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# Xi Jinping's Policies in Xinjiang

An Analysis of China's Objectives

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## Abstract

Xinjiang has always been a territory of major importance to the region's rulers historically. However, they have never managed to secure complete control over the territory and its peoples, the Turkic-speaking, Muslim Uyghurs, who have little in common with the country's ethnic Han majority population. The Uyghur's resistance to the Chinese Communist Party's rule has resulted in numerous clashes and violent incidents in the region, causing unrest and instability to the state's detriment. Xinjiang's growing strategic, economic, geopolitical, and ideological importance to the People's Republic of China and its president, Xi Jinping, has led to the adoption of a different approach towards the area. Under Xi Jinping's consolidated power, Xinjiang has experienced severe changes that have led to its complete securitization and its peoples to a state of constant surveillance, mass detention and incarceration. The policies, violating the Uyghur and other Muslim minorities' human rights, are part of a bigger plan which Xi Jinping is determined to realise.

Key Words: Xinjiang, Uyghur, securitization, foreign policy, security, geopolitics, strategy, Xi Jinping.

## Resumen

Históricamente, Xinjiang ha sido siempre un territorio de gran importancia para los gobernantes de la región. Sin embargo, nunca han conseguido asegurar el control total del territorio y de sus gentes, los uigures musulmanes de habla turca, que tienen poco en común con la población mayoritaria de etnia han del país. La resistencia de los uigures al gobierno del Partido Comunista Chino ha provocado numerosos enfrentamientos e incidentes violentos en la región, causando malestar e inestabilidad en detrimento del Estado. La creciente importancia estratégica, económica, geopolítica e ideológica de Xinjiang para la República Popular China y su presidente, Xi Jinping, ha llevado a la adopción de un enfoque diferente hacia la zona. Bajo el poder consolidado de Xi Jinping, Xinjiang ha experimentado graves cambios que han llevado a su completa securitización y a sus gentes a un estado de vigilancia constante, detención y encarcelamiento masivos. Estas políticas, que violan los derechos humanos de los uigures y de otras minorías musulmanas, forman parte de un plan más amplio que Xi Jinping está decidido a llevar a cabo.

Palabras clave: Xinjiang, uigur, securitización, política exterior, seguridad, geopolítica, estrategia, Xi Jinping.

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## **1. Introduction**

China's far north-western province, the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR), is the country's biggest frontier, bordering eight key Central Asian countries: India, Pakistan, Russia, Mongolia, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, and Kyrgyzstan (see annex 1) (Raza, 2019). This location presents on the one hand, fundamental political, economic, strategic, geopolitical and security opportunities for the People's Republic of China (PRC). The territory is also rich in key natural resources such as oil, natural gas, and coal, fundamental for the country's industrial production and economic development (Fallon, 2019). On the other hand, it also presents a number of challenges mostly due to the people's that inhabit the area, the Turkic Uyghurs, a Muslim minority which has populated the region for centuries and which has resisted to being assimilated by Han Chinese rule and customs (Hao & Liu, 2012). Due to their proximity to other Central Asian countries and the numerous ethnocultural differences that Uyghurs possess, they have struggled to retain independence from the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) while the latter has struggled to integrate them through an improvement of the economic and living conditions of the region, which has always remained underdeveloped when compared to other provinces and specially in contrast with eastern areas (Hao & Liu, 2012; Raza, 2019). The reason for this is also the root of the problems between the state and the Uyghurs, being the historical inequalities, discrimination, and human rights violations that the PRC has perpetrated against this ethnicity since 1949 in an attempt to govern the vast territory (Hayes, 2019).

Despite numerous approaches and policies taken throughout the decades, the Uyghurs and Xinjiang have remained a policy challenge that China needs to address to fulfil its goals, strongly linked to ideological motivations (Farwa, 2018). These have guided the state ruler's policy choices since Mao's time. Now, with Xi Jinping as the head of the CCP and president of the PRC, ideological renovation and goal achievement are at the core of his priorities; thus, dealing with the "Xinjiang issue" (Klimeš, 2018, p. 418). In order to do so, China seems to be carrying out a securitization strategy, leveraging the post 9/11 international policy shift led by the US, which has given states the opportunity to legitimately employ extraordinary measures to combat terrorism and extremism to maintain the state's integrity and survival. However, the result has been the creation of a mass internment campaign of the Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities along with the establishment of a high-tech surveillance system in the province, violating the population's human rights and threatening to erase their cultural, religious, and

linguistic practices, as they have been categorised as being the source of the three evils that threaten China's stability (Roberts, 2018).

### **1.1. Purpose and Motives**

In the last few years China's treatment of the Uyghur community has been occupying newspaper headlines and news outlets all over the world. Journalists, politicians, and governments from many countries, especially from the Western world have publicly denounced China's latest securitization policies in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR), especially since in 2018 the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) declared in a panel on their reviews of their periodic reports of China, concerns

about the numerous and credible reports that in the name of combatting "religious extremism" and maintaining "social stability", the State party had turned the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region into something that resembled a massive internment camp shrouded in secrecy, a "no rights zone". (United Nations, 2018, Questions by the Country Rapporteurs, para. 8)

The international community's response to these claims was even more substantial when several internal government files were leaked to The New York Times in 2019, exposing China's mass detention program of Muslim Uyghurs, Kazakhs, and other Muslim minorities. Despite the seemingly widespread condemnation and some sanctions from the US government, there has not been any active measure taken from any government or international organisation to address the ongoing actions, which, if anything, have increased. Moreover, in recent months of 2020, the situation of the Uyghur in Xinjiang has disappeared from the media's discourse, despite the problem is far from being resolved or even improved. Thus, there is an interest in analysing China's most recent policies in Xinjiang, but more specifically Xi Jinping's motivations and interests in the region at all levels, as well as what elements have made it possible for implementation with almost no significant external limitations and ability to divert attention from the area lately.

