Counterterrorism and Preventive Repression:
China’s Changing Strategy in Xinjiang

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Abstract:
In 2017-18, the Chinese Communist Party changed its domestic security strategy in Xinjiang, escalating the use of mass detention, ideological re-education, and pressure on Uyghur diaspora networks. What explains this shift? Commonly proposed explanations focused on domestic factors: ethnic unrest, minority policy, and regional leadership. We show that policy changes in Xinjiang were also likely catalyzed by the CCP’s changing perception of the threat posed by Uyghur contact with transnational Islamic militant groups in Southeast Asia and the Middle East, and a resulting increase in perceived domestic vulnerability. This threat shifted from theoretical risk to operational reality in 2014-2016, and occurred alongside a revised assessment that China’s Muslim population was more vulnerable to infiltration by jihadist networks than previously believed. Belief in the need to preventively inoculate an entire population from ‘infection’ by these networks explains the timing of the change in repressive strategy, shift toward collective detention, heavy use of re-education, and attention paid to the Uyghur diaspora. It therefore helps explain specific aspects of the timing and nature of the CCP’s strategy change in Xinjiang. These findings have implications for the study of the connections between counter-terrorism and domestic repression, as well as for authoritarian preventive repression and Chinese security policy at home and abroad.

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Introduction

Since 2017, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) crackdown on Uyghur and other Muslim minorities in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) has generated increasing attention and debate among activists, media outlets, and policy circles, in the US and around the world.\(^2\) Concern over heightened Chinese repression in Xinjiang prompted a formal expression of concern by the UN Commission on Anti-Discrimination in August 2018 and multiple legislative hearings in the United States that same summer and fall.\(^3\) Assistant Secretary of Defense Randall Schriver has publicly criticized China’s conduct as “unbecoming” of a country of the PRC’s stature, and a bipartisan group of legislators has proposed legislation (the Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act) to sanction Chinese officials involved in repression in Xinjiang.\(^4\) The issue has also polarized the international community: in summer 2019, a group of 22 countries sent a letter to the UN Human Rights Council calling on China to end its use of arbitrary mass detention, surveillance, and restrictions on freedom of movement, a move that was countered days later by a letter from 37

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\(^2\) Spelling and terminology in this field often carry political connotations; we wish to clarify that our choices here should not be interpreted to imply a particular political stance. We use the spelling “Uyghur,” which is the predominant transliteration among Uyghurs. We primarily use the formal names of the autonomous regions when we refer to developments in those polities, and “Tibet” or “Xinjiang” to refer to the ethnic areas, but in some cases, we use these terms interchangeably to avoid linguistic contortion.


\(^4\) Text of the bill may be found at: https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/senate-bill/178/text?format=txt
other countries in defense and support of the PRC’s “counter-terrorism, deradicalization” and “vocational training” policies.\(^5\)

Recent reporting indicates that somewhere between one and three million people – including Uyghur, Kazakh, and Kyrgyz minorities – have been detained in a network of nearly 1200 recently-constructed camps, where they are subject to forced re-education and political indoctrination. PRC authorities have also increasingly sought the involuntary repatriation of Uyghur migrants or asylum-seekers in third-countries, and placed diaspora networks under unprecedented pressure. What explains this change in China’s domestic security strategy in Xinjiang?\(^6\)

Typical explanations, both in the media and among scholars who study the region, highlight domestic political factors: unrest among China’s Uyghur population that escalated in 2008-09; a shift toward more assimilationist minority policy; and the leadership role of Chen Quanguo (陈全国), who became XUAR Party Secretary in 2016 after having held the same position in the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR, 2011-16).\(^6\) These factors provide important context for understanding the CCP’s recent securitization of and repression in Xinjiang. We find, however, that the policy shift described above may also have been catalyzed by the CCP’s changing perceptions of its external and internal security environment, a factor that has been less emphasized thus far but which is an important complement to domestically-focused explanations. This focus helps to explain some of the most distinctive, consequential aspects of the CCP’s recent approach: the timing of the shift in early 2017, the escalation from selective, individually-targeted detention to detentions that are collective and relatively indiscriminate; the choice to re-educate rather than simply detain; and the externalization of repressive policies through their application to the Uyghur diaspora.

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We argue that an overlooked and important factor that contributed to the change in China’s repressive strategy is the desire to prevent terrorism from diffusing into China via radicalized transnational Uyghur networks, particularly those with links to terrorist groups in Southeast Asia, Syria, and the broader Middle East. Until recently, studies of the PRC’s approach to terrorism and counterterrorism have been relatively sparse within the broader literature on terrorism and political violence, as well as in scholarship on China’s broader security behavior. A focus on terrorist threat, however, is valuable for understanding Chinese domestic security policy and repressive behavior in Xinjiang. Over the course of 2014-16, the CCP appears to have concluded that China’s Muslim population was broadly vulnerable to infiltration and “infection” from transnational jihadist networks, and that the primary vector for that infection was the Uyghur diaspora’s increasing contact with militant groups in Southeast Asia and the Middle East. This heightening threat perception helps explain why repression in Xinjiang – now described as the “main battlefield” in China’s fight against terrorism – shifted from targeted to collective, why it took a re-educational form, why it heavily emphasized diaspora connections, and why these changes occurred in early 2017, rather than earlier.

Before proceeding, we wish to address a concern raised in public discussion: that taking the CCP’s counter-terrorism narrative seriously as an explanatory factor will somehow legitimate or concede the morality of the CCP’s treatment of its Uyghur population. One Human Rights Watch

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official, in objecting to a UN counter-terrorism official’s visit in mid-2019, highlighted the “risks [of] confirming China’s false narrative that this is a counterterrorism issue, not a question of massive human rights abuses.”⁹ Scholars of political violence will be familiar with the concern that explanation sometimes feels uncomfortably close to justification, and will also know that this can produce an aversion to discussing perpetrators’ motivations at all—a dynamic that Holocaust scholars label a “moral sensitivity exclusion.”¹⁰

We acknowledge at the outset that our analysis does not allow us to definitively identify Beijing’s true underlying intentions in its policies toward Xinjiang, that there is significant debate over the severity of the Uyghur threat (discussed in more detail below), and that Beijing may be using the counterterrorism framework to deflect or reduce international pressure and criticism.¹¹ These are important empirical and ethical points. Invoking counter-terrorism, however, does not provide the PRC with a moral “blank check” for human rights abuses—and critics of China’s policies in Xinjiang are more likely to succeed in changing that policy if their arguments are based on accurate understanding of the causes of those policies. In the pages that follow, we separate empirical explanation from moral justification, and return to policy implications in the conclusion.

Empirically, our findings parallel and contribute to existing scholarship on transnational networks, terrorism, and domestic repression. A significant body of literature argues that trans-border ethnic ties increase the risk of conflict diffusion, especially if excluded or separatist ethnic

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¹⁰ Clendinnen 1998.

groups are involved. It also finds that transnational networks can either mobilize or sustain terrorist activity, and can make terrorist groups more resilient in the face of counterterrorist pressure. Placing Xinjiang in the context of this scholarship suggests that China’s attention to and concern about diasporic involvement in terrorist or ethno-separatist mobilization is not particularly unique.

Placing Xinjiang in dialogue with broader comparative work on political violence also illuminates – though does not definitively answer – the question of what results the CCP’s escalated strategy in Xinjiang are likely to produce. One set of studies suggests that collective or indiscriminate repression can be effective, particularly when employed against small, geographically-concentrated minority groups in authoritarian regimes. A number of other analysts argue, however, that Beijing


has misperceived or inflated the security threat – a common problem in information-poor authoritarian regimes, including China15 – and that the CCP may, as a result, be applying a counterinsurgency approach to Xinjiang when such an approach is unwarranted and inappropriate.16 Moreover, much other literature on collective repression suggests that it creates high risk of backlash;17 scholarship on Xinjiang itself generally characterizes previous CCP repression as counter-productive.18 Arguing that counterterrorism threat perceptions play an important role in China’s choice of strategy, therefore, does not imply that the chosen strategy will be successful, and nothing that follows should be read as either moral approval of the policies described, or as prediction of their likely success.

Our article proceeds in five sections. In the second section, we review recent developments in Xinjiang, focusing particularly on three aspects of China’s domestic security strategy and


repressive approach that changed in 2017-18: initiation of mass detention; wide-scale use of re-education; and increased pressure on the Uyghur diaspora. The third section reviews common, domestically-focused explanations for these phenomena. The fourth section begins our core argument: it documents increased contacts between Uyghur expatriates/migrants and Islamic militant organizations throughout 2014-16, and the fifth section traces heightening concern, during the same period, on the part of Chinese officials that the Uyghur population had become broadly susceptible to infiltration by these networks. Our arguments draw on a combination of Western, Chinese, and Turkish-language sources. We conclude by discussing the implications of our findings for the theoretical relationship between external threats and authoritarian repression, as well as policy implications for counter-terrorism and security cooperation with the People’s Republic of China.

