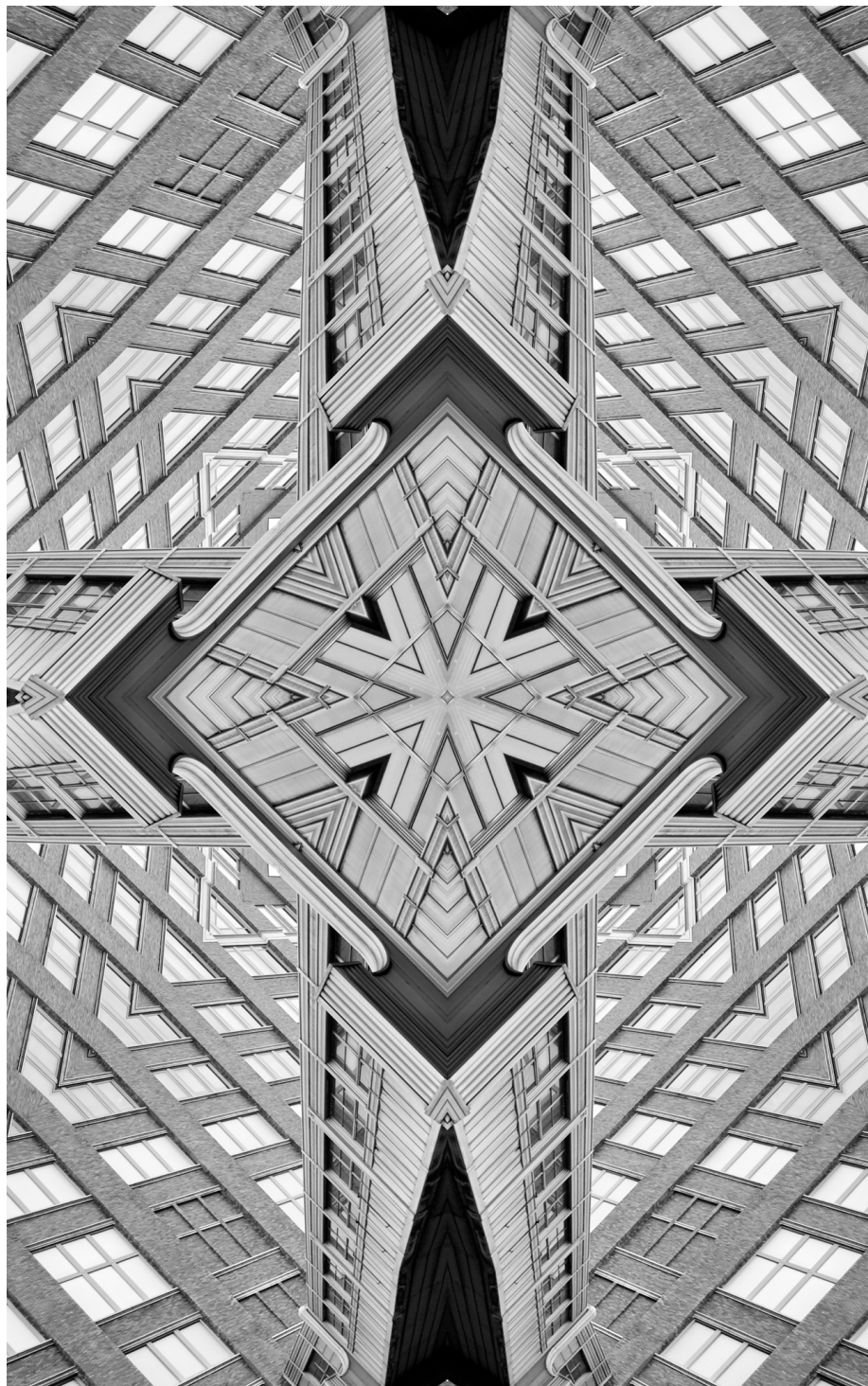


Issue Brief

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China's Xinjiang Policy: The Imperative for India

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Abstract

Over the past two decades, China, in the name of counterterrorism has been carrying out a repressive campaign against the minority Muslim Uyghur population in its northwest region of Xinjiang. Its policy has provoked widespread condemnation from Western democracies. However, Beijing appears unscathed by such criticisms, especially as the Muslim world has either remained silent, or else have approved China's actions in the region. This brief describes China's Xinjiang policy, outlines current responses from specific countries, and makes a case for India's proactive involvement.