China's past policies in Xinjiang and the issue of the Uyghurs have been studied by scholars, however, there is a current vacuum with respect to Xi Jinping's latest policies and how these fit into wider strategic, economic, foreign policy objectives of the CCP as well as deeper ideological motivations. Moreover, Xi's "One Belt, One Road" (OBOR) Initiative and his

renewed securitization policies in Xinjiang have been analysed in the past, but seldom combining both factors and looking at broader foreign policy strategies of the current president in relation to the Uyghur population in the region. There are several reasons for choosing this topic. One is an interest in intrastate conflicts, specially linked to social and ethnic factors. Second, an interest in foreign policy and security. My studies' specialization is centred on those themes, and I have always had an interest in geopolitical conflicts. Also, in the last few years a growing interest in the Asian region. This is partly due to my exchange in an Asia-Pacific country, Australia, where I had the chance to experience how China's foreign policy and other Asian countries' policies impact on their neighbours. At the same time, seeing clashes of different cultures, as in the case of the Chinese and Australian one, made my interest in social conflicts linked to political and ideological issues grow. China's policies in Xinjiang are the result of a long process of securitization and repressive measures against the Uyghur community, a Muslim minority concentrated in a region where China has major geopolitical, economic, and strategic interests. Along with this, the clash between the Han and the ethnic Uyghurs carries strong ideological motivations, which are connected to domestic conflicts, security, and human rights violations in the country.

## **2. State of Affairs**

### **2.1. The Uyghurs**

The Uyghurs are a Turkic-speaking ethnic group, mostly Muslim, that live in China. They are among the ten recognised Muslim minority groups that inhabit the PRC and one of the fifty-five, non-Han, ethnic nationalities that the State party recognises officially (Ma, 2019). Within China, Muslim ethnic groups represent a minority; both in terms of numbers, when compared to the total population of the country, and also in terms of geographical location, as these communities are often distributed throughout the vast territory inhabited by the predominantly ethnic Han (Israeli, 2012; Ma, 2019). However, Turkic Uyghurs are a minority concentrated in the territory of Xinjiang, which made them the predominant ethnic group in the region until a few decades ago, when the demographic picture started to change (see annex 2 & 3) (Hafez, 2020). Uyghurs' ethnic predominance in the province has been declining since 1949, when the People's Republic of China annexed Xinjiang and started its policy of mass migration of Han Chinese to the area to reduce their high prevalence (Hafez, 2020; Hayes, 2019; Israeli, 2012). In the early 1950s it was estimated that between 76% and 90% of Xinjiang's population was ethnic Uyghur, as several scholars note, but soon after the PRC's migration policies were implemented these numbers reversed, and now account for less than 50% (see annex 3) (Hayes,

2019; Israeli, 2012). Nonetheless, it is estimated that around eleven million Uyghurs inhabit Xinjiang nowadays (Maizland, 2021; Shiel & Chavkin, 2019).

## **2.2. Islam in China: the Uyghurs and the Hui**

Islamic religion in China has been from the beginning, heterogenous. Within China, there are several Muslim communities that have inhabited China since the 10<sup>th</sup> century approximately (Israeli, 2012). However, it is important to note that Muslims in China can be grouped into two big ethnic groups: the Hui; which are also labelled as “Chinese Muslims” (Gladney, 2003; Israeli, 2012) and the Uyghurs. Although both the Uyghurs and the Hui are Sunni Muslim and adhere to the Hanafi School of jurisprudence (Gladney, 2003; Gladney, 2004a; Israeli, 2012), there are some key differences between the Hui and the Uyghur that must be explained in order to properly understand why the CCP and previous governments have systematically struggled to control and assimilate the Uyghur into the Han Chinese society.

One of them is that Turkic Uyghurs were strongly influenced by Sufi orders which entered China from Central Asia and the Naqshbandiyya became the most popular one among the different orders (Gladney, 2003; Israeli, 2012; Millward, 2007). The strong influence in terms of religious and cultural ties with Central Asian Muslims makes the Uyghurs possess unique links with Xinjiang’s bordering and neighbouring people’s that the Hui lack (Gladney, 2003; Israeli, 2012). Another is that the Hui, although constituting the biggest minority out of the ten Muslim nationalities recognised by the Chinese government, are scattered all over the Chinese territory, living in almost all counties and in every province and city (Gladney, 2004a). A reason for this is that, since the first Muslim settlers arrived in China, they spread to the eastern parts of the country (Israeli, 2012). Moreover, the policies established first by the Ming Dynasty, which, according to Israeli (2012), made the Hui transform “from being Muslims in China to becoming Chinese Muslims” (p. 255). This was due to a new set of rules that forced the Hui to acculturate to Chinese customs, forcing Han Chinese to migrate to the western parts of the empire, where Hui Muslims had established themselves for the most part. The consequence was that the territories’ demography changed and since Muslims were banned from practicing their traditions, they progressively changed their names to Chinese ones, married Chinese people and adopted their customs, culminating with the adoption of the Chinese language and the accommodation of Muslim practices to Han Chinese customs (Gladney, 2003; Israeli, 2012). In contrast, Turkic Uyghurs resisted these practices due to their geographical location at the borderland of the country and cultural ties to Central Asian Muslims, which has allowed them to preserve their distinct language and culture (Gladney, 2003). In fact, another key difference

is that Uyghurs have a history of resistance against acculturation and assimilationist attempts by Chinese rulers, especially as they always emphasize connection to the land, and thus, these are their main defining and distinguishing traits (Gladney, 2004b; Gladney, 2003).

