

# CRS Report for Congress

Received through the CRS Web

## **China's Relations with Central Asian States and Problems with Terrorism**

**December 17, 2001**

Dewardric L. McNeal  
Foreign Affairs Analyst  
Foreign Affairs, Defense and Trade Division

# China's Relations with Central Asian States and Problems with Terrorism

## Summary

Over a number of years, the United States has been actively engaged in efforts to improve human rights conditions in the People's Republic of China (PRC). In the United States Congress, numerous pieces of legislation have been passed that censure, and in many cases impose sanctions against, the PRC for violations of human rights and religious freedoms. However, some analysts suggest that the events of September 11, 2001, may make it more difficult to pressure the Chinese government on human rights and religious freedom violations particularly as they relate to the plight of Uighur Muslims in northwestern Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR). They point out that China may be seeking concessions from the U.S. regarding Xinjiang in exchange for China's cooperation in the global campaign against terrorism.

According to various reports, some Uighur groups are engaged in alleged "terrorist" activity in Xinjiang and throughout Central Asia—including Afghanistan. Although the Chinese and Central Asian governments have been making claims of this nature for a number of years, it was not until after the events of September 11, 2001 that Western governments seemed interested in learning about the composition of the Uighur resistance movements in Xinjiang and how they operate in and around the Sino-Russian-Central Asian Corridor.

Analysts point out that a number of Uighur groups are reportedly associated with such elements as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, Hizb-ut-Tahrir, Jamaat-i-Islami, and Tableegi Jamaat, groups that are allegedly involved in subversive activities throughout Central Asia. Additionally, various reports suggest that links exist between the Al-Qaeda/Taliban forces and some Uighurs and other Central Asian groups operating in China and Central Asia. These alleged linkages have been a major source of consternation among Chinese and Central Asian officials, who argue that the Taliban movement in Afghanistan has helped to bring about a rise in radical Islamic militancy and greater instability in the region. However, human rights groups complain that the PRC is using the international campaign against terrorism as a pretext to intensify its crackdowns on Uighurs in the XUAR.

Additionally, some analysts point out that the September 11 attacks adversely affected plans of the newly formed regional organization known as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) made up of China, Russia, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan. Some analysts thought that the SCO had the potential to be a vital player in the post-Taliban regional security and rebuilding arrangement, especially since the SCO member states have been combating terrorism, extremism, and separatism (the so-called "three-evil forces") in Central Asia and Xinjiang during the past few years. However, the United States has seized the initiative on the issue of combating terrorism and has formed a global coalition including key SCO member states, such as Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan. This suggests that in the interim, at least, China and the SCO, may play a reduced role in the region as long as the US-led coalition is engaged in the war in Afghanistan.

## Contents

Background and Overview .....	1
U.S. Policy Implications .....	3
History and Composition of Uighur Movement .....	5
Armed Uighur Groups Alleged to be Active in Xinjiang .....	7
Other Extremist Groups and the Uighur Opposition .....	9
Non-Violent Uighur Groups and Associations .....	11
Human Rights Issues In Xinjiang .....	12
Shanghai Cooperation Organization .....	13
SCO and the Aftermath of September 11 .....	14
The New ‘Great Game’ .....	14
Bilateral versus Multilateral Cooperation .....	15

# China's Relations with Central Asian States and Problems with Terrorism

This report provides an overview of the Muslim separatist movement in China's northwestern Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region, China's attempts to stifle activities which it considers terrorism, and implications for U.S. policy. Some analysts suggest that the U.S.-led campaign against terrorism may make it difficult to pressure the Chinese government on human rights and religious freedoms, particularly as they relate to Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang.

China also has reportedly stepped up its suppression of Uighur Muslims following the attacks in the United States on September 11, 2001. A policy question for the United States is how to balance the anti-terrorist campaign with traditional concerns over human rights in China's western region, and how to react should Beijing use the threat of terrorism to abrogate rights of autonomy in Xinjiang as provided for in China's constitution.

## Background and Overview

Over one hundred years after Qing Dynasty troops gained control over East Turkestan,<sup>1</sup> currently known as Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region, some ethnic Uighurs in Xinjiang continue to aspire to reestablish sovereignty over their homeland. Uighurs did briefly establish the Republic of East Turkestan during the Chinese civil war (1945-1949), but self-rule came to an abrupt end when Communist troops entered Xinjiang in 1949. The Chinese government immediately began to consolidate its control over Xinjiang by sending retired ethnic Han Chinese soldiers into Xinjiang to form new units called "Production and Construction" Corps (Bingtuan).<sup>2</sup> The Chinese government has continued to resettle the Xinjiang area with ethnic Han Chinese migrants and with other ethnic minority groups. This has exacerbated tensions with the Uighurs, who have witnessed the Han population in Xinjiang, once a mere 6 to 7 percent, balloon to approximately 40 to 45 percent of Xinjiang's total population.<sup>3</sup>

Fearing continued cultural marginalization and religious persecution, Uighurs have become increasingly virulent in their protests against Chinese rule in Xinjiang. As a result of these protests and increased violence, in April 1996 the PRC

---

<sup>1</sup> Qing Dynasty troops after encountering strong resistance to Uighur fighters established its rule in 1884 and renamed East Turkestan, Xinjiang, which means "new frontier" or "new territory".

<sup>2</sup> See Human Rights Watch Report, *Xinjiang, China's Restive Northwest*, 1998.

