

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Beyond words: decoding power structures and rhetorical legitimating categories within Xinjiang White Papers (2003–2019)

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Abstract

Political discourse is a persuasive device used to gain public support, and official counterterrorism narratives are no exception. Drawing on theoretical convergence between Critical Terrorism Studies and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) in their understanding of discourse as a persuasive tool, this research aims to demonstrate the utility of discourse analysis in deciphering the political ideology sustaining official counterterrorism rhetoric. Through quantitative diachronic observation of key terms (terrorism, separatism, and extremism) and the systematic codification of Xinjiang White Papers (2003–2019), this research applies van Leeuwen's (2008) model of social practice analysis, participant representation, and legitimation categories to reveal the specific rhetoric tools ultimately aimed at securing the Communist Party of China's (CPC) political legitimacy. This article builds on CDA theory by linking discourse and political practice, reflecting on the pragmatic consequences of implicit power structures within official counterterrorism discourse, involving in this case the CPC and ethnoreligious groups in Xinjiang.

Keywords: China; Critical Discourse Analysis; extremism; legitimacy; people's war on terror; separatism; Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region

Introduction

Political discourse is a persuasive device used to gain support for political authorities, and its use in official counterterrorism narratives are no exception (Jackson 2005). Over a century ago, Max Weber defined legitimacy as “the basis of every system of authority, and correspondingly of every kind of willingness to obey . . . [it] is a belief, a belief by virtue of which persons exercising authority are lent prestige” (Weber 1964, p. 382). It is thus key to political stability. The protection of public legitimacy is also crucial to authoritarian governments, which attribute an especially important role to ideology (Esteban 2014; Holbig and Gilley 2010; Kubat 2018; Zhao 2016). Zheng (2010) notes that “to establish its supremacy, a dominant class must not only impose its rule via the state, it must also demonstrate its claims to ‘intellectual and moral leadership’, and this requires the arts of persuasion, a continuous labour of creative ideological intervention” (32).

Based on China's official discourse on the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (henceforth Xinjiang) and drawing on the theoretical convergence between Critical Terrorism Studies (CTS) and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) in their understanding of discourse as a persuasive tool (Jackson 2005; van Dijk 1997; van Leeuwen 2008; Wodak and Meyer 2009), this research demonstrates the

utility of discourse analysis in unraveling the ideology sustaining official counterterrorism discourse. Second, it applies van Leeuwen's (2008) model of social practice analysis, participant representation in discourse, and, more specifically, his categories of legitimation to reveal the specific rhetoric tools and themes ultimately aimed at securing political power. This article thus builds on CDA theory by establishing a link between discourse and political practice, reflecting on the pragmatic consequences of political discourse and their implicit power structures, in this case between the Party and ethnoreligious groups in Xinjiang.

The analysis presents two key arguments: first, China's official counterterrorism discourse aligns with international rhetoric, linking extremism to separatism in Xinjiang and referring to institutions like the UN as legitimating tools. Second, the discourse promotes ethnic assimilation and Party leadership, politicizing religion and creating social categories by framing development as a collective, legitimate goal, while labeling non-supporters as enemies.

Evolving dynamics in Xinjiang

The situation in Xinjiang has evolved in response to both national and international factors. Xinjiang was incorporated into the Qing Empire during its westward expansion in the eighteenth century. Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the region has experienced waves of ethnoreligious clashes and resistance to the Communist Party of China's (CPC) rule. As part of the integration project and economic drive under Mao Zedong, the migration of Han Chinese into Xinjiang was promoted in the 1950s, a trend that intensified in the 2000s under the Great Western Development Campaign (Smith Finley 2020; Vuori 2024). This led to a growing sense of discrimination among minorities in Xinjiang, which in turn escalated tensions and interethnic clashes between Han Chinese and local minorities. Ethnic resistance to Party rule has been a recurring issue, particularly after the 1980s (Bovingdon 2010; Smith Finley 2020; Vuori 2024), exacerbated by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of independent Central Asian states in 1991 (Kam and Clarke 2021; Roberts 2018; Smith Finley 2020). The onset of heightened tensions was marked by the Baren Incident (April 4–10, 1990), followed by posterior violent clashes between ethnic groups and security forces, such as the February 1997 incident in Ghulja, where protests were violently suppressed by Chinese security forces (Smith Finley 2020).

Economic development and the construction of a unified national identity (中华民族 *Zhonghua minzu*) have long been regarded as essential for political stability and territorial unity, particularly in border regions like Xinjiang. Greitens et al. (2020) signal the 2011 push, from Party-related scholars in China, for a "second-generation minority policy" as a turning point that aimed at prompting an emphasis on patriotism over ethnic identity which, despite being originally disregarded, did eventually crystalize in the official discourse. During the first Xinjiang Work Forum in 2010, Hu Jintao focused on "leapfrog-style development" to boost the economy in Xinjiang and ensure harmony in the region, while Xi Jinping highlighted the importance of ideology in protecting security in Xinjiang during the second Xinjiang Work Forum in 2014 (Famularo 2018). As a set of ideas, belief systems, norms, and imagery that shape people's interpretation of reality, ideology has been described as an instrument of power and social control (Foucault 1972). Public discourse serves as a channel through which political authorities can guide and garner public support, thereby ensuring legitimacy. In the context of Xinjiang, political and ideological re-education is central to the Party's efforts in social engineering and state-building (Kam and Clarke 2021).

In this aspect, the period of 2013–2014 marked a significant turning point, as both international and national events triggered the implementation of stronger, more widespread preventive measures in Xinjiang. The war in Syria and the rise of the Islamic State were important international events that significantly influenced China's approach and discourse on Xinjiang (Clarke 2018; Greitens et al. 2020; Vuori 2024). Nationally, a series of deadly attacks – such as the October 2013 Tiananmen Square attack, the March 2014 train station stabbing in Kunming, and the April 2014 market bombing in Urumqi – represented an escalation of tensions and an expansion of the threat beyond Xinjiang.

Consequently, surveillance of Uyghur social life and religious practices intensified, with the government linking these conflicts to religious extremism. This marked the beginning of an increasingly repressive set of state responses to the Uyghur population (Smith Finley 2020) and the launch of the People's War on Terror (反恐人民战争 *fankong renmin zhanzheng*), a core component of China's holistic counterterrorism strategy in the region (Xie and Liu 2019; Zhang 2022). Through extensive propaganda campaigns, the Party called for public participation in combating terrorism, implicitly evoking Mao's People's War (Kam and Clarke 2021) and aligning with Xi Jinping's policies, which underscores the role of ideological tenets in combating extremism (Zhang 2021).

Further intensifying these efforts, Chen Quanguo was appointed as Party Secretary in Xinjiang in 2016, implementing what Vuori (2024) describes as a macrosecuritization strategy. Apart from the expansion of big data surveillance (Vuori 2024), China has pursued since 2017 what Zenz (2023) characterizes as an unprecedented re-education campaign in Xinjiang, linked to the promulgation of the Regulations on De-extremification in March that same year. International reports estimate 800,000 to 3 million people from ethnic minorities have been detained in 1,200 camps in Xinjiang (Smith Finley 2019; Greitens et al. 2020; Baker-Beall and Clarke 2021; Vuori 2024; Zenz 2019), officially termed Vocational Education and Training Centers (VETCs). According to Zenz (2023), these re-education centers represent an innovative form of Maoist labor reform, aimed at social integration and overcoming non-Han resistance through ethnocultural assimilation into Han Chinese culture. These re-education measures aim to regulate the "values, beliefs, and loyalties of the Uyghurs so that they become useful subjects for maintaining the regime's political security" (Kam and Clarke 2021, p. 629).