Differences in terms of religion are also paramount. Because the type of Islam Turkic Uyghurs practice – Sufism – is expressed through tomb and shrine visiting and worshiping, breathing exercises, chants and ritual dances and music, it is less institutionalized (Millward & Tursun, 2004). As it is less tied to the state, it is harder for the CCP to control its expression and popular practice, as any building can host prayers and it is more publicly practiced (Millward, 2007). This contrasts with the more institutionalized Islam practiced by the Hui, who adapted even the new Islamic trends of several decades to their traditionalist Islam but have not participated in rebellions against the Han since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Gladney, 2003). Finally, it should be noted that within both the Uyghurs and the Hui, there has never been unity, as they have differed between the different orders (especially Uyghurs as they do not adhere to just one usually), clans, and in terms of leadership, religious practices, and political goals (Fuller & Lipman, 2004; Gladney, 2004b; Israeli, 2012). Nevertheless, when Uyghurs have engaged in protests, their overall religious bond has unified them against Han rule, while the recent exposure of some to more radical branches such as the Wahhabi trend has led to some violent attacks (Fuller & Lipman, 2004).

### **2.3. Uyghur relationship with the Han Chinese prior to 1949**

Due to the large distance that separates the territory of Xinjiang from China proper and from cities like Shanghai or Beijing, Muslim Uyghurs and Han Chinese did not have much interaction between them until the Ming and Qing Dynasties. However, tense, and complicated relationships between the Han Chinese and the Uyghur can be traced back to before 1949 (Millward & Tursun, 2004). In fact, it was during the previous rules of empires like the Ming and the Qing, that the process of assimilation, repression and discrimination towards the Uyghur began and was somehow continued when Mao's army took over. During the Ming Dynasty, from 1368-1644, assimilationist policies began and during the Qing Dynasty, the Uyghurs lost almost all the freedoms they enjoyed with the Mongols, according to Israeli (2012).

During the Qing Dynasty, from 1644-1911, Uyghurs began to experience attempts to control their homeland (Fuller & Lipman, 2004). In order to secure the border and retain control of the territory internally, the Qing established military state farms that were managed by Han Chinese soldiers, employing Han, Hui, and Uyghurs (Millward, 2007). Despite the farms had at the

beginning the strategic goal of providing grain for the troops while allowing the army to guard the territory, after 1831 they started to encourage Han migration to the region to promote stability and agricultural development in the area (Millward & Perdue, 2004). In this sense the Qing are often regarded as having employed a colonial style resembling to the European imperial projects, despite their initial approach was more decentralised (Millward, 2007). Over the first century, the Qing administration opted for a “banner system” whereby military authorities oversaw local governments handled by Muslim élites, which allowed them to keep their own Islamic religious and legal systems (Millward, 2007). Thus, at first ethnic and religious diversity was permitted, but after 1831 the approach shifted to a settler, more assimilationist one focused on Sinicization, especially after the reconquest, when Xinjiang was unified as a province in 1884 and started to be known by the Chinese as Xinjiang, which means “New Frontier” (Millward, 2007).

However, the end of the Qing era came partly as a result of not implementing these policies successfully, and thus the establishment of the Republic of China began in 1912 (Dillon, 2004; Millward, 2007). In the 1930s, as a result of discontents with previous Chinese rulers in the area, a rebellion of Uyghurs, Kazakhs, Hui, and other Muslim communities led to the establishment of an independent government in Khotan that extended to Kashgar and proclaimed the foundation of the First Eastern Turkestan Republic (ETR) in November 1933 (Millward & Tursun, 2004). The ETR’s government nature and ideology remain unclear, with some scholars arguing that despite having Islam as founding pillar it also incorporated modern and nationalist ideas of the jadidist movement, with a constitution stressing the reforms in basic areas like education, public health, and their democratic character (Millward & Tursun, 2004; Millward, 2007). It did not have enough time to develop further, as it was attacked by Hui troops with Soviet support, disappearing in 1934 (Millward & Tursun, 2004). Another rebellion in 1944 led by Kazakhs against the Chinese and the Guomindang government in Xinjiang led to the establishment of the Second ETR, depending this time on the Soviet Union for survival (Millward & Tursun, 2004). The republic, like the first one, had Islamist and modernising traits, despite being strongly anti-Han and GMD, and arose as a result of Turkic nationalism (although some Turkic peoples were on GMD, Chinese and Soviet sides too) (Millward, 2007). Its existence –lasting until the PLA took control in 1949 – with the creation of a government, constitution, its distinct turquoise flag with the white crescent moon and star and own currency, remain strong symbols for pro-independence Uyghur nationalists nowadays (Dillon, 2004). Overall, these two short periods of Xinjiang as an independent territory have had, according to

Dillon (2004) “a profound impact on the culture and psyche of the Uyghurs and the other non-Han Chinese people of the region” (p. 32).

## **2.4. Uyghur situation in the People’s Republic of China**

### **2.4.1. The Uyghur under Mao**

Since 1949, when Xinjiang was effectively taken over by the Communist army, the Uyghur position within China experienced many changes. To establish control of the territory, the CCP first redesigned the administration of Xinjiang, whereby at first non-Han officials were allowed to remain in their institutional positions (Millward, 2007). Nevertheless, the PRC progressively started to eliminate those who were associated with activist movements and replaced them with non-Han, local officials that obeyed the new regime. Later on, bigger purges of officials were carried out and non-Han officials were only permitted to work in the lowest levels of government institutions, while the Han occupied the highest ranks (Millward, 2007). This form of discrimination, denying local Uyghurs equal access to political institutions became more evident with the organisational system of the numerous ethnic groups that comprised the most remote areas of China (Millward & Tursun, 2004; Millward, 2007). Taking the Soviet Union’s concept of “nationality” to govern multi-ethnic territories, the PRC established for non-Han minorities the concept of “self-rule or autonomy”, which differed from the Soviet one in one fundamental difference. Under the CCP’s autonomy, there was no option for secession, as autonomous regions were directly under high rank, Han officials and the regions were an inalienable part of the country (Millward & Tursun, 2004; Millward, 2007). This meant that, on the one hand, non-Han peoples could occupy low, local, and regional positions in government, but on the other, they were still subject to the control of higher Han officials and the CCP and thus, their influence and power were in fact, very limited.

