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China Primer: Uyghurs

Uyghurs (also spelled “Uighurs”) are a Muslim ethnic group living primarily in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) in the far northwest of the People’s Republic of China (PRC). They have garnered the attention of U.S. policymakers, particularly since 2018 following reports of the mass internment of Uyghurs in “reeducation” centers. The detentions are part of a PRC government effort to systematically transform the thought and behavior of Uyghurs and forcefully assimilate them into Chinese society, which some observers believe is destroying Uyghur culture and identity. The U.S. government has responded by implementing targeted restrictions on trade with Xinjiang and imposing visa and economic sanctions on some PRC officials.

Uyghurs speak a Turkic language and practice a moderate form of Sunni Islam. The XUAR, often referred to simply as Xinjiang (pronounced “SHIN-jyahng”), is a provincial-level administrative region that comprises about one-sixth of China’s total land area and borders eight countries. The region is rich in minerals, produces over 80% of China’s cotton, and has China’s largest coal and natural gas reserves and a fifth of its oil reserves. Xinjiang is a strategic region for the PRC’s Belt and Road Initiative, which involves Chinese-backed infrastructure projects and energy development in neighboring Central and South Asia.



Sources: CRS, using U.S. Department of State Boundaries; Esri; Global Administrative Areas; DeLorme; NGA.

All or parts of the area comprising Xinjiang have been under the political control or influence of Chinese, Mongols, and Russians for long spans of the region’s documented history, along with periods of Turkic or Uyghur rule. Uyghurs played a role in the establishment of two short-lived, semi-autonomous East Turkestan Republics in the 1930s and 1940s. The PRC asserted control over Xinjiang in 1949 and established the XUAR in 1955. Uyghurs once were the predominant ethnic group in the XUAR; they now make up roughly half of the region’s population of 24.8 million, according to official sources. The government long has provided economic incentives for Han Chinese, the majority ethnic group in China, to migrate

to the region; Hans now constitute up to 40% of the XUAR population and the majority in Urumqi, the capital.

Since an outbreak of Uyghur demonstrations and ethnic unrest in 2009, and sporadic clashes involving Uyghurs and Xinjiang security personnel that spiked between 2013 and 2015, PRC leaders have carried out large scale criminal arrests and intensive security measures in the XUAR, aimed at combatting “terrorism, separatism and religious extremism.” Three violent incidents in China in 2014 purportedly carried out by Uyghurs against Han civilians were described by some outside observers as acts of terrorism, and some experts argue that the PRC government has used counterterrorism as a pretext for carrying out forced assimilation policies and mass detentions.

Forced Assimilation

Since 2017, in tandem with a national policy referred to as “Sinicization,” XUAR authorities have instituted measures to assimilate Uyghurs into Han Chinese society and reduce the influences of Uyghur, Islamic, and Arabic cultures and languages. The XUAR government enacted a law in 2017 that prohibits “expressions of extremification” and placed restrictions upon dress and grooming, traditional Uyghur customs, and adherence to Islamic dietary laws (halal). Thousands of mosques in Xinjiang reportedly have been closed, demolished, or “Sinicized,” whereby Islamic motifs and Arabic writings have been removed.

The XUAR has carried out a campaign to forcefully reduce birth rates or “illegal births” among Uyghurs. Furthermore, forced family separations among Uyghurs have become widespread. Nearly half a million Uyghur and other minority children in Xinjiang reportedly attend state-run boarding schools, where they are taught in Mandarin, the national language, rather than their ethnic language. Many Uyghurs have been assigned to employment in factories that are far from their families and communities.

In 2016, when Chen Quanguo was appointed Communist Party Secretary of the XUAR, the government stepped up security and surveillance measures aimed at the Uyghur population. Such actions included the installation of thousands of neighborhood police kiosks and ubiquitous placement of surveillance cameras, collection of biometric data for identification purposes, and more intrusive monitoring of Internet use. The central government sent an estimated one million officials from outside Xinjiang, mostly ethnic Han, to live temporarily in Uyghur homes to assess their compliance with government policies.

Mass Internment

Between 2017 and 2020, Xinjiang authorities arbitrarily detained between 1 million and 1.8 million Muslims by some estimates, mostly Uyghurs and smaller numbers of

ethnic Kazakhs and Kyrgyz as well as Hui, in “reeducation” centers. Held on the basis of past religious, cultural, scholarly, social, and online activities that the government now deems as extremist, also referred to as “pre-criminal offenses,” detainees were compelled to renounce many of their Islamic beliefs and customs as a condition for their release. According to some former detainees, treatment and conditions in the centers included factory labor, crowded and unsanitary conditions, food deprivation, psychological pressure, sexual abuse, and medical neglect and torture, sometimes resulting in deaths of detainees while in the camps or soon after their release. Since 2019, the XUAR government has released some detainees, sent others to factory labor, and kept many in pre-trial detention facilities or prosecuted them as criminals and imprisoned them.