<sup>3</sup> See People's Republic of China, Year 2000 Census.

government launched a series of new crackdowns and a controversial “Strike Hard” (Yan Da) campaign to reestablish order in Xinjiang. This has resulted in a number of Uighur leaders being killed, jailed, or driven into exile.<sup>4</sup>

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the establishment of independent states by the former Soviet Central Asian republics, encouraged some Uighurs in their aspirations to reestablish an independent homeland. According to some analysts familiar with the region, many Uighurs in Xinjiang felt that having their own state “cuts to the core of their ethnic identity and ultimate survival as a culture.”<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, other minorities in Xinjiang, the Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Mongols, all can look to sovereign states that border China, as pillars of “cultural and ethnic pride.”<sup>6</sup> However, with no real chance to see their own dream of an independent homeland become a reality because of the PRC government’s strong determination to retain control of Xinjiang at all cost, a number of underground separatist groups began to spring up throughout Xinjiang and the Uighur diaspora.<sup>7</sup>

The PRC’s Xinjiang fears were compounded by a number of significant events going on in Russia, Afghanistan, and Central Asia beginning in 1996. The Russians were prosecuting a second war in the break-away republic of Chechnya. Tajikistan was still suffering from the effects of its civil war. And the Uzbek government, led by President Islam Karimov, was dealing with an increasing threat from Islamic fundamentalists looking to establish a radical Islamic state in Uzbekistan. China feared that all of these events, which involved “Islamic fundamentalist” elements, would spread to Xinjiang and radicalize the Uighur groups in Xinjiang. However, the one event that would prove the most problematic to China and the entire Central Asian region was the fall of Kabul, Afghanistan to the Taliban militia in September 1996.<sup>8</sup>

The Taliban movement has been accused by leaders in Beijing and secular leaders throughout Central Asia of spreading its radical views of Islam into many parts of Central and South Asia, leading in some cases to a rise of “Islamic fundamentalist” groups and activity, including bombing, assassinations, and other acts of terror and subversion. In particular, China and the Central Asian states over the years have charged that the Taliban and their close associate, Osama bin Laden, have been funding, arming, and training a number of Uighurs, Kyrgyz, Kazakhs, and Uzbeks in camps located inside Afghanistan.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> See Uyghuramerican.org media reports, “ Central Asia: Uighurs Say States Yield To Chinese,” by Jean-Christopher Peuch, [http://www.uyghuramerican.org/mediareports/2001/cenasiayieldtoCHin.html].

<sup>5</sup> See Asia Week Inside Story China: Beijing vs. Islam, by Michael Winchester, [http://www.asiaweek.com/asiaweek/97/1024/is1.html].

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> The Scotsman, Uighurs warn of return to terror, by Damien McElroy, May 31, 2000.

<sup>8</sup> See transcripts from BBC News Report: *Who Are the Taleban, December 20, 2000.*

<sup>9</sup> BBC Monitoring Central Asia, “Central Asians, Uighurs training in Pakistan, Afghanistan (continued...)”

In 1996, China, Russia, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan formed a group known as the “Shanghai-Five” to serve as a bulwark against the spread of Islamic fundamentalist subversion. It was initially designed to be an informal grouping to discuss ways to resolve old border disputes and fortify common borders against terrorist and separatist activity. However, the group’s members soon decided they needed to cooperate more thoroughly to deal with what they called the “three evil forces”—terrorism, separatism, and extremism.<sup>10</sup> In the summer of 2001, the Shanghai-Five admitted Uzbekistan into the organization and established a permanent regional group called the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). The new organization approved two joint communiques that stressed its intentions to cooperate on combating terrorism and to establish an anti-terrorist center in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan.

However, the terrorist attacks against the United States on September 11, 2001 appear to have caused an unintended halt to a number of the SCO plans, at least for the near term. Shortly after the September attacks, the United States made counter terrorism its number one priority. Some China and Central Asian analysts indicate that now that the United States is taking on global terrorism, particularly in the Central Asian region, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization is beginning to feel a bit “overshadowed” and marginalized.<sup>11</sup> Surprisingly to some, Russia, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan are all providing robust support for the U.S.-led counter-terrorism effort. Analysts say that with the United States now “monopolizing” the agenda on anti-terrorism in the region, the Chinese are starting to fear that a major component of their Central Asian geopolitical strategy is being gradually neutralized.<sup>12</sup>

## U.S. Policy Implications

The attacks on September 11, 2001 and the U.S.-led retaliation in Afghanistan has wide-ranging policy implications for U.S. China policy in the short term, and may cause a number of policy shifts and challenges in the long term. One of the most difficult challenges is how the United States will balance its need to create a broad-based multi-state coalition to fight against terrorism with traditional American obligations to protect and defend religious freedoms and human rights. According to a number of analysts, China, Russia, and the Central Asian states, in exchange for lending support and cooperation to the U.S. in the fight against global terrorism, may want “support for their campaigns against groups they view as terrorists,” and a reduction in the level of criticism over what the United States views as human rights

---

<sup>9</sup> (...continued)

for “subversive” acts,” July, 11, 2000.

<sup>10</sup> See Institute for Peace and Conflict Studies article No. 521, Shanghai Five: Emerging Foreign Policy Dimensions, by P.A. Mathew, July 15, 2001.

