

HIV/AIDS AS A REGIONAL SECURITY THREAT

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The HIV/AIDS epidemic in Xinjiang and throughout the greater Central Asian region is a pressing security concern to China and the entire Central Asian region. Xinjiang's HIV/AIDS situation, put within the context of the regional HIV/AIDS epidemic throughout Russia, India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, and the Central Asian nations, bleakly reveals that China and the entire geopolitical region faces a security issue of the gravest proportions. Beijing does not seem to recognize this threat. While China is connecting Xinjiang to Central Asia's new trade, rail and road links with Kazakhstan and Tajikistan as part of its development strategy, these very openings are exposing Xinjiang directly to Islamic militants and the drug trade emanating from these countries and beyond.

The HIV/AIDS crisis will radically affect Xinjiang's economy, stability, and security just as the crisis deeply undermines Uyghur attempts to create a viable future in the region.¹ But worse for China, the HIV/AIDS crisis in Xinjiang, places the Chinese government in a no-win situation. Most Uyghurs already perceive Han Chinese as their opponents in the struggle for control of Xinjiang. Now, virtually anything the government does to improve relations with Xinjiang's indigenous peoples will provoke resentment. Nationalistic Uyghurs view the government's lack of response to HIV/AIDS as a deliberate program of genocide. Furthermore, China's huge project to develop the poor "great northwest" area, a region that includes Qinghai, Gansu, Tibet, and especially Xinjiang, which will accelerate Han population settlement as a force for acculturation and integration, could possibly unleash a massive economic and social disaster far greater than it is worth.

According to the China-CDC, about 85% of the Uyghur injecting drug users in Ili, the most secular region of Xinjiang, is HIV positive. The rate in Urumchi is about 40%. Data on drug use is obtained at police-run detoxification centers where drug users are detained typically for

about two months. Most addicts live “underground” to evade police detection. This makes them difficult to treat, and more significantly, difficult to prevent them from sharing infected needles with others.

Up to 2002, the government has viewed HIV/AIDS in Xinjiang as a “Uyghur disease,” as indeed it has been. But it will be the very Han people enticed to Xinjiang by the “Develop the Great Northwest” program—the truck drivers, young pioneer settlers, soldiers, police officers, prostitutes and government officials, including those most integral to the development scheme—who are likely to become infected and pass on the virus.² If the Chinese government proceeds with a full-fledged development program in Xinjiang without fundamentally addressing the HIV/AIDS epidemic it will cause hundreds of thousands of Han as well as Uyghur deaths, especially among the most productive 20-40-age group, as millions of working age male and female laborers become infected. At the same time, it will throw Uyghurs back on their own communal defenses, hindering the very acculturation into Chinese society that the government so desires.

Any economic gains that Chinese development might bring to Xinjiang are almost certain to be wiped out by the cost of treating opportunistic diseases associated with HIV/AIDS such as Tuberculosis and sexual transmitted diseases. Such diseases by themselves will be an immense burden for the health care budget of Xinjiang. Moreover, the under-funded and unreformed health system of the region will be too weak to react to patients with full-blown AIDS, a situation that could provoke rioting and militant action against governments seen to be heartlessly unresponsive.

The HIV/AIDS epidemic is certain to dramatically affect the social and economic development of China’s borderlands including Xinjiang and its international neighbors. Like Xinjiang, the Central Asian countries with their high prevalence of sexually transmitted diseases, frightening drug addiction rates, widespread unemployment, a young population and low HIV/AIDS awareness, all make the greater Central Asian region extremely vulnerable to a large

scale epidemic. According to the United Nations, Central Asia and Eastern Europe had the highest incidence rate of HIV/AIDS in 2001. The fact that the South Africa military currently has an HIV infection rate of over 90% portends that the regional military strength of Central Asian including Xinjiang will be profoundly weakened within ten years by HIV infection.

