

# The Economics of Repression

## The Belt and Road Initiative, COVID-19, and the Repression of Uyghurs in Xinjiang

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Since President Xi Jinping started his second term in 2017, Chinese forces have imprisoned up to two million Uyghurs in detention camps, which Beijing claims are educational centers for vocational training.<sup>1</sup> The international community has alleged human rights violations in Xinjiang, but Beijing defends that China's measures are necessary to eradicate the so-called "three evils of terrorism, separatism, and extremism."<sup>2</sup> Regarding Beijing's motivations behind the repressive measures in Xinjiang, much analysis has focused on the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) views of internal security, social control, and Han-ethno nationalism.

However, it is important to note that China also has economic interests at stake in Xinjiang's political stability. Experts have pointed out that the intensification of repression in Xinjiang coincides with Beijing's growing emphasis on Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects.<sup>3</sup> If the BRI projects facilitate the repression in Xinjiang, then one can also assume that the outbreak of COVID-19 has a secondary impact on Xinjiang through its immediate effects on the BRI projects. To gain a comprehensive understanding of the developments in Xinjiang, it is vital to track and identify the effects of the BRI and COVID-19 on the repression of the Uyghur minority.

### BRI and Its Impacts on the Repression in Xinjiang

Xinjiang is a critical region to the success of the BRI projects, as its location connects China with the countries in Central Asia and Middle East.<sup>4</sup> Four of the six major BRI land routes—including the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)—run through Xinjiang.<sup>5</sup> The massive investment in the infrastructure projects carries high risks for the periodic turmoil in the Xinjiang area.<sup>6</sup> As part of CPEC, for example, a significant amount of funding has been injected to develop Kashgar, a hub city on the ancient Silk Road that Central Asian countries have historically competed over. Given its significance as a strategic point for commercial networking, Beijing made Kashgar a special economic zone. It is noteworthy that Kashgar also has been traditionally regarded as the "spiritual heart" of

the Uyghurs.<sup>7</sup> Thus, China's commercial interests with BRI projects intersect with the Uyghur's cultural identity problems.

The strategic importance of BRI projects has driven the CCP to intensify its repression of Xinjiang Uyghurs for two major reasons. First, the BRI projects will enhance Xinjiang's connectivity with countries in Central Asia and the Middle East, and that means the Muslim population in Xinjiang will be more widely exposed to the external influences from those regions. The CCP has good reason to be worried about such increased connectivity. In 2014, the East Turkistan Islamic Party threatened to conduct a jihad in China, a year after Beijing announced the launch of the BRI projects.<sup>8</sup> In the same year, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) also threatened to seize the territory of Xinjiang, which it identified as a legitimate part of Islamic Central Asia.<sup>9</sup> Such threats from Central Asia and the Middle East amplifies the CCP's concerns about terrorism, separatism, and extremism in Xinjiang. In this context, Anna Hayes, a professor at James Cook University, argues that Beijing started to focus on "re-educating" the Muslim minorities so China could fortify the population against the external influences when it launched BRI projects.<sup>10</sup>

Second, the BRI projects facilitate the oppression of the Uyghurs by creating permissive conditions in world politics. There is evidence that many countries are inclined to support China at global fora because they benefit from billions of dollars in Chinese investments through BRI programs. Muslim countries are no exception.<sup>11</sup> Given the Muslim countries' outraged response to the Western satire of their religion and culture, as seen in the incident of *Charlie Hebdo*, some observers expected the Muslim-majority countries to form a united voice in the name of Muslim solidarity against the CCP's harsh treatment of Muslim populations. However, these Muslim countries remain oddly silent on the religious and cultural oppressions in Xinjiang.