Despite this system did not give Uyghurs de facto freedom of governance, it provided a sense of ownership which served to keep the population with a feeling of “self-rule” from the direct control of the Han, as non-Han officials could be seen holding authority positions (Millward & Tursun, 2004). Nevertheless, the “autonomy” system proved from the beginning that representation of minority groups was in practice much lower than officially stated and that it was far from the common understanding of what an autonomy constitutes (Millward, 2007; Mukherjee, 2015), but it successfully achieved the goal of consolidating power over Xinjiang, which finished in 1955. From that moment the territory was renamed the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR). The establishment of the XUAR meant that, although still a province administered by the CCP, it allowed the party to exert indirect rule over the

autonomous region, as it placed an Uyghur man, as chairman of the region's council who answered to Wang Enmao, a veteran of the CCP's army with the actual authority and power over the region (Dillon, 2004; Millward, 2007). Thus, it served to prevent it from being perceived by non-Han as an act of colonialism or attempted assimilation, avoiding possible opposition (Millward & Tursun, 2004; Millward, 2007). It also meant that, apart from the special representation at the regional levels in the autonomous area, the use of local languages both for educational and official purposes was allowed, as well as promotion of their cultural traditions (Millward & Tursun, 2004; Millward, 2007). Thus, certain political, religious, and educational liberties were granted to further guarantee control and avoid protests by the local population. To categorise the ethnic groups suitable for the special rights in those areas, the PRC developed the concept of "minority nationality", applying a Soviet definition, now for nation, to organise and identify those non-Han minority groups that would be officially recognised by the party (Millward, 2007).

According to Millward (2007), "in Xinjiang the nationality-identification process identified thirteen groups, Uyghur, Han, Kazak, Hui, Kirghiz, Mongol, Sibe, Russian, Tajik, Uzbek, Tatar, Manchu and Daur (other 'nationalities' have since established a presence)" (p. 244). It should further be noted that, as Millward (2007) indicates "only in Xinjiang, however, did the PRC leaders face a non-sinophone majority Islamic population with strong links abroad and a well-established clerical organisation" (p. 246), which is why the land reform starting in 1950 – despite being nationwide as an essential part of Mao's Communist Revolution – fulfilled key strategic objectives to further its control over the region. Besides serving economic goals, the land reform had two fundamental political goals (Millward & Tursun, 2004; Millward, 2007).

First, it meant an undermining of the traditional Islamic landlords that had the monopoly of the land, as peasants mobilised against the former and in contrast, aligned in favour of the Communists. At first the land reform meant that land redistribution would favour poorer peasants as it provided them with a territory of their own, but as the PRC's program moved forward, they were eventually dispossessed from the territories acquired (Millward & Tursun, 2004; Millward, 2007). Second, it directly eroded Islamic society, as it alienated the traditional nomadic, pastoral organisation under which the Islamic clergy and the different clans had established their social organisation, especially that of Kazakhs (Dillon, 2004; Millward & Tursun, 2004; Millward, 2007). This is because their pastoral, nomadic society and economy was directly connected to the way in which they organised their clans, around the herds. Consequently, the land reform was more disruptive for the Uyghurs and Kazakhs in northern

Xinjiang than for the Han, as the collectivisation of the land directly hit the social structures of the Uyghur and Kazakh society and their connection to the area (Millward & Tursun, 2004).

However, because of the differences the nomadic lifestyle had with those of the Han, the PRC eventually shifted its strategy to one based on incentive-giving to successfully implement their collectivised agricultural plan. Similarly, to reduce the power the Islamic institutions and clergy held over the population – through the system of rents from the land, the taxes that served to fund mosques and community services provided by the clergy – the PRC prohibited tax collection and sharia courts. Sufi Islamic orders; however, were less impacted by these prohibitions, as their order was more of a popular expression and less dependent on the mosques and shrines and the PRC allowed them until the mid-1950s (Millward & Tursun, 2004; Millward, 2007). It did not follow the same strategy when it came to securing control of the region.

As mentioned above, the PRC continued the practices started by the Qing Dynasty regarding settlement and migration of Han Chinese in Xinjiang (Millward, 2007), and as such, systematic, repressive, and discriminatory practices against the Uyghurs predate the Communist era. The main institution in charge of the migration policy was the “Production-Construction Military Corps” (PCC) or *bingtuan*, who settled hundreds of thousands of soldiers and then civilians from China proper in Xinjiang, offering employment and permanent settlement in the area (Millward & Tursun, 2004; Millward, 2007). These Corps contributed greatly to the change in the demographic picture of Xinjiang from the 1950s to the 70s. Yet, the biggest changes came with the beginning of the Cultural Revolution in 1956, which were marked by Han Chinese norms and values according to Mao’s ideology. This shift in the domestic politics meant a break from the early approach at the beginning of the 50s that aimed to avoid adopting harsh policies towards the Uyghurs that could spark protests (Millward & Tursun, 2004).