**China’s Changing Repressive Strategy**

The CCP has long framed counter-terrorism as a struggle against the “three evil forces” (三股势力) of terrorism, separatism, and extremism, which PRC officials say has tarred Xinjiang with violence, instability, and reduced economic development since the early 1990s. Securitization has been underway in the XUAR for some time: previous regional leaders like Song Hanlian and Wang Lequan have emphasized the importance of achieving social stability, and Xinjiang has been subject to periodic “Strike Hard” campaigns, as in the early 1990s, that involved temporary or cyclical escalations of repression. Xi Jinping’s vision of “social stability and enduring peace” (社会稳定和长治久安) in Xinjiang, outlined in 2014 and repeated again during his visit in 2018, contains a heavy

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19 “Xinjiang to Crack Down on ‘three evil forces’,” *Xinhua*, 6 March 2012, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2012-03/06/content_14766900.htm

emphasis on poverty alleviation and ethnic unity as broader preventive approaches that will contribute to achieving peace and stability in an important borderland defense region. In 2017-18, however, the CCP began to employ an internal security strategy that involved escalated use of collective detention, intensive ideological re-education, and coercive diaspora management. This section documents and explains each of these changes in repressive strategy.

Some elements of the CCP’s current approach began to appear on a comparatively small scale about five years ago. Immediately after the July 2009 crisis in Urumqi, the CCP focused on aggressively recruiting security personnel, and embedding security officials and grassroots party personnel in local communities. At a December 2013 Politburo meeting, Xi Jinping discussed a new strategic plan (战略部署) for Xinjiang, and in 2014, regional authorities announced the “Strike Hard against Violent Terrorist Activity” Campaign (严厉打击暴力恐怖活动专项行动). This campaign included a small re-education (or “transformation through education,” 教育转化) component: it touched only ~1% of various cities’ Uyghur populations, and totals numbered in the low thousands. Moreover, detentions were relatively short-term, lasting from 1-3 weeks; one

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23 Yang Jingjie, “Xinjiang to see ‘major strategy shift,’” Global Times, January 9, 2014, at http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/836495.shtml#.UtS1ivaFZ0Q

24 Work reports noted, for example, the successful transformation-through-education of 3087 “focal persons” (zhongdianren) in Turpan (out of a total of 3152, 0.7% of the city’s Uyghur population); and ~2400 of 2335 in Yining later that year (1.23% of the Uyghur population). James Leibold, “The Spectre of Insecurity: the CCP’s Mass Internment Strategy in Xinjiang,” China Leadership Monitor, Vol. 59 (March 2019), https://www.prcleader.org/leibold
county termed it “drip-feed-style concentrated educational training” (滴灌式集中教育培训), suggesting an approach that was intentionally highly individualized and small-scale.²⁵

Following the December 2015 passage of a new national counter-terrorism law (反恐怖主义法),²⁶ XUAR authorities announced regional implementation regulations that were substantially more stringent; Xinjiang’s Religious Affairs Regulations also underwent major revisions.²⁷ Chen Quanguo assumed leadership of the XUAR in mid-2016, and in a speech shortly after his arrival, called social stability the CCP’s “primary objective” (一个目标) in the region.²⁸ Domestic security spending increased almost exponentially: from 5.45 billion RMB in 2007 to 57.95 billion RMB in 2017 – 2.3 times the national average.²⁹ Police recruitment also rose sharply: in a yearlong period in 2016-17, Xinjiang advertised twelve times the number of security-related positions (90,000) it had advertised in 2009, and security sector employment growth far outpaced the private sector.³⁰ Authorities also began to establish convenience police stations (便民警务站) and apply grid-style social management (社会网格化管理), a technology-intensive approach to urban governance and


²⁶ Ben Blanchard, “China Passes Controversial Counter-Terrorism Law,” Reuters, 27 December 2015, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-security-idUSKBN0UA07220151228. Unofficial translation at “Counter-Terrorism Law,” China Law Translate, 27 December 2015, https://www.chinalawtranslate.com/en/%e5%8f%8d%e6%81%90%e6%80%96%e4%b8%bb%e4%b9%89%e6%b3%95-%ef%be%882015%ef%be%89/


²⁸ “Xinjiang zhaokai wending gongzuo dianshi dianhua huiyi jinjin weirao shehui wending he changzhijiu’an qianghua [Xinjiang holds a televised conference on stability work: tightly focus on social stability and strengthening long-term peace],” Zhongyang tongzhanbu, 2 September 2016, http://www.zytzb.gov.cn/tzb2010/s1345/201609/0f55d4c3daa3412fb3c6e58843de5b65.shtml


³⁰ Most of the positions were contract-based and outside the formal civil service, making them a cheaper and more flexible way to quickly augment the CCP’s coercive capacity in the region. Zenz, “Chen Quanguo.”
‘intelligence-led policing’ that has been used in China’s urban east since the mid-to-late 2000s,\textsuperscript{31} and that formed the backbone of a surveillance state that journalists describe as formidable in its intensity.\textsuperscript{32} Up until late 2016, however, the CCP’s policy remained one of building coercive capacity through a combination of technological and human surveillance; detention and re-education remained targeted and selective.

In 2017-18, the CCP took steps that differentiated its internal security strategy in Xinjiang from both past approaches and other areas of the country (including Han-majority areas and other relatively contentious minority regions like the TAR). In February 2017, Chen Quanguo attended a Central National Security Commission symposium in Beijing; shortly after, officials held a series of massive security rallies throughout the XUAR, and the region’s Justice Department ordered the creation of “concentrated transformation-through-education” (集中教育转化) centers.\textsuperscript{33} In March, new regional “Regulations on De-Extremification” (新疆维吾尔自治区去极端化条例) called for transformation-through-education via both individual and centralized measures.\textsuperscript{34} In the next few months, XUAR authorities began to apply involuntary detention and re-education on a mass scale,

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and discussed a five-year strategy designed to produce “comprehensive stability” (全面稳定) in the region that centered largely on transformation-through-education.\(^{35}\)

What this meant, in practice, was the establishment of a wide-scale extrajudicial detention and internment system, aimed at mass indoctrination and political-ideological re-education. Human rights groups estimate that 30% of southern Xinjiang’s Uyghur population has been detained for re-education, as have smaller numbers of the region’s Kazakh and Kyrgyz minorities.\(^{36}\) While the exact scale of imprisonment is unknown, scholars Adrian Zenz and Rian Thum arrive at figures of around 1-1.5 million people, between 5% and 10% of China’s Uyghur population; U.S. government estimates have ranged over time between 800,000 and three million.\(^{37}\) Formal arrests in Xinjiang, which are separate from “transformation-through-education,” have also risen: in 2017, Xinjiang had 1.5% of the PRC’s population, but 21% of its recorded arrests.\(^{38}\) In a bipartisan letter in early 2018, the chairs of the U.S. Congressional-Executive Commission on China referred to events in Xinjiang as “the largest mass incarceration of an ethnic minority in the world today.”\(^{39}\) This broadening of repression shifted the CCP from selective repression (targeting individuals because of what they do)

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\(^{37}\) Zenz argues that this total exceeds the size of the “reeducation through labor” (laodong jiaoyang, 劳动教养) system that China formally abolished in 2013. Adrian Zenz, “Thoroughly Reforming Them To a Healthy Heart Attitude,” Central Asian Survey 38:1 (2019); Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Subcommittee on East Asia, “Testimony of Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Scott Busby,” 4 December 2018, https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/120418_Busby_Testimony.pdf


toward collective repression: targeting people because of “who they are, where they live, and to which identity group they belong.” This shift from individual to collective repression is the first aspect of the CCP’s change in internal security strategy that we seek to explain.

The second notable feature of the CCP’s approach to domestic security in Xinjiang in 2017-18 is its emphasis on ideological and political re-education. Consistent with revised regulations, re-education programs in Xinjiang are heavily aimed at curtailing religious practice and bringing it under the discipline of the party-state. Much of the curriculum in detention facilities is patriotic education aimed at instilling ethnic unity and nationalist loyalty to the CCP, accomplished by replacing Uyghur language with Mandarin Chinese (which officials call “the country’s common language”) and substituting secular cultural habits for Muslim religious practice. Re-education also places a strong emphasis on indoctrination against the “three evils,” since Chinese thinking generally treats them as interrelated: religious extremism is the root cause of both separatist inclinations and terrorist tactics. One CCP official in Ili, a Kazakh autonomous prefecture in Xinjiang, characterized re-education’s purpose as “eliminating the hidden dangers affecting stability in society [to] put people whom we do not trust into a trusted place…. to make them into people who are politically qualified.”