<sup>11</sup> Wall Street Journal, “Chinese Goals Take A Backseat As U.S. Rises To The Fore In Asia,” by Andrew Higgins and Charles Hutzler, October 19, 2001.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

abuses.<sup>13</sup> This may anger religious and human rights activists, who may view it as capitulation of American values and principles. Although it may be important to review and reformulate those policies to make it easier to fulfill the requirements and goals of a multi-state coalition, some policy-makers argue that an equally important consideration for U.S. policymakers pursuing the campaign against terrorism is ensuring that the terrorism campaign does not give a blank check to authoritarian regimes pursuing their own domestic agendas of civil, political, and religious repression. There is also the question of whether the U.S.-led campaign against international terrorism should apply to groups seeking religious and political rights in authoritarian countries. On the one hand, it may appear that some Uighurs' ties with extremist groups could justify a crackdown by Beijing similar to that occurring in other countries. On the other hand, the political unrest by some Uighurs could be a logical response to suppression of their constitutional rights and the settlement of traditional Uighur lands by ethnic Chinese. The policy dilemma for the United States, therefore is the degree to which it may decline to react to possible human rights violations against Uighurs in Xinjiang in return for Chinese cooperation in the campaign against terrorism.

In the months leading up to the events of September 11, 2001, the United States and China seemed headed toward becoming "strategic competitors" or even adversaries. Before September 11, 2001, Sino-U.S. relations were plagued by a number of controversial issues such as national missile defense, U.S. weapons sales to Taiwan, the EP-3 spy plane collision, Chinese missile exports to Pakistan and elsewhere, and continued criticisms over China's violations of human rights and religious freedoms. But the tragedy of September 11, 2001, seemed to have pushed Sino-US relations in a different direction. The Chinese began to stress a common interest in combating terrorism, and U.S. policy makers began building a broad-based multinational coalition against terrorism that would include the PRC. Some see the anti-terrorism campaign as a new potential framework for a more constructive and cooperative relationship.

Despite this new cooperative environment and concessions that some in the foreign policy establishment consider as necessary to form the multi-state coalition against terrorism, the Bush Administration has also shown a willingness to stress the values and principles of human rights and religious freedoms, particularly with regard to China. Although the United States has lifted some sanctions against nations that are cooperating in the war on terrorism (e.g., Pakistan), neither the Bush Administration nor Congress, which has oversight authority on the waiving of sanctions placed on the PRC, has shown an inclination toward extending a waiver of any existing sanctions placed on the PRC.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> South China Morning Post, "Beijing Moscow support Afghan coalition government." October 11, 2001.

<sup>14</sup> There are a number of existing sanctions contained in Section 902 of P.L. 101-246, put in place after the Tiananmen crackdown, which ban the sale and export of a number of items to China, such as criminal detection and crowd control instruments, munitions including helicopters and helicopter parts, and satellites for launch by Chinese launch vehicles. Shortly after the September 11 attacks, several media reports hinted that in exchange for Chinese (continued...)

China reportedly expects the United States to moderate criticisms over the PRC's handling of Uighur separatism in Xinjiang. However, at the APEC Summit in Shanghai, in October 2001, President Bush made a statement that was interpreted as a strong reminder that the U.S. does not approve of China's policies toward ethnic minorities and does not intend to forgo its responsibilities to support human rights and religious freedoms. Bush stated that the Chinese should not attempt to use the war on terrorism as an "excuse to persecute minorities."<sup>15</sup> China nevertheless, insists that there are a number of Uighur groups that are actively involved in cross border "terrorism" and that it has the right to combat what it views as "terrorism" within and around its borders.

Also China and the SCO are being overshadowed by the U.S. presence and leadership in Central Asia at the moment, but Beijing may attempt to reassert its influence as a power broker in the region when the fighting in Afghanistan has died down by revitalizing the SCO mechanism. However, the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 and the U.S.-led retaliation has caused a range of geopolitical realignments among nations in Central Asia, most notably among the member states of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. After the attacks on the United States, a number of SCO members immediately pledged full support and cooperation to the United States. This apparent geopolitical realignment, combined with the possibility of long-term U.S. troop deployment in Central Asia, may raise concerns among the military and political elites in Beijing that the United States is engaged in a strategy of long term "containment" or "encirclement" of China on both its eastern and western borders. Analysts caution that the PRC has not lost its resolve to extend its sphere of influence into Central Asia nor has it abandoned its geopolitical strategy of using the SCO as its primary vehicle to achieve this goal. This could mean an increase in the possibilities for competition between China and the United States over influence in Central Asia.

## History and Composition of Uighur Movement

By the 14<sup>th</sup> century, ethnic Uighurs, a Turkic-speaking people from Central Asia were fully converted followers of Islam. They lived in ancient cities of great wealth and learning like Tashkent, in modern day Uzbekistan, and Kashgar in modern day Xinjiang, Western China. However, between the mid-1700's and the mid-1800's China conquered most of the Uighur homeland. The ethnic Manchu of Northern China<sup>16</sup> and Czarist Russian empires annexed the entire region of Central Asia by the late 1800's. Turkic-speaking peoples from West and East Turkestan were eventually

---

<sup>14</sup> (...continued)

support and cooperation in the war on terrorism, some of these sanctions would be eased or dropped.

<sup>15</sup> The Washington Post, "China Vows To Help in Terror Fight," by Mike Allen and Philip P. Pan, October 19, 2001.

<sup>16</sup> The Manchu ethnic group launched the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) after overthrowing the ethnic Han Chinese of the Ming Dynasty. It was the Manchus that first incorporated Uighur areas in Central Asia and later brutally repressed a rebellion in the late 1800's.



brought under the sovereignty of these two empires. Although the Uighurs reestablished East Turkestan just after World War II, Chinese Communist forces reincorporated East Turkestan into China at the end of the Chinese civil war, and East Turkestan became known as the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region. The name was supposed to reflect the large degree of autonomy granted by the PRC to Uighurs in the constitution. However, some Uighurs allege that the name is only symbolic and that little autonomy and rights are enjoyed by Uighurs presently.

