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# Crackdown and Consent: China's War on Terror and the Strategic Creation of a Public Discourse in the U.S.

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**Crackdown and Consent: China's War on Terror**  
**and the Strategic Creation of a Public Discourse in the U.S.**

By

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Submitted to Scripps College in Partial Fulfillment  
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Professor Thomas Kim

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## Abstract

Scholars have extensively detailed China's conflation of the Uyghur issue in Xinjiang with the international war on terror following September 11, 2001. Less studied is how the U.S. responded to China's framing of the Uyghur as terrorists, and of the Chinese government's characterization of Xinjiang as a region fraught with violence and extremism. On the whole, scholars who have addressed this latter issue conclude that China successfully coopted the U.S., and consequently cracked down on Xinjiang without substantial international outrage. On the basis of a review of official U.S. documents before and after 9/11, I argue that the U.S. response to China's framing of the Uyghur is not as clear-cut, and that multiple and conflicting U.S. responses emerged to the Uyghur-terrorist discourse. Specifically, the U.S. shifted from purely framing the Uyghur as victims of human rights abuses to projecting three new frames onto the Uyghur: victims of the war on terror; a minority group that may resort to violent methods of protest; and suspected terrorists. This new interpretation holds important ramifications for how scholars should understand China's treatment of the Uyghur, as well as for Sino-U.S. relations.

## Keywords

China; terror; Muslim; Sino-U.S. relations; terrorism; terrorist; Uighur; Uyghur; war on terror; Xinjiang; XUAR; 9/11

## Introduction

On July 5th, 2009, a riot<sup>1</sup> in China directed the attention of the international community towards a previously obscure area and people group: the Uyghur.<sup>2</sup> The riot, which was originally a peaceful protest, took place in Ürümqi, the capital of Xinjiang, and left more than 1,700 injured and 197 dead, involving thousands of rioters—most of whom were ethnic Uyghur—in a country notorious for harsh repression and no civil right to protest.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, such a public demonstration of similar size had not been seen in Communist China since protesters advocated for democracy at Tiananmen in 1989.

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<sup>1</sup> Though the 2009 Ürümqi incident began as a peaceful protest, this event is referred to here as a riot because the demonstration escalated into a violent conflict between the Han, Uyghur, and Chinese police. Also, in major news sources like *Xinhua* and *The New York Times*, this event is referred to as a riot. Edward Wong, "Riots in Western China Amid Ethnic Tension," *New York Times*, July 5, 2009, accessed December 12, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/06/world/asia/06china.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Although this ethnic group is referred to as both the Uyghur and the Uighur, this paper uses the prior spelling because major Uyghur organizations like the Uyghur American Association and World Uyghur Congress refer to themselves as the Uyghur.

<sup>3</sup> Yufan Hao and Weihua Liu. "Xinjiang: Increasing Pain in the Heart of China's Borderland." *Journal of Contemporary China* 21.74 (2012): 205, accessed October 5, 2015, doi:10.1080/10670564.2012.635927.

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Despite a series of incidents in Xinjiang stemming from years of repressive policies and growing Uyghur ethnic identity, it was not until the 2009 Ürümqi riots that the Uyghur became the public locus of China's ethnic tension. Like the Tiananmen protests, the struggle in Xinjiang brought to light domestic turmoil in China. Also, this incident similarly sparked calls for more democracy and human rights in China as well as accusations of government cruelty reminiscent of Tiananmen. However, while the Tiananmen protests called for political reform and modernization modeled on the democratic West, the Ürümqi riots primarily revolved around frustration over discrimination, ethnic tension, and lack of religious freedom. Furthermore, Tiananmen involved students and workers, and took place during China's economic emergence in Beijing—one of China's most modern cities; whereas the Ürümqi riots involved the Uyghur—a politically underrepresented and economically disadvantaged ethnic group—in the relatively undeveloped region of Xinjiang. Another key distinction that can be drawn between Tiananmen and Ürümqi is how the protesters and rioters were framed: in Tiananmen, those involved were called supporters of “bourgeois liberalism.”<sup>4</sup> In Ürümqi, the Uyghur were framed as “separatists” “extremists,” and even suspected as “terrorists.”<sup>5</sup> This choice to connect unrest in Xinjiang with terrorism is largely due to geopolitical factors: Xinjiang has been an indispensable geopolitical and economic asset to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) since its integration into mainland China, but it now represents a serious domestic and international challenge. Yufan Hao and Weihua Liu expressed this well when they wrote that the “Xinjiang issue involves China's core

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<sup>4</sup> *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*, s.v. “Tiananmen Square Incident,” accessed December 2, 2015, <http://www.britannica.com/event/Tiananmen-Square-incident>.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Cliff, “The Partnership of Stability in Xinjiang: State-Society Interactions Following the July 2009 Unrest,” *China Journal* 68 (2012): 80, accessed December 2, 2015, ISSN: 1234-9347.

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interests and the most serious challenge Beijing faces is how to cope with ethnic tension in a highly sensitive region bordered by politically unstable countries like Afghanistan.”<sup>6</sup>

The significance of Xinjiang has led many scholars to analyze the various underlying causes of the ethnic tension behind the Urumqi riots, and to examine how the Chinese government has sought to manage this tension through education, social programs, and economic incentives. Since 9/11, scholars have focused attention on whether and how the U.S. sponsored “war on terror” has influenced China to associate the Uyghur Muslim population with global terrorism. Many scholars, specialists, and officials in the U.S. argue that China’s “cooperation” in the war on terror has functioned as a thinly-veiled excuse to pursue political ends unrelated to halting terrorism. This body of scholarship has led to special attention directed at the Uyghur in Xinjiang, and the tracing of China’s quick inclination to blame violence in Xinjiang on Muslim Uyghur terrorists back to 9/11. Read in this light, the Uyghur uprising is the beginning of China’s effort to portray cracking down on Xinjiang as simply part of the global war on terror. For these scholars, it is not surprising that in the immediate aftermath of the Ürümqi riots, China’s major newspaper *Xinhua* speculated that terrorism was involved and placed the Uyghur at the top of the list of terror suspects:

“As the casualties rise from the July 5 riot in Ürümqi . . . experts have warned that terrorism might be the real driving force behind the violence. Terrorism expert Rohan Gunaratna said in a telephone interview with *Xinhua* on Friday that the World Uyghur Congress (WUC), which China alleges instigated the riot, is closely associated with the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), a separatist group that has been labeled by the U.N. Security Council as well as the Chinese and U.S. governments a terrorist organization.”<sup>7</sup>

Scholars have extensively examined how official Chinese statements like this one demonstrate the government’s intent to co-opt the U.S. war on terror for its own political ends.

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Yan Hao, Ruibin Geng and Yuan Ye, “Xinjiang Riot Hits Regional Anti-terror Nerve,” *Xinhua*, June 18, 2009. Accessed September 28, 2015. [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2009-07/18/content\\_11727782.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2009-07/18/content_11727782.htm).

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This paper goes further by analyzing how this leveraging also impacts the U.S. discourse surrounding the Uyghur. In order to thoroughly explore and explain this issue, this paper does the following: examine the various ways the scholarly community explains the CCP's treatment of the Uyghur issue in Xinjiang; discuss China's leveraging of the war on terror to justify its crackdown on Xinjiang; and evaluate official U.S. statements and the developing public discourse they represent. Ultimately, this research leads to a new interpretation of how 9/11 changed the situation for the Uyghur, even thousands of miles away in the U.S. Though prior to 9/11, in U.S. official documents, the Uyghur were either unacknowledged or framed as victims of human rights abuses, following the advent of the international war on terror and the anti-Muslim discourse it created, the Uyghur's identity in U.S. politics became more prominent and necessarily multifaceted: the Uyghur became no longer just human rights victims, but also victims of the war on terror, and contradictorily, possible terrorists themselves. Overall, this new framing reveals that in response to China's portrayal of Xinjiang as the locus of its war on terror, U.S. framing of the Uyghur is no longer binary, but diverse and complex.