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43 Human Rights Watch [HRW], “‘Eradicating Ideological Viruses’: China’s Campaign of Repression against Xinjiang’s Muslims,” 9 September 2018, p. 35.
The final element of China’s strategic shift that we focus on is a campaign to clamp down on the movement of Uyghur PRC citizens, both domestically and internationally, and to pressure the Uyghur diaspora and its transnational social and mobilizational networks. In 2016, Xinjiang residents were directed to turn in passports to the police, and required to apply to get them back. Religious regulations require citizens to conduct pilgrimages through the state-organized China Islamic Association; in 2018, travellers to Mecca began carrying smart cards embedded with their personal data and a GPS locator. Foreign ties are increasingly scrutinized; individuals who “maintain ties” with any of 26 countries (anything from visiting to having family in or frequent communication with contacts there) can be flagged for scrutiny; interviews with former detainees suggest that simply having friends or neighbors go abroad was enough to target someone for detention and re-education, especially in places where quotas have been imposed on local authorities.

CCP officials have also placed pressure on Uyghurs studying or working abroad to return to China – and on various governments to return them, involuntarily if necessary – and have required Uyghur expatriates to provide detailed personal information for a database on those who remain abroad. A 2017 report by the Uyghur Human Rights Project describes attempted recruitment of

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44 The PRC has always applied controls to internal and international travel, but controls have intensified.
informants among the diaspora by threatening family members who remain in China; efforts to monitor email and phone communications; and efforts to exert pressure via student organizations. The objectives appear to be multi-purpose: to persuade citizens to return to China for re-education; to create mistrust among diaspora members and thereby limit collective mobilization; and to discourage Uyghurs from making appeals for host country support or engaging in public advocacy.

The PRC has also convinced officials in the Middle East and Southeast Asia to repatriate Uyghurs who either sought asylum or were transiting (most often to Turkey); for example, the repatriation of over 100 Uyghurs from Thailand in 2015 drew attention among activists and media outlets and caused protests at the Chinese embassy in Turkey after photos surfaced of the detainees on a plane with black hoods over their heads.

CCP officials are sometimes described as replicating what happened in Tibet in Xinjiang, but close analysis of the two regions’ treatment shows some significant differences. Both underwent a clear tightening of political control and overall securitization following unrest in 2008-09, and both saw sharp increases in security spending and police recruitment, with central authorities’ financial support. Tibet did lead Xinjiang in some areas of domestic security innovation: its public security

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51 Note that this suggests not all members of the diaspora are targeted because they themselves are seen as likely to become terrorists. Megha Rajagopalan, “They Thought They’d Left the Surveillance State Behind. They Were Wrong,” Buzzfeed, 9 July 2018, https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/meghara/china-uighur-spies-surveillance


53 Greitens, “Rethinking China’s Coercive Capacity.”
expenditure began to rise before 2008-09, while Xinjiang’s lagged behind by several years. The TAR implemented convenience police stations and grid management in 2011, several years before Xinjiang. Other policy changes, such as the embedding of party cadres in local communities and small-scale re-education, appear to have been implemented in both regions at around the same time. Tibetan areas, however, do not appear to have experienced the dramatic expansion of detention and re-education that marked the 2017-18 policy turn in Xinjiang.

We therefore characterize the shift in China’s repressive strategy since early 2017 as one that: 1) moved from selective to collective repression and targeted an increasingly broad swathe of Xinjiang’s Muslim population for detention; 2) invested heavily not just in punitive detention, but in mass ideological and political re-education; and 3) increased surveillance, coercion, and control over Uyghur diaspora networks. Although elements of these policies were present in limited fashion prior to 2017, early 2017 marks a qualitative shift in the scale and intensity of their application to Xinjiang’s population.

Several aspects of this shift are puzzling from the standpoint of our knowledge of political violence. Indiscriminate violence is often thought to occur because discrimination is costly, yet the

54 Police recruitment in the TAR increased from 260 advertised positions in 2007 (the year before the unrest) to an average of 866 in 2008-09, to almost 2500 positions per year in the 2011-2016 period. Zenz and Leibold, “Chen Quanguo.”


CCP is pursuing collective repression after implementing a resource-intensive, surveillance-based system that should provide the regime with high informational capacity. Visible, broad-scale repression is often thought to be more costly and less preferable, since it risks domestic and international backlash, yet as we show below – the CCP escalated in both dimensions precisely when public security authorities were saying that the existing strategy had been largely successful. Thus we ask: what explains this shift in repressive strategy on the part of the PRC?

Assessing Common Explanations

We next discuss three common explanations for increased repression in Xinjiang that appear in scholarly literature and recent policy analysis. These explanations are: 1) increased levels of contention in Xinjiang beginning around 2009; 2) resulting shifts in the CCP’s ethnic minority policies; and 3) the individual leadership of Xinjiang Party Secretary Chen Quanguo. We see these domestic factors as important but incomplete complements to our international and security-focused argument.

Increased Contention in Xinjiang

It seems intuitive that increased dissent can result in increased state repression. Indeed, the idea that as observable threats from society rise, repression rises to subdue them has been termed the “Law of Coercive Responsiveness” or “Threat-Response Theory.” It suggests a positive

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correlation between contention, threat, and repression, and, as applied to China and Xinjiang, implies that increased repression is occurring as a response to the increased contention in the region that began in 2008-09.\textsuperscript{59}

In spring 2008, PRC authorities announced that they had prevented a suicide bombing by a Uyghur woman; attacks on police in Kashgar followed later that year. In July 2009, violent clashes between Uyghurs and Han and an ensuing police crackdown in Urumqi killed an estimated 200 people and injured 1700. Other terrorist incidents or clashes between police and protestors, each resulting in fatalities, occurred in Xinjiang throughout 2010-2014. Later incidents saw contention and violence spread beyond the borders of the XUAR, with violence aimed at Han civilians as well as security forces. In October 2013, a car driven by a Uyghur man ploughed into a stone pedestal in Beijing’s Tiananmen Square, killing two tourists and the four people in the car, and injuring another twenty bystanders. In March 2014, eight people attacked the Kunming Railway station with knives and machetes, killing 29 and injuring 143. As a result, media accounts commonly situate recent repression in the context of Uyghur-related contention since 2009.

Patterns of contention do appear to explain the overall securitization that occurred in Xinjiang from 2009 onward. If coercive capacity is defined as a regime’s ability to handle whatever security challenges are present on the ground,\textsuperscript{60} then the XUAR authorities in 2009 fell short. That year, Xinjiang’s level of domestic security expenditure was around the national average, but only due to higher-than-average assistance from the central government; police presence per capita was also comparatively low. As a result, when unrest broke out, approximately 14,000 paramilitary personnel

\textsuperscript{59} Ben Hillman and Gray Tuttle, eds., \textit{Ethnic Conflict in Tibet and Xinjiang: Unrest in China’s West} (Columbia University Press, 2016), pp. 1-17. Much of the following paragraph draws on their account.

\textsuperscript{60} Greitens, “Rethinking China’s Coercive Capacity.”
People’s Armed Police and Special Police Units had to be flown in from thirty-one different provinces to assist Xinjiang-based forces with stabilization operations. Subsequently, regional leaders focused on building up coercive capacity – but did so primarily by applying tools that had already been implemented in other, wealthier (and Han-majority) provinces. In addition to grid management, for example, officials began in 2012 to apply the “one village one policeman” (一村一警) standard, used in eastern China from the early 2000s; it assigned one trained policeman to work in his/her home village, with assistance from several staff, to take advantage of individuals’ familiarity with local social networks and issues. The CCP’s response to contention, in other words, was undeniably to build police presence and coercive capacity, but this was done in an attempt to catch up – both with the challenges in Xinjiang, and to bring Xinjiang up to a level comparable to what was already being done in much of the rest of China.