In 1991, Central Asian Muslims such as the Kazakhs, Uzbeks, Tajiks, Turkmen, and Krgyz,—ethnic groups of the former Soviet republics—finally won their independence and set up sovereign states. For the first time in several hundred years they governed their own independent homelands. Although the Uighurs did not gain independence like their Central Asian cousins, some saw the sovereignty gains of the newly independent states of Central Asia as a source of inspiration for their own struggle and as a safety zone from which to organize an independence movement. Analysts note that the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region shares a relatively porous border with Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, and Afghanistan,<sup>17</sup> and according to a number of reports these states have increasingly become a source of ideology, information gathering, arms procurement, and training for some Uighur groups in their struggle against PRC rule.<sup>18</sup>

Although the Uighur opposition to Chinese rule has existed in many forms throughout history, it has become more violent in recent years. Although some Uighurs have been trying to attain independence for a number of years, they have remained largely out of the view of mainstream media and have gained relatively little support from the international community. Some analysts argue that this is because the Uighur community lacks a single charismatic leader like Tibet's Dalai Lama, and because the Uighur resistance groups are largely fractured and disorganized, and lack the ability to gain the full attention of key states such as Britain and the United States.<sup>19</sup> Other analysts and human rights activists argue that the reason that the Uighur resistance movement has trouble gaining robust support and international attention is because it lacks a well funded lobby effort such as that of Tibet and Taiwan for advocating its cause in the West. These analysts point out that Uighurs are generally extremely poor and geographically isolated in a corner of the world that is largely forgotten and overwhelmingly populated by Muslims.<sup>20</sup> Analysts also argue that Beijing has kept international attention away from the Uighur resistance

---

<sup>17</sup> Xinjiang Autonomous Region shares a 5,000km border with the five states mentioned above, roughly 1,500km of the border has Turkic-speaking peoples on both sides.

<sup>18</sup> Center for Computational Science at the University of Kentucky, "Uighurs' Independence is Important to the Survival of Their People," by Gwynne Dyer, [[http://www.ccs.uky.edu/~rakhim/doc\\_files/gwynne\\_dyer.html](http://www.ccs.uky.edu/~rakhim/doc_files/gwynne_dyer.html)].

<sup>19</sup> Dialog.com, "International Data Reference on Terrorist, Guerilla and Insurgent Groups-Asia, Indo China and the Pacific Rim," May 1999, [[http://www.dialog.com/info/home/australia/fastways/terrorism\\_in\\_china.html](http://www.dialog.com/info/home/australia/fastways/terrorism_in_china.html)].

<sup>20</sup> Christian Science Monitor, "Roots of a Race Riot," by Robert Marquand, July 18, 2001.

movement by severely restricting access to Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region.<sup>21</sup> According to these analysts, the PRC did not want to cast any light on the “brutal tactics” that police have used to stamp out the resistance to Chinese rule.<sup>22</sup>

However, the events of September 11, 2001 have turned the attention of many analysts and journalists to the Uighur struggle. In particular, there appears to be interest in a number of reports about alleged links between some Uighur groups and the radical Islamic elements in Central Asia. Specifically, analysts have focused on the allegations that linkages exist between Osama bin Laden’s Al-Qaeda network and some Uighur groups throughout Central Asia. In a November 2001 briefing, PRC Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhu Bangzao, listed more than 10 separate organizations based in Central Asia, Afghanistan, and Xinjiang that he accused of “conducting terrorist violence” in Xinjiang and other parts of China.<sup>23</sup>

### **Armed Uighur Groups Alleged to be Active in Xinjiang**

A number of armed Uighur groups are believed to be active in the opposition to what they view as Chinese “occupation” of East Turkestan. Some of these groups advocate total separation from China and have resorted to violence against the PRC over the last several years. In late 1990, the level of violence in Xinjiang began to increase when a small uprising erupted in Baren, a town near Kashgar.<sup>24</sup> The PRC government cracked down swiftly and harshly, and local security forces were given wide ranging power to root out any element that “harms national unity” and “the solidarity of ethnic groups or social stability.”<sup>25</sup> The Baren uprising, reportedly led by Abdul Kasim, laid the foundation for an underground armed struggle against the Chinese in Xinjiang. In 1995, PRC security forces reportedly found a stowaway clutch of some 4,000 sticks of dynamite, 600 guns with ammunition, and 3,000kg of explosives.<sup>26</sup> In April 1996 Chinese security forces arrested more than 1,700 suspected “terrorists.” One month later a high ranking official of the Xinjiang Peoples Political Consultative Conference<sup>27</sup> was assassinated, and a number of bombings

---

<sup>21</sup> The Wall Street Journal, “China Provides Extensive Briefing On Separatists in Xinjiang,” by Charles Hutzler, November 15, 2001.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> See Laogai Research Foundation Special Report, *The World Bank and Chinese Military: Ignorance– Incompetence– or Cover Up?*, April 4, 1996.

<sup>25</sup> Dialog.com, “International Data Reference on Terrorist, Guerilla and Insurgent Groups– Asia, Indo China and Pacific Rim, May 1999, [www.dialog.com/info/home/australia/fastways/terrorism\_in\_china.html].

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> The Political Consultative Conference an entity controlled by the Communist Party that is made up of minority or non-Communist political parties. It has no real power and serves no real political purpose such as being an opposition party to the Chinese Communist Party. There are National Peoples Consultative Conference and several Provincial Political Consultative Conferences in China.

occurred along Chinese railroad lines.<sup>28</sup> Uighur armed resistance groups allegedly detonated three time bombs on buses in Urumqi on the day of Deng Xiaoping's funeral. By late 1998, China became concerned that the violence in Xinjiang was spiraling out of control. Beijing began to pressure the Central Asian states to assist with efforts to identify groups and leaders throughout the Diaspora. Beijing also insisted that any Xinjiang Uighur found outside Xinjiang be extradited to the PRC, and that all outside sources of assistance and shelter for the Xinjiang-based Uighur movement be cut off.