More than silence, some of them even express overt support for Beijing, praising China's human rights record in Xinjiang. In July 2019, 22 mostly Western countries issued a joint statement at the United Nations' Human Rights Council criticizing Beijing on Xinjiang issues. This marked the first major collective challenge to China's crackdown on Uyghur Muslims.<sup>12</sup> A day later, 37 other countries issued another letter in Beijing's defense. Nearly half of the signatories were Muslim-majority nations, including Pakistan, Syria, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan. These nations collectively blocked a Western motion at the United Nations calling for China to allow "independent international observers" into the Xinjiang region.<sup>13</sup> The "Muslim solidarity" in support of the CCP's crackdown of Muslims in Xinjiang demonstrates

how powerful China's diplomatic and economic might could be in quashing criticism from these countries.<sup>14</sup>

### **COVID-19 and Its Impacts on the Repression in Xinjiang**

If the BRI projects facilitate the oppression of Xinjiang's Uyghurs, the coronavirus has been breaking the causal chain. Due to the pandemic crisis, the BRI projects have been stumbling in 2020; the participating countries could not pay back the Chinese investment, and Beijing could not deliver the funds and labor forces as mutually agreed with the participating countries.<sup>15</sup> Such trends, unexpectedly created by the coronavirus, may have impacts on the repression in Xinjiang in two ways. On the one hand, the hard negotiations between China and the BRI participating countries on adjusting the contract terms may provide more incentives for the participating countries to avoid criticizing Beijing on Xinjiang issues. On the other hand, it is also possible that these countries feel less obligated to support Beijing, as China is also failing to implement the BRI projects in the agreed upon timeline.<sup>16</sup>

Recent developments show a complex pattern at work. This year, at the UN General Assembly, Western countries presented a statement to criticize the human rights situation in Xinjiang and Tibet. The Cuban representative then issued a letter in defense of Chinese policies. Compared to the UN assembly in 2019, there are 18 new countries that endorse China's position. Interestingly, at the same time, 10 countries that had signed the 2019 letter decided not to endorse the 2020 statement. The 10 countries include Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Algeria, Bolivia, Burkina Faso, Nigeria, Oman, the Philippines, Qatar, and Somalia. Catherine Putz, the editor of *The Diplomat*, found that many of the countries that did not renew their support for China's Xinjiang policies are either Muslim-majority states or have sizeable Muslim minority populations.<sup>17</sup> It is too early to conclude, but this change may be the signs of Muslim countries' retreat from supporting China's crackdown of the Muslim population in Xinjiang.

While the COVID-19 pandemic crisis contributes to growing criticism of China externally, it leads to more suppression of the Uyghur minority internally. In response to the international accusation, President Xi reaffirmed that China's policies in Xinjiang are "totally correct."<sup>18</sup> Even worse, Beijing seemed to make up for the economic loss caused by the pandemic crisis by utilizing Uyghurs as a supplementing labor force. According to various reports, China has sent thousands of Uyghurs to Hunan, Jiangsu, Jiangxi, and Zhejiang to run the factories after the evacuation of the regular workers since the outbreak.<sup>19</sup> In different parts of Xinjiang, 30,000 workers were forced to resume their duties at the peak of the pandemic in February 2020.<sup>20</sup> The COVID-19 crisis also allowed the CCP to reinforce its

religious repression and social control in the name of pandemic measures. Beijing closed the mosques in February, and the ban extended to the end of May.<sup>21</sup> Despite the outbreak in Xinjiang seemingly being under control, the restrictions are still in place, and many residents accuse the government of acting too harshly.<sup>22</sup>

## **Conclusion**

In sum, the BRI projects have facilitated the oppression of Xinjiang's Uyghurs, but the COVID-19 crisis has been complicating the pattern. The BRI amplifies Beijing's concerns in Xinjiang because the enhanced regional connectivity may further radicalize the local resistance among the Muslim Uyghurs against the authorities in China. The BRI projects also externally create favorable conditions for Beijing to silence the participating countries' criticism of China over Xinjiang issues. However, due to COVID-19, the implementation of BRI projects has slowed down. Many BRI participating countries, especially Muslim states, seem to be recanting their support of China. With Western objections to China's actions in the South China Sea and Hong Kong added to the chorus, the international community's disapproval of China's policies in Xinjiang are only likely to grow over the next few years.

As far as the strategic implication of the BRI projects is concerned, much of the debate in the West has focused on whether Beijing deliberately tries to influence other countries to its advantage through the use of "debt-trap diplomacy," and, if so, how effective such a strategy has been.<sup>23</sup> The case study of Xinjiang in this analysis suggests that more attention needs to be paid to the BRI's effects on the social control and domestic policies of China. ✪

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## **Notes**

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