The official discourse reflects these political shifts. Following the September 11 attacks in 2001, China adopted a new rhetoric that reframed previous conflicts in Xinjiang as part of its counterterrorism efforts, rather than counterrevolutionary struggles – as they were previously referred to (Rodríguez-Merino 2023; Vuori 2024). At the core of these changes in discourse is China's official concept of Three Evil Forces – a three-in-one threat that sees separatism, religious extremism, and terrorism as interdependent (Li et al. 2019). In this triad, nevertheless, the separatist element remains a central concern, representing "the ultimate goal [of terrorism in China] whereas terrorism is the instrument to achieve the goal; and extremism lays the ideological foundations of terrorism" (Zhou 2018, p. 75). In this framing, the western province of Xinjiang has been officially referred to as the main battlefield.¹ The so-called Three Evil Forces have been regarded as a growing and major threat to China's national security, particularly following Chinese President Xi Jinping's transition to power in 2013. After the release of the UN Plan of Action Against Violent Extremism in 2015, Xinjiang's official White Papers began to cite this document, aligning their focus with its emphasis on adapting national responses to "local and national drivers of extremism" (UN General Assembly 2015, p. 12) as well as incorporating preventive tools such as "education, skills development, and employment facilitation" (UN General Assembly 2015, p. 18). This served to integrate the Party's portrayal of separatism in Xinjiang with international efforts to combat terrorism and extremism through ideology.

Given the central role of discourse as a legitimating tool, several authors approached the situation in Xinjiang through critical frameworks. Representing key references to this paper, Rodríguez-Merino (2023) and Clarke (2018) applied Securitization Theory and CTS to explore the Party's discursive portrayal of and response to terrorism. In a later work, Kam and Clarke (2021) apply Foucault's concept of biopower to refer to the Party's assimilation efforts in Xinjiang. From their side, Lan and Navera (2022) apply CDA to explore hidden islamophobia in China's media and social media, pointing at how governing elites (including assimilated Muslims) are to define accepted religious practices, throwing light on the representation of extremism in discourse. Recent scholars notice the polarization of actors around religious extremism (Yu et al. 2023; Zhang 2021), but lesser attention is paid to its

¹The term "battlefield" is found in two XJWP published by the Chinese government in 2019, titled *The fight against terrorism and extremism and human rights protection in Xinjiang* and *Vocational education and training in Xinjiang*, respectively. The application of conceptual metaphors as "terrorism is war" has implications on the interpretation and response to the threat. For more insight, refer to Kruglanski et al. (2007).

original connection to separatism as the fundamental variable to consider. This paper draws on prior literature with the aim of contributing to the field by applying a systematic corpus-based CDA capable of providing empirical evidence and further exploring the Party's ideology behind its discourse, as well as its pragmatic consequences on social practices.

Language, power, and legitimacy in CPC discourse

In authoritarian governments, the application of the label “terrorism” tends to focus less on its violent dimension than on the fundamental challenge it poses to the authority of the regime (Aksoy et al. 2015; Daxecker and Hess 2012). In the case of China, the CPC's official counter terrorism discourse deliberately aims to project its image as a benevolent, responsible, and capable leader, both within China and to the international community.

Focused on four central concepts of subjectivity, legitimacy, power, and language or discourse, CTS enquires how the label of terrorism is applied within political discourse to legitimate power; by doing so, it demonstrates the malleability and subjectivity of the concept. Since fundamental values determine how different political systems interpret the threat of terrorism and how they respond to it (Wilson and Piazza 2013), these particularities must be reflected in the official discourse. CDA equally interprets discourse primarily as a persuasive device that contributes to the establishment and/or preservation of power relations in society, connecting discourse with social practices and context (Wodak and Meyer 2009). The choice of specific lexical items within a political discourse is determined by their capacity to “... effectively emphasize or de-emphasize political attitudes and opinions, garner support, manipulate public opinion, manufacture political consent, or legitimate political power” (van Dijk 1997, p. 25). Thus, this paper recognizes the importance of CDA to explore themes within counterterrorism discourse and, at a narrower or micro-level, linguistic elements (such as particular semantic structures) that ultimately unveil the underlying political ideology and priorities. The legitimating role of political discourse is developed through van Leeuwen's (2008) analytical method for CDA, which proposes a set of categories of legitimation (namely, moral evaluation, rationalization, authorization, and mythopoesis) to critically analyze the representation of social practices within the discourse and determine how their participants are validated or rejected. The application of rational and moral evaluations categorizes participants in positive or negative terms, ultimately determining their worthiness of trust. These rhetorical tools are applied to political discourse to extol the leading power and discredit opponents through polarization, wherein positive representations (associated with “I,” “us,” or “we”) are implicitly or explicitly contrasted with negative representations (related to “they” or “them”) (Heath-Kelly 2016; van Dijk 1997; van Leeuwen 2008). Political discourse also applies both personal and impersonal authorization – customs (traditions or habits), authority (norms, law, regulations), and/or recommendations (by legitimate actors, institutions, and so on) to justify why a specific measure was adequate or needed (van Leeuwen 2008). Through discourse and the representation of social practices, members of society are implicitly bound to either pole and are thus considered either an ally or an enemy of the ruling power. Discursive polarization is, therefore, a form of tacit exclusion or inclusion.

With the aim of building up on the connection between counterterrorism discourse, legitimacy, and policymaking, this essay advances the discussion on the Party's counterterrorism through an underutilized empirical methodology (corpus-based CDA) and by exploring a little-studied corpus (Xinjiang White Papers – XJWP). White papers represent official statements on politically relevant issues for the government. In the context of China, white papers are dedicated to a broad range of themes, including development, energy or food security, human rights, national defense, Tibet, and Xinjiang, among others. Sources to access these documents are relatively inconsistent. The first white paper, published in 1991, was dedicated to Human Rights in China. By analyzing the official discourse on Xinjiang, and not just counterterrorism discourse, this analysis provides a broader perspective, able to establish links with other themes seemingly unrelated to the construction of the threat, yet fundamental to interpret the ideology that underpins what has been labeled as preventive measures in

Xinjiang. In this regard, this analysis provides empirical evidence on the following arguments: first, it analyzes the quantitative evolution of official counterterrorism discourse in China to prove its alignment to the international discourse, emphasizing the ideological variable of the threat (extremism) as a bridge between international terrorism and separatism in Xinjiang. The discourse advances toward this goal through the institutionalization and role model of international institutions such as the UN or the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), applying discursive strategies such as overgeneralization, deliberate omission of fundamental elements, or reversal of accusations to protect its legitimacy and advance its objectives of stability in Xinjiang. Second, this research proves the central role of ethnic assimilation and the acceptance of the Party's political leadership by revealing the rhetorical politicization of religion and social polarization. These are sustained by the discursive construction of development and modernization as collective goals led by the Party, portrayed as moral and rational, and consequently represented as legitimate. In this context, the discourse proves the promotion of social unity and a mass line of action constructed around the "people's war on terror," carrying practical implications by excluding and incriminating those who do not participate in the struggle as enemies of the people, implying therefore a social division based on support to the Party's leadership (or lack thereof).

