



The Xinjiang Issue in Sino-American Relations

—The logic and perception of “anti-terrorism” and “poverty eradication”—
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1. Modifications to China’s Xinjiang Policy in Recent Years

In recent years, amidst the ongoing confrontation between the U.S. and China, the human rights issue in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) has become a focal point. The U.S. once cooperated with China on anti-terrorism after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, but in recent years, the U.S. has become more critical of China’s Xinjiang policy. The background to this change is the shift in China’s Xinjiang policy.

The shift in Xinjiang policy discussed here refers to modifications to policy that occurred after the inauguration of the Xi Jinping administration. Since the 1990s, the Chinese government has regarded the protests of local Muslims in XUAR as a kind of “terrorism” and has employed suppression in the cause of “anti-terrorism,” but, in the mid-2010s, it began to formulate an aggressive and reactive policy rather than a passive response to “terrorism.” Specifically, under the leadership of Secretary Chen Quanguo, who assumed the post of Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party Committee of Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in August 2016, a new type of surveillance society, unparalleled in the world, was formed using artificial intelligence, and “re-education camps” were established in various parts of Xinjiang for preventive detainment and mass detention of Uyghurs and other local Muslims. The camps are called Vocational Education and Training Centers in China and are said to provide vocational training for the poor and education in the Chinese language. What emerges is a fusion of the policy logic of “anti-terrorism” and “poverty eradication” (elimination of poverty), in which social stability is achieved by promoting employment among the poor through vocational training.¹

¹ As for the fusion of the policy logic of “anti-terrorism” and “poverty eradication,” see this author’s article, “National Unity under Xi Jinping Administration: Focusing on Policies in Xinjiang and Hong Kong,” Report of the Study Group on 『新時代』 中国の動勢と国際秩序の変容, ‘Shinjidai’—Chugoku no Dousei to Kokusai Chitsujo no Henyou,’ (‘New Era’ Chinese

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This fusion of “anti-terrorism” and “poverty eradication” policy logic has important implications for the new Xinjiang policy in the Xi Jinping era. As a part of the efforts to promote employment of the poor, mass transportation (labor export) to factories and other facilities outside XUAR, and mobilization of the poor to work in the cotton fields within the autonomous region have been carried out more assertively than before. In the last few years in particular, the local government has been more aggressive than ever in its efforts to achieve its goal of eradicating poverty by 2020.

Then there has been an increase in the sterilization of women from ethnic minorities,² which has drawn global condemnation in recent years. Although the restriction on the number of children a woman from an ethnic minority can have to two or three and the encouragement of sterilization as part of that restriction have been in place for some time, the number of sterilizations is said to have risen unnaturally at one point.³ In the background, it is thought that there was a policy logic of “anti-terrorism” and “poverty eradication” that promoted the elimination of poverty and the stabilization of Xinjiang society by resolving the issue of the large number of children in poor households of ethnic minorities, which are regarded as a hotbed of terrorism.

Almost no criticism of policies of vocational training for ethnic minorities, mobilization as part of employment promotion, and encouragement of sterilization has been heard from the public in China, including from relatively open-minded intellectuals. This is not because speech is controlled, but because, in general, vocational training, promotion of employment, and restrictions on childbirth are all not regarded as problems

Movements and the Transformation of International Order), The Japan Institute of International Affairs, 2021, pp. 43-47. (Japanese)

² The term “ethnic minority” is used in China to refer to ethnic groups other than the Han Chinese (Han people). In the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, ethnic minorities make up the majority of the population, and although they cannot be said to be a minority group in general, the term is used here as a classification for convenience.

³ Adrian Zenz, *Sterilizations, IUDs, and Mandatory Birth Control: The CCP's Campaign to Suppress Uyghur Birthrates in Xinjiang* (Washington DC: The Jamestown Foundation, June 2020) <https://jamestown.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Zenz-Internment-Sterilizations-and-IUDs-REVISED-March-17-2021.pdf?x45379>. Note that Zenz points out that based on the Annual Hygiene and Health Statistical Yearbooks, the number of sterilizations surged from 2017 to 2018, but according to the 2020 edition of the same yearbook published later, the number of sterilizations in 2019 began to decline. Also, according to the Xinjiang Statistical Yearbook, the number of sterilizations in 2017 declined sharply, not rose rapidly, and then began to increase in 2018. This point is detailed in the following. Marukawa Tomoo, 新疆における『強制不妊手術』疑惑の真相, Shinkyō ni okeru Kyōsei Funin Shujyutu Giwaku no Shinso, (The Truth Behind Allegations of ‘Forced Sterilization’ in Xinjiang), *Newsweek Japan*, June 2021. (Japanese) https://www.newsweekjapan.jp/marukawa/2021/06/post-72_1.php.