### **Xinjiang: a catch-22 situation** 进退维谷的情况

To fully understand the situation in Xinjiang, it is important to first grasp the history and significance of this region: The Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous, abbreviated to XUAR and written as 新疆自治区 in Chinese, is located in China's extreme northwest, and is the country's largest province. Although most people view China as ethnically and culturally homogenous, Xinjiang is multi-ethnic, with the Uyghur, or 维吾尔族, constituting only a slim majority of the population (9.832 million in Xinjiang) over the Han (8.363 million), who make up the

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overwhelming majority of China's population at 91 percent.<sup>8</sup> This region has a tumultuous history, and conflict between groups vying for power in Xinjiang is not a recent development. Indeed, Xinjiang experienced multiple periods of domination by local warlords in the intervals between the collapse of one Chinese dynasty, and the consolidation of power in the next. This fluctuation between eras of external rule by Chinese empires and internal domination by warlords ended in 1949 with the entrance of the People's Liberation Army into Xinjiang. However the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region was not formally established until 1955.<sup>9</sup>

China's history of losing and regaining its foothold in Xinjiang is connected with the region's politically valuable geographical location. As Figure 1 shows, China borders eight separate countries: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Russia, the Republic of Mongolia, India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan.

**Figure 1: Map of China and Xinjiang Border Countries**



<sup>8</sup> Linda T.H. Tsung and Ken Cruickshank, "Mother Tongue and Bilingual Minority Education in Xinjiang." *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism* 12.5 (2009): 551, accessed September 28, 2015, doi: 10.1080/13670050802153434.

<sup>9</sup>Hao and Liu, "Xinjiang: Increasing Pain," 206-207.

Figure 1: Wannabe Polyglot, "Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region," accessed November 13, 2015, <https://ibbeijinger.wordpress.com/2013/05/23/xinjiang-uyghur-autonomous-region/>.

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Geopolitically, Xinjiang is of vital importance to China, which is completely landlocked along its western borders. Furthermore, Xinjiang serves as a buffer between conflict in the Middle East and Mainland China, although this tension historically spills over into Xinjiang, especially from Afghanistan and Pakistan. Therefore, Xinjiang is considered virtually a cultural-political fault line and an area of instability and confrontation between the Middle East and Asia.

Besides its geopolitical significance, Xinjiang holds economic significance for China. As one-sixth of China's landmass, the region houses immense natural resources and potential for economic development. In addition to being the passageway of the new Eurasian continental bridge, Xinjiang is the most important energy base in China, and contains 115 of the 147 raw materials found in the entire country.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, if Xinjiang were to become independent, Tibet, Inner Mongolia, and other regions with strong ethnic identities, could quite possibly follow, and China would lose more than half its territory and critical resources—a blow which would severely set the Chinese economy on a downward course. Nevertheless, the chance of losing Xinjiang always existed, as ethnic tension, primarily between the Uyghur and Han peoples, threatens to destabilize the region. This increasing tension is largely due to the increasing Han population in Xinjiang province—a purposeful policy decision on the part of the CCP to dilute the Uyghur population and thereby diffuse ethnic conflict.<sup>11</sup> However, contrary to expectations, this strategy of ethnic dilution has had the opposite effect, as it is reported “attitudes of racial and cultural superiority have become commonplace as the Han population in Xinjiang grows.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Hao and Liu, “Xinjiang: Increasing Pain,” 211.

<sup>11</sup> Barry Sautman, “Paved with Good Intentions: Proposals to Curb Minority Rights and Their Consequences for China,” *Modern China* 38.1(2012): 11, accessed November 14, 2015, doi: 10.1177/0097700411424563.

<sup>12</sup> Zang Xiaowei, “Uyghur-Han Earning Differentials in Urumchi.” *The China Journal* 65 (2011): 144, accessed October 10, 2015, doi:10.2307/25790561.

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Historically, the Han and Uyghur have a long history of ethnic tension which persists today. Much of this tension comes from discrimination against the Uyghur's culture and beliefs, which distances this religious minority more than others from the generally nonreligious Han majority. Culturally, the Uyghur are viewed as barbaric and inferior, and therefore face bias in society as a whole, especially in the workplace.<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, many Han people believe that the Uyghur receive unjust preferential treatment due to the government's affirmative action policies—driving another wedge between these two groups.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, the Uyghur feel removed from both political and economic development in Xinjiang due to a lack of political participation and economic involvement.<sup>15</sup> Driven by a sense of unjust deprivation combined with a weak affiliation to local elite, many Uyghur have developed a strong tendency toward separatist nationalism, and therefore do not identify with China as a whole. Since the most important goal of the CCP is to “maintain stability,” or 保持稳定, there is little if any distinction drawn between separatism and terrorism in China's policies toward the Uyghur.<sup>16</sup>

Lack of Uyghur integration into Chinese society has also led to the creation of multiple international Uyghur advocacy groups, the most prominent of which are the World Uyghur Congress (WUC), the World Uyghur Youth Congress (WUYC), and the Uyghur American Association (UAA). While these organizations are widely regarded as peaceful human rights groups outside of China, several more controversial groups also exist, including the East Turkestan Liberation Organization (ETLO) and the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM).<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Hao and Liu, “Xinjiang: Increasing Pain,” 218.

<sup>14</sup> Sautman, “Paved with Good Intentions,” 17.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 214.

<sup>16</sup> Elizabeth Van Wie Davis, “Uyghur Muslim Ethnic Separatism in Xinjiang, China,” *Asian Affairs: An American Review* 35.1 (2008): 16-17, accessed October 15, 2015, doi: 10.3200/AAFS.35.1.15-30.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 208.

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The war on terror had significant consequences for these groups: since 9/11, China has insisted that all are dangerous, and that some are even terrorist organizations.

However, leveraging the war on terror in its Uyghur framing accounts for only one method employed by China to control and crackdown on this problematic region without invoking international involvement or even excessive criticism. Scholars on the Uyghur issue have extensively detailed how China attempts to deal with ethnic tension and separatism in the region since there is perhaps no issue about which China is more sensitive than its control of Xinjiang.<sup>18</sup>

### **Discrimination, religion, and politics**

As previously discussed, the CCP's political legitimacy rests on its ability to maintain stability nationwide—an ability that is threatened by ethnic tension in Xinjiang. Scholars identify several ways in which China has sought to address this ethnic tension: through anti-discrimination laws, preferential treatment policies, and decreasing the size of the Uyghur population through dilution. In the scholarly community, it is widely accepted that the Uyghur in Xinjiang face rampant discrimination in politics, the marketplace, and everyday life.<sup>19</sup> This discrimination greatly contributes to ethnic tension between the Han and Uyghur, so the Chinese government enacted anti-discrimination laws in Xinjiang in hopes of decreasing the economic and social divide between these two groups.<sup>20</sup> However, these laws are not effective, as they lack sincere enforcement.<sup>21</sup> Another way that the government attempts to increase stability and decrease the

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<sup>18</sup> Zang, Xiaowei, "Uyghur-Han Earning," 141.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

<sup>20</sup> Ronald Brown, *Understanding Labor and Employment Law in China*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 83-86.

<sup>21</sup> Sautman, "Paved with Good Intentions," 15-16.

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Han-Uyghur divide in the region is through preferential treatment policies. Still, some scholars argue that Uyghur favoritism actually exacerbates ethnic tension, because many Han Chinese see Uyghur as undeserving of special treatment, and accuse the government of reverse discrimination.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, scholars Ma Rong, Wang Lixiong, and Wang Yinggou argue that the government should depoliticize ethnicity, because race-based policies potentially create barriers to integration.<sup>23</sup> China scholar Thomas Cliff notes: Chinese policy-makers assume there is a “positive correlation between a high Han population and socio-political stability in Xinjiang.”<sup>24</sup> Indeed, other methods employed by the Chinese government include diluting the Uyghur ethnicity through a controversial policy of cash incentives for interracial marriage between the Uyghur and Han, and flooding the region with Han Chinese residents.<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, the outnumbering of the Uyghur has in many ways strengthened the identity of this ethnic group, which, in the face of “the Han other,” has grown more distinct and tightly-knit. Therefore, while there is now a higher population of Han Chinese now in Xinjiang, the 2009 Ürümqi riots show that ethnic tension still exists in Xinjiang, and China’s efforts to increase stability in the region have been largely ineffective.