China in the 21st century is competing with the global powers in economic growth, military power, technological innovations, and strength in manufacturing. Indeed, the country's economic growth over the past four decades—often described as a “miracle”—has lifted significant proportions of the population out of poverty. At the same time, the Chinese government is facing criticisms, specifically from the western world and other democracies, for its authoritarian policies. These include its repressive policy on the Uyghurs of Turkic heritage living in the Xinjiang Autonomous region in northwest China.

The Uyghurs are an ethnic minority group of over 12 million in Xinjiang, which shares borders with the central and south Asian countries of Mongolia, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India. The Uyghurs are Turkic speaking, and shares civilisational roots with Central Asia. The community is listed among the 55 ethnic minorities officially recognised by China to be in its territory, who do not belong to the majority Han-Chinese and comprise about 8 percent of the country's total population.

Map 1: Xinjiang's location



Source: DW

Introduction

Uyghurs are a majority in Xinjiang. Over the years, the systematic demographic alteration^a carried out by the Chinese government has caused a decline in their numbers in proportion to other ethnic groups living in the region. The census carried out in 2010 showed Uyghurs as comprising 45.85 percent of the total population in Xinjiang. The other groups such as Han account for 40.48 percent, Kazakhs are 6.5 percent, Hui 4.5 percent, and other ethnicities account for 2.67 percent.¹

The Chinese government is carrying out the mass detention of Uyghurs in an attempt to homogenise their cultural, religious and political beliefs in accordance with those of the Han majority's. According to human rights groups, it has been undertaking widespread and all-pervasive surveillance; forced sterilisation of women; torture and execution inside the detention centres; targeted harassment; and forced labour in Xinjiang.

China has found allies in the Muslim world, with these countries condoning its actions in Xinjiang either openly or tacitly. It appears that with its military, economic and diplomatic prowess, China has been able to silence these government leaders. Because of its growing global power status, China's diplomatic efforts have ensured that much of the world either remains silent on Xinjiang, or comes to its defence. Financial deals and investments have aided the Chinese government in thwarting any serious criticisms and diplomatic challenges outside the western world.²

While Chinese state media is in a tight control of the government and the Chinese Communist Party, the western media and human rights groups have persistently investigated the country's Xinjiang policy and exposed its many brutalities. This brief outlines the strategies of the Chinese communist regime against its Muslim population in Xinjiang, and examines the stance of Muslim-majority countries on the issue. It builds a case for India to take a proactive position in consonance with the democratic values that it seeks to espouse.

^a China has encouraged migration of non-Uyghurs from other parts of the country. In 1947, Uyghurs constituted 75 percent of the total population of China; it had reduced to 46 percent by 2010.

China's 'Strike Hard Campaign' against Uyghurs

China has been carrying out a Sinicisation campaign on the Uyghurs as part of the 'Strike Hard Campaign Against Violent Extremism' that it launched in 2014, initially targeting computers and other technological devices. In the initial stages of the campaign, Muslim religious texts which were not approved by the government were confiscated.³ Chinese authorities conducted raids in the areas populated by the Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang to find hidden religious texts, DVDs, audio cassettes and other objects containing religious material. The campaign has since evolved into one of the worst forms of repression the world has witnessed in the 21st century—what many describe as a full-blown “cultural genocide”.^{4,5,6}

By 2017, Beijing had put an estimated 2 million Uyghurs⁷ in detention centres, often referred to as “concentration camps” by western media.^b A vast majority of the detainees are Turkic-speaking Uyghurs. Most of them are detained without charges and often kept inaccessible to their families. Many were detained for travelling to or contacting people from any of the 26 countries that China considers as “sensitive”.⁸

China has set up as many as 1,200 of such detention facilities in Xinjiang and has spent US\$ 108 million on them since April 2017. These camps have expanded in size and scale as found out by satellite imagery investigations by media organisation, Reuters, in collaboration with Earthrise Media.⁹

Inside the overcrowded camps, the inmates are tortured, deprived of sleep, and forced to learn Mandarin; they are made to read texts promoting Chinese nationalism, and taught the tenets of communism. Every move of the detainees is surveyed by cameras and audio recording devices, and even visits to the lavatories are monitored.¹⁰ Testimonies of former inmates tell stories of being forced to chant slogans and to pray for the long life of Xi Jinping. Those who refuse are cuffed for up to 12 hours, and repeat offenders are tortured with techniques such as waterboarding.¹¹

“According to HR groups, by 2017, Beijing had put an estimated 2 million Uyghurs in detention centres, often referred to as ‘concentration camps’.”