Rising contention is, however, an incomplete explanation for the specific changes in strategy that occurred in early 2017. First, the timing of the change in repressive strategy is somewhat puzzling. Contention in Xinjiang was high throughout the 2009-2014 period, but by 2015-16, the CCP judged that its coercive build-up had been relatively successful in quelling terrorist attacks. At a 2015 terrorism work conference, for example, China’s security chief Meng Jianzhu, Secretary of the Commission on Political-Legal Affairs, said that authorities had successfully prevented 98% of terrorist attacks from being carried out. The pattern of publicly documented violence also suggests

64 Yao Tong and Sui Yunyan. “Xinjiang fankong biaozhang ji dong’yuan bushu hui’yi zhokai Zhang Chunxian, Meng Jianzhu chuxi bing jianghua” [Zhang Chunxian and Meng Jianzhu speak at the XUAR counter-
that the CCP’s approach had produced a reduction in Uyghur-related violence by around 2016-17 (though certainly had not eradicated it entirely).65 This gap in timing between the peak of contention in Xinjiang and the 2017-18 shift in CCP policy suggests a need for additional explanatory factors.

The data also present several other puzzles. Both Tibet and Xinjiang experienced unusually high levels of unrest and mobilization in 2008-2009,66 and both subsequently experienced overall securitization (increased security spending and police presence), but only Xinjiang experienced the dramatic escalation in scope and intensity of detention and re-education.67 Second, contention does not explain why the CCP opted for mass re-education, which is resource-intensive (physical and personnel) compared to simple detention. Third, domestic contention alone also does not shed much light on why Uyghur diaspora networks have been put under so much pressure, especially relative to the diasporas of other minority groups. Cumulatively, this suggests a need for additional explanation.

Assimilationist Minority Policies

A second, related explanation situates the CCP’s changing approach to Xinjiang in the context of evolutions in China’s broader ethnic minority policy. Under this line of argument, the 2007-2014 period of unrest and violence in both Tibet and Xinjiang emboldened more

65 Hillman and Tuttle, p. 1-17.


67 The explanation may be, in part, that Xinjiang’s contention was more violent; we address this point in our explanation focused on how China frames terrorism threats, below.
assimilationist voices and prompted a shift in the PRC’s approach to minority issues, reducing space for ethnic autonomy and pushing for assimilation and Sinicization in ways that aligned with Xi Jinping’s broader ideological reorientation toward CCP-led nationalism, which has resulted in reduced space for religious life and civil society activity across China. Although these arguments are China-specific, they parallel broader scholarly work that finds a correlation between increased ethno-nationalism and minority repression, confirming their intuitive plausibility.

Like securitization, the shift in minority policy had its roots in the 2008-09 unrest. Inspection teams sent to the TAR after 2008 produced a Central Party work report that, in 2011, offered a revised interpretation of China’s ethnic challenges. It proposed that fundamental contradictions (“vestiges of feudalism,” 封建主义残余) remained in Tibetan mentality and must be addressed to resolve social contradictions; re-education was therefore necessary. Official speeches and party documents on Xinjiang ran in close parallel with this interpretation; in 2011, rhetoric began to emphasize that “new conditions” called for revised approaches to ethnic unrest and conflict.

Around that time, scholars with strong official ties (and in some cases formal party or government positions) – such as Ma Rong, Hu Angang, and Hu Lianhe – began to call for a “second-generation minority policy” that would weaken recognition and acceptance of distinctive

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70 See tweet by Tibet scholar Robbie Barnett, https://twitter.com/RobbieBarnett/status/1026588170056622080

71 Documents continued to state that “the Party’s strategy on Xinjiang has been proven correct,” but the introduction of “new conditions” was an important shift. See discussion of XUAR Party Secretary Zhang Chunxian’s 2011 speech in Terrone in Hillman and Tuttle, p. 49; Leibold, “Xinjiang Work Forum.”
ethnic identity in favor of a stronger national identity developed through party-led patriotism and inter-ethnic “contact, exchange, and fusion” (交往交流交融). Because they de-emphasized traditional notions of ethnic autonomy, these proposals received pushback from within China’s ethnic establishment. However, a 2012 speech by Zhu Weiqun, director of the United Front Work Department (UFWD) and a leading voice on ethnic policy, adopted parts of the proposed wording. The 2014 Central Work Forum on Xinjiang called for “inter-ethnic mingling” (among other things) to combat the “three evil forces,” signaling approval of this policy line by Xi Jinping and the CCP leadership. In August 2018, Hu Lianhe, one of the concept’s intellectual pioneers, appeared as a UFWD representative to answer questions about Xinjiang from the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD), indicating the extent to which this new thinking had been integrated into the party-state’s ethnic affairs apparatus.

There is no question that changes to the CCP’s thinking about minority policy have shaped behavior in both Tibet and Xinjiang. In particular, it is hard to imagine wide-scale adoption of re-

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73 Liu Ling, “Jianchi jiben zhengzhi zhidu—zai fazhan zhong jieyue minzu wenti [Persist with the Fundamental Political System; Resolve Ethnic Issues Via Development],” Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology, CASS (Beijing, 2012).


75 Leibold, “Xinjiang Work Forum.”


77 This is also not new; the CCP’s framing of minorities in Xinjiang as “backwards” led to particular developmental approaches to ethnic policy in the past, while Uyghurs have been associated with violence and instability since at least the early 2000s. Li Dezhu [李德洙], “Vigorously developing ethnic minority culture-actively promoting the building of a harmonious society [大力发展少数民族文化 积极推进和谐社会建
education programs that actively seek to overwrite ethnic and cultural autonomy (in this case, Uyghur/ Turkic language and culture) with Mandarin Chinese and pro-CCP patriotism without the CCP having informally revised the commitment to autonomy that has long governed its management of ethnic difference. Shifting minority policy, then, appears to be an underlying permissive condition that helps explain some facets of China’s approach.

Again, however, important specific aspects of the strategy shift in Xinjiang bear further explanation. Ethnic assimilationist policies have been in ascendance since 2009, and were publicly approved by CCP leaders for Xinjiang in 2014, yet detention and re-education did not expand until almost three years later. Moreover, this underlying shift applies to all 55 of China’s ethnic minorities, yet only the Muslim minorities in Xinjiang (mostly Uyghurs, but also Kazakh and Kyrgyz) have been subjected to mass detention, intensive indoctrination, and diasporic coercion. The timing of the strategy change and the relatively unique treatment of Xinjiang’s Muslims, therefore, are attributes that suggest a role for other explanations.

The Leadership Explanation: Chen Quanguo

The third factor commonly emphasized by China scholars is the leadership role of Chen Quanguo, who became Party Secretary in Tibet in mid-2011, and Party Secretary in Xinjiang in 2016 (the only official to have held that title in both regions). Chen replaced Zhang Chunxian, a protégé of fallen internal security chief Zhou Yongkang who held the role from 2010-2016; before Zhang, Wang Lequan served as party secretary for fifteen years (1994-2010). Chen’s work in Tibet was...
praised as a national model in 2015 by then-security chief Meng Jianzhu, and in autumn 2017, he was promoted to the 25-person Politburo.\textsuperscript{79} He has been characterized as a “rising [political] star” with “a reputation as an ethnic policy innovator,” and “a pioneer of aggressive policing techniques.”\textsuperscript{80} His role is, according to James Leibold, “the leading theory at present” for China’s crackdown in the XUAR,\textsuperscript{81} and his assumption of leadership in 2016 does coincide with the early 2017 strategy shift documented above. It is therefore natural to consider how important Chen’s personal leadership has been to CCP policy in Xinjiang.

Adjudicating this explanation requires us to confront a fundamental empirical challenge: ultimately, we do not have the information necessary to pinpoint the true locus of decision-making, the set of policy options considered, the process by which the decision was made, or the underlying motivations of the actors whose preferences were decisive. We cannot know for sure whether Chen is a policy entrepreneur or an implementer of central policy, or somewhere in between. We believe, however, that too heavy an emphasis on Chen’s personal influence is inconsistent with the (limited) data available about the PRC’s policy process. First, although coverage of Xinjiang commonly characterizes Chen as “replicating” his Tibet strategy in Xinjiang, the two regions have been treated differently: the scale of detention, intensity of re-education, and clampdown on the Uyghur diaspora appear to be qualitatively more than what occurred in Tibet, under Chen or afterward. Second, explanations emphasizing Chen’s entrepreneurship often overlook the fact that he brought certain tools to Tibet and Xinjiang after observing experiments with them in eastern China; many of his


\textsuperscript{81} https://twitter.com/jleibold/status/103894924069570656
signature policies have been pursued in regions beyond Xinjiang. Third, both historical evidence about the importance of party unity in enabling major changes to CCP strategy, and the fact that Chen rolled out the new policies after returning from a major national security symposium with other top leaders in Beijing, suggest that the CCP is unified in its implementation of Xinjiang’s new domestic security strategy, and that the motivating force of the shift lies beyond Chen’s individual preferences or leadership.\(^8\)

**The Changing Threat: Uyghurs & Transnational Terrorist Networks**

The above explanations, all grounded in domestic political developments in China, are important contributing factors to CCP policy toward Xinjiang. As we show below, however, an explanation that has thus far received comparatively little attention – China’s perceptions of the evolving internal-external security environment and counterterrorism threat – also has important value for explaining specific aspects of domestic security strategy in Xinjiang since 2017. A full understanding of the CCP’s changing strategy in Xinjiang requires attention to international developments that affected China’s perceptions of its own security.