Uyghur ethnic identity is also made more distinct because the differing religious traditions of these two groups fuel tension and complicate Uyghur integration into Han China. Religious and cultural tension is exacerbated by the fact that the Uyghur, who are primarily Sunni Muslims, live in a society that officially guarantees “freedom of religious belief” in its constitution, but often discourages any belief system that can threaten the CCP’s monopoly on

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Cliff, “The Partnership,” 83.

<sup>25</sup> Edward Wong, “To Temper Unrest in Western China, Officials Offer Money for Inter-marriage,” *New York Times*, September 2, 2014, accessed October 15, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/03/world/asia/to-temper-unrest-china-pushes-interethnic-marriage-between-han-and-minorities.html>.

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power.<sup>26</sup> The CCP's seemingly insincere "religious freedom" policy not only confuses and frustrates the Uyghur, but also acts as a barrier to political participation. For example, in 1991 the Organization Department of the CCP Central Committee issued "The Notice on Proper Settlement of the Issue of Party Members' Religious Belief."<sup>27</sup> This policy disallowed members of the Party from self-identifying as belonging to a particular religious sect, or participating in any religious activities. However, since religion is at the heart of Uyghur ethnic identity, the political opportunities of the Uyghur are limited by their core identity as a race founded upon a religion. Therefore, since they are unable to exercise much influence in local government, the Uyghur do not feel a part of the society which is dominated by largely secular Han politics.

### **Poverty is the root of terrorism**

Scholars have also examined how China uses economic development policies to solidify its control over Xinjiang and to diffuse ethnic tension. These scholars cite Uyghur-Han earning differentials as a main cause of intergroup tensions and conflicts in Xinjiang, as well as a sense of relative deprivation on the part of the Uyghur. Yufan Hao and Wenhua Liu argue that earning differentials between the Uyghur and Han show that economic inequality is vast. Indeed many Uyghur feel they are economically disadvantaged.<sup>28</sup> For example, there is an extremely high proportion of Uyghur farmers, and a low proportion of professional technical workers with relatively higher salaries—a disparity that is increasingly obvious to the Uyghur because of urbanization, the Internet, and television.<sup>29</sup> The CCP approached this issue through the Invest in

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<sup>26</sup> Council on Foreign Relations, "Religion in China," accessed December 1, 2015, <http://www.cfr.org/china/religion-china/p16272>.

<sup>27</sup> Zang, Xiaowei, "Uyghur-Han Earning," 144.

<sup>28</sup> Hao and Liu, "Xinjiang: Increasing Pain," 214.

<sup>29</sup> Zang, Xiaowei, "Uyghur-Han Earning," 143.

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the West or Open-Up the West Project, known in Chinese as 西部大开发, a policy that aims to more evenly distribute China's wealth and resources, which are primarily concentrated in the East.<sup>30</sup> Xinjiang is a major recipient of these policy funds. In fact, only a few years ago Premier of the PRC Li Keqiang announced that "the region's development and stability are at a critical moment" so Beijing would "invest another 7.26 billion yuan (\$1.13 billion) in municipal infrastructure construction and other livelihood programs in Hotan in south Xinjiang."<sup>31</sup>

However, the Han have been the main beneficiaries of this economic growth in Xinjiang due to discriminatory hiring practices, and what scholar Jessica Koch terms "non-engaging economic development." Basically, Koch argues that the main reason why economic growth cannot solve the Uyghur issue is that this development is "imposed" rather than "negotiated."<sup>32</sup> Indeed, Hao and Liu agree that although the "living standard for most Uyghurs has been improved, some still do not think they have benefited from the Reform and Open-up Policy or West Development Campaign, which they feel is just aimed at transferring the oil and gas from the Uyghur region to the Han region."<sup>33</sup> Therefore, campaigns for economic development in Xinjiang have had the adverse effect of worsening ethnic tension through a combination of social discrimination, economic inequality, and a sense of relative deprivation and even exploitation.

### **Closing the gap through education**

Another prevalent area of scholarship has examined how the Chinese government uses education directives to gain a firmer hold on Xinjiang. For example, one education campaign seeks to

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> Yuan, Yuan, "More Help, More Prosperity," *Beijing Review* 32 (2011): 1, accessed October 15, 2015, [http://www.bjreview.com/Cover\\_Stories\\_Series\\_2011/2011-08/08/content\\_382091.htm](http://www.bjreview.com/Cover_Stories_Series_2011/2011-08/08/content_382091.htm).

<sup>32</sup> Jessica Koch, "Economic Development and Ethnic Separatism in Western China: A New Model of Peripheral Nationalism," (PhD diss., Asia Research Center at the University of Amsterdam, 2006): 6.

<sup>33</sup> Hao and Liu, "Xinjiang: Increasing Pain," 217.

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promote the Mandarin dialect of Chinese, or 普通话, as a way to close the gap between the Han and Uyghur in the tense region. The reasoning behind this particular policy is that the Uyghur's weaker command of Mandarin (their native tongue is a Turkic language known by the Han as 维族话) is a driving force behind their inability to fully integrate into Han society, and also a practical reason why they are less successful in the workplace. Indeed, Eric Schluessel argues that "Uyghur identity, as understood and articulated by the secular elite, is fundamentally linguistic,"<sup>34</sup> and Chien-peng Chung argues that "Many Uyghurs do not speak Mandarin Chinese, which is usually a prerequisite for good paying jobs or government positions."<sup>35</sup> Consequently, the government established Mandarin-focused "bilingual" schools throughout Xinjiang. In theory they seek to promote Uyghur childrens' "bilingual" education, but in practice, they force Mandarin over and above any other language, which further marginalizes the Uyghur.<sup>36</sup>

Moreover, this plan to "raise the cultural quality of Xinjiang people" through education is largely unworkable, as its implementation depends on educational resources that are simply not available, such as a sufficient number of qualified instructors.<sup>37</sup> As a result, scholars note that this language imposition actually fuels bitterness among the Uyghur, who are "resentful about

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<sup>34</sup> Eric T. Schluessel, "History, Identity, and Mother-tongue Education in Xinjiang," *Central Asian Survey* 28.4 (2009): 384, accessed September 25, 2015, doi: 10.1080/02634930903577144.

<sup>35</sup> Chung Chien-peng, "China's 'War on Terror': September 11 and Uighur Separatism," *Council on Foreign Relations*, July/August, 2002, accessed October 1, 2015, <http://www.cfr.org/china/chinas-war-terror-september-11-uighur-separatism/p4765>.

<sup>36</sup> Schluessel, "History, Identity, and Mother-Tongue," 394.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 395-396.

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the marginalization of the Uyghur language and interpret the language policy as just another ploy by the Chinese government to encroach on their cultural identity and dilute their heritage.”<sup>38</sup>

### **The war on terror and diversionary strategy**

More recently, scholars have moved on from examination of these ineffective methods employed by the Chinese government to evaluation of how China leveraged the international hysteria surrounding the 9/11 attacks in 2001 to consolidate power in Xinjiang. A major theme dominating this scholarship is the diversionary theory of war put forth by Jaroslav Tir and Michael Jasinski, and applied to China by more recent scholars. The diversionary theory of war asserts that when confronted with public antagonism over domestic issues, government leaders sometimes divert the populace’s attention from these problems, and thereby, survive politically.<sup>39</sup> This method is extremely attractive to China, which, as a totalitarian regime without free elections, greatly fears public discontent and uncontrolled nationalism. This is because these outpourings of public feeling have historically threatened the regime’s monopoly on power and control.<sup>40</sup> For example, one of China’s most significant challenges right now is controlling anti-foreign nationalism (primarily against Japan and the U.S.), which, thanks to the creation of online communities, is a rallying point for grassroots nationalists.<sup>41</sup> A nationalism that unites the majority against the Uyghur minority displaces this uncontrolled, anti-foreign nationalism, and is damaging for China’s foreign relations, transferring public outrage from an external “other” to

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<sup>38</sup>Rosalyn Ching Mun Lim, “Religion, Ethnicity, and Economic Marginalization as Drivers of Conflict in Xinjiang,” (PhD diss., Georgetown University, 2011): 77.

<sup>39</sup>Jaroslav Tir and Michael Jasinski, “Domestic-Level Diversionary Theory of War: Targeting Ethnic Minorities,” *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 52.5 (2008): 641, accessed November 5, 2015, doi: 10.1177/0022002708318565.

