

Why Xinjiang? Why Now?

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Within one day after returning to Australia, a number of people have been brought me up to speed on can only be described as wilful misinformation. I have heard talk in the media and by government figures of 'camps' (invoking Nazi concentration camps), of 'brainwashing', of a whole minority nationality – the Uyghur – being subjected to 'human rights abuses'.

My initial reaction was to think that this was a large science fiction plot, with another earth-like planet and a place called China, about which fanciful narratives had been developed. It is certainly not the China in which I live and work for a large part of the year. But then I realised that such narratives are supposedly speaking about the same place. So I enquired further and found that the following information is systematically not made available in this part of the world, even though one can easily find it (and not merely in an earlier post).

Ever since the incorporation of Xinjiang into China in the mid-eighteenth century, it has been a restive part of the country on the western border. However, from the 1990s, these problems have become more acute. The reason was a notable increase in influence from Islamic extremism from further west, with a number of outcomes.

To begin with, there were a spate of terrorist attacks. If we take only the period from 2008, we find: an attempted suicide attack on a China Southern flight in 2008; in the same year there were threats to launch attacks on the Beijing Olympics; a car ramming in Tiananmen Square in 2013, with injuries but no fatalities; a knife attack Kunming Railway Station in 2014, killing tens of people and injuring many more. All were perpetrated by radical Muslim Uyghurs. Further, some Uyghurs were discovered training with al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and had developed links with militant groups in restive parts of Pakistan. Radical fronts outside China were passing weapons, explosives and militants along drug routes. The list could go on, but the situation is quite clear: some Muslims among the Uyghur minority were engaged in organising and carrying out terrorist activities.

The question arose: how to deal with this distinct and deadly problem? It is not a problem facing China alone. In countries like Australia, there are strong pushes to have people stripped of citizenship and expelled. But this is hardly a solution, for it passes the problem onto someone else. In other places, the response is to lock them up and throw away the key. But this serves to radicalise them even further. More brutally, some countries send armed forces to the supposed source of terrorism, invade and destroy the country in question and thereby foster with even more extremism.

Some places, however, have decided to try a different approach. The primary problem was with mostly young people from a range of backgrounds. They may have been fighting in the Middle East, been to training camps in Pakistan or Afghanistan, married an extremist husband, or been radicalised at home and formed part of a cell. Upon returning home or having their cell discovered, the problem was to find a way to help them fit back into their local communities. In close consultation with Muslim leaders, programs were set up. Given an often low level of education, the programs included classes to improve educational levels. Often unemployable and poor, they were given vocational training in skills for future work. Contact with outside radical groups was closed or monitored very closely. And – most importantly – a long process of cultural, ideological and theological education began, led by local experts and Muslim leaders, to try and get these young extremists to see that Islam is not about what they had been led to believe.

This approach has been and continues to be tried in many places around the world, with different emphases and different levels of success. For example, the city of Aarhus, Denmark, undertook a such a deradicalization program, albeit not without some controversy inside Denmark, since a good number wanted them expelled for good. Turkey has had significant success with its program, France some success, the UK perhaps less so and Australia even less. In fact, 'deradicalization' has become an in-word, journals have been established, businesses have tried to cash in. As is their common practice, Chinese scholars and government officials (both national and local – in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region) studied these approaches carefully and came up with one that is similar in some respects and unique in others. The Chinese prefer to call them 'de-extremism' activities, given the dangers of separatism, extremism and terrorism.

Of course, we may criticise one or another approach. None is perfect in dealing with a persistent problem shared by many countries. Some times they are too heavy-handed and alienate young people further. At other times they are too soft and make not enough difference. But the underlying purpose in a Chinese situation should be forgotten: the recovery of a person's life so that they may re-enter as a productive member the society they left not so long ago.

As I have mentioned before on a number of occasions, these programs are only part of an immediate response to a profound challenge to social and religious harmony (*hexie*), stability (*wending*) and security (*anquan*). But what is unique about the Chinese method relates to the basic human right to economic wellbeing. Thus, the longer term approach is to deal with the systemic poverty in Xinjiang, based on the position that poverty provides a breeding ground for radicalism like this. Not all such approaches in the past have worked so well, so now Xinjiang receives a massive amount of preferential economic incentives for people to innovate and find their own ways out of poverty. It is also a significant feature of the Belt and Road Initiative, for which Xinjiang is the pivot.

This raises the double question with which I started. Why Xinjiang? Why now? For a minority of 'Western' countries, Tibet used to be the flavour of the month, but now it is Xinjiang. Are the de-extremism programs new in Xinjiang? No, the programs in various forms have been under way for four or five years, although they were revised and updated in April 2017, with new regulations and the expansion of vocational and training centres. The more significant poverty alleviation projects span decades. So why do media outlets and some government figures in a relatively small number of countries focus so much attention on Xinjiang?

The first part of an answer is that 2018 marked the first real signs of significant success of the Chinese approach in Xinjiang. A minimal standard is that no terrorist activity has taken place since 2014, compared with 1,136 across the world in 2017 and 639 in the first half of 2018. More importantly the perception in China and abroad is that Xinjiang is now safe for travel. A few years ago I mentioned to a few people that I would like to travel to Xinjiang. Too dangerous! They said. Don't go there. Now there is no problem. This year more than 100 million Chinese and foreign travellers flocked to Xinjiang. Further,

with the Belt and Road Initiative, economic activity has noticeably improved, with investments doubling over the last two years and Xinjiang growing in 2017 by 7.6 percent. As has been pointed out, stability has returned to Xinjiang as a result of the programs.

The second part of the answer comes from a Turkish perspective: 2018 saw the official launch of the Belt and Road Initiative, with close and pragmatic cooperation between all Central Asian countries, a number of European countries, nearly all countries in Africa, and many in other parts of the world. The initiative has been running already for some time, but 2018 was the launch. A significant plank in the initiative is Turkey, for whom China is its second largest trading partner (Germany is still the first, for now). Given the importance of both Xinjiang and Turkey in the Belt and Road Initiative, the rhetoric and misinformation concerning Xinjiang is seen – quite strongly in Turkey – as an effort by some ‘Western’ countries to drive a wedge between China and Turkey.

Turkey is of course not the only Muslim majority country to be involved in the Belt and Road Initiative. It includes Pakistan, the countries of Central Asia, some in the Middle East and in Southeast Asia. Noticeably, these countries have not joined the rhetoric and misinformation from a handful of ‘Western’ countries. But the Turkish perspective may give us an insight into why Xinjiang has become the flavour of the month among some ‘Western’ countries.

The catch is that the effort will not succeed. The Muslim majority countries are singularly unimpressed with some ‘Western’ countries, which have consistently demonised Islam for a good while, now trying to irritate China over its treatment of Muslim extremists. And the Chinese are confident enough that the Belt and Road Initiative has already developed too far for anyone to derail it.