This section provides evidence that some of the CCP’s shift in repressive strategy in Xinjiang was motivated by fear of emerging contacts between Uyghurs and Islamic militant organizations in Southeast Asia and the Middle East. In contrast to domestic contention, which peaked in 2009-2011, the threat of Uyghur alignment with external jihadist groups coalesced in 2014-2016, making it a likely factor in precipitating policy shifts in early 2017. This increase in external terror threat also applies primarily to Xinjiang – not to Tibet or any other ethnic minority population – which helps

\(^8\) While it is accurate that different levels of the party-state system may have different motivations or priorities, our view on strategy in Xinjiang is consistent with that of Fravel, who finds that shifts in external military strategy occur only when the party is united. Taylor Fravel, *Active Defense: China’s Military Strategy Since 1949* (Princeton, 2019).
explain why China’s response to Xinjiang has differed from other minority regions. This section traces the shift in external threat; the next section outlines how it translated into perceptions of domestic vulnerability.

The argument that follows does not suggest that the developments described pose a serious threat to the CCP at present. Even the most generous estimates of capability (discussed below) do not imply that insurgency is either present or imminent. Rather, in the last several years, the threat shifted from theoretical to operational – albeit still at a low level – precipitating action by the CCP to ensure that it does not escalate any further. The fact that it is occurring so early is why we call it preventive repression.

The CCP has always laid some blame for ethnic unrest in China’s western regions at the feet of foreign infiltration, typically a handful of “separatists” or “splittists” who were usually upper-class intelligentsia with Western connections.83 This framing was especially notable in the 1990s, as newly independent Central Asian states prompted heightened vigilance against ethnic separatism in Beijing.84 The separatism narrative exists today: when Uyghur scholar Ilham Tohti was sentenced to life imprisonment on grounds of ‘separatism’ for questioning CCP policy toward the Uyghurs, state media described his ‘close links’ to the West and then suggested that he had promoted ethnic violence and provided a ‘moral excuse’ for and the ‘brains behind’ terrorism.85 In the main, however, China’s concerns since the end of the Cold War have typically been focused on Uyghur diasporas in


Central Asia, especially Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, and their potential contribution to separatist sentiment in Xinjiang. PRC authorities attributed intermittent violence in the XUAR in the 1990s to ‘pan-Turkic splittists’ in Central Asia, but these groups’ operational links to events in China were murky at best. Diasporic activism was generally non-violent, and the PRC found it relatively easy to pursue counter-terrorism security cooperation with its neighbors in the region, who were usually secular and somewhat authoritarian.86

China’s rhetoric about the Central Asian Uyghur diaspora began to shift during the post-9/11 War on Terror. Instead of emphasizing pan-Turkic separatism, the CCP drew connections between Uyghur organizations and jihadist groups, especially those in Afghanistan and Pakistan. In 2002, the PRC attributed responsibility for past attacks in Xinjiang to the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), a previously unknown organization that it claimed was funded and supported by al-Qaeda.87 In 2003, the Ministry of Public Security issued a list of terrorist organizations; all were Uyghur diaspora organizations, and many were Europe-based advocacy NGOs that prominent terrorism experts said were incorrectly labeled.88 ETIM and its successor organization, the Turkestan Islamic Party (TIP), which emerged sometime between 2006 and 2008, operated first in Afghanistan, and then in the Af-Pak tribal areas.

The capabilities of both groups, and their actual connection to terrorist incidents in Xinjiang, are debated; Western scholars are largely skeptical. Sean Roberts, for example, argues forcefully that pre-2001, “ETIM was not an active militant organization which had the capacity to carry out attacks.


Rather, it was at least initially created as a training organization that could give aspiring Uyghur militants experience with weapons—mostly informal, highly disorganized, and deprived of both weapons and financial resources.” He describes being told by interviewees that a ‘training camp’ in Jalalabad had access to a single automatic rifle; one of the group’s leaders admitted that none of the Uyghurs who had come to the camp had carried out attacks in China. 89 Similarly, despite glossy recruitment videos that attempt to portray a well-organized militant organization, Roberts finds ‘little evidence’ that TIP in Pakistan post-2003 “was capable of carrying out either militant or terrorist attacks,” or that any significant number of Uyghurs from China joined the organization. Only in 2014 did TIP videos surface showing Uyghurs who had recently arrived in Afghanistan. 90 Thus until 2014, CCP perceptions or fears about the links between Uyghurs in China, the Uyghur diaspora, and jihadist militant groups remained a theoretical possibility rather than an operational reality. 91

In 2014, however, developments in Southeast Asia and the Middle East began to change that perception. Uyghurs had sought to enter or transit Southeast Asia from 2009 onward, but mid-2014 marked the first reports of actual contact between Uyghurs and jihadist militant groups in the region. In June 2014, five Uyghurs were arrested in the Philippines after meeting with both the Abu Sayyaf Group and the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters; 92 in September, four were arrested in Indonesia attempting to train with IS-affiliated militant group the Mujahideen Indonesia Timur.

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90 Roberts in Clarke, pp. 117-18; see video online at https://archive.org/details/jennet_ashikliri_10

91 Raffaello Pantucci, “Uyghur Terrorism in a Fractured Middle East,” in Clarke, Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism in China, p. 162.

PRC authorities saw these contacts in light of the recent expansion of Uyghur-involved attacks beyond the XUAR: the Tiananmen car attack, violence at Urumqi’s rail station, and the March 2014 knife attack in Kunming (which the PRC blamed on militants attempting to flee to Southeast Asia). Moreover, Xi Jinping’s new “comprehensive national security” framework, proposed in 2014, explicitly warned of the need to be on guard for these types of interlocking (external-internal) security threats. On the heels of these developments, the CCP now observed the first known cases of Uyghur militants connecting with jihadist groups in Southeast Asia.

These linkages accumulated in 2015-16. In August 2015, an attack on Thailand’s Erawan shrine, thought to be retaliation for Bangkok repatriating Uyghurs to China, resulted in 20 deaths. Uyghurs were shot and arrested in Indonesia in both November and December 2015; the December incident involved someone training to be a suicide bomber. Other Uyghurs were killed fighting with MIT in March/April 2016, and arrested elsewhere in Indonesia in February 2017. In short, over the course of 2014-2016, PRC authorities observed the growing involvement of Uyghurs in radical Islamist militant groups in Southeast Asia, as well as expressions of sympathy for the Uyghur

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cause from some of those groups.99 Beijing responded at the foreign policy level by pressing for extradition of arrestees and other Uyghur asylum seekers, and increasing intelligence-sharing and law enforcement cooperation in the region.100 Internally, security chief Meng Jianzhu warned the domestic security apparatus that global terrorist activity was intensifying, implying a corresponding need for domestic vigilance.101

During a similar period, mounting evidence of Uyghur participation in militant groups in Syria further heightened China’s concern. The CCP saw developments in Southeast Asia and the Middle East as connected; a Chinese Vice Minister of Public Security told Malaysia’s foreign minister in 2015 that PRC citizens fighting with Islamic State (IS) had transited through Malaysia.102 In 2015, TIP began to post videos of Uyghurs fighting in northern Syria; by mid-2016, media outlets reported that a group formerly composed of a few hundred people had swelled to thousands of fighters operating in cooperation with al-Qaeda-affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra (Jabhat Fatah al-Sham).103

99 Stephanie Kam Li Yee, “Uyghur Cross-Border Movement into Southeast Asia,” in Clarke, Terrorism and Counterterrorism in China, pp. 173-185; Banlaoi, “Uyghur militants in Southeast Asia.”


101 Note that this is around the same period that the CCP is emphasizing its success in limiting attacks within the XUAR. Cai Changhun. “Meng Jianzhu: ba fan kongbu gongzuo fang zai gengjia tuchu weizhi” [Meng Jianzhu: focus on counter-terrorism activities], China News, 11 December 2015, http://www.chinanews.com/gn/2015/12-11/7667800.shtml.


As a result, Roberts notes, the Syria-based “TIP today reflects an active Uyghur militant movement, the likes of which has not existed since the establishment of the PRC.”