Corpus-based critical discourse analysis of Xinjiang White Papers

White Papers in China are official documents that convey the government's position on key political issues, covering topics such as human rights, national defense, development, ethnic politics, energy or food security, Tibet, and Xinjiang, among others. The source to access these papers, however, is inconsistent. The first accessible White Paper, published in 1991 on human rights in China can be found on China.org, but this source only includes papers up to September 2019. The State Council of the People's Republic of China's official website provides White Papers from March 2011 onward, while the State Council Information Office's site only includes papers from 2017 to the present (as of 2024). At the time of writing, twelve White Papers have been dedicated to Xinjiang, with the most recent, published in September 2021, addressing Xinjiang's population data and dynamics.

This paper draws on research conducted between 2017 and 2019,² developing an in-depth quantitative analysis of nine Xinjiang-related White Papers published from 2003 – the year the first white paper on this theme was released – through 2019. During this period, a total of 117 White Papers were published, nine of which focused on Xinjiang and are the focus of this analysis. Since this article aims to explore the legitimating function of China's discourse in addressing an international audience, the analysis is based on official Chinese-English translations provided by the State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China.

Xinjiang has been since 2001 officially framed as the key source of terrorism concerns by the CPC (Rodríguez-Merino 2023). Particularly, the pace of the Party's publication of white papers on Xinjiang (2003, 2009, and then annually since 2015) seemingly signals their reactive character to a set of significant national and international events mentioned in the prior section. These publications reflect a need to justify political measures that, ultimately, reflect the Party's perception of the threat as a sign of its own lack of legitimacy in Xinjiang. A deep, systematic analysis of XJWP, published by the Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, provides a needed holistic approach to the issue. It does not only provide a direct insight into the Party's representation of the terrorist threat – and its evolution – but, most importantly, its observation in a broader perspective, providing evidence of its connection to ethnic and religious distinctive identity as fundamental concerns for the Party. The corpus in this paper is composed of all XJWPs available between the first publication in 2003 and 2019, consisting of nine official documents published within a 16-year period and totaling 87,629 words (Table 1).

²These are the results from the author's analysis for her PhD dissertation, meaning that qualitative analysis does not include papers published after 2019 (one in 2020 and two in 2021). While the contents of later publications are considered in the broader context, the focus remains on the documents available up until 2019.

Table 1. Corpus: 2003–2019 Xinjiang White Papers

Publisher ³	Date	Title	Number of tokens (words)
Information Office of the State Council of the People’s Republic of China	2003	<i>History and Development in Xinjiang</i>	15,504
Information Office of the State Council of the People’s Republic of China	2009	<i>Development and Progress in Xinjiang</i>	13,485
Information Office of the State Council of the People’s Republic of China	2015	<i>Historical witness to ethnic equality, unity and development in Xinjiang</i>	15,964
State Council Information Office	2016	<i>Freedom of religious belief in Xinjiang</i>	5,401
State Council Information Office	2017	<i>Human rights in Xinjiang – Development and progress</i>	7,888
State Council Information Office	2018	<i>Cultural protection and development in Xinjiang</i>	6,096
State Council Information Office	March, 2019 (2019a)	<i>The Fight Against Terrorism and Extremism and Human Rights Protection in Xinjiang</i>	9,519
State Council Information Office	July, 2019 (2019b)	<i>Historical Matters Concerning Xinjiang</i>	6,867
State Council Information Office	August, 2019 (2019c)	<i>Vocational Education and Training in Xinjiang</i>	6,905
TOTAL			87,629

This paper applies a synergistic methodology that combines quantitative and qualitative tools to gradually scrutinize the discourse. Data collected through Corpus Linguistic (CL) tools is first filtered, selected, and scrutinized using LancsBox Corpus Linguistics software (Brezina et al. 2020), exposing discursive patterns that would otherwise remain imperceptible. Drawing from the results from a prior examination of the most frequent nouns and adjectives within XJWPs (García-Noblejas 2022), this paper explores the evolution of the framing of terrorism, separatism, and extremism through the application of mainly three CL tools: keyword search, “keyword in context” (KWIC) and collocations. Keyword search allows the location and comparative observation of key terms and derived terms from their respective lexical roots (“terrorist,” “extremist,” “separatist,” and so on); KWIC provides a list of contextual items (left and right) of the desired term, thus throwing some light on its framing throughout the corpus⁴; participants in the discourse and their association to other elements are explored through the analysis of collocations – the most frequent immediate surrounding items – which are visually represented through GraphColl (graphics of collocations). The corpus is later carefully codified through NVIVO software, consisting of the gradual assignation of codes to sets of information within the corpus (open coding), requiring their increasingly detailed labeling to guarantee a loyal representation of the contents. Drawing on van Leeuwen’s model (2008), this process paid special attention to participants and legitimating categories (particularly argumentation, evaluation,

³The official name of the publisher changed from Information Office of the State Council of the PRC (IOSC) into State Council Information Office (SCIO) after 2017. Even though the respective official names have been used in this table for accuracy, SCIO is used throughout the text and in the final reference list for consistency.

⁴Due to space limitations, this paper includes only some representative references obtained through KWIC. For further insight into the complete results, refer to García-Noblejas (2022).

and authority) within the discourse. Results are interpreted through recurrent, regressive, and reciprocal feedback between quantitative and qualitative results. Chronological observation of these allows the location of priority shifts in the discourse, their significance, motivations, and objectives (Ädel 2010).

Results: Corpus-based CDA of Xinjiang White Papers (2002–2019)

The application of the Three Evil Forces within the discourse has shifted since the publication of the first XJWP in 2003. Figure 1 shows their respective evolution within the corpus, unveiling some interesting milestones: the first publication in 2003 arrived a year after the inclusion of the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) in the US List of Terrorists and Groups Identified Under E.O. 13224 (until November 2020, when it was removed) and the United Nations Security Council Consolidated List in 2002 (United Nations Security Council, Resolution 1390 [2002]); the publication in 2009 – where extremism is still less prominent than separatism – follow disturbances in 2008 in the context of the Olympic Games and posterior riots in Urumqi in 2009. In this context, the official discourse defends that these riots were in fact planned and promoted by the Uyghur diaspora (particularly the World Uyghur Congress, blamed by the CPC of sparking separatist ambitions in Xinjiang), who is accused of instigating ideological infiltration with the aim of splitting Xinjiang (Buckley 2009). In 2015, separatism became noticeably diminished in relation to terrorism and extremism for the first time, marking an important milestone since it reflects some determining events at the national and international level: internationally, 2012 saw the rise of the militant organization the Islamic State (ISIS) and posterior publication of the UN *Plan of Action Against Violent Extremism*. At the national level, 2015 is the first XJWP published after the election of Xi Jinping as General Secretary of the CPC in 2012 and a wave of attacks within and beyond Xinjiang province that occurred between 2013 and 2015. Under Xi’s leadership, some aspects of the mentioned “second-generation ethnic policy” (Greitens et al. 2020) are emphasized and reflected in the discourse. 2015 and 2017 also saw the publication of the *Xinjiang Religious Regulations* and *Regulations on De-Extremification*, respectively.