<sup>40</sup>John Knight, “Economic Causes and Cures of Social Instability in China,” *China & World Economy* 22.2 (2014), accessed December 12, 2015, doi: 10.1111/j.1749-124X.2014.12059.x.

<sup>41</sup>Shunji Cui, “Problems of Nationalism and Historical Memory in China’s Relations with Japan,” *Journal of Historical Sociology* 25.2 (2012): 203-210, accessed December 15, 2015, doi: 10.1111/j.1467-6443.2011.01419.x.

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an “internal one that is much easier for the Chinese government to monitor and control.”<sup>42</sup>

Consistent with Tir and Jasinski’s focus on the connection between nationalism and the use of diversionary force, J. Snyder likewise argues that in China, controlled nationalism is employed to divert the attention of the public away from problematic domestic issues. Furthermore, Kilic Bugra Kanat uses Tir and Jasinski’s diversionary theory to argue that the war on terror presented the perfect opportunity for China to divert public attention from recurring domestic troubles towards a “suspect community,” and to create a new, controlled anti-Uyghur nationalism.<sup>43</sup>

Besides augmenting political stability in China, the war on terror also allowed China to garner international legitimacy. Indeed, China has been severely criticized since Tiananmen, and this criticism has only been intensified by the Senkaku/Diaoyu island disputes and the Taiwan issue.<sup>44</sup> Thus, 2001 presented a favorable time for China to regain soft power in the West by portraying itself as an ally of the U.S. in a fight against a common enemy: global terrorism. Chien-peng Chung observes that the Uyghur were chosen as China’s local terrorist threat: “The September 11 attacks and the subsequent crisis offered an opportunity for the government to reframe its battle with the Uyghur separatists as part of a larger international struggle against terrorism.”<sup>45</sup> In the subsequent months and years, China supported this hypothesis by actually framing tightened security in Xinjiang and more limited cultural and religious freedom for the Uyghur as their contribution to the war on terror. At first, this designation of the Uyghur as China’s domestic terrorists was not accepted by the international community; when China first referenced the ETIM in an official state document in 2001 titled “Terrorist Activities Perpetrated

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<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> Kilic Bugra Kanat, “ ‘War on Terror’ as a Diversionary Strategy: Personifying Minorities as Terrorists in the People’s Republic of China,” *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 32.4 (2012): 512-518, accessed October 2, 2015, doi:10.1080/13602004.2012.746179.

<sup>44</sup> Kanat, “ ‘War on Terror’ ,” 512.

<sup>45</sup> Chung, “China’s ‘War on Terror’ ,” 10.

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by ‘East Turkestan’ Organizations and their Ties with Osama bin Laden and the Taliban”, the U.N. and U.S. both refused to accept the nexus between the ETIM and terrorism. Instead, both the ETIM and ETLO were considered separatist organizations, and China was accused of unjustifiably conflating separatism with terrorism.<sup>46</sup> However, less than a year later in 2002, both the U.N. and U.S. reversed this policy view, and officially added the ETIM to a global list of terrorist organizations, with promises to defund this organization.<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, in 2011, WikiLeaks published a file about the Guantanamo Bay prison camp that revealed twenty-two suspected Uyghur were held there since shortly after 9/11,<sup>48</sup> a fact affirmed by a U.S. congressional record article later that year, which referred to the Uyghur detainees at Guantanamo Bay as “trained terrorists.”<sup>49</sup>

China’s increasing crackdown on Xinjiang has been exhaustively documented and analyzed by scholars on China. Kanat, Chung, and other China specialists like Matthew Teague,<sup>50</sup> Teemu Naarajärvi<sup>51</sup>, and Sean Roberts<sup>52</sup> all extensively analyzed trends in the CCP’s treatment of the Uyghur. For example, Kanat applies a qualitative analysis primarily to other scholarly articles and Chinese reports. Naarajärvi, likewise, focuses on Chinese studies and official statements. Sean Roberts, on the other hand, examines alleged Uyghur terrorists attacks

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<sup>46</sup> Sean Roberts, “Imaginary Terrorism? The Global War on Terror and the Narrative of the Uyghur Terrorist Threat,” *Ponars Eurasia* (2012), accessed September 27, 2015, <http://www.gwu.edu/~ieresgwu/assets/docs/ponars/RobertsWP.pdf>.

<sup>47</sup> U.S. Department of the Treasury, IIP Digital, *Treasury Dept. on Addition of ETIM to Terrorist List* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2002).

<sup>48</sup> “Prisoner List for China,” The Guantanamo Files, accessed September 29, 2015, <https://wikileaks.org/gitmo/country/CH.html>.

<sup>49</sup> U.S. Congress, Congressional Record Online, *Additional Concerns Regarding Matthew Olsen’s Nomination*: (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Library of Congress, 2011).

<sup>50</sup> Matthew Teague, “The Other Tibet,” *National Geographic*, December, 2009, Accessed 5 November, 2015, <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=45411654&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

<sup>51</sup> Teemu Naarajärvi, “War on Terror with Chinese Characteristics?” *Per Urales ad Orientem : Iter polyphonicum multilingue* 264 (2012), accessed September 27, 2015, [http://www.sgr.fi/sust/sust264/sust264\\_naarajarvi.pdf](http://www.sgr.fi/sust/sust264/sust264_naarajarvi.pdf).

<sup>52</sup> Sean Roberts, “Imaginary Terrorism,” 2.

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in China and corresponding Chinese statements about these attacks in an effort to frame the designation of China's efforts in Xinjiang as part of the war on terror.

These scholars exclusively focus on how China appropriated the “war on terror” to justify the harsh repression of the Uyghur. Though their research is important to understanding how the international community responded to 9/11, it is equally important to examine how the U.S., as the instigator of the official war on terror, in essence aided and abetted China's policy toward the Uyghur. A detailed study of changes in the U.S. framing of the Uyghur pre- and post-9/11 can offer valuable insight into the ways that the U.S. changed its rhetoric leading up to and following major policy decisions that affect the Uyghur, such as its designation of the ETIM as a terrorist organization. In particular, the official documents provide valuable insight into the framing of this ethnic minority in U.S. public discourse. Indeed, this thesis argues that in addition to historically framing the Uyghur as victims of human rights abuses, in response to China's appropriation of the war on terror, the U.S. created and perpetuated three conflicting frames onto the Uyghur: a frame that extends this victim narrative to include the victimization on the basis of the war on terror; a markedly distinct frame that admits the possibility of Uyghur violence; and a final frame that directly acknowledges and even condemns the Uyghur as terrorists.

### **Data and methodology**

This paper compiles and analyzes official source documents from the U.S. in order to inform the scholarly community about how the U.S. understanding of China's treatment of the Uyghur changed and continues to change because of the war on terror, and the types of frames projected onto this controversial ethnic group. I examine official U.S. documents and statements about the Uyghur before and after the attacks on September 11, 2001. Given that the major news agencies

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in China like *Xinhua* or *The People's Daily* associated with statements about the “Uyghur terrorism problem” are state-controlled, the U.S. counterpart of these statements consist of documents from state-controlled sources of information. These U.S. statements, like the documents from state-controlled news sources in China, are produced by the government and are therefore accessible to the general public within and outside of the U.S. The overall category of U.S. statements is divided into several subcategories based primarily on their source: the Library of Congress, the Department of State, and the Congressional-Executive Commission on China (CECC). In addition to organizing the data into subcategories, I also lay out the following protocol for data recording: 1) date (pre-9/11 or post); 2) type of U.S. official document; 3) specific number of mentions of Xinjiang, Uyghur/Uighur, separatist, terrorist, or extremist; 4) outstanding quotes; 5) analysis of overall language use, broader values, norms, ideologies, and other contextual factors embedded in a particular (set of) document(s) as well as the intended audience/purpose; and 6) people to contact for follow-up interviews.

