

Changes in the Policy Issue of China's Xinjiang Policy in Recent Years

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China's governance policy for the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (hereafter, "Xinjiang") has been drawing global attention in recent years. It has been covered by many media outlets as an example of human rights violation of an ethnic minority. Criticism has intensified in the West, and the Xinjiang issue, alongside the Hong Kong issue, has become one of the focal points for confrontation between the United States and China. However, despite the great degree of attention given to the human rights violation, a comparatively small number of studies have organized the processes of the Xinjiang policy in its development by successive generations of leadership. This is because interest in the Xinjiang policy has mainly been focused on elucidating the actual situation with regard to the persecution of the ethnic minorities.

In organizing the processes of the Xinjiang policy in recent years, we can glean important clues from the concept of "policy cycle," which this study group is focusing on. A "policy cycle" is the single flow of processes from the setting of policy issues, to the development of policies, selection of policies, implementation of policies, and evaluation of policies. By examining the Xinjiang policy using this analytical framework we should be able to discuss succinctly the changes in the policy issues established by the leadership, as well as the factors behind the changes.

To date, successive generations of leadership have consistently positioned the maintenance of security, under the label of "anti-terrorism," as the core of the policy issue for the Xinjiang policy. In other words, the policy issue is how the Chinese Communist Party represses incidents that it regards as "acts of terror." The leadership under Xi Jinping, too, positions this policy issue as the core of its Xinjiang policy. However, the specific nature of its contents underwent a change from 2014.

Before discussing the changes to the nature of the policy issue, I wish to focus on the situation surrounding the implementation of the policy, and to organize the policy processes. From before, various counter-terrorism measures had been put in place and implemented in Xinjiang, including the strengthening of the presence of the People's Armed Police, installation of surveillance cameras, and the strengthening of inspections at checkpoints. Since 2014, however, the contents of these counter-terrorism measures underwent significant changes both in their nature and scale.

Since Xi Jinping's visit to Xinjiang and the second central symposium on work related to Xinjiang in 2014, a new type of surveillance has spread across Xinjiang under the government-issued order of the "people's war on terror." This new type of surveillance includes the use of spyware applications and facial authentication systems, among other tools. Moreover, there was a change in government

with the replacement of the Chinese Communist Party Committee Secretary of Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in August 2016. Under the newly appointed Secretary, Chen Quanguo, a de-extremism law of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region was enacted in March 2017, thereby establishing the legal basis for the policy. Along with the formation of a surveillance society the likes of which have never been seen in the world through the utilization of artificial intelligence, so-called “re-education facilities” (vocational education and training centers, or in the local languages, “職業技能教育培訓中心/قایتا تەربىيەلەش لاگېرلىرى”) were established in various parts of Xinjiang, where the preventive detention and large-scale internment of ethnic minority citizens was carried out.ⁱ

The existence of these facilities was justified under the pretext of realizing social stability by promoting of employment of the poor through “vocational training.” It has been pointed out that the ethnic minorities who have gone through such “vocational training” are engaged in the manual labor of picking cotton, or sent in groups to factories across mainland China and put to work in “forced labor,” and there are concerns over connections with the global supply-chain.ⁱⁱ The number of people who have undergone “vocational training” at the facilities is estimated to be more than 1 million people according to previous research,ⁱⁱⁱ and as suggested by the white paper titled “Employment and Labor Rights in Xinjiang”^{iv} published by the State Council of the People's Republic of China in September 2020.

Apart from such large-scale preventive internment, China has also come under widespread criticism from the global community in recent years for the sterilization procedures and birth control that it is apparently carrying out forcibly on ethnic minority women.^v The fusion of the reasoning of counter-terrorism measures and poverty eradication lies behind this movement. In other words, the logic of the policy is to bring about the long-term stability of Xinjiang's society by restricting the number of ethnic minority children born to each woman to two or three, thereby eliminating large ethnic minority households living in poverty—regarded as a breeding ground for terrorism—and preventing the birth of the next generation of “terrorists.” This can be described as a part of the new style of large-scale, preventive counter-terrorism measures.