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in Chinese society. It is also important to note that there is still a deep-rooted victim mentality against terrorist incidents of which Uighurs and others are considered to be the main perpetrators. From the viewpoint of such public opinion, poverty eradication as a measure to prevent the recurrence of terrorism is welcomed and not criticized. If it can bring long-term stability to Xinjiang, it can be expected to be supported by the majority of public opinion.

2. Public Opinion in the West

In contrast to such public opinion in China, Western society regarded China's Xinjiang policy as highly problematic in the mid-2010s, and the degree of condemnation increased. Already before that, the necessity of the U.S.-China anti-terrorism cooperation had weakened. On the other hand, the critical view of China's Xinjiang policy was becoming more widespread due to the activities of Rabiye Qadir (Rebiya Kadeer) and others, and Western society became more concerned about the mass detention and detainment of ethnic minority citizens in Xinjiang from around 2017. First of all, Uyghurs, Kazakhs, and other ethnic minorities living outside of China were suddenly detained when they visited Xinjiang, and there were many cases where they lost contact with each other. There were also testimonies of people who barely escaped alive from Xinjiang by land, such as Sayragul Sauytbay (a Kazakh with Chinese nationality), who was working as a teacher at a "re-education camp."⁴ It gradually became known that many Xinjiang residents have surrendered their passports and were restricted in their freedom of entry and exit. Then, in 2019, a BBC reporter was invited to the "re-education camp" and reported from inside the camp, but whatever the intentions of the Chinese organizers were, the resulting impression left on viewers was a strange prison-like atmosphere.⁵ This systematic mass detention, which is unthinkable in the modern world, reminded the Western public of the concentration camps in Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, and the degree of criticism intensified.

⁴ For more information about Sayragul Sauytbay's case, see Oka Natsuko, 「中国・新疆ウイグル自治区のカザフ人ー不法入国とカザフスタン政府のジレンマ」, Chugoku Shinkyo Uiguru Jichiku no Kazafujin – Fuhou Nyukou to Kazafusutan Seifu no Jirenma, (Kazakhs in China's Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region: Illegal Entry and the Kazakhstan Government's Dilemma), IDE Square, April 2020. (Japanese)
https://www.ide.go.jp/Japanese/IDESquare/Analysis/2020/ISQ202010_002.html.

⁵ BBC News, "Inside China's 'thought transformation' camps," 17 June 2019.
<https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-asia-china-48667221>.

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Then, Western society strongly condemned the tightening of birth control in Xinjiang. The Western Christian world, where abortion is often raised as a political issue, reacted sensitively to the testimony about sterilization from the overseas Uyghur community and others. It goes without saying that there has been criticism of encouraging sterilization, especially by conservatives. Furthermore, when it came to the coercive nature of sterilization, criticism grew even among the so-called leftists. This was considered as an important opportunity for Western public opinion to transcend party lines and regard the current situation in Xinjiang as “genocide.”

Furthermore, the fact that ethnic minority workers in Xinjiang were being transported to factories and other facilities in various parts of the country (labor export) and that ethnic minority citizens were being mobilized to work in the cotton fields also came to attract attention, and the tone of the argument that this was labor with coercion, or “forced labor,” grew stronger.⁶ The mobilization itself is not denied by the Chinese media, and, in fact, publicity of ethnic minorities being loaded onto large buses and sent off to the cotton fields, for example, has been affirmed by the policy logic of “anti-terrorism” and “poverty eradication.” However, in contemporary Western society, which takes for granted the freedom of choice of occupation, China’s logic was not accepted positively. Subsequent assertions by the Chinese side were also not accepted, highlighting the gap in perception between China and the West.