Due to a deterioration in the relations with the Soviets and a perceived failure of the economic reforms, China’s development was seen as failing to perform accordingly and Mao decided to test new strategies (Millward, 2007). In 1956 Mao initiated the Hundred Flowers Movement, a campaign in which the CCP asked citizens to express their criticism towards the government freely (Millward & Tursun, 2004). However, due to the sharp criticism received, especially from the non-Han minorities in Xinjiang, shortly after the Anti-Rightist Rectification campaign was launched, to punish those who had been encouraged to criticise at the beginning (Rudelson & Jankowiak, 2004). Those affected most by this were Uyghurs and non-Han, which expressed

the biggest grievances towards the autonomy system in Xinjiang and minority discrimination by Han officials. In Xinjiang, critics were targeted and accused of being “local nationalists”, referring to ties with the Soviets and thus of being traitors. Since these initiatives did not help to improve China’s economy but did show a problem of widespread discontent among the population towards the CCP’s policies, Mao initiated the Great Leap Forward (Dillon, 2004).

The Great Leap Forward relied fully on ideology and willpower, merging both industrial and agricultural productions into communes with little supervision of experts, as they had been purged in the previous campaign (Millward, 2007). The results proved false success, resulting in food shortages and famine. In Xinjiang, the effects were similar as in the rest of China except for the anti-Islamic measures targeting Xinjiang Muslims as part of the Religious Reform Movement (Millward & Tursun, 2004). These prohibitions, affecting nomadic social structures and thinking, proved that the Great Leap had a political goal more explicit in Xinjiang, which was to force non-Han minorities into adopting the communist ideology through the reforms and to erase ethnic differences between the nationalities and the Han (Millward, 2007). Nonetheless, the consequence was an attempt at erasing ethnic identity in Xinjiang and forced assimilation of Han culture (Millward & Tursun, 2004). For this reason, ethnic tensions increased, causing thousands of Uyghurs and other minorities to leave and seek asylum in the Soviet Union, sparking protests in the frontier region (Millward & Tursun, 2004). Seeing the effects the Great Leap had caused, the party retreated partially from their assimilationist approach and adopted a more moderate one (Millward, 2007). Communisation after the Great Leap slowed down but more purges were carried out in non-Han cadres, proving the PRC’s reluctance to show failure in the management of the autonomous region has always existed. In 1965 Mao initiated the “Proletarian Cultural Revolution”, which resulted in the confrontation of Hans accusing each other of being capitalists and traitors (Millward & Tursun, 2004). Despite ending relatively soon, in 1967 for most of China, in Xinjiang it lasted another year, since purges were more aggressive.

Both the Great Leap and the Cultural Revolution were different in Xinjiang compared to the rest of the country because they created factional, ethnic clashes between the Han and non-Han, as well as attacking non-Han cultures labelling them as backward, capitalist and forbidding their people’s from practicing their traditions (Millward & Tursun, 2004; Millward, 2007). In addition, as part of the Revolution, the constitution was changed during those years, affecting the autonomy system and special rights given to “minority nationalities”, making Mao’s era the toughest period for Uyghurs so far (Dillon, 2004).

### **2.4.2. The Uyghur under Deng Xiaoping**

When Mao Zedong dies in 1976 and Deng Xiaoping takes control of the party in 1978, reforms to boost economic growth and political stability make the PRC's approach shift radically (Millward & Tursun, 2004). Pragmatism becomes the norm instead of communist ideology, as it was perceived that Cultural Revolution policies had damaged support for the party among non-Han in Xinjiang. Consequently, moderate policies returned, and accommodation was chosen to respect minorities' rights, with the drafting of a new constitution in 1982 guaranteeing the changes (Millward, 2007). During Deng's mandate, restrictions on Islam eased, mosques were rebuilt, reopened, travel to Muslim countries became easier and border controls at the frontier were relaxed (Dillon, 2004; Millward, 2007). Moreover, Deng wanted to strengthen the autonomy system and a law in 1984 was passed enlarging minority freedoms (Millward, 2007). An example of them was the one-child policy, which despite establishing a limit of one child per family nationwide, allowed ethnic minority groups to have more (Benson, 2004). In addition, more representation in regional posts by non-Han meant more Uyghurs occupying positions in local institutions. Along with the liberalisation of non-Han areas and the promotion of their cultures and languages by the CCP, on the economic front the liberalisation of the economy allowed Xinjiang to raise its production and recover from the crisis provoked by the Great Leap and Cultural Revolution (Millward, 2007). Altogether, these policies were seen by Deng as safeguarding the region from separatist sentiments.

Although an improvement in the situation of Uyghurs and other minorities in Xinjiang raised living standards during the 80s, Deng – who in fact since 1989 delegated his daily political duties to Jiang Zemin – experienced during his last years some protests and incidents that began to raise concerns among party leaders, as they had ethnoreligious characteristics (Li, 2019; Millward, 2007). One of the most remarkable ones is the “Baren incident” in 1990, in which the East Turkestan Islamic Party came to be known (Rudelson & Jankowiak, 2004). The protest was organized by the movement's founder, Zeydin Yusup, and became violent when demonstrators and policemen engaged in fighting, shooting broke out and an unclear number of people died<sup>1</sup>, including Yusup (Millward, 2007). The underlying grievances behind the protest were never publicised by the PRC, which solely focused on Islamic faith and separatism. However, it should be noted that, as many scholars such as Millward (2007) highlight, these

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<sup>1</sup> Methodological note: The exact number of deaths and arrests during incidents and protests in Xinjiang is hard to know due to the different figures and accounts of the incident given by official state sources and independent media and organisations. Nonetheless, scholars like Millward (2007) note that casualties might usually be higher than the ones officially reported by the PRC, if witnesses' claims and NGO reports are correct.

protests with Islam as a common thread and cited cause may be due to the decades of repression suffered, which mobilised Muslim communities belonging to different branches and sects together, with the shared purpose of protecting their religion and traditions. Moreover, despite claiming religion as a motive, most were concerned with “the treatment and survival of Uyghurs as a nation” (Millward, 2007, p. 282).