Moreover, that movement has emphasized its long-term plan to fight in Xinjiang. While some Uyghur militants indicated that they might settle in Syria, others explicitly said that they sought combat experience to take back to China. One said, “My goal was to return to China with knowledge of how to wage war; I came not to stay in Istanbul, not to stay in Syria, but to learn weaponry and return to fight for Eastern Turkistan.” TIP videos praised the attacks in Beijing in October 2013 and Urumqi in April 2014 as a sign of Uyghur willingness to take up arms against the CCP (though it is unclear that the group actually bears responsibility for executing the incidents). TIP leader Abdul Haq al-Turkistani also said in 2016, “The soldiers of Islam must be willing to return to China to emancipate the Western province of Xinjiang from the communist invaders.” Developments in Syria, therefore, represented not just a newly active Uyghur militant movement, but one that actively encouraged and praised attacks in the Chinese homeland, one that expressed an intent to return and fight there, and one for which global jihadist networks, previously unconcerned with China, expressed increasing support.

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104 Roberts in Clarke, p. 124.
105 Quoted in Roberts in Clarke, p. 122. See also similar comments by TIP official Ibrahim Mansour that TIP fights in Syria both to help Syrian brethren and to gain experience to fight in Xinjiang. Weiss, “Turkistan Islamic Party.”
TIP’s affiliation with al-Qaeda is also not the only concern that Beijing has about Uyghur involvement in jihadist militancy in the Middle East. In summer 2017, reports surfaced of a new group, Katibat al Ghuraba al Turkistan (KGT), operating in northern Syria alongside other al-Qaeda-affiliated groups; its relationship to TIP is unclear, but it claims to be comprised primarily of Uyghurs and has focused some messaging on China and Xinjiang.\footnote{Caleb Weiss, “New Uighur Jihadist Group Emerges in Syria,” 18 January 2018, https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2018/01/new-uighur-jihadist-group-emerges-in-syria.php} Smaller numbers of Uyghurs are also said to be fighting alongside Islamic State, which has been less hesitant than al-Qaeda about its desire to target China, and which has incorporated Xinjiang into its transnational jihadist ideology. In July 2014, IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi listed China first in his litany of places where “Muslims’ rights are forcibly seized,” and exhorted his followers to take up arms on behalf of their brethren around the world and “take revenge.”\footnote{Alexa Olesen, “China Sees Islamic State Inching Closer to Home,” \textit{Foreign Policy}, 11 August 2014, https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/08/11/china-sees-islamic-state-inching-closer-to-home/; for a copy of his comments, see https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2014/07/abc5ab-bakr-al-e1b8a5ussaync4ab-al-qurayshc4ab-al-baghdc481dc4ab-22message-to-the-mujc481hidc4abn-and-the-islamic-ummah-in-the-month-of-ramae1b88dc481n22-en.pdf.} In late 2015, IS killed PRC hostage Fan Jinghui, sparking strong statements from officials and netizens in China.\footnote{This included Xi Jinping. See Yuwen Wu, “IS Killing of Chinese Hostage: a game changer?” \textit{BBC News}, 19 November 2015, https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-china-blog-34865696} In early 2017, a purported IS video referred to “evil Chinese communist lackeys” and promised, “in retaliation for the tears that flow from the eyes of the oppressed, we will make your blood flow in rivers.”\footnote{Michael Martina and Ben Blanchard, “Uighur IS Fighters Vow Blood Will ‘Flow in Rivers’ in China,” \textit{Reuters}, 1 March 2017, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-china/uighur-is-fighters-vow-blood-will-flow-in-rivers-in-china-idUSKBN16848H} Chinese officials have expressed concern that the number of PRC nationals joining IS, in particular, could increase, as the
organization has shown the ability to recruit non-Uyghur Muslims from China; analyst Mordechai Chaziza deems China “one of the top recruitment pools for [both] ISIS and al-Qaeda.”

There are varying estimates on how many Uyghurs total have travelled to the Middle East to fight. A Chinese-language journal article by public security researchers referred to 300 East Turkestan separatists fighting with IS specifically; similar figures have appeared in Chinese media.

Western analysts have expressed skepticism at these numbers, but a 2016 analysis of IS files found record of 114 Chinese Uyghurs joining IS in the year between mid-2013 and mid-2014. Moreover, the majority of Uyghurs, including those with TIP, fight not with Islamic State but as part of the al-Nusra front. In March 2017, Israeli intelligence estimated 3,000 Uyghur fighters; in May, Syrian ambassador to China Imad Moustapha placed this figure at 5,000—not including accompanying family members who could bring the total to 3-4 times that many. The Chinese special envoy for

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113 Mordechai Chaziza, “China’s Counter-Terrorism Policy in the Middle East,” in Clarke, Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism in China, p. 141;


116 Gerry Shih, “China’s Uighurs Grapple with the Pull of Extremism,” Associated Press, 28 December 2017, https://apnews.com/360a77319815495a842be4ec8f75e9


Syria, Xie Xiaoyan, said in August 2018 that there is no accurate figure, but conceded that areas in Syria and Iraq have “rather a concentration of ETIM terrorists.”

These developments pose several threats to Chinese security interests. The most obvious is the potential for Uyghur militants to return and launch new attacks or otherwise escalate violence in Xinjiang. As early as 2012, PRC Major General Jin Yinan warned that TIP could take advantage of the conflict in Syria to gain experience and reinvigorate the group’s profile; in 2014, PRC Special Envoy Wu Sike warned that “after being immersed in extremist ideas, when they return to their home country [foreign fighters] will pose a severe challenge and security risk to those countries.”

The fact that Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan also have citizens fighting with some of the same groups in the Middle East means that Uyghurs do not have to return to PRC territory to pose a threat; rather, simply returning to Central Asia heightens the risk of cross-border collaboration that could diffuse conflict into Xinjiang and provide terrorist networks with a support base in neighboring countries. The experiences that Uyghurs gain alongside militants in Southeast Asia and the Middle East could also create more deadly tactical innovations, such as the increased use of suicide bombing over time.

The second threat is to Chinese personnel, facilities, and interests overseas. Uyghur involvement with transnational jihadist militancy is not a threat simply because people could return to fight in Xinjiang or conduct attacks inside China; China increasingly projects itself into other

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countries around the world in ways that significantly increase the country’s attack surface. 40 PRC nationals were killed in 18 terrorist incidents worldwide from 2004-2016; Chinese scholars who study terrorism found nearly 4,000 Chinese companies operating in the “arc of instability” from Central Asia to the Middle East and North Africa – areas that the PRC perceives as especially vulnerable to terrorism and militancy, but that are also key to advancing Beijing’s economic goals, including Xi’s signature Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).122 Thus, China’s expanding overseas activities and population are likely to provide a longer list of potential targets and more ways for militant groups to hold Chinese interests at risk in the future. The August 2016 car suicide bombing of the PRC embassy in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, reportedly undertaken by Uyghurs who had connections to TIP in Syria, exemplifies this risk.123

In short, in 2014-16, coalescence of operational ties between Uyghurs and jihadist groups in Southeast Asia and the Middle East produced what one terrorism analyst called “the most significant set of shifts in China’s external terrorist threat environment since 9/11.”124 These developments occurred at a time when Xi Jinping’s national security strategy paid special attention to the interrelationship between external and internal security challenges, and when his signature Belt and


124 Andrew Small, “China and Counter-Terrorism: Beyond Pakistan?” in Michael Clarke, Terrorism and Counterterrorism in China, p. 130.
Road Initiative elevated the importance of stability in the region, making it critical for achieving not just domestic stability goals, but foreign policy objectives.\(^{125}\)

Not surprisingly, then, these developments prompted changes in China’s foreign policy and security behavior abroad. The PRC increased counter-terrorism-focused law enforcement cooperation; passed a counter-terrorism law authorizing the PLA to conduct missions abroad; and increased military-security cooperation in the Middle East and North Africa, from anti-terror drills with Saudi Arabia in late 2016 to senior Chinese military visits to Syria in summer 2018.\(^{126}\) Given that the security threat that China perceived was as much internal and external, however, the CCP also pursued major changes to domestic security strategy in Xinjiang. The following section explores how threat perceptions produced the strategy we described above.

**Domestic Vulnerability to External Threat: The CCP’s Repressive Strategy**

The CCP’s shifting perceptions of threat from Uyghur participation in jihadist organizations abroad led to an inflection point in the regime’s domestic security strategy in Xinjiang. Scholarly work indicates that international developments as well as domestic threats can threaten authoritarian rule at home—and China, in particular, tends to treat external and internal security threats as interrelated and to be suspicious of external actors’ intent to destabilize China.\(^{127}\) We argue that the CCP


\(^{127}\) There is a vast literature on the international diffusion of authoritarian breakdown; for a summary, see Edward Goldring and Sheena Chestnut Greitens, “Rethinking Democratic Diffusion: Bringing Regime Type
escalated repression in specific ways in early 2017 as a preventive attempt to stop the transmission of perceived security threats across state borders into China. Leaders in Beijing and Urumqi concluded that a broad swathe of Xinjiang’s Muslim population was more vulnerable to infiltration by jihadist infiltration than previously understood, and beginning in spring 2017, pursued new internal security strategies to try to prevent that possibility from materializing inside PRC borders.