Examining how the Uyghur are differently framed over time due to the war on terror requires a methodology suited to understanding the oftentimes ambiguous and even multiple or changing meanings of public statements on this complex and evolving political issue. Consequently, this paper utilizes the strengths of qualitative discourse analysis to interpret the primary data and to place these interpretations into a coherent, useful analysis. Qualitative discourse analysis is a valuable method of analysis for two main reasons. First, qualitative discourse analysis seeks to “deal with the richness of complexities,” and to search for underlying meanings by using the context of broader values, norms, ideologies, and other contextual factors

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in a document.<sup>53</sup> Second, qualitative discourse analysis can be used to track shifts in state and party ideologies and news coverage. Indeed, this method is well-suited to track changes in discourse about the Uyghur in official U.S. documents because it incorporates the premise that the formation of a discourse is a purposeful, active process.<sup>54</sup> I deploy qualitative discourse analysis to interpret data from official documents with the ultimate purpose of identifying clear trends in the U.S. over time with regard to how the Uyghur's are framed in state-sanctioned discourse.

Though these two advantages make qualitative discourse analysis the most promising method of research for the following data sets, this method is not without its limitations. Critics argue that this type of analysis is overly subjective, so the interpretation of data can be skewed to fit the researcher's hypothesis. Indeed, scholars sometimes reject research employing qualitative discourse analysis on the grounds that the scholar's interpretation of data is incomplete and potentially biased. Proponents of qualitative discourse analysis acknowledge the subjectivity of interpretation, but argue that a principled and intellectual defensible deployment of this subjectivity can help to produce a more critical and accurate interpretation than one achieved through quantitative data. While it can be helpful to look at the lexical collates to the Uyghur, to understand how the Uyghur are framed over the period of many years, even decades, scholars need to deploy an interpretive method of analysis that allows for a deeper examination of the ideational collates to the Uyghur. Though "official documents are intended to be read as

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<sup>53</sup>Jared J. Wesley, "The Qualitative Analysis of Documents," *From Text to Political Positions: Text Analysis Across Disciplines*, ed. Bertie Kaal et al. (Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Co., 2014), 143.

<sup>54</sup> See, for example, Richardson's use of qualitative discourse analysis to record how the "ideational framing" of British Muslims in journalistic texts changed over the course of three elections by taking comprehensive samples of newspaper reports to analyze how discourse changed in these media texts over time.

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objective statements of fact,” they are in reality “socially produced.”<sup>55</sup> Official U.S. statements always have an agenda, and sometimes those purposes may be ambiguous or not explicitly stated, and the meaning drawn from those statements by government actors may even change as U.S. interests and analyses of a situation shift. Ambiguous or concealed agenda can be uncovered by elucidating how state actors engage in discursive practices in an effort to (re)produce hegemonic understanding of the target object—in this case the Uyghur and their relationship to China. Since discourse and language are understood as a *social practice*, qualitative discourse analysis reinforces the idea that the formation of a discourse is itself an active means of political and social change, which in turn allows for the interpretation of the framing of the Uyghur in official, public discourse in the U.S. as an active social practice with an ultimate purpose that can be discovered.

Obviously this research does not include classified U.S. documents on the Uyghur. No doubt access to these materials would help scholars gain a fuller and more complete picture of how the Uyghur issue affects relations between the U.S. and China. Nevertheless, unclassified official government documents still offer valuable insight into how, and perhaps why, the U.S. government frames the Uyghur issue as it does through its various branches of government and other official political venue. This framing is in itself a decidedly worthwhile facet of international relations, because changes in discourse have the potential to inform us about changes in policies and, ultimately, political relationships. Discerning the rationale behind why an official document refers to the Uyghur may aid our understanding of the timing and logic supporting major policy changes, like the decision to designate the East Turkestan Independence

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<sup>55</sup> Toolkit, “Document Analysis,” n.d. <http://www.drcath.net/toolkit/document.html>.

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Movement as a terrorist organization in 2002, and the choice to imprison twenty-two suspected Uyghur ETIM members in Guantanamo Bay.

Applying qualitative discourse analysis to U.S. official documents also allows one to critically assess the hypothesis that China not only appropriated the war on terror, it also co-opted the U.S. in its efforts to crack down on the Uyghur. Indeed, this research challenges said hypothesis by demonstrating that U.S. responses to China's use of the war on terror rhetoric actually fall on more of a spectrum.



Figure 2 portrays how the U.S. varied its responses to China's bold claims of Uyghur terrorism. Some of these responses framed the Uyghur as victims of human rights abuses, while others did not fully discount the possibility of Uyghur terrorism, but more carefully characterized them as separatists. Lastly, some official documents fell on the far right of the spectrum because they clearly framed the Uyghur as terrorists. In light of the enduring and pervasive impact throughout the world of the U.S. war on terror, but especially in Muslim populations, scholars must not only evaluate whether and how other countries appropriated this anti-terrorism campaign, but also how the U.S. responded to external appropriation of official state language on combating terror. The following four frames present four distinct ways the U.S. responded to China's appropriation of the war on terror.

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### **Uyghur as victims**

I argue that the U.S. changed its discursive practice of identifying the Uyghur as human rights victims and instead moved to associate the Uyghur with violent resistance and terrorism. The eventual political shift to the ETIM being designated as a terrorist organization was presaged by the discursive movements manifested in official U.S. statements in multiple public arenas.

The first association evident throughout these official statements is made between the Uyghur and the harsh treatment and oppression imposed on them by China. This history of referring to the Uyghur as victims of a repressive regime constitutes a useful baseline for tracking subsequent changes in association. Prior to 9/11, the Uyghur are referred to exclusively as victims of rampant human rights abuses in XUAR. Many of these texts are linked in their condemnation of the Chinese government's treatment of the Uyghur minority, and advocacy of more religious freedom and cultural diversification. For example, a concurrent (i.e., non-binding) resolution proposed in Congress in 2000 stated:

The Chinese government has imprisoned a person from almost every Uyghur family in Ghulja City since 1996. At present, the Chinese government is still arresting hundreds of Uyghur and mercilessly torturing them in the prisons. The Chinese human rights violation of the Uyghur people is nowhere to be found in the world.<sup>56</sup>

This concurrent resolution's purpose was to urge the Chinese government to release Rebiya Kadeer, the Uyghur human rights activist, so the statement that “a person from almost every Uyghur family in Ghulia,” a city in Northwestern Xinjiang, has been imprisoned and “mercilessly tortur[ed]” works to advance this cause by emphasizing the extreme extent to which the government's hand reached—that is, into almost every Uyghur household. Obviously, the U.S. cannot impose their rule of law on China; even a joint resolution passed by Congress and

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<sup>56</sup> U.S. Congress, Congressional Record Online, *Congressional Resolution 81*, sp. Senator William V. Roth Jr., CR S3269-3270 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Library of Congress, 2000).

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signed by the President would have no legal consequence. Because of this lack of enforceability, some may argue that concurrent resolutions are not a useful means of analyzing U.S. politics. Moreover, this particular concurrent resolution failed to pass, upon a Congressional vote of 170-260. Yet the very lack of enforceability and overwhelming defeat of this concurrent resolution begs us to question why members of Congress bothered to consider it at all. Sometimes joint resolutions are proposed to satisfy a domestic constituency, but it is, *prima facie*, implausible to suggest that a serious domestic constituency exists in the U.S. that has the political heft to influence U.S. support of the Uyghur population. More plausible is that Congress sought to engage in U.S.-China relations by discursively invoking the status and bodies of the Uyghur minority as victims of Chinese human rights abuses. Change in discourse can produce a change in politics, and even an unenforceable resolution can nonetheless impact Sino-U.S. relations. Therefore, although this document was never presented to the Chinese government, it still shows how, prior to 9/11, members of the U.S. government framed the Uyghur as human rights victims, with the clear intent of presenting this frame to the Chinese government in public discourse.

This framing of the Chinese government as abusive and intrusive was not new in 2000, nor strictly associated with human rights violations against the Uyghur. In May of 1999, a congressional resolution on the tenth anniversary of the Tiananmen Square Massacre was released. This resolution holds a particularly contemptuous tone towards governmental authority in China:

[P]erhaps any representative of the government could tell us that there are no persecuted Christians in China. Perhaps they could tell us there is no ethnic and religious persecution in Tibet or Xinjiang. Perhaps they could tell us there are no forced abortions or forced sterilization, no dying rooms for unwanted children, usually baby girls and usually handicapped children. They also perhaps could tell us there is no political suppression or dissent and no torture. Of course, we would know that is a lie, but it is about time we held them to account.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> U.S. Congress, Congressional Record Online, *Concerning Tenth Anniversary of Tiananmen Square Massacre*, sp. Rep. Nancy Pelosi, H.Res. 178 (106th): (Washington, D.C., U.S. Library of Congress, 1999).