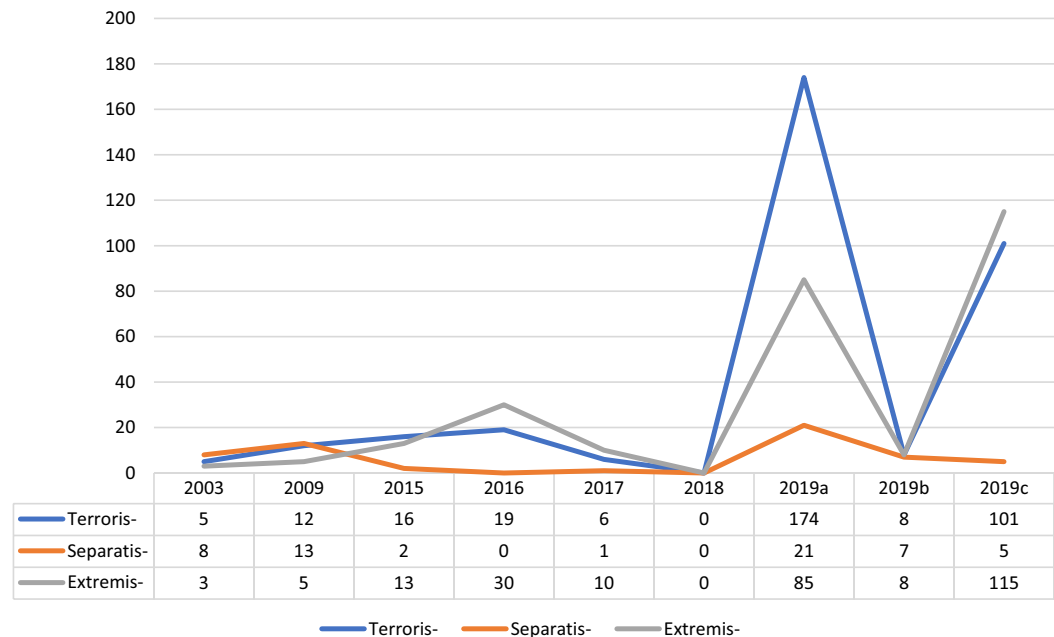


Figure 1. 2003–2019 Xinjiang White Papers: Frequency of Application and Evolution of “Terroris-,” “Separatis-,” and “Extremis-.”

Also in 2015, President Xi promoted a fifth “identification”⁵ between the Chinese people and the Party (Klimeš 2018). As Fig. 1 shows, separatism is prominent only in the discourse prior to 2015, whereas extremism becomes more frequent after 2015, peaking in 2019 as the most frequent term among the three for the first time. This change in the discursive prioritization of extremism over separatism runs parallel to national policy shifts focused on the ideological dimensions of the threat. Furthermore, this tendency aligns with that of international anti-terrorist discourse, aiming to legitimately apply ideological measures in Xinjiang as part of international efforts against extremism. This shift further reflects shifts in political action from 2015, ultimately related to the VETCs in Xinjiang which, as will be shown, are framed as measures to contribute to ethnic and religious minority integration (through legal, linguistic, religious, and vocational education) to the rest of China and, consequently, their development and modernization.

Even though references related to terrorism are quantitatively emphasized throughout the corpus (with a total of 341 hits, followed by extremism with 269 and separatism with 57), a closer examination of its framing proves the qualitative centrality of the ideological variable (represented by extremism). Out of 166 total references to the node “terrorism” in the whole corpus, Table 2 and Fig. 2 show that 106 were followed by the conjunction “and” (all of which appeared only immediately after 2015), which reflects its association with extremism – 88 combinations, out of which 18 include the modifier “religious.”

Table 2. 2003–2019 Xinjiang White Papers: collocations of “terrorism”

Corpus: 2003–2019 XJWP Search term: terrorism Span: 1–1 Collocation freq. thresh- old: 5.0 L1–R1		
Position	Collocate	Freq (coll.)
R	and	106
L	of	34
L	against	20
L	combating	16
L	fighting	11
L	separatism	8
L	by	6
L	at	5
L	on	5
L	to	5

⁵The fifth identification corresponds to Xi Jinping’s framework of the “Five Identifications” (wǔ gè rèntóng 五个认同), which include ethnic identification with (1) the motherland, (2) the Chinese nation (zhonghua minzu), (3) Chinese culture, (4) the Chinese Communist Party (CPC), and (5) socialism with Chinese characteristics. Due to space constraints, this article does not elaborate further on this topic. For additional insights, see Cui Banyan (November, 2016).

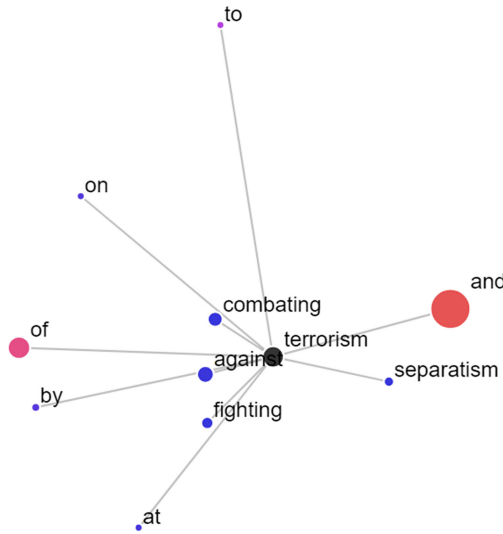


Figure 2. 2003–2019 Xinjiang White Papers: GraphColl Representation of Collocations of “Terrorism.”

Nearly all these combinations are present in the final two XJWP, except for two that appear in the 2016 XJWP. This tendency to characterize extremism as “religious” increases within the context of “vocational education and training” in Xinjiang, where the full construction of “terrorism and religious extremism” is applied fifteen times (the other three times occurring in the first 2019 XJWP). Although ideology has generally been regarded as a central tool used to promote Party legitimacy (Holbig and Gilley 2010; Kubat 2018; Wu and Devine 2018; Zhai 2021), the emphasis on the ideological variable of the terrorist threat runs parallel to Xi’s ideological campaign, ostensibly linked to an increased emphasis on stability – and religious extremism as a root cause of instability, particularly in Xinjiang (Famularo 2018; Greitens et al. 2020; Li et al. 2019; Zhang 2022) and Tibet. The concept of terrorism thus serves as a legitimating concept which, in practice, highlights the ideological aspect of the threat.

Analysis of extremism

A first extraction of key clusters – frequent terms left and right to “extremism” – showed its direct connection to “religious (extremism),” “violent (extremism),” and “and.” To sharpen the analysis, Table 3 and Fig. 3 show the context of one term left and right to “extremism,” using a threshold of five repetitions.

Since the rhetorical association between terrorism and extremism has been already explored, this section brings attention to the modifier “violent” (six repetitions) and its distribution in the corpus, being exclusively found within the last XJWP dedicated to the polemic VETC in Xinjiang, and only in the context of the UN’s 2015 *Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism*. The deliberate exclusion of the modifier “violent” elsewhere in the corpus indicates that “extremism” in China does not necessarily need to imply violence to be considered a threat. Such omission suggests the application of pre-emptive ideological measures, signaling what Greitens et al. (2020) refer to as an attempt to “...keep contention from emerging altogether, rather than trying to respond after it has materialized” (38). The emphasis on ideological measures gets materialized in one of the metaphors⁶ located in the discourse,

⁶The relevance of metaphors within political discourse as tools of persuasion has been explored by Charteris-Black (2004) or Lakoff and Johnson (1981). For further insight into this and other metaphors, refer to a prior analysis of metaphors within China’s official counterterrorism discourse (García-Noblejas 2022, pp. 286–290; García-Noblejas Floriano 2025).