^b Exposés revealing the existence of mass detention camps was initially met with official denials. However, as the campaign led by human rights groups and further investigations by the media in western countries picked steam, Chinese authorities admitted that the camps do exist, but that they were meant as “vocational education centres.” Officially, China maintains that the camps are meant to impart skills for employment and language courses.

China's 'Strike Hard Campaign' against Uyghurs

There are reports of sexual abuse of women inside the camps. Cases of forced abortion have also been recorded; intrauterine contraceptive devices have been forcefully implanted in some of the women.¹² Men cannot sport beards and women are not allowed to wear veils;^c pilgrimages to Mecca are also banned.¹³ As Lindsay Maizland, a researcher at the Council on Foreign Relations has noted, every Islamic practice has been deemed as extremist in Xinjiang.¹⁴

Outside the camps, Xinjiang is a living example of how a police state utilises sophisticated technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI), including its application in facial recognition. Although surveillance is widespread across the country, it has acquired a lethal dimension in Xinjiang. Spyware is installed^d in mobile phones of the Uyghurs to keep a tab on their online activities. Individuals can be arrested and detained for charges such as sharing Quranic verses on WeChat or installing WhatsApp on their devices.^{15,16}

The security establishment in Xinjiang has divided the cities, towns and villages into small grids, with each 300 square meter-area containing not more than 500 people. Each grid has a police station where individuals are stopped for identity check, biometric collection, and iris scan, and authorities download content from their mobile phone for technical intelligence analysis.¹⁷ The DNA, fingerprints, blood types as well as voice samples of millions of Uyghurs between 12 and 65 years old have been collected.^{18,19}

Apart from the electronic surveillance, the CCP has deployed some one million civilians from the majority-Han population in Xinjiang to keep a close watch on the activities of the Muslim families and report possible suspicious behaviour. This includes fasting in the holy month of Ramzan, offering prayers, and keeping copies of the Quran in their homes.²⁰

An account in *Foreign Policy* describes the work of these informers: "At times, the big brothers and sisters feared the Uighurs might be slippery, that however cheerfully they might open their houses or declare their loyalty to the Chinese nation, beneath their smiles and gestures of wholesome secularism there might

c Veils and other such headgear are of religio-cultural significance to Uyghurs, and men usually grow a beard.

d Government circulars instructed people to install a surveillance app called 'Jingwang' on their mobile phones, and physical checks of devices were conducted at various spots to ensure compliance. Those who uninstalled the app were detained for 10 to 12 days.

China's 'Strike Hard Campaign' against Uyghurs

lurk darker allegiances, uncured attachments to their diseased religious ways. But there were simple ways to test for this kind of thing. One could offer a host a cigarette or a sip of beer; a hand could be extended in greeting to a little sibling of the opposite gender, staying alert for signs of flinching. Or one could go out to the market for some freshly ground meat and propose that the family make dumplings. And then wait and watch to see if the Uyghurs would ask what kind of meat was in the bag.”²¹

The Chinese government claims that what it is conducting in Xinjiang is counterterrorism. In 2009, ethnic riots between Han Chinese and Uyghurs in Urumqi claimed 200 lives. The riots were triggered by protests organised by the Uyghurs against the state-incentivised migration of Han Chinese to Xinjiang. The riots made Beijing paranoid and the regime started regarding the entire population of Uyghurs as potential terrorists.²² Attacks conducted by the East Turkestan Islamic Movement only fuelled the suspicions of the communist party.²³ However, many analysts have called Beijing's actions in Xinjiang as nothing short of a “cultural genocide.”

German anthropologist, Adrian Zenz has noted that the ongoing Sinicisation campaign uses active violence to “impose an ideology”; he likened it to Mao Zedong's campaign and called it ‘Cultural Revolution 2.0’. In an interview with *Der Spiegel*, he noted: “Everyone who has spent time in a camp knows that their families won't be free for generations to come, that once they become parents, they won't be able to speak freely with their children because they will be forced to share everything with their teachers. It is a perfidious, all-encompassing concept of social control that is the equivalent of cultural genocide.”²⁴

For her part, Irish scholar Ciara Finnegan stresses that the Uyghur youth are the most vulnerable to the targeted violent campaign. She writes: “This bid of cultural genocide is widespread in its implementation and targets any Uyghur groups who could maintain the existence of the Uyghur culture. The barrage of brain-washing that detained Uyghur adults is subjected to aims to re-wire their cultural and religious beliefs and release pro-party citizens back into the Xinjiang region, distrusting or devoid of their former Uyghur culture.”²⁵