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Unsurprisingly, this simple resolution passed with an overwhelming majority: 418-0. After all, how could any member of the House vote against a bill to “express sympathy for the families of those killed” in the 1989 democratic protests, and condemn “egregious human rights abuses by the Chinese government?”<sup>58</sup> Though the Uyghur are seldom mentioned in the news or public school curriculums, the persecution of Christians, forced sterilizations, and the Tiananmen Square Massacre are held up as examples of atrocities in China. Therefore, by grouping human rights abuses against the Uyghur in Xinjiang with these more widely known abuses, the Uyghur issue assumes the negativity surrounding these other controversial issues.

Prior to 9/11, in U.S. official documents, the Uyghur were mentioned exclusively in reference to human rights issues, rather than associated with terrorism, or defended as nonviolent activists. As a result, the U.S. did little more for the Uyghur than support Rebiya Kadeer and issue concurrent resolutions protesting human rights abuses. Also, neither the Uyghur nor Xinjiang appear anywhere on the Congressional Executive Commission on China’s website prior to 2002. Moreover, there is no mention of China, let alone the Uyghur, in the Department of State’s annual *Patterns of Global Terrorism Report* prior to 9/11. Although, this report notes that “several nations in East Asia experienced violence in 2000,” China is not listed among these nations.<sup>59</sup> On the other hand, the Uyghur appear in the Department of State’s *International Religious Freedom Report* and *International Human Rights Report* prior to 9/11:

In China . . . particularly serious human rights abuses persisted in minority areas, especially in Tibet and Xinjiang, where restrictions on religion and other fundamental freedoms intensified. Some minority groups, particularly Tibetan Buddhists and Muslim Uighurs, came under increasing pressure as the Government clamped down on dissent and "separatist" activities.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Public Affairs, *2000 Patterns of Global Terrorism*, n.a.: (Washington, D.C., U.S. Department of State, 2000).

<sup>60</sup> U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Public Affairs, *1999 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices*, n.a.: (Washington, D.C., U.S. Department of State, 1999).

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At this point, Tibetan Buddhists and Muslim Uyghur were often referenced together as victims of China's repressive, anti-religion policies. The Uyghur were not yet differentiated by either China or the U.S. as more closely associated with any terrorism or tension with the Middle East. Furthermore, "separatist" appears in quotation marks, suggesting that the State Department questioned this designation. Similarly, the *International Religious Freedom Report* issued a few months before 9/11 cites police crackdowns on centers of Muslim religious activity and worship in Xinjiang because of accusations from the local police of Uyghur separatist activity.<sup>61</sup> In addition, although several terrorist incidents are mentioned in this report, none are associated with the Uyghur, either directly or indirectly. Instead, these events are attributed to "unknown terrorists."<sup>62</sup> At this point, some may argue that the U.S.'s dismissal of accusations of Uyghur violence before 9/11 is due to the fact that the Uyghur were nonviolent before 9/11 and China's subsequent crackdown. However, this argument focuses on how, despite China's claims of Uyghur violence well before 9/11, the U.S. continued to classify the Uyghur as "separatists" at worst, and more commonly as victims of human rights abuses until after 9/11.

### **Victims of the war on terror**

The U.S. framing of the Uyghur changed dramatically after 9/11. Indeed, following the September 11, 2001 attacks, this narrative of the Uyghur as victims of China's repressive regime was extended to a view of the Uyghur as victims of China's war on terror. Scholars documented and analyzed how the Chinese government leveraged the war on terror to deflect public attention away from domestic problems and create solidarity in the face of the perception of a terrorist

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<sup>61</sup> U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Public Affairs, *2001 Report on International Religious Freedom*, n.a.: (Washington, D.C., U.S. Department of State, 2001).

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

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threat.<sup>63</sup> The U.S. government, likewise, noted and criticized this ulterior motive in many of its public statements. For example, in a Congressional article released about a month after 9/11, a representative stated:

Following the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, Chinese officials pledged to join the global effort against terrorism. But comments made by Chinese officials following the attacks indicate that they may try to exact policy concessions from the United States in exchange for support for anti-terrorism efforts. For example, according to a Reuters article on September 18, China's Foreign Ministry Spokesman Zhu Bangzao stated, "The United States has asked China to provide assistance in the fight against terrorism. China, by the same token, has reasons to ask the United States to give its support and understanding in the fight against terrorism and separatists."<sup>64</sup>

Here, the U.S. directly questions China's motives behind its alleged support for U.S. antiterrorism efforts. Although the Uyghur are not mentioned specifically, the speaker points out that China's assistance comes with the caveat of policy concessions exacted from the U.S.; specifically, the policy concession that the U.S. allow China more freedom in its domestic fight against "terrorism and separatists." Against the backdrop of frequent associations between Tibetans and Uyghur with terrorism and separatism, the price of China's support for the U.S. war on terror was allowing China a freer hand in its treatment of groups like the Uyghur. The Uyghur were more directly referred to as victims of China's war on terror in subsequent government documents:

Meanwhile, in northwest China, the international war against terrorism is used to justify harsh repression in Xinjiang, home to China's mainly Muslim Uighur community. Several mosques have been closed, use of the Uighur language has been restricted and certain Uighur books and journals have been banned. The crackdown against suspected "separatists, terrorists and religious extremists" intensified following the start of a renewed security crack-down in October 2003. Arrests continue and hundreds of dissidents remain in prison.<sup>65</sup>

In this quote, found in another concurrent resolution released on the anniversary of the Tiananmen Square Massacre, it is apparent that the Uyghur issue became closely connected with

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<sup>63</sup> See Kanat, Chung, and other China specialists like Teague, Naarajärvi, and Roberts who are cited in the literature review.

<sup>64</sup> U.S. Congress, Congressional Record Online, *Congressional Record 107th Congress 1st Session*, n.a., CR S11096-S11097 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Library of Congress, 2001).

<sup>65</sup> U.S. Congress, Congressional Record Online, *Condemning the Crackdown on Democracy Protestors in Tiananmen Square, Beijing in the People's Republic of China on the 15th Anniversary of that Tragic Massacre*, sp. Christopher Smith of New Jersey, H3684-H3689 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Library of Congress, 2004).

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this more well-known instance of human rights abuse in China. Even the title of the resolution patently denounces China: “Condemning the Crackdown on Democracy Protestors in Tiananmen Square, Beijing in the People’s Republic of China on the 15th Anniversary of that Tragic Massacre.” However, in contrast to previous documents which clearly conflate human rights abuses in Xinjiang with those in Tiananmen, this particular document goes further by specifically identifying the war on terror as the very tool China employs to implement its repressive religious and ethnic policies. Indeed, after introducing the idea that the war on terror is used to “justify harsh repression in Xinjiang,” this statement lists specific examples of the application of this anti-terrorism campaign to the Uyghur, including shutting down mosques, banning religious books, and imprisoning dissidents. Here in the U.S., one’s religious freedom is considered a constitutional right, so this statement paints Xinjiang as nothing short of a dystopia controlled by the authoritarian regime that is the Chinese government.

This oppressor-oppressed narrative continues throughout this period and up to the present in various official documents articulating U.S. policy. For example, in its most recent human rights report, U.S. State Department states, “The government continued to repress Uyghurs expressing peaceful political dissent and independent Muslim religious leaders.”<sup>66</sup> Another Congressional concurrent resolution urging the United Nations Commission on Human Rights to call on the PRC’s government to end human rights violations also included China’s leveraging of the war on terror against the Uyghur as a strong reason for U.N. action: “The Chinese Government has used the international war on terror as a pretext for a harsh crackdown on Uighurs in Xinjiang, including those expressing peaceful political dissent and independent

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<sup>66</sup> U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Public Affairs, *2014 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices*, n.a.: (Washington, D.C., U.S. Department of State, 2014).