Hard and Soft Policies

Since 1949, China has manipulated the Xinjiang Uyghurs to its advantage by implementing “hard” and “soft” policies that have caused the Uyghurs to respond in ways that divide and weaken the Uyghurs. Soft policies are used to encourage development but only to the degree that Beijing believes it can control the consequences. Often Beijing will support certain aspects of Uyghur development at the same time it is undermining others. Hard policies are used to crush the various forms of resistance that surface during the period that soft policies are emphasized. Hard policies slow acculturation by polarizing Uyghurs and Hans. Soft policies tend to accelerate Uyghur acculturation into the Chinese state but they also provoke violent resistance by Uyghur militants who are set on preventing China’s acculturation policies from succeeding. Because of the extremely sensitive nature of ethnic relations in Xinjiang, the government often floats new policies as trial balloons, in order to measure the indigenous response.

In Xinjiang, the Chinese government also implements “soft” and “hard” measures to undermine Uyghur nationalism. Beijing’s soft policies towards Xinjiang foster regional autonomy and promote affirmative action policies in order to undermine ethnic resistance and sustain Chinese power in there. However, Chinese officials have found that such ethnic benefits undermine minority integration into the Chinese nation-state and facilitate non-violent resistance. In 1985-89, the Chinese government floated another “soft” policy allowing mosque construction to flourish and even sent hundreds of Uyghur Communist leaders on the Hajj to Mecca in order to increase their prestige at the local level. But when this strengthened Islam at

the local level, the government employed hard policies to shut down mosques. The government has also supported the writing of Uyghur historical works that openly challenge its own versions but then cracked down on books that were deemed too controversial or nationalistic.

China's current "Strike Hard" policy involves both police clampdowns on disaffected Uyghurs and a relaxation of controls on Uyghur society in order to foster Xinjiang's economic development. In recent years, Chinese leaders fear Islamic fundamentalists from Central Asia and the war in Afghanistan might provoke ethnic unrest among the Muslim Uyghurs of Xinjiang. Xinjiang is China's front line in its war against international terrorism. Beijing maintains that Xinjiang harbors Uyghur Muslim extremists intent on overthrowing Chinese rule with the backing of Osama bin Laden's terrorist network, a claim which cynics believe China is invoking to justify crackdowns on Islam in Xinjiang and on Xinjiang's dominant ethnic group the Uyghurs.

To be fair to the Chinese government, Xinjiang has a greater potential than all other regions of China to cause upheaval. It is thus of major geopolitical significance not only to China, but also to India, Pakistan, the Central Asian nations, and Russia. The greater Central Asian region has the largest concentration of nuclear powers on the planet. In Beijing's view, instability in Xinjiang could bring instability to Tibet, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. And so Beijing sees its crackdown in Xinjiang as part of the global war on terrorism and thus has cooperated with the United States and its allies in this struggle. China's struggle is against Uyghur terrorism that has plagued the government from the beginning of the 1990s on. Violent bombing campaigns have been a major part of the Uyghur independence movement. At the same time China is doing everything it can to maintain stability in Central Asia to allow for China's eventual economic dominance there.

The Uyghurs respond to Chinese policies in three ways: adaptation, non-violent resistance and violent resistance. The first response is adaptation in both its active and passive forms. Uyghurs follow this path when they trust Chinese policies. The second response is one of

non-violent resistance. Uyghur intellectuals who are in the process of acculturating to the urban life in Xinjiang's capital Urumchi but who are mistrustful both of the Chinese state and Islamic conservatives in the Uyghur community often respond in non-violent ways. They produce nationalistic writings and present their own versions of Uyghur history that contradict official government versions. The third response is violent resistance, the tactic favored by secular militants as well as a small number of Uyghurs who have been placed on the international list of terrorist by the Chinese and American governments.

Non Violent Resistance

Until 1985 the government forbade indigenous peoples to voice any criticism or opposition. Only with the "soft" policies of 1985-1989 were Uyghurs allowed to vent their frustration. What followed was an unprecedented outpouring of non-violent resistance to China's policies and to the ideas the government used to rationalize them.