3. The U.S.-China Clash in Focus

As Western public opinion continued to criticize these issues, condemnation of China by the U.S. Congress grew stronger across party lines. In December 2019, the U.S. House of Representatives passed the Uyghur Act of 2019 with 407 in favor and 1 against, and, in June 2020, the Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act was passed. Around the same time, a report on sterilization (see note 3) was issued, and U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said it was “shocking.” This statement, rather than being the Secretary’s personal view, was to a large extent representative of the intense opposition of American public opinion

⁶ For the former, see Vicky Xiuzhong Xu, Danielle Cave, James Leibold, Kelsey Munro and Nathan Ruser, *Uyghurs for Sale*, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, March 1, 2020. <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/uyghurs-sale>. For the latter, see 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://newlinesinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/20201214-PB-China-Zenz-1.pdf>.

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toward forced sterilization. Later, U.S. Secretary of State Pompeo issued a statement (January 2021) claiming that China had committed “genocide” in Xinjiang, which was formalized by the Biden administration, and the U.K. House of Commons and other bodies passed “genocide” resolutions.

Criticism of China by Western countries and China’s opposition to that condemnation developed into a confrontation involving many countries on the stage of the UN Human Rights Council. When 22 countries issued a joint statement condemning China’s Xinjiang policy in July 2019, 37 countries issued a joint statement in support of China. In October 2020, 39 countries issued a statement criticizing China, and 45 countries issued a statement defending China.⁷ In June 2021, 44 countries, including Western countries and Japan, issued a joint statement expressing concern about the human rights situation in Xinjiang, while 69 countries signed a statement in defense of China.⁸ In each of these statement battles, the pro-China side won and that has given momentum to Chinese public opinion.

The focus of the clash between the West and China is precisely the difference in values between the two sides. Issues such as detention in re-education camps, encouragement of sterilization, and mobilization of labor are perceived very differently by Western countries and China with regard to their coercive nature. This discrepancy is not limited to the perceptions of government officials but is manifested as a discrepancy in the perceptions of public opinion in general. According to China’s logic, ethnic minorities are provided with vocational training, sterilization, and work opportunities of their own free will. The Chinese side admits that it has re-educated ethnic minorities and

⁷ See below for a breakdown of the countries that participated in each statement in 2019 and 2020. Catherine Putz, “Which Countries Are For or Against China’s Xinjiang Policies?” 15 July 2019. <https://thediplomat.com/2019/07/which-countries-are-for-or-against-chinas-xinjiang-policies/>. Catherine Putz, “2020 Edition: Which Countries Are For or Against China’s Xinjiang Policies?” 9 October 2020. <https://thediplomat.com/2020/10/2020-edition-which-countries-are-for-or-against-chinas-xinjiang-policies/>.

⁸ For the countries participating in the Joint Statement on the Human Rights Situation in Xinjiang in 2021, see The U.S. Mission to International Organizations in Geneva, “Joint Statement on the Human Rights Situation in Xinjiang,” 22 June 2021. <https://geneva.usmission.gov/2021/06/22/joint-statement-on-the-human-rights-situation-in-xinjiang/>. For the countries participating in the joint statement for China, see “Joint statement of 69 countries at the Interactive Dialogue on High Commissioner’s annual report at the 47th session of the Human Rights Council”, by PERMANENT MISSION OF THE PEOPLE’S REPUBLIC OF CHINA TO THE UNITED NATIONS OFFICE AT GENEVA AND OTHER INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS IN SWITZERLAND. 22 June 2021. <http://www.china-un.ch/eng/dbdt/t1886467.htm>

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provided sterilization and work opportunities as part of its “poverty eradication” efforts, but it claims that none of that is compulsory and that it is based on voluntary action.

From the Chinese government’s policy point of view, in response to the long-running “terrorist incidents,” it has developed a series of proactive policies aimed at fundamentally resolving the structure that gives rise to “terrorism.” In other words, the government is trying to accommodate the untrustworthy reserve army of “terrorists” and create a new Xinjiang society composed of trustworthy and decent ethnic Chinese. In the background is a deep-rooted distrust of ethnic minorities who may collude with foreign powers, and there is concern that the criticism of “genocide” by Western countries will strengthen distrust of the government.

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