Further changes, such as the increase in Han population in Xinjiang during the 90s and 2000s, due to the fast development of the region which sparked migration, urbanisation, and the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 – eliminating a destabilising threat in the border but also setting an example of achieved independence by Central Asian nations – made PRC leaders reconsider Xinjiang’s situation and policies (Gladney, 2004b). As demonstrations advocating for further freedom and democracy continued in the 90s, the international community’s attention towards Xinjiang was caught thanks to Uyghur diaspora which began to advocate and lobby in their countries to spread the Uyghur cause worldwide (Millward, 2007). In parallel to this, the CCP began to adopt a more integrationist approach to tighten their control over Xinjiang, while keeping the region open for commercial gain. The measures entailed massive arrests of suspects of separatism, mainly imams, religious students, and alleged separatist organisations and restrictions on religious activities (Roberts, 2018).

It is worth noting that, according to Wiemer’s 2004 work (as cited in Millward, 2007), Xinjiang’s economic growth and development during this time did not come as a result of foreign investment as it did in other areas in China, but rather remained extremely centralised and controlled by the state. The reason for this was political, as the PRC considered it was safer to keep tight control of the Uyghur region. A downside of the “Open Door Policy” was that from that moment onwards, the legitimacy of the CCP now depended on its ability to improve living standards of all peoples, but more importantly of those minorities which had suffered the worst consequences of past radical policies, and whose development was perceived as essential to avoid inequalities and separatism claims (Dillon, 2004; Millward, 2007).

### **2.4.3. Policy implementation in Xinjiang during the Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao era**

In the late 1990s, with Jiang Zemin now as the new president of the PRC, the same pragmatic approach was continued regarding Xinjiang, and the focus was further placed on improving the economic conditions and living standards of Uyghurs and all other minorities (Millward, 2007). It was thus decided to invest in Xinjiang and promote the region’s economic development to

make unrest and separatist demonstrations disappear (Millward, 2007; Rudelson & Jankowiak, 2004). In this sense, there was a continuation of the Deng era. However, new initiatives were created such as the “Great Development” of the West” programme in 2000, a strategy aimed at fulfilling the promise during Deng’s mandate of prioritising western provinces’ economic development (Benson, 2004; Millward, 2007). From the beginning, the program was focused on infrastructure development, as well as boosting its two key industries, oil, natural gas, and cotton (Wiemer, 2004; Millward, 2007). The former is basic for China, as Xinjiang is considered to have “the country’s largest oil reserves” (Starr, 2004, p. 3), making it the country’s energy hub. The program made Xinjiang’s economy grow, especially the natural resources’ extraction and processing industries, which were already essential for the PRC, but became more important since, in the early 90s, China became a net importer of energy, specifically of oil (Gladney, 2004b; Millward, 2007). Thus, utilizing domestic energy resources has become a domestic security issue, but also to avoid relying on oil from the Middle East (Millward, 2007).

Despite the slow growth rate – due to the high centralisation of Xinjiang’s economy – the region developed, and Jiang Zemin attributed it to the “unity of nationalities” (Millward, 2007, p. 304), once again showing the political dimension of the economic reforms in the province. A harmony among different ethnic groups was publicised by the PRC as being the pillar of Xinjiang’s economic improvement. Yet, Uyghurs remained poorer than the Han, especially when compared with other provinces, and attributed it to the difficulties they faced to find a job (Hao & Liu, 2012) as Han contractors, according to Millward (2007) seemed to prefer hiring Han to avoid adapting to Uyghur’s cultural differences. In addition, Becquelin’s 2000 work (as cited in Millward, 2007) notes that growing Han migration was encouraged by the party and the new economic policies to attract more Han to Xinjiang and secure the border. The latter exacerbated ethnic tensions and it was proven, that despite party efforts to harmonise different ethnic groups, at social level prejudices and stereotypes towards Uyghurs and other minorities remained. These continued tensions between the Han and the Uyghur, caused by domestic and external factors already present and discussed above during the previous decade, culminated in several violent events. The 1995 Gulja (Yining) incident is a clear example of it, as it arose as a consequence of the PRC banning the celebration of a traditional Uyghur gathering (*mäshräp*) organised with the aim of preventing Uyghur youth from engaging in drug and alcohol abuse (Amnesty International, 1999; Millward, 2007; Dautcher, 2004). When the football tournament to replace the gathering was also prohibited, demonstrations erupted.

In response to the growing violence in Xinjiang beginning in the 90s, and after Gulja, several policies were adopted. The year 1996 was key in this sense, as first, the “Strike Hard” campaign was announced as a policy focused on countering terrorism, crime, and separatism (Dillon, 2004; Millward, 2007). Following its announcement, the PRC reported having detained high numbers of terrorists and separatists, which according to Millward (2007) could be the reason behind the growing unrest and not of an increase of separatist violent activity. The second policy adopted was the creation of the “Shanghai Five” after Chinese, Russian and Central Asian leaders met in the city to create a joint alliance to address security concerns in the region, especially focused on terrorism and border issues (Dillon, 2004; Millward, 2007). The alliance became in 2001 the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), after Uzbekistan joined, and it became more focused on military, counter-terrorism activities, and coordination (Dillon, 2004; Gladney, 2004b; Millward, 2007). The organisation, as Millward (2007) points out, has helped China increase its influence over its Central Asian neighbours, in addition to its growing economic and soft power. Furthermore, it should be noted that the SCO was originally intended to address the perceived problem of the Uyghur dissidents abroad.