As China launched its new soft approach in Xinjiang in 1985, many, but by no means all, Uyghurs had already concluded that the Uyghurs, even if united, would never gain control of the region. Instead, they pursued strategies based on their social group or oasis to maximize their place within the Chinese state. Thus, China's hard policies introduced cleavages among the oasis-dwellers while the soft policies served to isolate Uyghur nationalists. At the oasis level the majority of Uyghurs resisted Chinese policies through non-violent means. But writings about Uyghur history and national heroes reflected oasis identities more than a region-wide consciousness. Indigenous intellectuals who push a region-wide program too hard were treated as pariahs, dismissed from their jobs, or incarcerated. Uyghur intellectuals challenge the government carefully, pushing to the breaking point and pulling back when necessary. It continues to be a very dangerous game.

Violent Resistance

The Chinese government has claimed that from 1990-2001, Xinjiang was hit by over 200 militant actions, leading to 162 deaths.³ Uyghur militants attacked police stations, assassinated judges, and demolished communications and electric power infrastructure. They bombed buses, movie theaters, department stores, hotels, markets, trains, and even successfully struck Chinese army bases. Initially the attacks appeared to be random and limited in scope, focusing especially on the government's policy on religion.⁴ But eventually their growing scale and coordination evoked a strong response from the government labeled "Strike Hard" since 1996.

Instead of seeing Islam as a channel through which local Uyghurs are able to express social and political frustrations in a variety of areas, the government chooses to perceive it as itself the cause of those frustrations, which in turn gives rise to actions that further exacerbate the situation.⁵ As an atheistic regime, the Chinese government does not understand that by clamping down on all Islamic practice as fundamentalist or potentially militant, it provides no moderate alternative and only produces greater militancy among its Muslim populations. The government's clamp down on Islam dates to April 5, 1990, when up to 3,000 Uyghurs were killed in clashes with the Chinese police in the town of Baren near Kashgar. Some maintain that the incident was caused by the government's removal of a popular *mullah*, while others believe it was initiated by Uyghur attacks on government birth control officers. Whatever the case, the Baren affair demonstrated Beijing's fear of Islam as a source and vehicle of resistance.

In Xinjiang, "Strike Hard" has focused on Uyghur "splittism" or separatism and on "illegal religious activities." This has elicited a cycle of protests and bombings across Xinjiang, along with further retaliations. In 1997, government troops cracked down on secular students in a campaign whose sole crime was to have organized a campaign against alcohol abuse. China's "Strike Hard" policies have spurred violent resistance and posed serious dilemmas to the government. More than 300 perished in the ensuing battle. Between 1997-99, Amnesty International recorded that 210 Uyghurs were executed.

China's government remains convinced that the main causes of religious and ethnic violence were not its own policies but forces operating from beyond its borders, especially in the new states of Central Asia. The war against the Taliban and al Qaeda in Afghanistan significantly broadened China's "Strike Hard" campaign in Xinjiang. The Chinese government linked the United States' War on Terrorism with its own anti-terrorism campaign in Xinjiang and signed on to assist the war effort.⁶ In August 2002, it announced that there were eight Uyghur terrorist forces operating in Xinjiang and throughout China. Judging by their names—the Eastern Turkestan Islamic Movement, the Eastern Turkestan Islamic Party, the Eastern Turkestan Islamic Party of Allah, the Islamic Reformist Party "Shock Brigade," and the Islamic Holy Warriors-- five have some religious connections. Three others-- the Eastern Turkestan International Movement, the Eastern Turkestan Liberation Organization, and the Uyghur Liberation Organization-- appear to have more a more secular character.