Table 3. 2003–2019 Xinjiang White Papers: collocations of “extremism”

Corpus: XJ WHITE PAPER ALL (blank) Search term: extremism Span: 1–1 Collocation freq. threshold: 5.0 L1–R1		
Position	Collocate	Freq (coll.)
L	and	100
L	religious	90
L	violent	6
R	in	21
R	has	12
R	is	12
R	to	6
R	Xinjiang	6

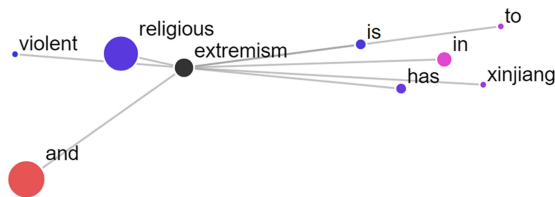


Figure 3. 2003–2019 Xinjiang White Papers: Graphcoll Representation of Collocations of “Separatism.”

depicting the threat as “mental shackles” or mental poison that supposedly limit the chances of people to prosper,

It is hard for some people who have been convicted of terrorist or extremist crimes to abandon extremist views, as their minds have been poisoned to the extent of losing reason and the ability to think sensibly about their lives and the law. Without necessary intervention measures it will not be possible for them to cast off the shackles of religious extremism, get back to normal life, and improve their prospects for a better future.

SCIO (2019c) *Vocational education training in Xinjiang*, 4.

The exploration of “extremism in” through KWIC indicates that “in accordance to the law” is its most frequent five-gram to the right. This analysis also unveils an emphatic use of the term “law” precisely within the 2015 XJWP with a total of fifty mentions (compared to thirteen and twelve mentions within prior XJWP in 2003 and 2009, respectively). It was 2015 when the first counterterrorism legislation in China was promulgated, serving as legitimating impersonal authority. The exploration of a broader context of “extremism in” through KWIC unveils the protection of “normal” religious practices in opposition to “religious extremism,”

The autonomous region has always pursued the policy of freedom of religious belief, protected normal religious activities, worked hard against extremism in ensuring the life safety of the people, and effectively prevented spreading of religious extremism.

SCIO (2015) *Historical Witness to Ethnic Equality, Unity and Development in Xinjiang*, 21.

Even though a clear description of what is considered “normal” is lacking, the critical interpretation of the discourse provides some clues. First, extremism is framed as the “ideological base” of separatism and terrorism, thereby justifying measures aimed at promoting Uyghur integration into the ethnic Han majority, rationalizing ethnic assimilation as a preventive measure. Furthermore, the framing of “Party members” and “patriotic religious individuals” as victims of religious extremism highlights political ideology as a determining variable in the depiction of participants within the discourse,

They [religious extremists] tell people not to obey anyone but Allah and incite them to resist government management. They abuse those who do not follow the path of extremism as pagans, traitors and scum, urging their followers to verbally assault, reject, and isolate non-believers, Party members and officials, and patriotic religious individuals.

SCIO (2019a) *The Fight Against Terrorism and Extremism and Human Rights Protection in Xinjiang* 2019, 10.

Religion gets thus politicized by suggesting patriotism and “Chinese cultural concepts” as a countering measure against religious extremism. This way, “normal” religious practices are implicitly related to patriotism and religious people’s identification with China, in contrast to religious extremists, who attempt to split the country.

Xinjiang encourages religious organizations and believers to promote patriotism, peace, unity, moderation, tolerance and benevolence through their sermons and preaching, spread the Chinese cultural concepts of advising people to perform good deeds, teaching people morality and being merciful, and lead religious believers in maintaining proper faith and honest deeds, and resisting religious extremism . . .

. . . Xinjiang religious circles, taking root in the local soil and culture, have furthered scripture study with Chinese characteristics, inherited and carried forward the fine traditions of patriotism, peace, unity, moderation, tolerance and benevolence, opposed violence and advocated the rule of law and order.

SCIO (2016) *Freedom of religious belief in Xinjiang*, 10–11.

This representation is constructed over the Party’s interpretation of a unified ideology and the integration of China’s ethnic and religious groups as a source of stability, which translates into the application of ideological measures to that goal. More particularly, the categorization of knowledge deficiency as root causes of people’s vulnerability constructs a discursive logic where the application of educational and vocational measures to prevent extremism is framed as a rational alternative. Ethnic minorities in Xinjiang are thus portrayed in XJWP as vulnerable to the influence of international terrorism due to their inability to speak Mandarin Chinese and lack of professional skills and understanding of the law,

Some areas in Xinjiang were severely disturbed by terrorism and the infiltration of religious extremism. For this reason, some people cannot speak, read or write in standard Chinese, have a weak understanding of rule of law, and have difficulty finding employment through a lack of employable skills. As a result, such people are more inclined to be incited or coerced into criminality by terrorist and extremist forces.

SCIO (2019a) *The Fight Against Terrorism and Extremism and Human Rights Protection in Xinjiang*, 26.

The polarization of participants in the discourse in terms of political ideology further points to their differentiation as “insiders”/“Chinese” or “outsiders”/“anti-Chinese.” CDA revealed the use of metaphorical expressions that imply the external source of the threat.

Penetration of religious extremism has been curbed in accordance with the law. Influenced by international religious extremism, religious extremism has been spreading in Xinjiang in recent years.

SCIO (2017) *Human rights in Xinjiang – Development and progress*, 13

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, religious extremism made further inroads into Xinjiang.

SCIO (2019a) *The Fight Against Terrorism and Extremism and Human Rights Protection in Xinjiang*, 9.

Furthermore, CDA demonstrates the portrayal of China as a victim of a sort of conspiracy between separatists and “international anti-China forces” (Dickson 2016) in the discourse,

The tiny group of separatists who had fled abroad from Xinjiang collaborated with those at home, and looked for opportunities to carry out splittist and sabotage activities with the support of international anti-China forces.

SCIO (2003) *History and Development in Xinjiang*, 12.

With the support of international anti-China forces, the “East Turkistan” forces have resorted to all means, fair or foul, to organize, plan and carry out acts of separatism and sabotage.

SCIO (2019a) *The Fight Against Terrorism and Extremism and Human Rights Protection in Xinjiang*, 9.

This representation victimizes China, which further serves to consolidate a nationalist identity against an external enemy (Rodríguez-Merino 2023; Tanner and Bellacqua 2016) that aims at splitting the country. Thus, a holistic analysis of China’s official counterterrorism discourse requires the consideration of its separatist variable, further explored below.

Analysis of separatism

Among the triad of terms, “separatism” is the less frequent in the discourse. Despite its quantitative discretion, its qualitative relevance is shown through its rhetorical connection to terrorism. Table 4 and Fig. 4 show the collocations corresponding to a span of five words to left and right to the node, revealing “and” (24), “terrorism” (13 rep.), and “extremism” (12 rep.) as the most frequent clusters emerging under a threshold of five repetitions.