The PRC has accused a number of Xinjiang based Uighur groups of committing "terrorist" acts in Xinjiang and other parts of China and Central Asia. In light of the global anti-terror campaign, some western journalists have begun to focus more attention on these groups. They include:

***United Revolutionary Front of Eastern Turkistan***— led by 77 year old Yusupbek Mukhlisi, also known as Modan Mukhlisi. This group claims to have more than thirty armed units working in and around Xinjiang, including expert bomb makers. Mukhlisi fled China in 1960, and for more than thirty years he advocated peaceful resistance to what he calls "Chinese rule" over East Turkestan.<sup>29</sup> However, this relatively moderate policy was disavowed in March 1997 when the United National Revolutionary Front of East Turkestan and two other Kazakhstan-based Uighur groups issued a joint declaration stating that they were "taking up arms against Chinese oppression."<sup>30</sup> In a recent article published in the *Japan Times*, Mukhlisi boasts of having a "well developed" movement in Xinjiang and says that he has "twenty-two million Uighurs" ready to conduct armed struggle against the Chinese. He claims to have "ties to several groups" across the border in Kazakhstan.<sup>31</sup>

***Organization for the Liberation of Uighurstan***— led by Ashir Vakhidi. This group is said to be internally divided over many personal and political issues. Reportedly these divisions include disagreement over whether to use East Turkestan or Uighurstan as the name of a Uighur sovereign state.<sup>32</sup> However, the group is committed to armed struggle against Chinese "occupation" of the "Uighur homeland."

***Wolves of Lop Nor***— this group has not publicly listed its leader, but it is reported to have claimed responsibility for a number of bombings on trains and for several

<sup>28</sup> Dialog.com, "International Data Reference on Terrorist, Guerilla and Insurgent Groups—Asia, Indo China and Pacific Rim, May 1999, [[www.dialog.com/info/home/australia/fastways/terrorism\\_in\\_china.html](http://www.dialog.com/info/home/australia/fastways/terrorism_in_china.html)].

<sup>29</sup> Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty Online, "Kazakhstan: Exiled Uighurs Step Up Fight Against Beijing, by Jeremy Bransten, 14 October 1997, [<http://www.rferl.org/nca/features/1997/10/F.RU.971014135113.html>].

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> The Japan Times Online, "Fighting for independence in the shadow of a Goliath," by Russell Working, November 6, 2001, [<http://www.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/getarticle.p15?eo20011106al.html>].

<sup>32</sup> Dialogue.com, "International Data Reference on Terrorist, Guerilla and Insurgent Groups—Asia, Indo China and the Pacific Rim, May 1999.

assassinations in Xinjiang. According to reports, this group released a statement to Taiwan radio stating that all of its attacks are in response to “suppression of pro-independence activism” of Uighurs in Xinjiang by Chinese government forces. Additionally, following a Beijing bombing, this group revealed that the attack had been planned by Uighur exiles in Kazakhstan and that more events would be planned. Although there have been no incidents or threats against Chinese nuclear facilities, some China watchers point out that the city of Lop Nor in Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region, home of the “Wolves,” is also the site of one of China’s largest nuclear test sites.<sup>33</sup>

***Xinjiang Liberation Organization and Uighur Liberation Organization (ULO)***—reportedly active in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. According to some reports, they are responsible for the assassinations of Uighurs who they viewed as “collaborators” with the PRC and Central Asian governments.<sup>34</sup> There are also reports that Uighurs from this group are dispersed throughout the region;<sup>35</sup> and that the countries of Tajikistan, China, Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, and the Russian republic of Chechnya are home to ULO members.<sup>36</sup>

***Home of East Turkistan Youth***—(branded as Xinjiang’s Hamas) is a radical group thought to be committed to armed struggle against the Chinese in Xinjiang. This group reportedly has over 2,000 members and allegedly has undergone explosives training in camps inside Afghanistan.<sup>37</sup>

***Free Turkistan Movement***—led by Uighur and reported “Islamic fundamentalist” Abdul Kasim, this group led an uprising in April 1990 in the Xinjiang town of Baren. Although figures vary, PRC officials report 22 people were killed in the incident. The Baren incident touched off harsh crackdowns on religious activity throughout Xinjiang. Additionally, Chinese officials claim that the weapons used in the Baren incident came from Afghan Mujahadeen.<sup>38</sup>

## **Other Extremist Groups and the Uighur Opposition**

Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region is home to an estimated 10 million Uighurs. According to some reports there are an additional 500,000 Uighurs in “Western Turkestan,” which includes Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> See stratfor.com, “Chinese Cleanup Targets Uighurs,” May 16, 2001, [<http://www.stratfor.com/asia/commentary/0105162140.html>].

<sup>35</sup> These reports from Strategic Forecasting Service, an analytical news service, are attributed to Aziz Soltobaev, on the staff of the American University of Kyrgyzstan.

<sup>36</sup> See Stratfor.com, “Chinese Cleanup Targets Uighurs,” May 16, 2001, [<http://www.stratfor.com/asia/commentary/0105162140.html>].

<sup>37</sup> Federation of American Scientist: Intelligence Resource Program, “Uighur Militants: Committee for Eastern Turkistan.”