Indeed, since 1949, the demographic makeup of the province has been altered beyond likelihood of reverting to its old state. In 1949, Uyghurs comprised 75 percent of the population whereas Han Chinese, 7 percent.²⁶ The census of 2010 showed Uyghurs as 46 percent of the total population, and Han Chinese, 40 percent; the rest were Kazakh and Kirgiz.²⁷

China's 'Strike Hard Campaign' against Uyghurs

Many Uyghurs have fled China to escape the persecution, taking asylum in countries like Turkey, Malaysia, Kazakhstan, and Egypt. The Chinese government, however, is able to use its diplomatic channels to coerce countries to send fleeing Muslims back to the country; Thailand, Egypt, Malaysia, Afghanistan, Bulgaria, Cambodia, UAE and India have done so. According to Human Rights Watch, Egypt rounded up many Uyghur students in 2017 and sent at least 20 back to China to “face arbitrary imprisonment, disappearance, torture, or summary execution.”²⁸ Alternatively, Chinese officials have directly contacted Uyghurs who have attempted to live in other parts of the world and ordered them to return, failing which their families face targeted harassment and detention.

“Informers would accompany a family to the market for some ground meat for making dumplings; they wait and see if the Uyghurs will ask what kind of meat is in the bag.”

Violations of International Norms and China's Response

China is a signatory to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)— both UN conventions meant to protect an individual's essential rights.²⁹ Article 7 of ICCPR, which was adopted by the UN General Assembly on 16 December 1966, bans torture or cruel treatment of citizens. It also prohibits the conduct of medical and scientific experiments involving human beings without permission. The authorities in Xinjiang are in clear violation of this and many other provisions of ICCPR. China is signatory to ICCPR but it has not ratified the treaty.³⁰

Through suppression of religious rights, freedom of the press, civil and political rights, the county has continuously violated the interim obligations.³¹ By signing the treaty, Beijing enjoys the diplomatic heft of being part of UNHRC but resists implementing the norms set out by ICCPR at home. China is the only permanent member of the UNSC yet to ratify the ICCPR treaty.^{32,33}

The country signed ICESCR in 1997 and ratified it in 2001. How China is carrying out the cultural cleansing of Uyghurs and imposing the Han culture on the population violates the conventions of ICESCR. Brainwashing and enforcing allegiance to the communist doctrines on the population is a process violative of Article 2, 3 and 26 of the convention. Preventing the Uyghurs from observing their religious rituals violates Article 27 of the ICESCR.^{34,35}

Irrespective of whether Beijing has signed an international convention or ratified them, the authorities display flagrant violations of the principles of these treaties. Instead of urging China to ratify ICCPR, critics are now pressing on it to withdraw from the treaty, perhaps to prevent further mockery of these universal principles.³⁶

Chinese authorities in Xinjiang are in clear violation of provisions of, among others, the global agreement on civil and political rights.

Violations of International Norms and China's Response

China's narrative

China justifies its Xinjiang policy by saying it is meant to curb separatism, extremism and terrorism. To be sure, there is extremism and terrorism in Xinjiang, and the region has witnessed violence in the past. However, state response targeted at the entire population has been vastly disproportionate. In the past, China would blame a section of Uyghur extremists for the incidence of violence. After 9/11, China has used the US war on terror as an excuse for its Sinicisation and ethnic cleansing of the Uyghur population.

When reports of China's mass detention of Uyghurs first came out in the Western media in 2017, the government propaganda machinery's strategy was to deny the existence of the detention camps. On 18 May 2018, the *Associated Press* reported that the Chinese foreign ministry denied the existence of the camps and stated that the ministry "had not heard of this situation."³⁷

Eventually, amidst a relentless media coverage of the existence of the camps and the ill treatment of detainees, China shifted its strategy. Satellite images accessed by Western media exposed the scale and size of these detention camps and monitored the vast expansion of these facilities over the years. After earlier denials of the very existence of the camps, Chinese officials eventually had to admit to it, but referred to the facilities as 're-education camps' or schools meant to curb radicalisation and terrorism.³⁸

Shohrat Zakir, the party chairman of Xinjiang claims these "schools" were meant to eliminate the "seeds of terrorism" and that they were "vocational school-style training centres for eliminating the soil for the survival of terrorism".³⁹ Xinjiang authorities have repeatedly asserted that the detainees are provided free meals and accommodation, and are being given skills development trainings.

