their treatment of Uighurs and minority communities within China. This

coalition could make real progress and change if backed by powerful nations such as the USA. It could also garner more attention if supported by major majority-Muslim countries, like Saudi Arabia.

Economic Sanctions

Another possible solution would be the use of economic sanctions - more specifically, to sanction Chinese organisations and officials involved with anti-Uighur activities. In the words of the USA's Pentagon top Asia official (from 2014-16), David Shear, even if economic sanctions don't have massive negative effects on China, their symbolic impact is not to be underestimated, and may even "achieve some moderation in the Chinese approach".

Inter-governmental dialogue

The international community should also challenge and question China's representatives at the UN and use the forum as a medium to condemn the regime's actions against the Uighurs. Although China wields a significant amount of power compared to most other nations due to its permanent Security Council membership, the purpose of the UN is for countries to communicate on issues of global interest, and it should be utilised as such. Additionally, to quote Lynette Ong, a China expert at the University of Toronto, "ultimately, it is the responsibility of the United Nations" to resolve this issue through imposing multilateral sanctions.

Support the Uighur diaspora and Uighur-led organisations

Finally, it is imperative that the international community dedicates itself to helping the Uighur community and growing diaspora, not just coming up with new ways to punish China. This can include welcoming refugees and asylum seekers (especially as many are currently undocumented in Türkiye and Kazakhstan, risking deportation). Countries can also offer financial aid to human rights organisations committed to the Uighur cause, such as the Uyghur Human Rights Project.

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