<sup>38</sup> The Pioneer, “China Tries to quell the Xinjiang uprising, by Aditya Bhagat, February 27, 1997.

Turkmenistan, and another estimated 150,000 Uighurs in Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, Western Europe, Turkey, and the United States.<sup>39</sup> According to the figures and information listed above, the Uighur Diaspora is surprisingly large and spread throughout several countries. Chinese government officials and a number of Western sources suggest that some of the groups in the Uighur Diaspora are linked to extremist elements in the countries in which they reside. PRC officials allege that these include links to Osama bin Laden's terrorist network. On June 9, 2000, a Bishkek journalist named Aleksandr Knyazev, stated what the Chinese government has believed for several years, that "it is widely known" that "Uighurs are fighting on the Taliban side" in the war in Afghanistan.<sup>40</sup> Knyazev named several well known groups, such as the Hizb-ut-Tahrir Party and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan as having trained and recruited Uighurs. He also stated that he had the opportunity to meet and interview a Uighur captured by the Anti-Taliban forces in Northern Afghanistan; the captured Uighur came from the small town of Aksu in Xinjiang. According to comments made by the Uighur captive, he had received his training in a camp near the Pakistani town of Peshwar.<sup>41</sup>

In another report, the Russian special envoy to Pakistan in September 2000, pointed out that he had identified five camps in Pakistan used to train terrorists, and that there is proof of Chechens, Uzbeks, Tajiks, and Uighurs from China being trained in those camps.<sup>42</sup> According to other reports, some Uighur resistance groups have ties to other groups listed below. This listing, however, does not imply that the groups have significant, or even recognizable, influence on Uighurs living in China.

***Tableeghi Jamaat***— a Pakistani Islamic missionary organization that China believes has supplied Uighurs with arms and recruited Uighurs to train and fight in Afghanistan. In 1998, Krygyz authorities broke up a faction of this group led by a Chinese-born Uighur called 'Kasarli,' showing that China and the Central Asian states were beginning to cooperate on cracking down on the violent groups in Central Asia and Xinjiang.<sup>43</sup> This group has also caused some difficulty in the Chinese-Pakistani relationship over the last couple of years. According to reports that appeared in the ITAR-TASS Russian news agency and Reuters news service in February of 1997, the Chinese government accused this group, and indirectly the Pakistani government, of distributing religious materials in Xinjiang and with being "actively involved" in violence and unrest in Xinjiang.

***Hizb-ut-Tahrir*** (Islamic Revival)— has a number of cells throughout Central Asia. According to some reports, the goal of this group is to create a "Caliphate" or

<sup>39</sup> See Federation of American Scientist: Intelligence Resource Program, "Uighur militants: Committee for Eastern Turkistan."

<sup>40</sup> BBC Monitoring Central Asia, "Central Asians, Uighurs training in Pakistan, Afghanistan for "subversive" acts," July 11, 2000.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> BBC Monitoring South Asia, "Putin envoy says Afghan Taliban training Uighurs, Chechens, Central Asians," September 27, 2000.

<sup>43</sup> Dialogue.com, "International Data Reference on Terrorist, Guerilla and Insurgent Groups-Asia, Indo China and the Pacific Rim, May 1999.

independent state within the territory that includes parts of China's Xinjiang, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan.<sup>44</sup>

***Committee for Eastern Turkistan***— based in Alma-Ata, Kazakhstan, this group was originally formed by Uighur Guerillas who fought against the Peoples Liberation Army from 1944-1949.<sup>45</sup>

***Jamaat-i-Islami***— is Pakistan's largest Islamic political party, and is led by Qazi Hussain Ahmad. Several reports indicate that a number of Uighurs, some say hundreds, have been recruited by Jamaat-i-Islami and trained by the Afghan Mujahadeen.<sup>46</sup>

***Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU)***— military wing is led by Juma Namangani, who has been recently identified as a top Lieutenant to bin Laden and is accused by many Central Asian states and China of actively recruiting and training a number of Uighurs in the IMU's paramilitary centers in the city of Mazar-e-Sharif, Northern Afghanistan. In addition to being linked to the Taliban and Al-Qaeda, the IMU has also been linked to Hizb-ut-Tahrir. The IMU was one of three groups, in addition to the Taliban and Al-Qaeda, named in U.S. President George Bush's address before a joint session of Congress on September 20, 2001. Although not independently confirmed, Namangani was reportedly killed in late November 2001, during a battle with the anti-Taliban forces to retain control over Mazar-e-Sharif.

***Osama bin Laden's Al-Qaeda Organization***— reports suggest that some 6,000 to 7,000 foreign fighters and guerillas are in Afghanistan. These mercenaries reportedly include some who are Pakistani, Kyrgyz, Arab, Uzbek, Tajik, Chechen, and also reportedly includes Uighurs from Xinjiang and other parts of the Uighur Diaspora. Allegedly, most of these foreign mercenaries were funded and trained by Osama bin-Laden's Al-Qaeda organization in Afghanistan.

## **Non-Violent Uighur Groups and Associations**

A number of Uighur groups and individuals advocate only a modicum of autonomy from the PRC. They also claim to want the PRC to only honor its promises of autonomy for minorities as presented in the Chinese Constitution. Some other Uighur groups within Xinjiang and abroad seek independence from the PRC, but seek it through non-violent political activities. For example, there are "Uighur opposition-in-exile" groups in countries such as the United States, Germany, and Turkey. They belong to groups such as the Uyghur American Association and the East Turkestan National Congress, which is a federation of a number of Uighur associations. Some of these non-violent groups, such as the Regional Uighur Organization, also are based

---

<sup>44</sup> See Uyghuramerican.org, "Central Asia: Uighurs Say States Yield To Chinese," by Jean-Christophe Peuch, March 29, 2001.