Weeks after the first wave of media coverage on the mass detentions in Xinjiang, China's official mouthpiece, *The Global Times* published an editorial lashing out at the western countries for their criticism of governance in the Xinjiang region. The editorial asserted that China's aim is to prevent Xinjiang from becoming "China's Syria or China's Libya."

The editorial stated: "Xinjiang is operating under the rule of law and ethnic unity. As business recovers, the region's future is promising." The mouthpiece called out the western media outlets, suggesting that the criticisms only meant

Violations of International Norms and China's Response

to provoke trouble in Xinjiang and “destroy the hard-earned stability in the region.” Lauding the strong leadership of the Chinese government, the newspaper claimed that the actions of the government were justified under Chinese law and were instrumental in bringing about stability in the region.⁴⁰

Indeed, Chinese media have often labelled Western criticism of its government's policy in Xinjiang as a “conspiracy” and “misinformation”. When Europe and the US imposed a ban on the import of cotton from Xinjiang, the Chinese media said the ban “was built on fabrications, not on facts.”⁴¹ Similarly, when western countries imposed sanctions on China, the communist party mouthpieces questioned the basis of such action and argued that the claim of human rights abuses are false, and based on lies and disinformation.⁴²

China then followed through with countersanctions. When Europe, the US, UK and Canada banned the travel of top officials of the federal government in Xinjiang and seized their assets, Beijing retaliated by imposing a travel ban on members of the European parliament who have criticised China, as well as scholars who have written on the human rights issues in the region.⁴³ Chinese media defended these sanctions by relying on the oft-repeated narrative of misinformation and extremism.

An editorial in 2021 in *China Daily* stated: “This was a necessary and justified response by China to the troublemaking of some anti-China forces in the US and other Western countries who have fabricated rumors and lied to distort what China is doing to combat extremism and terrorism in Xinjiang. Thanks to the effectiveness of these efforts to raise community resistance to extremist ideology, people of all ethnic groups and religions in Xinjiang enjoy peace and prosperity. But these efforts to safeguard people's lives and livelihoods and maintain peace and stability in the region are being deliberately misportrayed by those hoping to foment unrest in the region to turn it into a pressure cooker creating internal pressure within China.”⁴⁴

Similarly, Chinese officials⁴⁵ have used the issue of religious extremism and terrorism to justify the mass detention and suppression of its Muslim population. They suggest that the re-education camps have succeeded in weaning the youth from the extremist path and “provided them with employment training for a better life.”

Violations of International Norms and China's Response

Experts have noted that the fate of Uyghurs can be likened to that of the Tibetans, as the Chinese government has suppressed both peoples in the name of addressing separatism. The 9/11 terrorist attacks in the US were a turning point in China's narrative on the Uyghurs. Beijing began to align its campaign in Xinjiang with the war on terror to make its actions justifiable to the world.⁴⁶

A report published by Human Rights Watch in 2001 made observations that the crackdown on religious activity dated back to 1998 as government orders ensured that only government-sanctioned mosques, imams and schools can operate. The regulations made it mandatory for the local government to ensure that the imams stand on the side of government and records were maintained on their ideological position. In some cases, underground mosques which were not certified by the government were razed to the ground.⁴⁷ These events point to the fact that from the very beginning, Beijing's real target was not the separatist or terrorist element of the population, but the practice of Islam itself.^{48,49,50}

The abhorrence for Islam is made more evident in a white paper⁵¹ issued by the Chinese government in July 2019 which claims that the Uyghurs were merely forced to accept the religion.⁵² The paper gives important insights into the CCP's historical interpretation and thinking on Islam and those who practice the religion. The publication was an attempt to spin the global narrative in favour of Beijing ahead of the UNHCR session in Geneva the same year.⁵³

The report states: "The introduction of Islam into Xinjiang was related to the emergence of the Arab Empire and the eastward expansion of Islam. The Uighur conversion to Islam was not a voluntary choice made by the common people, but a result of religious wars and imposition by the ruling class, though this fact does not undermine our respect for the Muslims' right to their beliefs. Islam is neither an indigenous nor the sole belief system of the Uyghur people."