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Muslim religious leaders.”<sup>67</sup> These documents, which clearly fall among those depicting the Uyghur as victims of the war on terror, also clearly discount the notion of a substantiated Uyghur terrorist threat in China. Indeed, in its annual report in 2006, the U.S. Congress discredited China’s claims of increasing terrorist activity in Xinjiang by looking at the broader context of China’s history of repression in the region:

The government uses counterterrorism policies as a pretext for severely repressing religion in the XUAR. The government describes security conditions in the XUAR in a manner that suggests terrorist attacks continue in the region, even as official sources indicate that no terrorist attacks have taken place in the XUAR since 1999. Authorities continue to detain and arrest XUAR residents engaged in religious activities deemed unauthorized and have charged them with a range of offenses, including state security crimes. The government targets "religious extremism," splittism, and terrorism in anti-crime campaigns, calling them the "three evil forces." The government began tightening control over religious practice in the region in the early 1990s, following unrest in the region, but intensified its crackdown after September 11, 2001. Official sources published in 2001 recorded an increase in the number of Uighurs sent to prison or reeducation through labor centers since the mid-1990s because of religious activity.<sup>68</sup>

Here a U.S. state entity again projects a discursive frame that directly conflicts with the discursive frame put forth by the Chinese government, that is, the portrayal of the Uyghur as a group harboring the “three evil forces” of extremism, separatism, and terrorism. Instead, this document details the application of this anti-crime campaign with strong language and outright dismissal. Indeed, this document states “*official sources* indicate that *no* terrorist attacks have taken place in the XUAR since 1999.” Based on this last claim, it becomes apparent that there is a discrepancy between this denial of terrorism in Xinjiang and the U.S. decision to add the ETIM to its list of terrorist organizations in 2002. And indeed, the aforementioned texts all support the idea that the U.S. sees the Uyghur as nothing more than repressed victims of the Chinese government.

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<sup>67</sup> U.S. Congress, Congressional Record Online, *H.Con.Res.83, sp. Representative Christopher Smith of New Jersey*, H.Con.Res.83 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Library of Congress, 2005).

<sup>68</sup> U.S. Congress, Congressional Record Online, *2006 Annual Report*, n.a.: (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Library of Congress, 2006).

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### **Qualified disapproval**

As Figure 2 shows, the United State's framing of the Uyghur cannot be categorized as one which completely rejects Uyghur terrorism, nor one which blatantly describes the Uyghur as terrorists. Instead, this framing can be arranged into a spectrum, which ranges from discourse that frames the Uyghur as victims, to discourse that frames the Uyghur as terrorists. These next documents can be categorized as a group of texts which propagate a discourse that neither directly associates the Uyghur with terrorism, nor fully discounts the possibility of violent Uyghur resistance. Taken at face value, these texts seem to perpetuate the aforementioned victim narrative. However, a closer examination of the wording in these texts reveals small, but significant, deviation from previously discussed official documents. While the CECC blatantly dismisses Uyghur terrorism in a 2006 statement, other U.S. statements do not take such a clear stand on either side of the issue. For example, the Congressional concurrent resolution from 2005 includes the statement that "the Chinese Government has used the international war on terror as a pretext for a harsh crackdown on Uighurs in Xinjiang, including those expressing peaceful political dissent and independent Muslim religious leaders."<sup>69</sup> Like previously analyzed documents, this text spots how China uses the war on terror as a "pretext" for consolidating power in the region. Unlike other statements, however, this document allows for the possibility of Uyghur violence through the word "including." Indeed, this wording implies that among the Uyghur, there are those who do not express "peaceful political dissent." After all, a Uyghur group that *includes* peaceful dissenters leaves room for the possibility of militant members—a possibility that was incompatible with previous victim narratives. A similar differentiation is made in the State Department's "International Report on Religious Freedom" from 2004 and

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<sup>69</sup> U.S. Congress, Congressional Record Online, *H.Con.Res.83*, n.a.: (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Library of Congress, 2005).

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2014. Indeed, all these reports either repeat verbatim or paraphrase this claim: “[A]uthorities often failed to distinguish between peaceful religious practice and criminal or terrorist activities.”<sup>70</sup> Again, the language employed in this text allows for the possibility of a range between the peaceful activist and the “terrorist” which could include “criminal.”

Even a human rights report from 2003 seems unwilling to either completely dismiss or call out Uyghur violence:

Because the Government authorities in Xinjiang regularly grouped together those involved in “ethnic separatism, illegal religious activities, and violent terrorism,” it was often unclear whether particular raids, detentions, or judicial punishments targeted those peacefully seeking their goals or those engaged in violence. Many observers raised concerns that the Government's war on terror was a justification for cracking down harshly on Uighurs expressing peaceful political dissent and on independent Muslim religious leaders. On December 15, the Government published an “East Turkestan Terrorist List,” which labeled organizations such as the World Uighur Youth Congress and the East Turkestan Information Center as terrorist entities. These groups openly advocate for East Turkestan independence, but have not been publicly linked to violent activity.<sup>71</sup>

Recall that U.S. official statements are socially produced rather than objective statements of facts, and even the slightest deviation in wording can indicate a political decision on the part of public officials. With this in mind, the decision to qualify a condemnation of the Chinese government's crackdown with the phrase that it is “unclear whether particular raids, detentions, or judicial punishments targeted those peacefully seeking their goals or those engaged in violence” cannot be overlooked, but must be taken as a purposeful phrasing. This statement exhibits a rather cautious attitude towards the Uyghur issue, and it signals the possibility of the Uyghur as terrorists.

Furthermore, rather than directly denouncing China for leveraging the war on terror, this document attributes speculation of ulterior motives on China's part to third party observers:

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<sup>70</sup>U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Public Affairs, *International Religious Freedom Report*, n.a.: (Washington, D.C., U.S. Department of State, 2004-2014).

<sup>71</sup> U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Public Affairs, *2003 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices*, n.a.: (Washington, D.C., U.S. Department of State, 2003).

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“[M]any observers raised concerns that the Government's war on terror was a justification for cracking down harshly on Uighurs.” This tendency of the U.S. to pass the responsibility of implicating China in the exploration of the war on terror for political ends manifests in several other documents. Like the State Department, the CECC also attributes accusations of foul play on the part of China to nongovernmental actors in a commission analysis in 2005:

In January 2004, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization opened a Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure in Tashkent to fight the "three evils of terrorism, splittism, and extremism" in Xinjiang and bordering member states. Amnesty International and other human rights groups accuse the Chinese government of using the post-September 11th global war on terrorism to repress peaceful Uighur demonstrations for autonomy. The US-based Center for Contemporary Conflict published a report in 2002 urging policymakers to recognize that Uighurs themselves are often divided over how best to promote their rights. The report concluded that only increased autonomy could prevent increases in violence.<sup>72</sup>

Rather than directly accuse China of co-opting the war on terror, accusations are assigned to “Amnesty International [and] other human rights groups,” which are conveniently out of the control of the U.S. government. On the other hand, the proposal that the Uyghur are “divided over how to promote their rights” is attributed to the Center for Contemporary Conflict, a U.S.-based research group, not the CECC. In this way, the CECC simultaneously criticizes China’s anti-terrorism efforts and differentiates between methods of protest among the Uyghur without actually laying claim to either statement. By passing this heavy burden of accusation onto the shoulders of non-state entities, the U.S. demonstrates an unwillingness to take a firm position on either side of the issue. Rather, the safest, most diplomatic choice appears to be one where human rights violations are reprimanded, and the issue of Uyghur terrorism is not directly addressed.

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<sup>72</sup>U.S. Congress, Congressional-Executive Commission on China, *Upgrade in Police Armament in Urumqi Signals Continued Tensions in Xinjiang*, n.a.: (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Library of Congress, 2005).

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### Uyghur as threats

A final trend that is identifiable throughout U.S. documents leading up to and following 9/11 is the formation of a discourse that frames the Uyghur as a dangerous group of extremists, and even as potential terrorists. Though the previous three frames seem to contradict U.S. policy decisions to treat Uyghur as threats to international safety, this final frame helps to explain this behavior. Indeed, in the following documents, the Uyghur are not described primarily as human rights victims, and China is not as harshly criticized for cracking down on Xinjiang. Instead, the U.S. and China seem to form a partnership in an effort to fight international terrorism. This discourse, which falls more towards the far right of the framing spectrum (see Figure 2), is quite apparent in the *2001 Patterns of Global Terrorism* report.