The new repressive strategy launched in 2017-18 sought to address this problem in several ways. Targeting diaspora networks aimed to cut off a likely vector by which terrorist threats could re-enter China, while detention and re-education sought to inoculate the population from infection. The strategy shift, therefore, was a type of “diffusion-proofing” against a specific threat—jihadist terrorism—by both cutting off extremism at its supposed entry point, and simultaneously immunizing the population against those ideas taking root. In that sense, it was a form of preventive repression that targeted dissent at even earlier stages than many forms of pre-emptive repression studied by scholars—seeking to keep contention from emerging altogether, rather than trying to respond after it has materialized.


Official statements, speeches, and documents reveal increasing concern that international terrorist networks might penetrate Xinjiang and inflame violence. Chinese-language scholarship emphasizes that Uyghurs’ transnational ties provide ideological and material support that can radicalize the population and increase its capacity for violence. A 2013 news story reported, “rioters internalized religious extremism spread by foreigners,” pointed particularly to ETIM audio/video products, and cited “collusion between hostile forces at home and abroad.” It quoted a military researcher as saying, “the ‘three evil forces’ of terrorism, separatism and extremism were boosted, partly because some countries offered consent and supported religious extremist forces.” In 2014, Special Envoy Wu Sike referred to China as a victim of terror that had its roots in the Middle East, and in 2017, CCP officials in both Xinjiang and Ningxia (the autonomous region of the Muslim Hui people) warned of the risk of religious extremism and jihadism infiltrating the populations of their respective provinces. A China Daily editorial written after the 2017 video that promised “rivers of blood” in China noted, “the video lends further credence to… the oft-ignored assertions of links between domestic and foreign terrorist elements.” PRC sources often explicitly express concern that Xinjiang will become “China’s Libya” or “China’s Syria,” a metaphor meant to

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suggest that Islamic militancy and terrorism could plunge the country into instability, or even civil war.\textsuperscript{135}

As a result, rhetoric from top security leaders has consistently focused on disrupting connections between international and domestic actors to prevent terrorist attacks. Meng Jianzhu, Minister of Public Security (2007-2012) and head of China’s top domestic security body, the Central Political and Legal Affairs Commission (Zhengfa wei, 2012-2017), characterized the 2009 violence in Urumqi as the work of domestic and international separatists and terrorists, implicitly framing the threat from the start as a transnational one.\textsuperscript{136} In 2013, he began to call for increased preventive work on terrorism, in keeping with a broader shift toward preventive social management under Xi Jinping’s leadership.\textsuperscript{137} In a 2015 meeting of the Zhengfa wei and the National Counter-Terrorism Leading Small Group (国家反恐怖工作领导小组), Meng emphasized the international roots of terrorist violence in China, and proposed increased border security to prevent terrorists from entering China from abroad, as well as more intensive religious management to prevent religious extremism from taking root.\textsuperscript{138}

\textsuperscript{135} “Protecting peace, stability is top of human rights agenda for Xinjiang,” Global Times, 18 August 2018, http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1115022.shtml


\textsuperscript{137} Fu and Distelhorst 2018: 111-13; “Meng Jianzhu zai Wushi”; “Meng Jianzhu, Guo Shengkun zai Xinjiang jiancha zhidao fankong weiwen gongzuo” [Meng Jianzhu and Guo Shengkun direct counter-terrorism and stability activities in XUAR], PRC Central Government Webpage, 1 July 2013, http://www.gov.cn/ldhd/2013-07/01/content_2437549.htm

\textsuperscript{138} Note that the CCP’s conception of ‘extremism’ includes aspects of Islamic religious practice that are not linked directly to violence. Cai Changchun, “Meng Jianzhu: ba fan kongbu gongzuo fang zai gengjia tuchu
Chen Quanguo provided an encapsulation of CCP thinking in 2017, when he outlined six principles for fighting terrorism in Xinjiang. His remarks characterized prevention as central to the “people’s war,” which he subsequently elaborated to include prevention of both “returns from abroad” (防回流) and “weapons inflows” (防热兵器流入); he further highlighted the need to prevent collaboration between international and domestic terrorists and between domestic terrorists across regions, both in person and online. Finally, Chen emphasized digitization of public security, which has been used to amass intelligence on China’s Muslim minorities and their links to anyone abroad, as well to apply intelligence to predictive policing for counter-terrorism purposes. Chen’s speech provides insight into how PRC public security organizations combat terrorist infiltration of Muslim populations in Xinjiang on a concrete operational level: one of the apps used for surveillance in Xinjiang, for example, flags “returns from abroad” and prompts a security investigation of the individual in question.

A subset of this work focuses on reducing online contact between China’s Muslims and transnational jihadists. The XUAR Informatization Promotion Regulation, passed in 2009 and

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140 For example, the chief engineer of one of the companies involved in Xinjiang’s Integrated Joint Operations Platform, CETC, was quoted in Bloomberg in 2016 as saying, “It’s very crucial to examine the cause after an act of terror. But what is more important is to predict the upcoming activities.” “China tries its hand at pre-crime,” Bloomberg, 3 March 2016, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2016-03-03/china-tries-its-hand-at-pre-crime. See also Human Rights Watch, “Big Data Fuels Crackdown in Minority Region,” 26 February 2018, https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/02/26/china-big-data-fuels-crackdown-minority-region

amended in 2014, explicitly aimed to stop the flow of online jihadist content into the region. Regulations that tightened authorities’ control over online religious content were justified in terms of “fend[ing] off foreign influences” and “combat[ing] extremism” by “banning religious-involved separatist activities and any practice that stirs religious conflict among citizens.” Revisions made in 2017 by the State Council were explained with reference to their anti-extremism function and said to be especially important “to deal with newly emerging situations or problems,” suggesting that relatively recent developments were behind the policy changes.

Key to the rise of this approach was the CCP’s growing belief that China’s Muslim population was more vulnerable to foreign jihadists than previous assessments had indicated. PRC leaders became convinced, as they had in Tibet, that Xinjiang was threatened not just by a handful of foreign-backed separatists, but the thinking of large percentages of certain ethnic minorities. In late 2015, references to “infection” in people’s thinking began to appear in discussions of Xinjiang. The party secretary of the region’s Justice Department, Zhang Yun, explained that approximately 30% of Xinjiang’s population had been infected by religious extremism, and proposed that re-education would “get a grip on the origin [of extremism] and put an emphasis on the 30% who have been affected by extremist religious views”; it would thereby remove pressure to “strike hard” against these individuals later. In early 2016, Li Xiaoxia, a Xinjiang sociologist, estimated the

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142 Julia Famularo, “Fighting the Enemy with Fists and Daggers: China’s Counterterrorism Policy in Xinjiang,” in Clarke, Terrorism and Counterterrorism in China, pp. 50-53.


number of people contaminated by extremism to be around 20%.\textsuperscript{146} figures that track fairly closely with the percentage of the population estimated to have been detained for re-education.