To be sure, declarations by Chinese officials have often exposed how they are misinformed about Uyghur culture. For instance, the Chinese embassy in Washington in January 2021 tweeted that Uyghur women were "baby-making machines". The tweet was posted to promote a study carried out by a state-run institution examining the decline of the birth rate among Uyghur women. The study attributed the decline in birth rates in Xinjiang to contraceptive measures meant "to eradicate religious extremism".⁵⁴ The tweet confirmed China's mass sterilisation campaign of Uyghur women:⁵⁵ "The minds of (Uighur) women

Violations of International Norms and China's Response

in Xinjiang were emancipated and gender equality and reproductive health were promoted, making them no longer baby-making machines.” Amidst harsh criticisms by US officials and civil society, the tweet was later deleted.

In February 2021, China censored the Clubhouse social media platform after discussions centring around reconciliation and realities of Uyghur life in Xinjiang took place on the newly launched social media app. Many citizens from the Chinese Han majority participated in conversations with the Uyghur victims – undetected by the otherwise all-pervasive censorship mechanism—who narrated the ordeal of their family members under the police state in Xinjiang. As per reports, around 1,000 netizens joined the conversation which turned emotional when a Han girl living in mainland China apologised to an Uyghur woman for the brutality faced by her family. This rare conversation went on for 12 hours without interruption by Chinese censors, as the newly launched Clubhouse app was still not under the radar of the government at the time. However, the Chinese government within days sought to disconnect the people from the app by imposing a massive firewall on its use.⁵⁶

“China’s abhorrence for Islam is evident in a July 2019 white paper which claims that the Uyghurs were merely forced to accept the religion.”

Global Reaction: Condemnation and Approval

Western democracies

China's Xinjiang policy has triggered strong criticism predominantly from the western countries. Leaders of the US, UK, Australia, New Zealand and countries of the European Union (EU) have called out China on its campaign against the Uyghurs.⁵⁷

The US has called it “one of the worst human rights crises of our time” and a “stain of the century.”⁵⁸ In July 2020, it imposed sanctions on two CCP officials and a Chinese company for its involvement in human rights abuses against the Uyghurs. Months later, the Trump administration blocked imports of commodities being produced by five companies in Xinjiang that are linked to coercive labour.⁵⁹ The EU has adopted two resolutions, in 2019 and 2020, condemning the mass detention and calling upon European companies to end ties with entities in Xinjiang linked with forced labour.^{60,61}

In July 2019, the UK, on behalf of 22 nations, at the United Nations urged China to end its “mass arbitrary detentions and related violations.” Signed by western democracies and other countries like Japan, the collective letter stated: “Credible reports of mass detention, efforts to restrict cultural and religious practices, mass surveillance disproportionately targeting ethnic Uyghurs, and other human rights violations and abuses in the region.”⁶²

On 29 October 2019, these countries reiterated their stand at the Third Committee Dialogue of the Committee for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. They demanded access to accurate information and pressed Beijing to allow UNHCR and UN Special Procedures “immediate unfettered, meaningful access to Xinjiang.”⁶³ A similar statement was issued by Germany in 2020, co-signed by 38 countries. Notably, 16 more countries joined the club of 22 democratic countries which had condemned China the previous year.⁶⁴

Global Reaction: Condemnation and Approval

Islamic nations

China has been able to win over a significant number of countries in its favour, and analysts say this owes largely to its economic and strategic heft. After the July 2019 statement of western countries condemning China's actions in Xinjiang, 37 countries—half of which were Muslim-majority—came to China's defence. In a joint statement, they lauded Beijing's efforts in counterterrorism: "Faced with the grave challenge of terrorism and extremism, China has undertaken a series of counter-terrorism and deradicalization measures in Xinjiang, including setting up vocational education and training centres."⁶⁵

The following year, Cuba issued a second counter-statement in defence of China's policy in Xinjiang; it was co-signed by 44 countries.^{66,67} In response to Western criticism, China has drummed up support from African and Middle Eastern nations, mostly those who have signed on to its flagship infrastructure project, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).⁶⁸

The following paragraphs outline the responses of specific Muslim-majority countries.

Turkey

Turkey was once the only Islamic nation country that had openly called out China on its Xinjiang policy. In February 2019, Turkish Foreign Minister, Mevlut Cavusoglu, urged China to make a distinction between terrorists and innocent people, and to respect human rights and freedom of religion. He demanded "full protection of the cultural identities of the Uyghurs and other Muslims."⁶⁹ However, after a meeting in July 2019 between Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Chinese President Xi Jinping, Turkey capitulated. During a visit to Beijing, the Turkish president chose milder language in his statement on the Uyghurs, urging for a solution that "takes into consideration the sensitivities on both sides." Erdoğan also cautioned that the issue was being "exploited".⁷⁰ He said, "Those who exploit the issue, those who try to gain something from the issue, by acting emotionally without thinking of the relationship that Turkey has with another country, unfortunately, end up costing both the Turkish republic and their kinsman."