Forced Labor

The PRC government has pressured many Uyghurs, including former detainees, into accepting employment in textile, apparel, agricultural, consumer electronics, and other labor-intensive industries, in Xinjiang and other provinces. Some factories utilizing Uyghur labor are tied to global supply chains. Uyghurs who refuse to accept such employment, which often involves heavy surveillance and political indoctrination, may face detention.

Selected U.S. Responses

Beijing Winter Olympics. In December 2021, the Biden Administration announced that it would not send a U.S. official delegation to the Winter Olympic Games in Beijing, due to “the PRC’s ongoing genocide and crimes against humanity in Xinjiang and other human rights abuses.” U.S. athletes, however, would still be allowed to compete.

Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act. On June 17, 2020, former President Trump signed the Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act of 2020 (P.L. 116-145) into law. The act aims to impose sanctions on PRC officials determined to be responsible for human rights abuses against Uyghurs and other Muslim minority groups in Xinjiang. The act also mandated a number of reports from the executive branch on subjects including the extent of human rights violations and abuses in Xinjiang, the implications for U.S. security and economic interests, and U.S. efforts to protect Uyghur-Americans and ethnic Uyghurs from China residing in the United States from harassment or intimidation by officials or agents of the PRC government.

Targeted Sanctions and Investment Restrictions. The United States has to date publicly designated 10 current or former PRC officials for sanctions in relation to human rights abuses in Xinjiang, pursuant to Executive Order (E.O.) 13818, which implements and builds on the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act (Title XII, Subtitle F of P.L. 114-328). Among those designated is XUAR Party Secretary Chen Quanguo. Also designated are two entities, the Xinjiang Public Security Bureau and the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps, a state-run paramilitary organization with major economic interests in the XUAR. The State Department also has announced visa restrictions against Xinjiang officials and immediate family members pursuant to other authorities. The Treasury Department in recent months also has begun imposing

restrictions on U.S. investments in certain PRC companies involved in the surveillance and tracking of religious and ethnic minorities in China.

Import Restrictions. Since October 2019, U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) has issued a series of announcements blocking the import of goods suspected of involving Xinjiang-related forced labor pursuant to the forced labor import ban under Section 307 of the Tariff Act of 1930. In December 2021, Congress passed and President Biden signed into law P.L. 117-78. Among other provisions, the law creates a presumption that goods produced or manufactured in Xinjiang, or by entities with certain ties to Xinjiang, are made with forced labor, unless CBP affirmatively determines otherwise.

Export Controls. Since October 2019, the U.S. Department of Commerce has added 67 PRC companies and public security entities to the Bureau of Industry and Security (BIS) “entity list” under the Export Administration Regulations (EAR) specifically due to their connection to human rights abuses or repression in Xinjiang. A number of other PRC entities have also been added, due in whole or in part, to their connection to human rights abuses in China. The actions impose licensing requirements prior to the sale or transfer of certain U.S. items to these entities, with a presumption of license denial for most items.

Atrocities Determination. On January 19, 2021, the State Department announced that it had determined that the PRC had committed crimes against humanity and genocide in Xinjiang, and called on multilateral and juridical bodies to pursue accountability. The Biden Administration has indicated concurrence with this determination.

East Turkestan Islamic Movement

The PRC government has attributed some past deadly incidents in the XUAR to the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), which it portrays as a Uyghur separatist and terrorist group with ties to global terrorist organizations. At its height in the late-1990s and early-2000s, ETIM was a small, loosely organized and poorly financed group based in Afghanistan and Pakistan that lacked weapons and had little contact with global jihadist organizations, according to some experts. The Turkestan Islamic Party (TIP), which some reports refer to as the successor to ETIM, emerged around 2004. The U.S. government designated ETIM as a terrorist organization under Executive Order 13224 in 2002 (to block terrorist financing) and in 2004 placed ETIM on the Terrorist Exclusion List (TEL), which bars members of terrorist groups from entering the United States. The Trump Administration removed ETIM from the TEL in 2020, stating that “for more than a decade, there has been no credible evidence that ETIM continues to exist.” United Nations sanctions monitors differ in their assessment, reporting in 2021 that ETIM had a presence in Afghanistan and Syria.

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