The CCP was especially concerned with the secret training military camps that were established first in Xinjiang – despite details being unclear –, it is very likely that in the late 90s some training happened in the bordering countries as well (Dillon, 2004; Millward, 2007). This links with the concerns of some groups of Uyghurs radicalising in Pakistan and Afghanistan during the war there, which the US government confirmed after having found smaller numbers of Uyghurs than the PRC claimed along the Taliban, and taken them prisoners in Guantanamo Bay (Dillon, 2004; Starr, 2004; Millward, 2007). Thus, the SCO not only served its initial purpose, but it also served to increase China’s influence on Central Asian member states, as Beijing offered good oil deals and security cooperation in exchange for their help to close training camps, cut civil and political rights of Uyghur diaspora and extradite Uyghur individuals labelled as suspects by the CCP (Dillon, 2004; Millward, 2007; Rogers, 2018). The third was the release of “Document 7” by the Standing Committee indicating illegal religious activities and foreign influences in Xinjiang (Dillon, 2004; Millward, 2007). Overall, domestic policy towards Xinjiang changed, and the autonomy system was redefined during Jiang’s mandate. The changes entailed constitutional adjustments regarding freedom of religion, which was further restricted; increasing the number of Han officials at local institutions; education, with limitations for Uyghur students to study abroad, the language employed when teaching,

book ban and inspection at schools; cultural practices, with bans and regulations on prayers, religious activities, and traditional Muslim clothing (Millward, 2007; Rogers, 2018).

A second and more violent incident took place in Gulja in 1997, whereby official sources differ a lot in the accounts of the protest from independent, foreign ones. According to foreign accounts based on testimonies gathered by Amnesty International, Uyghur protests erupted due to the frustrations from the 1995 incident, increased arrests of religious students, increased police presence in the area and overall perceived repression as part of the Strike Hard campaign (Amnesty International, 1999; Millward, 2007). Religious banners were used and when police forces confronted demonstrators, reports by Amnesty International claim many were injured and killed. It took 2 days for order to be restored and a two-week curfew and seal of the city was imposed afterwards. Shortly after Gulja, 3 bombs placed on public buses exploded in Urumqi killing some people, on the day official ceremonies for Deng Xiaoping were taking place in Beijing (Amnesty International, 1999; Mackerras, 2010; Millward, 2007). This attack was thus probably performed with a political motivation. Following these two incidents, Amnesty International reports claimed the crackdown in Xinjiang in 1997 was severe, with hundreds of executions, thousands of arbitrary arrests, many claims of torture alleged, and whose main targets were religious students, imams, and political dissenters (Amnesty International, 1999). In fact, the crackdown continued in the 2000s.

When 9/11 took place, it had a worldwide effect on anti-terrorism policies, including China's, but it also presented geopolitical dilemmas regarding the US' presence in China's sphere of influence. The CCP decided to leverage the situation and started to publicly discuss the security situation in Xinjiang (Dillon, 2004). Thus, after 9/11 the official position of the party changed, from keeping news from the region contained and downplaying the impact of the violent incidents to exaggerating their extent. One of the first changes was the modification of the criminal legal code shortly after September 11, which added terrorist crimes to other crimes (Amnesty International, 2002; Roberts, 2018). Another was the release of a document almost simultaneously titled "Terrorist Activities Perpetrated by 'Eastern Turkistan' Organizations and their Ties with Osama bin Laden and the Taliban", expressing that terrorist organizations of Uyghurs tied to Al Qaeda were posing an immediate threat to China's security (Government of China, 2002; Roberts, 2018, p. 232). This new policy approach was enshrined in a document released in 2002 by the PRC named "East Turkistan" Terrorist Forces Cannot Get Away with Impunity (Millward, 2007, p. 339). The wording of the document according to Millward (2007) suggests an intentional link of many incidents to the East Turkestan Islamic Party and to blame

and connect it with Islamic extremism like Al Qaeda (Roberts, 2018). It was also the first time they described the situation in Xinjiang as an issue of terrorism apart from separatism and spoke of East Turkestan as being connected to Bin Laden. In addition, the “three evil forces” previously identified by the Chinese state as “separatism, crime and terrorism” during the 90s became “separatism, terrorism and religious extremism” with the establishment of the SCO (Klimeš, 2018; Roberts, 2018).

Therefore, showing a shift in the policies of Jiang Zemin to address security in Xinjiang and taking a very similar narrative to the one used by the US when referring to Al Qaeda, as part of the War on Terror (WoT). The beginning of Hu Jintao’s mandate in early 2003 was marked by a short period of stability in Xinjiang, which lasted until 2005 approximately (Jintao, 2012). During the first years Hu continued the policies of his predecessors which focused efforts in the economic development of Xinjiang. More measures were directed as Hu believed the key to solve ethnic tensions was to boost the socioeconomic standards of the Uyghurs (Jintao, 2012). In fact, the idea was to achieve assimilation and integration of Xinjiang and its peoples with Han Chinese culture through economic integration policies (Chou, 2012).

However, the effect of the late 90s violent incidents and the adoption by the PRC of the WoT rhetoric made state campaigns previously aimed at combating separatists transform into counter-terrorism ones from 2001 (Roberts, 2018). Crackdown on Uyghurs continued during early 2000s, with travel restrictions to cut ties with Uyghurs from neighbouring countries; campaigns by police and security forces to limit religious practices; increased police searches of terrorist suspects, and arrests with charges linked to terrorism, many ending in death sentences; raids in religious centres, closing down of mosques and attempts at re-education of workers and students, focused on political ideals (Amnesty International, 2002; Roberts, 2018). Further cooperation was demanded to the SCO by Hu in 2006 to combat the three evils, creating a legal framework to fight them across the region comprising member states territory (Dupont, 2007; Roberts, 2018). In 2008, when the Beijing Olympic Games were about to take place, “ethnic profiling” of Uyghurs started targeting the entire ethnic group, banning them from traveling to Beijing and outside Xinjiang (Roberts, 2018). The state-controlled media exacerbated this rhetoric of Uyghurs posing a threat to the rest of the population and raised ethnic tensions with the Han. Some violent incidents the same year where Uyghurs had been involved were depicted in state media as terrorist attacks; thus, allowing the state to conduct another crackdown and leading to the 2009 Urumqi riots (Roberts, 2018).