Global Reaction: Condemnation and Approval

Malaysia

With the change of government in Malaysia in 2020, there has been a shift in the country's stance on the Uyghurs issue. In September 2020, Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin announced that the country will not extradite Uyghurs to China and would rather give them safe passage to a third country. However, the government has decided “not to interfere” in the internal affairs of China and has not publicly condemned Beijing for its policy.⁷¹

Kingdom of Bahrain

Bahrain is the second among the world's Islamic nations to have denounced China on its treatment of the Uyghurs. In January 2020, the Council of Representatives in Manama issued concern over the mass detentions, the denial of people's rights, and suppression of the Uyghurs' religious faith. It pleaded with the international community to “save the lives of innocent Uighur Muslims through stopping violations against them.”⁷²

Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

Among China's most prominent defenders is the crown prince of Saudi Arabia, Mohammed bin Salman. During a visit to Beijing in February 2019, Salman endorsed China's policy and stated that the country has the right to “carry out anti-terrorism and de-extremization work for its national security.”⁷³ The statement of the prince holds great significance, as much of the Muslim world looks up to the Saudi family for religious and spiritual leadership. Indeed, the Organisation of Islamic Countries (OIC) has officially commended China for providing care to its Muslim citizens.⁷⁴

The question therefore is, Why have Muslim nations chosen to defend China on its Xinjiang policy? The answer is largely about economics. Turkey, for instance, which had initially launched a scathing criticism of China, eventually capitulated after it secured funds worth US\$ 1 billion from China, as part of projects related to the BRI.⁷⁵

e In clear departure from its policy of raising a hue and cry on injustices committed against Muslims anywhere in other parts of the world.

Global Reaction: Condemnation and Approval

Similarly, for Pakistan, the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)—considered the crown jewel of the BRI—is key to either its willingness to defend China,^c or its silence on other occasions when confronted with the issue. The CPEC involves \$62 billion worth of infrastructure projects which are essential for Pakistan. In January 2020, Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan was quoted to have said, “China has helped us. They came to help us when we were at rock bottom, and so we are really grateful to the Chinese government.”⁷⁶ To be sure, though, a mild statement criticising China’s policy came from Pakistan’s minister for religious affairs, who suggested that the regulations in Xinjiang will only fuel extremism rather than counter it. The country’s foreign minister, however, clarified the official stance in defence of Beijing.⁷⁷

Likewise, for Saudi Arabia, its officials signed deals worth \$70 billion with Beijing in August 2017. Indeed, many of the OIC countries are part of the BRI, and others share trade relations with China. The risk of losing investments outweighs any concern for the Uyghurs. There is also the fear of Chinese retaliation, which might not be unfounded given how China has launched a massive campaign against the cloth manufacturing company H&M for stopping its imports of cotton from Xinjiang. Market access remains a big concern for the companies of these Islamic countries.⁷⁸

More significantly perhaps, the OIC countries themselves do not have a laudable track record on human rights in their own territories.^{79,80} Their selective concern for issues concerning Muslims is driven by internal politics and the possibility of shoring up religious fervour abroad. China’s repression in Xinjiang does give them enough basis to stoke passions but it also comes at great cost and runs contrary to their usual anti-western stance.

“Why have Muslim nations chosen to defend China’s Xinjiang policy? The answer is largely about economics.”

India's Strategic Silence

Although many countries in the world have taken a neutral position on China's policy in Xinjiang, India is most notable among those who have maintained conspicuous silence. Home to the world's second-largest Muslim population and priding itself as the world's largest democracy, India has hardly uttered a word of significance on the plight of the Uyghurs. This, despite the fact that China has repeatedly sought to needle India on its internal affairs or support elements inimical to India's interests. In the aftermath of the abrogation of Article 370 in August 2019, for example, China was the only country that backed Pakistan's efforts to internationalise the Kashmir issue at the UN Security Council. For a decade, China ensured a stalemate at the UN on the designation of Masood Azhar as a global terrorist.⁸¹ Even after the Pulwama suicide attack in February 2019, China continued to veto the decision on Azhar. More importantly, China is among the three nations that have come to Pakistan's rescue at the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), blocking efforts to blacklist the country for its state support to terrorist outfits in its territory.