<sup>45</sup> See Federation of American Scientists: Intelligence Resource Program, "Uighur militants Committee for East Turkistan."

<sup>46</sup> The Pioneer, "China tries to quell the Xinjiang uprising," by Aditya Bhagat, February 27, 1997.

in Central Asia.<sup>47</sup> In addition to these groups and associations, Uighur news groups and media sources are dedicated to reporting on the situation of Uighurs in Xinjiang. For example, the East Turkestan Information Bulletin, published by the East Turkestan Union in Europe (ETUE), a Munich based organization, says that its mission is to “disseminate objective current information on the people, culture and civilization of Eastern Turkestan and to provide a forum for discussion on a wide range of topics and complex issues.”<sup>48</sup> According to some analysts, most of these groups and associations have “consistently advocated peaceful means” to gain their independence from the PRC.

## Human Rights Issues In Xinjiang

Although for a number of years the PRC government has claimed that some Uighur groups are linked to terrorist groups in Central Asia, until recently the allegations were viewed by many in the West as mere “propaganda” or as an excuse to persecute political dissidents in Xinjiang. According to some analysts and rights activists, one reason that Chinese allegations against Uighurs are so highly disregarded by many in the West is that Beijing is prone to group all Uighurs into the “terrorist” category. Since September 11, however, there has been an increase in the number of reports by outside sources about Uighur violence in Xinjiang, and some of the reports make claims similar to those that have been made by the PRC over the past five years.

However, since the terrorist attacks on the United States, a number of international Uighur groups and activists have been concerned that as the U.S. prosecutes the war on terrorism, the Uighur cause will be viewed in a new unfavorable light by the international community. Uighur activists fear that Chinese complaints about terrorism are becoming more accepted in the west. In a recent interview with the *Washington Post*, imprisoned Uighur businesswoman Rebiya Kadeer’s son expressed his concerns that the U.S. will “weaken” its support for human rights among China’s minority populations, “especially the Turkic speaking, Uighur Muslims” of Xinjiang.<sup>49</sup>

According to Turdi Ghoja of the Uyghur American Association, the PRC is taking “advantage of the global war on terrorism” to indulge in “killing, torturing, and imprisoning” Uighurs in Xinjiang “without causing too much criticism from the international community.”<sup>50</sup> Recently, U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights Mary Robinson in a meeting with PRC leaders, stressed that the war on terrorism

---

<sup>47</sup> See Human Rights Watch Backgrounder, China: Human Rights Concerns in Xinjiang, October 11, 2001.

<sup>48</sup> See East Turkestan Information Bulletin, [[http://www.caccp.org/et/etib3\\_5.html#1](http://www.caccp.org/et/etib3_5.html#1)].

<sup>49</sup> Washington Post, “Uighur Activist Back U.S. but Worry Their Cause Will Suffer,” by John Pomfret, October 13, 2001.

<sup>50</sup> See National Review Online’s Guest Comment, “Meanwhile, In China: On Persecution of Muslims, Christians, and the Falun Gong,” by Ann Noonan (Laogai Research Foundation), November 9, 2001.

“must not infringe on the human rights of China’s Muslims.” Robinson told PRC officials that since the September 11 attacks, her office has seen a rise in allegations of “summary executions, imprisonment, and torture” of Uighurs, which is considered a serious violation of the principles embodied in the United Nations Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. China is a signatory of both documents.<sup>51</sup>

Additionally, China has drawn criticism from a number of Uighurs and human rights advocates because it “consistently fails” to live up to its own constitutional provisions governing autonomous regions.<sup>52</sup> For example, Amnesty International cites several instances of Uighurs being detained “merely for being relatives or friends of political prisoners or fugitives,” or they say Uighurs could be detained and held without charge for a number of months, just for rousing suspicions that they are involved in acts deemed harmful to the national security of the state.<sup>53</sup> Chinese Vice Premier Qian Qichen denies these allegations and insists that “China strictly distinguishes the separatists from the rest of the 10 million Chinese Muslims in the Xinjiang region.”<sup>54</sup>

## Shanghai Cooperation Organization

On June 15, 2001, in Shanghai, the heads of states of China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan (Kirghizia), Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, formerly known as the “Shanghai Five” and later the “Shanghai Forum,” released a joint-press communique describing what they called their intention to “raise the Shanghai Five to a higher level” and “build a regional organization of multilateral cooperation covering various fields.”<sup>55</sup> This joint communique announced that the new regional organization would be called the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). The establishment of the SCO, largely spearheaded by the Chinese, is seen by many observers as part of a security strategy to prevent Kazakh or Uyghur separatists from using Central Asian states as a safety zone to plot separatist activities in Xinjiang. It is also seen by some analysts as an organization that the Chinese have used to spread their sphere of influence, both economic and geopolitical, throughout Central Asia.

---

<sup>51</sup> Los Angeles Times, “U.N. Voices Concern Over Rise in Alleged Abuse of Chinese Muslims,” by Anthony Kuhn, November 10, 2001.

<sup>52</sup> See Chinese Constitution *Section VI: Sections 112-122 The Origins of Self Government of National and Autonomous Areas* and *Chapter Two: The Fundamental Rights and Duties of Citizens*, with particular emphasis being placed on Articles 35, 36, and 37.

<sup>53</sup> See Amnesty International On-line, “Peoples Republic of China Uighurs arbitrarily detained and tortured,” February 4, 1999, [<http://www.web.amnesty.org/ai.nsf/print/ASA170051999?OpenDocument>].