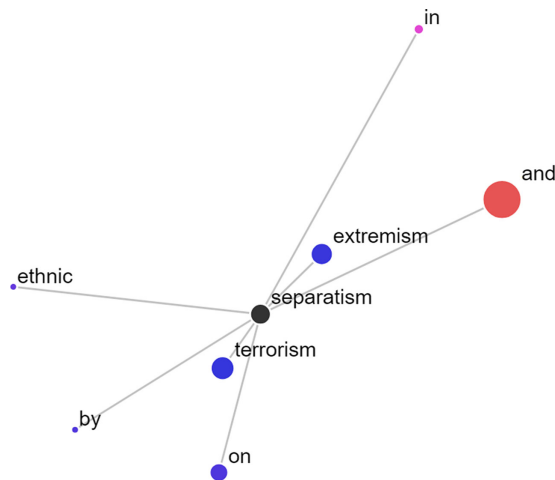
The application of KWIC to “separatism and” reveals how years 2003 and 2009 see the term “separatism” directly associated with East Turkistan forces,

Especially in the 1990s, influenced by religious extremism, separatism and international terrorism, part of the “East Turkistan” forces both inside and outside China turned to splittist and sabotage activities with terrorist violence as their chief means. Some “East Turkistan” organizations openly stated that they would use terrorist and violent means to achieve their purpose of separation.

SCIO (2003) *History and Development in Xinjiang*, 12.

Table 4. 2003–2019 Xinjiang White Papers: collocations of “separatism”

Corpus: XJ WHITE PAPER ALL (blank) Search term: separatism Span: 5–5 Collocation freq. threshold: 5.0 /L5–R5		
Position	Collocate	Freq (coll.)
L	terrorism	13
L	on	10
R	and	24
R	extremism	12
R	in	6
L	ethnic	5

**Figure 4.** 2003–2019 Xinjiang White Papers: Graphcoll Representation of Collocations of “Extremism.”

In the 1990s, influenced by terrorism, separatism and extremism, the “East Turkistan” forces both inside and outside China turned to terrorist violence as the chief means of their separatist activities. The terrorist nature of the “East Turkistan” forces was eventually recognized by the whole world.

SCIO (2009) *Development and Progress in Xinjiang*, 25.

This emphasis on the East Turkistan forces is related to the opportunity offered by the inclusion of the ETIM in the USA⁷ and the UN list of terrorist groups in 2002, implicitly legitimating the alleged connection between international terrorism and the separatist threat in China. Nevertheless, the discourse deliberately broadens the reference to the group into the abstract and imprecise term of East Turkistan “forces,” magnifying the threat and consequently justifying more expansive measures. The threat is then framed as a generic actor that bridges the ideology of international terrorism and Uyghur separatism, thus justifying the East Turkistan forces as a shared regional and global concern,

⁷Executive Order 13224 in September 2002.

In addition, the “East Turkistan” forces pose a threat to regional security and stability. The “East Turkistan” terrorist organizations, with ETIM as representative, have carried out actions in Central and South Asia over a long period of time, creating many bloody incidents of terror and violence, including assassinations, arson and attacks on police.”

SCIO (2009) *Development and Progress in Xinjiang*, 26.

Since the 1990s, especially after the September 11 attacks in the US, the “East Turkistan” forces inside and outside China have stepped up their collaboration as terrorism and extremism spread around the globe, trying desperately to establish “East Turkistan” through “Jihad” (holy war).

SCIO (2019a) *The Fight Against Terrorism and Extremism and Human Rights Protection in Xinjiang*, 9.

Despite its combination with “terrorism” and “extremism,” and its quantitative discretion compared to these two, qualitative discourse analysis proves that the fight against terrorism in China is focused on what the Party perceives as a separatist threat derived from a lack of legitimacy in Xinjiang.

An exploration of the preposition “on” (the most frequent collocation to the left of the node after terrorism) mostly referred to SCO conventions and programs “on Combating/Fighting Terrorism, Separatism, and Extremism.” These combinations are applied especially within the context of the last two XJWPs dedicated to combating terrorism and discussing the VETC in Xinjiang. The role of SCO in this context is relevant because it adds to the legitimacy provided by the UN, working as impersonal authorization through regional legal cooperation.

Table 3 and Fig. 3 further show a connection between separatism and ethnicity. Ethnic separatism has been closely studied as a conflict between identities, that is, that of the “motherland” against a distinctive ethnic identity (Greitens et al. 2020; Zhou 2017). The focus on ethnic separatism thus serves to justify measures to promote the integration of ethnic minorities into a collective Chinese identity as a preventive tool. In this regard, Bovington (2010) explains that,

the [Party] depicts the populace as yang to the dangerous yin of separatists: the people are the vast majority, sensible and noble in worldview, closely linked with the Party and the military, and bound to win in their never-ending quest to tie Xinjiang more tightly to China. Yet, again as elsewhere, the [Party] showcases the enemy to unite the people in opposition to it. (42)

The aim of this discursive linkage is thus not so much a matter of ethnicity (or religion) as it is one of loyalty to the Party.

Discussion: legitimating categories within China’s official discourse on Xinjiang

This analysis of Chinese counterterrorism discourse has employed a mixed-methods approach to quantitatively identify and qualitatively interpret discursive sources of political legitimation for both the Party and its measures. This final section discusses the most meaningful results with the aim of shedding some light on the Party’s legitimacy as the transversal priority within its own counterterrorism discourse.

The UN and the SCO: impersonal authority and role models

The discourse reflects a shift in emphasis from separatism to extremism that stems from President Xi Jinping’s change in strategy regarding ethnic conflict in Xinjiang. For Xi, the solution could no longer be found in mere economic means and instead demanded ideological ones (Greitens et al. 2020; Roberts 2012, 2018). This change in discourse reached a milestone in 2015 when it incorporated references to the vocabulary used in the UN’s 2015 Plan of Action to advance international

legitimation.⁸ The CPC's particular focus on the UN as a role model—to use van Leeuwen's (2008) terms—attempts to legitimize measures officially described as aimed at preventing and countering threats framed as extremism. The fact that other ethnic groups in China (such as the Hui)⁹ do not receive special attention in this regard indicates the framing of "extremism" in association with insurgence and separatism. Processes of Sinification have historically aimed at maintaining political stability and territorial unity, especially in border regions (Bovingdon 2002). Since the vast majority of the Uyghur population lives in Xinjiang – a relatively isolated border region, distant from the political center of the country – they are perceived by the Party as more vulnerable to foreign influence (especially considering the birth of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) after the dissolution of the USSR from 1991). This makes their integration into the mainstream Chinese culture more imperative, yet complex.

The Party thus aims to cut down on linguistic and cultural barriers to facilitate Uyghur interaction with other regions or ethnic groups and therefore promote their sense of belonging to the Chinese nation. From the Party's perspective, the promotion of ethnic assimilation into the greater Chinese nation is an effective counterinsurgency tool that, together with patriotism, supposedly makes ethnic minorities less vulnerable to separatist influence. Once integration and patriotism are identified as preventive measures against separatism (and allegedly potential terrorist tactics to that end, by extension) according to the Party's priorities and methods, then the connection between the Party's counterterrorism discourse and its measures in Xinjiang makes more sense. However, as discussed by scholars such as Dwyer (2005), Smith Finley (2013), and Roberts (2018, 2020), repressive measures in Xinjiang have in fact effectively strengthened ethnic identity consciousness and advanced radicalization. This conforms to the understanding of several counterterrorism scholars, who explain the potentially counterproductive effect of coercive measures by damaging popular support for the government (Dragu and Polborn 2013).