Official discourse on Xinjiang has employed medical metaphors that evoke a sense of preventive urgency. Officials have compared extremism to both cancer (毒瘤) and infectious disease (瘟疫), and cite detention and re-education as necessary interventions to pre-empt serious health crisis for patients at risk. A university work team sent to identify targets in a village for re-education described its work as finding “tumors” that must be eradicated, presumably before they could metastasize and grow;\textsuperscript{147} a party document from Hotan stated, “anyone infected with an ideological virus must be swiftly sent for ‘residential care’ of transformation-through-education classes before illness arises.”\textsuperscript{148} An October 2017 speech distributed to the Xinjiang Communist Youth League embraced the medical metaphor’s preventive logic in detail:

If we do not eradicate religious extremism at its roots, violent terrorist incidents will grow and spread all over like an incurable malignant tumor. Although a certain number of people who have been indoctrinated with extremist ideology have not committed any crimes, they are already infected by the disease. There is always a risk that the illness will manifest itself at any moment, which would cause serious harm to the public. That is why they must be admitted to a re-education hospital in time to treat and cleanse the virus from their brain and restore their normal mind.\textsuperscript{149}


These were not just rhetorical flourishes for an external audience; internal party documents employed the same language, warning that “violent terrorist acts will multiply like cancer cells” if religious extremist thought itself is not rooted out of people’s minds.\(^{150}\)

Re-education is explained as a form of deep preventive counter-terrorism work, to both internal and external audiences. CCP authorities view extremism as the ‘ideological foundation’ of terrorism, implying that the only truly effective form of prevention is to alter people’s ideology and thinking. XUAR officials warn that “as long as extremism exists, terrorism will spread like cancer,”\(^{151}\) echoing Xi Jinping’s 2014 assertion that extremist religious ideology lay behind “a series of violent terrorist incidents from Bachu [in Kashgar] to Shanshan [in Turpan] and from Kunming to Urumqi.”\(^{152}\) The objective of prevention is therefore easily linked to the tool of re-education; Meng Jianzhu referred to re-education as aiming to create “a healthy heart attitude.”\(^{153}\) At a February 2019 conference for foreign diplomats in Beijing, deputy foreign minister Zhang Hanhui and XUAR deputy governor Erkin Tuniyaz referred to CCP efforts as “preventive counter-terrorism and de-extremism work.”\(^{154}\) The same Youth League recording quoted above defended re-education not

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150 “Dao jiaoyu zhuanhua ban xuexi shi xiaibu shang huan bing quznzhong de yici mianfei zhuyuan zhi [Going to the Transformation-through-Education class is a free hospitalization for ideologically ill people],” Hetian lingjuli, April 10, 2017, at https://read01.com/BL28Bk.html#.XFOZC88zY0Q


152 Quoted in Famularo, “ Fighting the Enemy with Fists and Daggers,” p. 47.


simply as preventive, but actually life-saving: “[G]oing into a re-education hospital for treatment is not a way of forcibly arresting people and locking them up for punishment, it is an act that is part of a comprehensive rescue mission to save them.” If extremism or terrorist inclination are diseases, then re-education is an immunization that will protect patients, and the entire body politic, from future infection.

In short, around 2015-16, just as the CCP observed new evidence of Uyghur participation in Islamic militant groups abroad, it also concluded that as much as a third of Xinjiang’s population was vulnerable to extremist infection. The CCP therefore concluded that it was imperative to treat a much broader swathe of that population with preventive re-education than it had previously targeted, and that it needed to do so before extremist infection could manifest in terrorist symptoms. This precipitated rapid deployment of wide-scale involuntary detention, shifting the CCP from selective to collective repression and differentiating Xinjiang from other minority regions. CCP officials are not ignorant of their shift toward collective targeting, but appear to embrace it; one Kashgar-based police chief recalled being told by a party official, “You can’t uproot all the weeds hidden among the crops one by one—you need to spray chemicals to kill them all. Re-educating these people is like spraying chemicals on the crops. That’s why it is a general re-education, not limited to a few people.”

This perception of widespread domestic vulnerability also makes sense of the CCP’s intense focus on re-education. Officials concluded that existing policies focused on degrading citizens’ capacity for terrorism were inadequate, and that they needed an additional policy pillar aimed at addressing the “root cause” of people’s propensity for extremism and terrorist violence – a goal

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155 Millward 2019.
which could only be achieved via intensive and longer-term re-education of a large number of Xinjiang’s inhabitants.\textsuperscript{157} Mass re-education as preventive counterterrorism policy, therefore, securitizes large areas of cultural, religious, and educational life in Xinjiang, because these are seen as the root causes of behavior that can threaten PRC security.\textsuperscript{158} Defining religious and cultural practice as a security threat helps explain the turn to collective targeting, mass detention, and dilution of minority culture involved in re-education, as well as the extension of these policies to diaspora communities where Uyghur culture can reside and survive abroad. These heightened perceptions of domestic vulnerability to infiltration by a newly-coalescing external threat help explain the shift in 2017-18 to collective repression, intensive re-education, and targeting of both diaspora networks and online contacts, who were seen as primary vectors of potential terrorist infection.

**Conclusion and Implications**

In early 2017, the CCP changed its domestic security strategy in Xinjiang. In addition to existing policies of securitization and surveillance, authorities escalated the use of mass detention, ideological re-education, and pressure on Uyghur diaspora networks. Commonly proffered explanations (contentious politics, minority policy, and regional leadership) are helpful, but incomplete. We argue that changing perceptions of China’s international security environment, and related perceptions of vulnerability on the domestic security front, significantly contributed to the CCP’s adoption of a new internal security strategy in Xinjiang. Specifically, the new policies appear to have been catalyzed by increased perceptions of the threat posed by Uyghur participation in transnational Islamic militant groups in Southeast Asia and the Middle East – a threat that shifted from potential to operational over the course of 2014-2016, and one that was coupled with a revised

\textsuperscript{157} Leibold 2019. We discuss the implications of this capacity/willingness distinction in the Conclusion.

\textsuperscript{158} Wang and Minzner 2015.
assessment of heightened domestic vulnerability to infiltration on the part of China’s Muslim population. The CCP’s belief in the need to block and preventively inoculate its population from infection by extremist and terrorist networks explains the timing of the change in early 2017, the shift from selective to collective repression, the heavy emphasis on re-education, and the pressure applied to Xinjiang’s transnational ethnic (Uyghur) and religious (Muslim) networks, as well as helping to explain why Xinjiang experienced a marked change in domestic security strategy while other regions, such as Tibet, did not.

Our argument is that the CCP’s changing perception of its internal vulnerability to an evolving transnational terrorist threat shaped the regime’s repressive strategy in Xinjiang. As noted above, we acknowledge that Beijing may have misperceived the threat, that it may use the threat instrumentally to deflect criticism, and that its recently-adopted strategy may well be counter-productive. Even if this is true, our findings have important theoretical and practical implications.

Theoretically, we contribute to the field’s understanding of authoritarianism and preventive repression. China has used two approaches to policing in Xinjiang, both aimed at identifying and eradicating dissent before it translates into oppositional public behavior: surveillance-intensive, intelligence-based policing, and political re-education. These forms of repression are both preventive, and while they are complementary in many respects, they work via different pathways. Intelligence- and tech-based policing seeks to target and pre-empt the capacity of citizens to challenge the party-state, while re-education and “transformation through education” target their willingness to do so.\(^{159}\)

We propose, therefore, that re-education be incorporated into broader discussions of authoritarian

survival (perhaps in a comparative framework with other forms of legitimation), as well as into recent discussions of preventive repression. Doing so would be particularly useful because some work on preventive repression assumes that its advantage lies in its selective and covert nature, which can minimize potential blowback. China’s strategy in Xinjiang, however, highlights conditions under which preventive repression is not necessarily more selective or covert, and instead leads to higher and more visible repression. There are many questions here that future research could explore more systematically.

Our analysis also has implications for foreign policy related to Xinjiang and to various countries’ relations with the PRC. We conclude that perceptions of terrorist threat have shaped CCP behavior in Xinjiang, an argument that many have been reluctant to embrace. China’s perceptions of the threat may be inaccurate, and/or its public rhetoric may be instrumental, but our analysis suggests that those who seek to alter China’s treatment of its Uyghur citizens may be more effective if they approach that behavior as being grounded in counter-terrorism policy, rather than simply making arguments on human rights grounds.

At the same time, China’s linking of international terrorism with policies of domestic repression poses an operational conundrum for countries that seek to collaborate with China on common terrorist threats. Mass internment of Chinese Muslims will likely make it harder, not easier, for countries to justify and craft law enforcement and counter-terrorism cooperation with the PRC. (Turkey’s recent decision to harshly criticize China’s treatment of its Uyghur citizens may be only the most recent prominent example.\textsuperscript{160}) At the same time, however, if cutting off counterterrorism cooperation with China increases their own terrorist risk, countries that collaborate with China on counter-terror efforts in multiple parts of the world will face significant and potentially difficult

tradeoffs; this may be why countries that conduct significant counterterrorism cooperation in China were largely absent from the letters that adopted a public stance on Xinjiang.\textsuperscript{161} Policymakers who want those countries to act differently will have to recognize the tradeoffs that those countries’ governments face, and craft solutions that realistically address their respective security challenges.

More broadly, examining the external sources of China’s domestic security policies in Xinjiang reinforces the view that we can gain analytical leverage, and potential policy traction, by viewing CCP behavior not just through the lens of a repressive party-state, but as the behavior of a state that, despite its growing power, is simultaneously insecure both at home and abroad, and that sees these insecurities as deeply interrelated.\textsuperscript{162} Even insecurities that appear primarily domestic may in fact have significant origins in China’s changing role on the world stage.

\textsuperscript{161} Putz, “Which Countries Are For or Against China’s Xinjiang Policies.”