Furthermore, a new pillar has been added to the Xinjiang policy in recent years, in the form of an assimilation policy, and greater weight is being given to this new policy. Particularly with regard to the aforementioned “re-education facilities,” numerous reports and testimonies have shed light on the fact that ethnic minorities are being educated (re-educated) at the facilities under the pretext of “vocational training.” Specifically, they made to study subjects such as the Chinese language (the Han language), and the history and culture of China.^{vi} Educating ethnic minorities not in their native languages, but in the Chinese language (the Han language), and on the history and culture of the Han race rather than of the local ethnic groups, shows clearly the goal of the administration to promote assimilation. In his important address delivered at the third central symposium on work related to Xinjiang held in September 2020, Xi Jinping also emphasized that education instills a profoundly

heartfelt spirit of community among the Chinese people.^{vii} According to directives found among internal government documents exposed by the New York Times, the culture and religion of the local ethnic minorities were regarded as a “virus” that could infect people.^{viii}

Hence, the Xinjiang policy in recent years has gradually pivoted toward large-scale, preventive counter-terrorism measures that utilize new and state-of-the-art technology, in addition to the previous counter-terrorism measures that had been implemented, as well as toward the direction of an assimilation policy. It is likely that these policy changes have taken place against the backdrop of the discovery of a new “policy issue.” That is to say, while previous counter-terrorism measures had originated from the passive idea of how to respond quickly to acts of terror, these have changed gradually over the past few years to an emphasis on taking the proactive stance of preventing people who cause terrorism from being born or emerging in society. It goes without saying that this proactive stance has resulted in the sending of many innocent citizens into “re-education facilities.”

ⁱ Bethany Allen-Ebrahimian, “Exposed: China’s Operating Manuals for Mass Internment and Arrest by Algorithm,” *International Consortium of Investigative Journalists*, November 24, 2019 <<https://www.icij.org/investigations/china-cables/exposed-chinas-operating-manuals-for-mass-internment-and-arrest-by-algorithm/>>. All quotes taken from the website were last accessed on January 28, 2021.

ⁱⁱ Adrian Zenz, “Coercive Labor in Xinjiang: Labor Transfer and the Mobilization of Ethnic Minorities to Pick Cotton,” *Intelligence Brief*, Center for Global Policy, December 2020 <<https://cgpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/20201214-PB-China-Zenz-1-3.pdf>>. Danielle Cave, James Leibold, Kelsey Munro and Nathan Ruser, *Uyghurs for Sale*, Australia Strategic Policy Institute, March, 2020 <<https://www.aspi.org.au/report/uyghurs-sale>>.

ⁱⁱⁱ For example, Adrian Zenz, “‘Wash Brains, Cleanse Hearts’: Evidence from Chinese Government Documents about the Nature and Extent of Xinjiang’s Extrajudicial Internment Campaign,” *The Journal of Political Risk*, Vol. 7, No. 11, November 2019 <<https://www.jpolarisk.com/wash-brains-cleanse-hearts/#more-2426>>.

^{iv} The State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, “Employment and Labor Rights in Xinjiang” White Paper, September 17, 2020 <<http://www.scio.gov.cn/zfbps/32832/Document/1687588/1687588.htm>>.

^v Adrian Zenz, *Sterilizations, IUDs, and Mandatory Birth Control: The CCP’s Campaign to Suppress Uyghur Birthrates in Xinjiang* (Washington DC: The Jamestown Foundation, 2020) <<https://jamestown.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Zenz-Sterilizations-IUDs-and-Mandatory-Birth-Control-FINAL-27June.pdf?x71937>>.

^{vi} For example, Natsuko Oka, “The Kazakh people in China’s Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region—Illegal Migration and the Dilemma of the Kazakhstan Government,” IDE Square, April 2020 <https://www.ide.go.jp/Japanese/IDESquare/Analysis/2020/ISQ202010_002.html>.

^{vii} State Council of the People’s Republic of China, “Xi Jinping delivers an important address at the third central symposium on work related to Xinjiang,” September 26, 2020 <http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2020-09/26/content_5547383.htm>.

^{viii} Austin Ramzy and Chris Buckley, “‘Absolutely No Mercy’: Leaked Files Expose How China Organized Mass Detentions of Muslims,” *The New York Times*, November 16, 2019 <<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/11/16/world/asia/china-xinjiang-documents.html>>.