The reference to separatism as part of this three-in-one threat finds support particularly in the context of the SCO, which naturally legitimates this discourse against separatism given shared member priorities in terms of the protection of their national sovereignty against both national and international threats to their regimes. Cooperation among SCO members is grounded in the fact that these require the survival of the regime to guarantee the survival of the state, thus cooperating to respond to internal challenges to their regime security (Aris 2009). Since consensus among the member states over regime survival is at the base of the framing of the Three Evil Forces¹⁰, questions about the Party's measures in Xinjiang are less frequent. This aspect is especially relevant since it demonstrates how shared ideology fosters the efficiency of persuasive discourse by reflecting the value systems and providing cognitive validity. SCO was created as a response to growing concerns about the spilling effect of the disintegration of the Soviet Union and posterior birth of the CIS, which in fact encouraged Uyghur independence movements in Xinjiang (Smith Finley 2021). Thus, collaboration with SCO member states has been crucial for the Party to curb and prevent any sort of undesired communication between the CIS and separatists in Xinjiang. While the Party fields objections from liberal democracies, its priorities and concerns are shared by regional partners who provide an alternative – and strategically more significant – source of international support for its counterterrorism measures.

⁸Some measures in Xinjiang have been denounced by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. In August 2022, the report *OHCHR Assessment of human rights concerns in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, People's Republic of China* described the VETC as "far-reaching, arbitrary and discriminatory restrictions on human rights and fundamental freedoms, in violation of international norms and standards" (43).

⁹The Hui, who are a Muslim group more assimilated into the Han majority, do not threaten the Party's legitimacy; in contrast, Uyghur separatism remains a primary concern in terms of national security (Gladney 2003).

¹⁰The Shanghai Cooperation Organization has its roots in the "Shanghai Five," an organization created in 1996 precisely to counter border tensions and, specially, separatism in Xinjiang (Radio Free Europe, August 09, 1999). According to the organization's official webpage, it currently counts nine member states (the Republic of India, the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Republic of Kazakhstan, the People's Republic of China, the Kyrgyz Republic, the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, the Russian Federation, the Republic of Tajikistan, the Republic of Uzbekistan), as well as three observers and fourteen dialogue partners.

Extremism: a bridge between international terrorism and separatism in Xinjiang

The connection between separatism and religion existed within the context of conflict in Xinjiang as early as the 1990s (Clarke 2018; Dwyer 2005; Roberts 2012; Zhou 2017), but, as the analysis indicated, the emphasis on references to terrorism and extremism over separatism may be an attempt by China's propaganda authorities to align with international discourse after 9/11. The Chinese discourse highlights the items that are internationally recognized as threats while leaving risks to China's territorial integrity relatively in the background. The analysis has further unveiled how the discourse on separatism became more abstract and general by moving from the discussion of ETIM to East Turkistan forces; such a movement aims at legitimizing the application of broader measures to counter a more generic threat. Greitens et al. (2020) focus on the latest preventive measures as exemplary of an authoritarian government's strategy to counter dissidence and prevent further instability. The permanence and intensification of securitization and control, as well as a perception of injustice and discrimination by the Uyghur, stoked grievances among the Uyghur population in Xinjiang. On the other hand, in 2008, The Turkistan Islamic Party¹¹ leader Abdul Haq directly threatened China during the 2008 Olympic Games, catalyzing the Party's fear of attack (Xu et al. 2014) and leading to strengthened security measures around the Olympics (Pokalova 2018). It is important to note, nevertheless, that instability in Xinjiang in 2009 was rather related to ethnic discontent and a perception of injustice and unequal treatment (Finley Smith 2021) and not directly linked to international terrorism. However, political securitization reached new highs in 2015 due to the Party's suspected connection between Uyghurs and radical Islamic militant groups in Southeast Asia as well as international sympathy toward the Uyghur cause (Greitens et al. 2020), which further fueled the government's concerns. The official discourse reflects the Party's representation of domestic challenges to its rule in Xinjiang as influenced by international terrorism and religious extremism, justifying the application of special ideological measures as preventive measures in front of an international audience which, in Xinjiang, translate into an assimilationist approach aimed at ethnic minorities (Clarke 2018; Greitens et al. 2020).

Although the Party's use of ideological means to promote Uyghur assimilation into mainstream Chinese society is nothing new (Bovingdon 2002; Pokalova 2018), the discourse increasingly refers to these means as preventive measures to counter radical ideology under President Xi's leadership (Smith Finley 2019; Greitens et al. 2020; Li et al. 2019). Growing concerns about the potential radicalization of the Uyghur diaspora contributing to jihad, which emerged between 2014 and 2016, motivated a more regular and emphatic attention to Xinjiang and the Uyghurs – reflected in the annual publication of XJWPs since 2015. Attacks in China between 2013 and 2015 – particularly in Tiananmen Square in 2013 – took on highly symbolic meaning by hitting the core of political power in China; the attack at the Kunming Railway Station in distant Yunnan province to the south-east of Xinjiang further indicated the expansion of the threat beyond the region, prompting stronger measures to curb its intensification (Famularo 2018). These events also stimulated the promulgation of the first counterterrorism legislation in China in 2015 (Greitens et al. 2020), mentioned before and reflected in the discourse. The advancement of the rule of law allegedly represents a tool to legalize measures that had been implemented mainly through unofficial administrative orders (Zhou 2018). Discourse analysis thus reflects the Party's institutionalization and strengthening of its legal system as a legitimating tool within the context of counterterrorism (Becquelin 2004; Clarke 2018; Zeng 2014).

Rationalization as a source of legitimacy: lack of knowledge, prevention, and VETCs

Changes in the discourse thus signal the implementation of additional preventive measures in the region starting in 2015, when the focus on Xinjiang becomes more evident, prompted, and legitimized by the aforementioned events. As expected, the discourse presents several milestones linked to national

¹¹The Turkistan Islamic Party, formerly known as the East Turkistan Islamic Party (ETIP), has been considered by the Chinese government as the main secessionist threat in the XUAR (Li Wei et al. 2019).

or international events with the aim of justifying the Party's increased securitization of Xinjiang. Accordingly, the discourse focuses more heavily on identitarian elements, such as religion and language, from 2015. The discursive shift reflects changes in domestic policy, promoting a unified Chinese identity around "Socialism with Chinese Characteristics" as Xi's fifth identification, which aims at building ideological bonds between Chinese people and the Party. According to Kam and Clarke (2021), these assimilation efforts aim at correcting "flawed" behavior and fostering an "ideal" order under which society can flourish. Such social engineering resembles the practices of the Qing Empire that, under Confucian values, intended to shape society to maintain harmony. The re-education system in Xinjiang therefore represents a step further in the Party's effort to push what Yu (2014) calls "rigid stability" through massive ideological campaigns. VETC – based on knowledge barriers as root causes of people's vulnerability, as CDA unveiled – allegedly contributes (through the legitimating role of law) to promote the integration and rehabilitation of individuals influenced by extremist ideology. Reference to the 2015 UN *Plan of Action*, which details how extremist groups exploit marginalized communities, poverty, and inequality, is used to legitimate measures reportedly aimed at the integration of ethnic minorities (and thus their participation in national development and modernization), such as the promotion of Mandarin as the official national language. The role of Mandarin is emphasized as a tool for constructing a feeling of belonging to the motherland as well as a vehicle for patriotic education and civic nationalism, particularly in border regions such as Xinjiang (Dwyer 2005; Leibold 2015). While integration measures are part of the tactics used by liberal democratic governments to counter radicalization, the forceful and widespread approach to the assimilation of Uyghurs has been denounced by other countries (the USA, the United Kingdom, Canada, and the Netherlands, among others) and human rights groups (Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch). In such an effort to promote national identification with the motherland, the discourse however fails to consider the damaging consequences of these measures on minority identities and cultural marks – particularly those linked to religion and language. Although the emphasis on the rule of law aims at conferring greater legitimacy and capability to Beijing's fight against terrorism and extremism, Zhou (2018) highlights how "the legal instruments . . . touch on many fundamental rights and individual freedoms," rendering them "...not fully compatible with international human rights standards" (97), consequently – and partially – hampering the persuasive goal of the discourse.