China, and Thailand also suffered a number of bombings throughout the year, many believed by authorities to be the work of Islamic extremists in those countries; few arrests have been made, however . . . Chinese officials strongly condemned the September 11 attacks and announced China would strengthen cooperation with the international community in fighting terrorism on the basis of the UN Charter and international law . . . China and the United States began a counterterrorism dialogue in late-September . . . [that] undertook a number of measures to improve China's counterterrorism posture and domestic security. These included increasing its vigilance in Xinjiang, western China, where Uighur separatist groups have conducted violent attacks in recent years.<sup>73</sup>

This report is in stark contrast to the *2000 Patterns of Global Terrorism* report, which contained no mention of the Uyghur, let alone Uyghur violence. In that report, China was not included among the "Several nations in East Asia [that] experienced terrorist violence in 2000."<sup>74</sup> Here China is directly and indisputably the victim of "bombings" that are "believed to be the work of Islamic extremists." The word "suffered" emphasizes a victim narrative, previously unseen prior to 9/11, where the Uyghur were assigned the roles of the victims, and China, the perpetrator. Furthermore, the Uyghur are strongly associated with these bombings, as the end of this

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<sup>73</sup> U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Public Affairs, *2001 Patterns of Global Terrorism*, n.a.: (Washington, D.C., U.S. Department of State, 2001).

<sup>74</sup> *2000 Patterns of Global Terrorism*.

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statement notes that anti-terrorism efforts in the region involve “increasing its vigilance in Xinjiang, western China, where Uighur separatist groups have conducted violent attacks in recent years.” Though other official documents actively dismiss China’s claims of Uyghur violence in the region, this State Department publication does exactly the opposite by recognizing Uyghur violence as an issue intimately connected with international terrorism, rather than a product of China’s political imagination or an excuse to crackdown on an independent-minded ethnic minority. Moreover, this statement highlights U.S.-China cooperation in the war on terror. Though other statements focus mainly on the policy concessions China aims to exact for such cooperation, after noting China’s promise to cooperate with international antiterrorism efforts, this statement goes on to detail active bilateral cooperation at the end of 2001.

The Uyghur are further vilified in the official documents of other state entities. A 2009 Congressional record article on the subject of the twenty-two Uyghur prisoners held in Guantanamo Bay includes several statements that directly frame the Uyghur people as dangerous. For example, Republican congressman Frank R. Wolf of Virginia states, “[Uyghur] detainees are trained terrorists who were caught in camps affiliated with Al Qaeda” and “There have been published reports that these terrorists were members of the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement, ETIM, a designated terrorist organization affiliated with Al Qaeda.” Later, Wolf even states, “Those who would use terror are terrorists no matter their intended target.”<sup>75</sup> By the end of this statement, it is clear that in moving the conversation from the concrete issue of Uyghur terrorism, to an amorphous, ill-defined fear of terrorism in general, the Uyghur are presumed to be terrorists.

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<sup>75</sup>U.S. Congress, Library of Congress, *Uyghur Terrorists*, Frank R. Wolf of Virginia: (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Library of Congress, 2009).

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Most references to Uyghur terrorism accompany statements about the ETIM. Indeed, this association between the Uyghur and ETIM works in a way similar to the association between the oppression of the Uyghur and the Tiananmen Square Massacre. In documents that uphold the Uyghur victim narrative, references to Tiananmen are employed to strengthen the connection between well-known human rights abuses in Tiananmen, and current, lesser-known offenses in Xinjiang. In this new narrative that presents the Uyghur as terrorists, associations between the Uyghur and the ETIM work similarly by creating the perception of Uyghur militancy. This is best demonstrated in the 2002 CECC report:

The Chinese government supports the U.S.-led global war on terrorism, but critics argue that Beijing is using terrorism as an excuse to crack down on human rights and religious freedoms of the Uighur Muslim population in Xinjiang. However, while many Uighurs are unhappy with Beijing's controls, they manifest their discontent through different means, from deep personal immersion into Islamic traditions to advocating independence through violent methods . . . Uighur separatists have committed occasional acts of violence in recent years, and a few have been linked to terrorist groups . . . In August 2002, the U.S. government designated the East Turkestan Islamic Movement as a foreign organization that supports terrorism and placed this obscure Xinjiang separatist group under an executive order blocking its financial transactions and freezing its assets in the United States.<sup>76</sup>

This report, which was issued four months after the decision to designate the ETIM as a terrorist organization, works to reconcile this designation with the conflicting frame of the Uyghur as victims of the war on terror, and not actual terrorists. Here, “critics” are assigned the humanitarian voice of dissent. Nevertheless, the structural indicator “however” separates the opinions of critics from the view of this document, which more directly advocates a viewpoint in which some Uyghur do “manifest their discontent through different means,” including “violent methods.” Furthermore, this statement directly links Uyghur separatists to terrorists groups, before giving a specific example of a group linked to terrorism: the ETIM. This particular framing of the Uyghur as an oppressed group with terrorist tendencies, as evidenced by multiple

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<sup>76</sup> U.S. Congress, Congressional-Executive Commission on China, *2002 Annual Report*, n.a.: (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Library of Congress, 2002).

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references to the ETIM, can be traced throughout the period following 9/11 and up to the present. Unlike the previous three frames, this association between the Uyghur and terrorism accounts for U.S. policy decisions to designate the ETIM as a terrorist organization and imprison Uyghur in Guantanamo Bay. This final narrative frame also directly contradicts official U.S. statements that dismiss China's accusations of Uyghur terrorism.

### **Conclusion and future prospects**

The existence of these three competing frames is indicative of conflicting beliefs about the Uyghur within the U.S. government over time, and points to the critical importance of tracking the multiple discourses created and perpetuated after 9/11. Although many scholars, in their examination of the war on terror and repression of the Uyghur, either assign the U.S. the role of the willing partner in China's campaign to crackdown on Xinjiang, or the voice of dissent, it is clear from a thorough examination of these official statements that the U.S. narrative cannot be reduced into either binary view. First, prior to 9/11 the U.S. projected the "Uyghur as victim" frame, in which China was strongly criticized for human rights violations toward the Uyghur in Xinjiang. In the months following 9/11, this narrative did not change much, but instead was extended to include U.S. official condemnation of China's leveraging of the war on terror to justify the harsh repression of the Uyghur. The U.S. decision to not immediately adopt China's "Uyghur as terrorist" frame can be attributed to the fact that the U.S., prior to 9/11, consistently interpreted the Uyghur as human rights victims. Therefore our government did not suddenly and wholesale adopt a new frame that directly contradicted the prior narrative. However, as time progressed, a third and fourth frame appeared in U.S. official documents. These frames look less favorably upon the Uyghur, and are more supportive of China's actions in Xinjiang. Not only did

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time affect the language of political discourse about the Uyghur, but the existence of multiple state entities also contributed to the projection of multiple frames. For example, the CECC, as a committee tasked with monitoring “human rights and the development of the rule of law in China,” tends to publish documents that call for more rights for this minority group.<sup>77</sup> On the other hand, global terrorism reports published by the State Department directly refer to Uyghur terrorism. Therefore, though many agree that China leverages the war on terror to kill two birds with one stone by improving its international legitimacy and consolidating power over a historically problematic ethnic minority, a complete analysis of the Uyghur issue requires an examination of the multiple frames the U.S. projected in response to China’s own “war on terror.” Furthermore, an analysis of these four frames supports the idea that 9/11 changed the discourse around not only the Uyghur, but also other Muslim communities around the world. Although many criticize the harsh persecution of Muslim minorities, others frame these groups as terrorists. It is clear that U.S. is not immune to this international trend, as evidenced by the shifting discourse on the Uyghur in official statements. What is still unclear is the extent to which the U.S. will cooperate in China’s “war” against Uyghur terrorism, and any corresponding and possibly new frames which both China and the U.S. have yet to project onto the Uyghur issue in Xinjiang.

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<sup>77</sup> Congressional Executive Commission on China, “About,” accessed December 6, 2015, <http://www.cecc.gov/about>.

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