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> *BBC Monitoring Asia Pacific*, “China: Press communique of Shanghai summit,” June 16, 2001.



## SCO and the Aftermath of September 11

In the days and weeks after the terrorist attacks on the U.S. in September 2001, China has reportedly become increasingly concerned that its strategy for expanding its presence and influence in the Central Asian region through the SCO mechanism is in jeopardy.<sup>56</sup> They point out that the U.S. efforts to build and lead an international coalition against terrorism, particularly in Central Asia, have been swift and effective. The U.S. appears to have completely seized the initiative from the newly formed SCO regional grouping, and has provided SCO members with an unanticipated alternative for addressing the issue of regional terrorism.<sup>57</sup> Indeed, the willingness and level at which a number of SCO member states have offered their support and cooperation to the United States is disturbing to a number of Beijing's elites. Several western diplomats and Asia specialists note that many in Beijing are deeply concerned that Washington could so quickly project its power into Central Asia and even develop close working relations with China's closest ally in the region, Pakistan.<sup>58</sup>

**The New 'Great Game'.** The PRC's reported plans to expand its influence throughout Central Asia may be put on hold because of rapidly unfolding events in the region. However, prior to September 2001, it appeared that China was well on its way to establishing a powerful presence in Central Asia. According to some western analysts, by the Spring of 2000, China and Russia both seemed poised to take advantage of what was viewed by the Central Asian states as U.S. indifference toward the region. As an example of the latter, analysts point to former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's "whirl-wind" tour of the region in 2000. In an unsuccessful attempt to address the pleas from the governments of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan for security assistance, the U.S. offered a mere \$16 million dollars of combined assistance for all three states.<sup>59</sup> They reportedly considered Washington's \$16 million dollar offer a "declaration of disinterest" in the region and its security concerns.<sup>60</sup> Analysts argue that this sent an immediate signal to China that the time was ripe to capitalize on Washington's perceived "ambivalence" toward the region.

Although the United States had delivered around \$1.5 billion in aid to the region between 1992 and 1998, this assistance was accompanied by pressure on the Central Asian states to establish pluralistic and democratic societies. On the other hand, the Central Asian states were more concerned about security and consolidation of their secular governments in the wake of increased "Islamic fundamentalism" than they

---

<sup>56</sup> Wall Street Journal, "China Worries That Rising U.S. Influence In Central Asia Could Harm Its Interests," by Charles Hutzler, September 24, 2001.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid

<sup>58</sup> The Christian Science Monitor, "China's new balancing act," by Robert Marquard, November 8, 2001.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> The Wall Street Journal Europe, "Shanghai Five: The 'Great Game' Returns," August 23, 2001.

were with democracy and pluralism in their societies.<sup>61</sup> China, which was much less concerned about democracy and pluralism, saw an opportunity. For example, China provided military and technical aid to Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan. China also increased trade and economic ties with most of its western neighbors, hoping to ensure access to valuable Central Asian oil and natural gas resources.<sup>62</sup> Additionally, Beijing was using the SCO to develop closer ties to Moscow than it had enjoyed at any other time since the Sino-Soviet split in the late 1960's. Most of these relationships were further enhanced by the signing of the Declaration of the Establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the Shanghai Covenant on the Suppression of Terrorism, Separatism, and Extremism, and the Sino-Russian Friendship Pact, signed this past summer in Moscow.<sup>63</sup> An important component of this process was the development of a potential Sino-Russian counter-weight to closer ties between Russia and the United States. This potentially significant gain for China was undermined by the geopolitical and policy shifts following the September 11 attacks. At the same time, many in China believe that heightened U.S. awareness of possible threats posed by Islamic fundamentalist groups could serve Chinese interests.<sup>64</sup>

However, since September 11, the eagerness of some member states to assist the United States bilaterally in the war on terrorism raises a number of questions about the future of the SCO and China's plans for spreading its influence and presence in the region. For example, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan, all key members of the SCO and recipients of Chinese security and technical assistance, have offered their broad support to the U.S. efforts to fight global terrorism, and each state appears to have pushed its own domestic interests and agenda over those of the SCO.<sup>65</sup>

**Bilateral versus Multilateral Cooperation.** The absence of the SCO as a regional player in the war against terrorism has surprised a number of China watchers, who believed that the Shanghai Cooperation Organization had, on paper at least, a number of options that it could have offered the United States to assist in the war on terrorism. Some analysts argue that the SCO had been involved in the fight against "terrorism" and what it calls the "three-evils forces" in the Central Asian region since 1996 and could have used this collective experience and its new anti-terrorist center in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan to offer multilateral regional support to the war on terrorism. Instead, it appears as though the multilateral SCO option has been

---

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> See Central Asian Caucus: Analyst, "Did Putin Shanghai Bush?," by Robert M. Cutler, July 4, 2001.

<sup>63</sup> The Christian Science Monitor, "China's new balancing act," by Robert Marquand, November 8, 2001.

<sup>64</sup> On December 6, 2001, while meeting with terrorism officials in Beijing, Francis X. Taylor, the U.S. State Department's top counter terrorism official, noted that some Chinese Muslims had fought for Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. However, Taylor stressed that Washington did not support the PRC's insistence that Muslim separatists in China's northwest are a part of a global fundamentalist terror threat.

<sup>65</sup> The Wall Street Journal Europe, "Shanghai Five: 'Great Game' Returns, by Ilan Berman, August 23, 2001.

put on hold as each state is offering bilateral support to Washington and possibly looking to gain military and security aid along with other support.

## *Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region and Central Asian States*