People's war on terror: political polarization and moral duty

Prior analysis of official reports from the National Congress of the Communist Party of China reflected the discursive construction of a collaborative tandem between the Party and the people toward economic development and modernization as collective goals (García-Noblejas 2020). This analysis of XJWP also reflects the transversal role of development as a legitimating tool alongside the promotion of social unity to build widespread trust in and support for the Party. Through development (both eudemonic and ideological), the discourse reflects the promotion of social unity between the Party and the people. Concretely, CDA located the polarization of actors to frame terrorism, religious extremism, and ethnic separatism as threats to both the government and patriotic individuals, building on what Xie and Liu call the "partnership of stability" (2019). Such polarization is further reflected in the discourse through the dichotomy between religious "extremist" and "normal" practices. Discourse analysis reveals how religious people are portrayed as victims of foreign religious extremism, establishing patriotism and religion "with Chinese characteristics" as a preventive measure, thus reflecting the politicization of religion (Famularo 2018) while highlighting the morality of Chinese culture. Polarization of religious practices in these terms shifts the focus of attention to official concerns about separatist ambitions in Xinjiang as a lack of patriotism and identification with the "motherland." The people's war in Xinjiang was promoted by provincial party leadership from 2016 onward (Kam and Clarke 2021), represented by the reorganization of the United Front between 2012 and 2018 (Joske 2019). Even though within XJWP the concept of "the people's war on terror" is not officially

mentioned,¹² the XJWPs in 2019 already introduced a “mass line” approach, which attempts to reunify people under the Party’s command to counter dissidence. In fact, the so-called people’s war against terror in Xinjiang alongside mass mobilization (Zhang 2022) through ideological campaigns are two of the most significant characteristics of the Party’s counterterrorism efforts reflected in the official discourse. Counterterrorism discourse thus works as a unifying tool through the concept of the people’s war against a common enemy (Kam and Clarke 2021; Tanner and Bellacqua 2016; Wayne 2009; Zhang 2022). Under these premises, those who threaten the Party’s leadership (or question it) implicitly damage a common national goal and are thus portrayed as the enemies of the masses. One concrete outcome is the implied victimization of China and its people, further contributing to social polarization between those who support the Party – and thus the collective fight – and those who do not. In this dichotomic representation of participants, the discourse is stigmatizing those who do not identify with the socially constructed knowledge and values that sustain economic development as the core precondition for political legitimacy. While this discourse may harmonize with the Han and already assimilated ethnic groups in China, since it is constructed over shared knowledge and values, it clashes with less integrated minorities in Xinjiang (or Tibet). Since 2015, the securitization effort in Xinjiang has aimed at normalizing (correcting) Uyghur behavior described as “extreme” or “abnormal” through “... political and ideological re-education, reformative training and punishment” (Kam and Clarke 2021, p. 637). As the analysis in this research has proved, this strategy and its key milestones can be traced back through the XJWP discourse.

Conclusions

Corpus-based CDA has been proven as an effective methodology to reveal political ideology and, most importantly, significant shifts in political action. The combination of quantitative tools and van Leeuwen’s (2008) analysis of representation of social practices and participants in the discourse has been applied to China’s official discourse on Xinjiang, demonstrating its efficiency to provide empirical evidence to the discussion. While the official discourse emphasizes an assumed relationship between international terrorism, religious extremism, and ethnic separatism in Xinjiang, this analysis demonstrates the Party’s perception of a lack of ethnic identification with the motherland as the key source of political instability in Xinjiang. The chronological analysis of key terms within the discourse (terror-, separat-, and extremis-) in XJWP indicates the deliberate rhetoric interrelation of the terms as a reaction to national and international trends with the aim of, first, countering international accusations of ethnoreligious repression and, second, justifying the measures in Xinjiang as adapted to the local conditions. The rationalization of measures is complemented by the UN and SCO as quantitatively discreet – but qualitatively fundamental – participants in the discourse, providing legitimate role models and impersonal authorization to the Party’s representation and reaction to the threat. Nevertheless, this discourse analysis also provides evidence of the manipulation of the UN’s discourse through the deliberate overgeneralization of the threat (from ETIM to East Turkistan forces) or the omission of the violent element as a prerequisite to apply measures against extremism. Both discursive trends signal the representation of the threat as abstract, thereby rationalizing the application of collective ideological measures aimed at integrating ethnic minorities in Xinjiang into a broader national identity under the Party’s leadership. Therefore, despite its measurable lack of emphasis within the official discourse, separatism emerges as the Party’s central concern. This analysis proves the qualitative centrality of the separatist variable of the threat, drawing attention to the representation of ignorance or lack of knowledge – in terms of legal, vocational, and linguistic knowledge – among the victims as the root cause of their vulnerability to extremism. These elements signal the implicit evaluation of VETCs as rational and moral by compelling the integration of ethnic minorities in Xinjiang into the rest of China supposedly as a tool to promote stability which, in turn, is portrayed as a

¹²The concept is mentioned in page 17 on a document titled *Fight against Terrorism and Extremism in Xinjiang: Truth and Facts*, published in 2022 by the Information Office of the People’s Government of Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region.

condition for development. This analysis thus provides empirical evidence of the implicit application of the nationally constructed stability discourse (Sandby-Thomas 2014) in Xinjiang as a preventive tool against insurgency. Nevertheless, the construction of development as the collective people's goal implies the polarization of participants and encourages a collective fight against a common enemy represented by those questioning the Party's leadership as representative and guarantor of popular will. This discourse gradually intensified, concluding in the direct mention of the term "people's war" in 2022 (Information Office of the People's Government of Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region 2022, p. 17) which, evoking Maoist strategy to mobilize the masses against anti-revolutionaries, has serious practical implications, including social stratification based on individuals' ideologies. In particular, the politicization of religion in these terms may lead to social discrimination against ethnoreligious groups whose identity marks differ from the officially constructed "normal" identity, reinforcing systemic inequality. Measures in Xinjiang, such as the VETCs, therefore, appear aimed at mitigating these distinctive marks – namely, language and religion – to promote assimilation. Ultimately, and most importantly, this seemingly reflects the CPC's interpretation of identity as a malleable concept upon which social stability depends.

The application of quantitative and CDA tools has been efficient to scrutinize official discourse on Xinjiang, particularly to interpret the representation of participants and their interaction within the discourse. The diachronic observation of these elements within political discourse is significant because it provides empirical evidence, thus adding strength to theoretically sustained knowledge. Second, it can unveil meaningful shifts and trends in the discourse that could translate into practical political measures, thus acquiring a prospective value. Finally, it is widely replicable, making corpus-based CDA a valuable tool for the advancement of social sciences.

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