

What About the Uyghur?

Roland Boer, 2020

Of late, it has become fashionable in some former colonisers – known as the ‘West’ – to switch from the ‘vegetarian between meals’ (Dalai Lama) and focus on the Uyghurs, mostly concentrated in Xinjiang Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in the far western parts of China. Supposedly, the whole of the Uyghur minority is kept under what some call a ‘police state’. The reason why is never articulated, except perhaps the ‘inherent evil’ of the Communist Party of China.

Let us have a look at the facts.

To begin with, there is the simple historical question. Xinjiang was incorporated into the Chinese state in the 1750s and eventually became a full province in 1884, marking the western border of the Chinese state under the Qing. Obviously, Xinjiang has been part of China for centuries.

Further, for some international critics, the claim that radical Muslim Uyghurs are involved in terrorism is a smokescreen for the suppression of the Uyghur. But let us see how selective the terminology of ‘separatism’ and ‘terrorism’ is. From one perspective, the attack on the World Trade Centre in New York in 2001 is ‘terrorist’, while the efforts by some in Tibet and Xinjiang are peaceful and ‘separatist’, seeking independence. In short, any attack on western sites are ‘terrorist’, but any attack in other parts of the world – whether China or Russia or Syria – are ‘separatist’. From another perspective, the attempted suicide attack on a China Southern flight in 2008, threats to attack the Beijing Olympics in 2008, a car ramming in Tiananmen Square in 2013 and the deadly knife attack in Kunming railway station – all perpetrated by Uyghur radical Muslims – are ‘terrorist’ acts. To add a twist to all this, the Chinese government typically uses a three-character phrase, “separatism, extremism and terrorism,” which indicates that they see a continuum and not an either-or relation.

Third, it is clearly not the case that the whole of the Uyghur minority nationality is engaged in separatism, extremism and terrorism. I have encountered a good number of Uyghurs who assert strongly and passionately that they are Chinese and decry the small number of their nationality who engage in terrorist activities. The fact is that a very small number of Uyghurs, influenced by radical Islam, have engaged in terrorist activities. By far the vast majority of Uyghurs see themselves as part of China and seek to contribute positively to it.

Fourth, a crucial feature of Chinese sovereignty is the resistance to all forms of foreign interference. This approach to sovereignty arises from the anti-colonial struggles of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in which Chinese independence from semi-colonialism developed a strong sense of the need to prevent foreign intervention. (It also influences China’s dealings with other countries, in which it avoids any effort to change political, economic and social patterns.) Thus, there has been a profoundly negative effect from the CIA’s intervention in Tibet in the 1950s, funding the Dalai Lama and inciting the ill-fated uprising in 1959, in which tens of thousands of Tibetans died and the Dalai Lama and his entourage fled to India. CIA operations wound up in the 1970s, only to be replaced with western propaganda, funding and organisation – especially by the United States’ National Endowment for Democracy that carries on the work of the CIA – of protests in Tibet, all of which are based on a

particular interpretation of 'democracy' and 'human rights'. These activities have also focused on Xinjiang, with the added dimension of a distinct increase in influence from Islamic radicalism from further west in the 1990s. The discovery of Uyghurs training with al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, or links with militant groups in restive parts of Pakistan, as well as various radical fronts focused on Xinjiang and passing weapons, explosives and militants along drug routes, made it clear to the Chinese government that another form of foreign interference had arisen. All of these efforts are seen as profound challenges to Chinese sovereignty.

Fifth, it is asserted by some that Uyghurs are subjected to facial recognition cameras, social credit systems and political arrest. Let us set the record straight. Facial recognition cameras, first developed reliably in China (as with so much technological innovation these days) are used for the sake of social security – a fundamental feature of Chinese culture. I am told that some corporate media reports make much of the fining of jaywalkers. This is laughable. If the Chinese devoted their valuable time and energy to this pursuit, billions of fines would be given every day, for the Chinese love to jaywalk. Instead, facial recognition cameras are used for more serious purposes: criminal networks; fugitives from justice; or terrorist cells.

Social credit: the best example is a recent announcement on a high-speed train. The announcement stated that if you had not bought a ticket and did not contact the conductor as soon as possible, it would reflect negatively on your social credit record. In other words, the system is geared to ensuring conformity with the laws of the land.

Arrest for political purposes: this is usually framed in terms of 'prisoners of conscience', who are supposedly subjected to 'brain-washing' techniques. Again, let us deal with the facts. The fiction that one million Uyghurs are in 'internment camps' - spread by dodgy news services - is precisely that, a fiction. China has abolished re-education labour camps, although it could be argued that in certain circumstances (international interference) that they can be a good thing. Instead, a central feature of high-school and university is 'ideological and political education'. This entails being taught the basics of Marxism, socialism with Chinese characteristics, and now Xi Jinping Thought. All worthwhile subjects that need to be taught well. And all Chinese people – including the 55 minority nationalities and even theological colleges – must study such subjects

Sixth, some sources – such as the 'Human Rights Watch' (affiliated with the US state department and funded by right-wing abusers of human rights) – trot out a standard 'western' approach to 'human rights'. This tradition typically focuses on civil and political rights, such as freedom of political expression, assembly, religion and so on. In an imperialist move, this specific tradition of human rights is assumed to be universal, applying to all parts of the globe. Because some Uyghurs are denied Muslim practices, expressions of anti-Chinese sentiment, and subjected to ideological and political education, this is deemed to be a violation of 'human rights'.

The problem here is that such an approach systematically neglects alternative approaches, such as the Chinese Marxist one. This tradition identifies the right to economic wellbeing as the primary human right. So we find that in relation to Xinjiang, Chinese sources have identified the deep root of the problem as poverty. Thus, when unrest in Xinjiang rose to a new level in the 1990s (under foreign influence), much analysis and policy revision followed. The result was two-pronged: an immediate focus on comprehensive security (which is a core feature of Chinese society at many levels); and a long-term effort to improve

economic conditions in a region that still lagged behind the much of eastern China. Not all such incentives have been as successful as might have been hoped, with the various nationalities in Xinjiang – not merely Uyghur, but also including Han, Hui, Kazak, Mongol and Kirgiz – benefitting at different levels. The most significant project to date is the massive Belt and Road Initiative, launched in 2014. Although its geographical scope is much vaster than the western parts of China, the economic effect is already being felt in these parts. In light of all this It is reasonable to say that there has been a marked improvement in the economic wellbeing of all those who live in these and other regions, such as Yunnan and Guizhou. The basic position is that if people see that their living conditions have improved, they will more willingly see themselves as part of the greater whole

The outcome: in the short-term the Chinese government has instituted various measures to ensure that the terrorist attacks of the last couple of decades do not happen again. The fact that they have not happened in the last few years is testimony to the effectiveness of these measures. In the long-term, previous policies to develop Xinjiang economically have been assessed and found wanting, so a whole new approach has been developed in terms of the Belt and Road Initiative.

Finally, we should be aware of the deeper level of the ‘preferential policy [*youhui zhengce*]’ in relation to all of the 55 minority nationalities in China. Since its revision in the 1990s (after careful studies of the breakup of the Soviet Union), the policy has developed two poles of a dialectic. On the one hand, autonomy of the minority nationalities was to be enhanced, in terms of economic progress, language, education, culture and political leadership. On the other hand, China’s borders were strengthened as absolutely inviolable. Secession is simply not an option. A contradiction? Of course, but the sense is that for the vast majority of the nationalities, it is precisely the benefits of increased autonomy that has led them to appreciate being part of China.