China's double standards on terrorism are being exposed globally. Internally, it is carrying out a "cultural genocide"⁸² in the name of counterterrorism; at the same time, it has no qualms in being an accomplice to terror activities carried out on Indian territory. This is reason enough for India to take an unequivocal stand on the issue. Chinese state media and officials, for instance, do not shy away from commenting on the Citizenship Amendment Act passed by the Indian parliament – suggesting the Indian law could bolster separatism in Xinjiang.^{83,84}

In 2016, India decided to grant a visa to Uyghur dissident Doklun Isa in retaliation for Beijing's technical hold-up on the designation of Masood Azhar as an international terrorist. However, within days, New Delhi cancelled Isa's visa without explanation, inviting criticism domestically and from the Uyghur dissident who claimed that India has capitulated under Chinese pressure. Allowing Doklun Isa to address a seminar of anti-China dissidents would have sent a much-needed signal to China – that New Delhi will not tolerate backing to Masood Azhar and will give an appropriate response for every transgression. By cancelling the visa, India lost an opportunity to take a principled stand on the Uyghur issue in consonance with its democratic values, and also signalled that China had the upper hand in the bilateral relationship.⁸⁵

Uyghur dissidents have repeatedly requested India to take a proactive stance. In 2020, Doklun Isa warned India to be wary of Beijing's conduct in the bilateral relationship, pressing New Delhi to "find its voice to speak up for human rights and demand that China ceases its crime against humanity that the Uyghurs are

being subject to.”⁸⁶ The chorus for having a clear stand on the issue has grown louder after Chinese incursions in eastern Ladakh and the Galwan clashes which led to casualties on both sides. After the border clashes, Isa hoped the friction will make India realise that silence is no longer an option, and called on India to speak up on the massive violation of the Uyghurs’ rights.⁸⁷

Democratic norms and principles are integral to India’s growing prowess in the neighbourhood and the rest of the world. Maintaining silence on the issue of the Uyghurs is akin to granting Beijing a carte blanche on its poor human rights record. Instead of appeasing China on the issue, New Delhi can bolster its image as a champion of democratic values in the world and a vocal arbiter in the region for human rights. More so, India will send a strong message to Pakistan and its population by raising its voice on the Uyghur genocide and the hypocrisy of the Muslim world.

Analysts note that India’s hesitation to raise the issue stems from China’s sensitivity to what Beijing considers an “internal matter.” China has repeatedly sought to play both active and passive roles on issues that India considers to be an “internal matter”. From raising the Kashmir issue at the UNSC to supporting terrorist actions in the country, Beijing’s meddling has gone too far. If China had shown a modicum of consideration for India’s internal issues or displayed some reciprocity on issues sensitive to India, maintaining neutrality on Uyghurs would make sense.


Conclusion

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India should join other democratic nations on the issue of China's Xinjiang policy. Such an endeavour will certainly have repercussions, but it is in India's interest to test China's resolve on this issue and perhaps use it as leverage to ensure reciprocity from Beijing.

There are many ways in which India could engage with the matter. Taking it before the UN may not be the best way to go forward, as it risks increased activism from China on Kashmir. Joining the global alliance of democratic countries will not be a prudent option. But a first step can be for India's political leaders to issue statements condemning Beijing. New Delhi can also provide an avenue for Uyghur activists to raise their voice. Such an effort should begin with granting these activists visa and permission to call the attention of the Indian public to their plight.

New Delhi can utilise its diplomatic prowess in its neighbourhood to nudge countries such as the Maldives, Bangladesh and Afghanistan to take a stand. Like India, these countries have officially remained silent. Given the anti-China attitude in the new government of Maldives, which is also a Muslim-majority country, India's support might help its leaders to be more vocal on the issue. If New Delhi manages to turn around Dhaka and Male, there will be tremendous pressure on Islamabad to assuage domestic concerns.

There is a lesson to be learnt on how India played the Tibet card during the border confrontation in Ladakh. The deployment of the Special Frontier Force (SFF), which draws its cadre from the Tibetan diaspora, served a dual purpose of playing into the psychology of China's military and raising stakes for internal security in Tibet. By exploiting the internal weakness of China, India delivered a strong message. Given the fraught relations between the two countries and China's increased belligerence, India would greatly benefit from adding the Uyghur card to its diplomatic arsenal.⁸⁸ 

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