On August 26, 2002, the U.S. State Department, China and the United Nations announced that one of the eight Uyghur militant groups, the Eastern Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), would be placed on the list of international terrorist organizations. Slowly information about this militant organization came out. The ETIM Uyghur resistance began after the 1990 Baren uprising. Seeing the government's readiness to use force against apparently peaceful students, Uyghur activists from the South of Xinjiang fled to a base at a religious school (medressa) in Pakistan and there founded the ETIM. ETIM fighters dedicated themselves to fighting a "Holy War" in Central Asia and to fighting against Chinese invaders. The ETIM's leadership is purported to have had close links to Osama bin Laden and to have sent agents and weapons into Xinjiang beginning in 1998.⁷ It appears that at least two of the al Qaeda fighters captured in Afghanistan and sent to Guantanamo, Cuba were Uyghurs from the ETIM.

Xinjiang's Endgame

The greatest immediate threat to Beijing's control of Xinjiang is not Uyghur militancy or terrorism but heroin addiction and the HIV/AIDS epidemic that is already spreading there like a whirlwind. HIV/AIDS has already affected the Uyghurs in proportions far exceeding any other ethnic minority in China. HIV/AIDS rates among the Uyghurs are now estimated to be the highest in China, surpassing Yunnan, which borders on Burma, the source of Xinjiang's heroin. Initially, many Uyghurs smoked heroin, but began injecting it as the supply began to decrease as a result of "Strike Hard" crackdowns on drug trafficking. As of May of 2003, there were no methadone clinics or clean needle exchange programs and most heroin addicts share needles. Furthermore, no anti-retroviral drugs are available in the region. The focus given to SARS has further weakened China's response to HIV/AIDS that is becoming the most serious challenge that the Uyghurs have ever faced as a people.

The Uyghurs are facing an epidemic chain of infection, devastation, and disintegration as the number of new HIV cases grows exponentially each year. Public health systems are poorly positioned to stem the disease. There are no hospitals in Xinjiang prepared to treat patients with full-blown AIDS. Testing is prohibitively expensive. Although international teams including Johns Hopkins University, Yale University, Save the Children, AusAID, and the Australian Red Cross, are working in Xinjiang with the Xinjiang Red Cross, the programs are limited in scope with a lack of coordination or sharing of information among the various organizations. Such coordination is crucial to prepare for the rising numbers of Uyghur patients as they develop full-blown AIDS and as Uyghur disaffection and anger mounts as the AIDS toll climbs.

Heroin addiction and HIV/AIDS will also profoundly effect the Uyghur movement for greater self-rule. As the Uyghurs become increasingly infected with HIV/AIDS and much of the population becomes involved with the care of sick relatives, the Uyghurs' ability to effectively resist the Chinese state will be sapped. The HIV/AIDS epidemic is also likely to radicalize at least a small minority of Uyghurs. Indeed, one cannot rule out the grim possibility that AIDS-

infected Uyghur suicide bombers could strike out against Hans and Chinese government targets out of sheer despair, rather than nationalist aspirations. As infection rates escalate throughout Xinjiang, it is becoming clear to all Uyghurs, not only to Uyghur nationalists, that the Uyghurs are in a fight for their very survival.

¹ Zeng Yi and Wu Zunyou, "Control of AIDS Epidemic in China," *Bulletin of the Chinese Academy of Sciences* 2, (2001), 6.

² "HIV/AIDS: China's Titanic Peril: China's Response to AIDS-- 2001 Status and Analysis," UNAIDS, 2001.

³ Hutzler, Charles, "Trade is China's Carrot to Muslim Separatists," Wall Street Journal, (September 21, 2001).

⁴ Hutzler, Charles, "Trade is China's Carrot to Muslim Separatists," Wall Street Journal, (September 21, 2001).

⁵ Becquelin, Nicolas, "Xinjiang in the Nineties," The China Journal 44, (July 2001).

⁶ "China Also Harmed by Separatist-Minded Eastern Turkestan Terrorists," People's Daily, (October 10, 2001); Eckholm, Erik, "China Seeks World Support in Fight with Its Muslim Separatists," The New York Times, (October 12, 2001).

⁷ "Chinese Police Eager and Ready to Step Up Fight Against Terrorism," Agence France-Presse, (September 21, 2002).