The 2009 Urumqi riots initially started as a clash between security forces and a group of Uyghurs protesting about government responses, but violence extended throughout the city and led to enormous ethnic clashes between Han and Uyghurs that were, according to Roberts (2018), “the worst ethnic violence in PRC history” (p. 242). The state’s response was a massive crackdown, involving comprehensive arrests and searches for Uyghurs that had allegedly participated in the riots, which extended for months after the incident and considerable increase in security measures in Xinjiang (Roberts, 2018). In addition, there were restrictions on communications affecting the entire province, with an Internet and phone shutdown that lasted for almost a year; therefore, putting the region on lockdown. As Roberts (2018) explains:

While clearly not a terrorist attack, the Urumqi riots marked a turning point in Uyghur-state relations as well as in general Han attitudes towards Uyghurs. The intense ethnic violence that took place during the riots resulted in a palatable increase in widespread Han fears of Uyghurs throughout the country. The riots also suggested that efforts to integrate Uyghurs into PRC society had failed, even in Urumqi, where Uyghurs were considered to be much more cosmopolitan than elsewhere in the region. (p. 243)

What followed in 2010, was an escalation of securitization that led to more ethnic profiling by state institutions and Han population, increase in the installation of surveillance systems and new policies to monitor Uyghur behaviour (Roberts, 2018). These included instructions to security forces to watch population and control them at public spaces, to oversee their religious practices and thoughts; thus, repressing Islamic practice among Uyghurs. Moreover, according to Roberts (2018), these measures led to an increase in violent incidents the following years, the most prominent being: a 2010 bombing in a police station in Aksu, attacks at Hotan police station, Han community in Kashgar in 2011 and knife killings in 2012 (Guo, 2015). It is important to note that despite not all of the incidents were acts of terrorism, Chinese media and officials categorised all as terrorist acts (Roberts, 2018).

On another note, the Central Xinjiang Work Forum (XJWF) held by Hu Jintao in 2010 called for more policies “for improving the living standards of all ethnic groups in Xinjiang and attaining the overall objective of building a moderate prosperous society” (Jintao, 2012, p. 54). The forum introduced the term “leapfrog development”, showing a continuation of Jiang’s Great Development campaign and “permanent order”, focused on security (Smith, 2019). Therefore, Hu still believed that with economic and social development ethnic unrest would be solved, implying that an equation of the ethnic minorities’ standards to that of the Han through

economic measures was the key, especially after the 2009 riots (Jintao, 2012). However, as Chou (2012) argues, policies to respect cultural identity and autonomy of minorities in Xinjiang were not implemented, ignoring the root cause of the problem.

#### **2.4.4. Policy implementation in Xinjiang during Xi Jinping's first mandate (2013-2016)**

In the spring of 2013 at the 18<sup>th</sup> CCP Congress Xi Jinping was elected for his first term as president of the PRC, and with him a new era of policies to deal with Xinjiang were implemented (Klimeš, 2018). Both the security measures and violence, as Roberts (2018) argues, “facilitated an escalating cycle of repression followed by violence and more repression in the following years” (p. 244). Moreover, there was further increase in the prevalence and severity of violent incidents just after Xi came to power, like: the 2013 attack by a suicide car in Tiananmen Square, Beijing; the 2014 knives attack at a train station Kunming, in Yunnan province, the bombings at Urumqi; and the 2015 killing of 50 Han workers at a coal mine in Xinjiang (Guo, 2015; Klimeš, 2018; Roberts, 2018). The latter incidents caused nationwide impact, and days after the 2014 Urumqi incident, the Xinjiang party secretary wrote in an article the “people’s war on terror and for social stability” (Klimeš, 2018, p. 417). A few days following this, the Second Central Xinjiang Work Forum (XJWFII) is held, with Xi signalling a new, different approach to be taken regarding Xinjiang, one emphasizing the importance of the region in terms of security, as well as strategic and economic aspects (Roberts, 2020). Xinjiang’s importance in the economic realm was especially highlighted, since the One Belt One Road Initiative (OBOR) was presented by Xi in 2013, along with the “neighbourhood diplomacy” and “big power diplomacy”; thus, underscoring the strong link between the country’s economic and foreign policy (Klimeš, 2018; Roberts, 2020). Moreover, this link in terms of policies also stressed the interdependence of the security situation in Xinjiang, and corresponding policies, to the successful implementation of the OBOR, as according to Klimeš (2018) “Xinjiang’s stability is seen both a motivation behind and precondition of the BRI” (p. 418).

Likewise, months after the forum, the Central Ethnic Work Conference took place in September 2014, with Xi announcing changes in the ethnic policies following the same approach signalled at the XJWFII, that is, to advance and strengthen the ethnic unity of all Xinjiang’s ethnic groups and promote “social stability” (Leibold, 2014, 2015). Thus, in the aftermath of the most violent incidents, the emphasis was placed on security rather than economic growth to stabilise ethnic unrest. Furthermore, 2014 was key as camps started to be built and more security forces moved

to Xinjiang (Aljazeera News, 2019; Zenz & Leibold, 2017). Then, “in 2015, the National Security Law (NSL) and the Counterterrorism Law (CTL) were enacted to systematize the country’s counterterrorism legal architecture and bureaucracy” (Li, 2019, p. 314), including the definition of terrorism under CTL. Finally, the appointment of a new Party Secretary in Xinjiang, Chen Quanguo – who previously was Secretary in Tibet –in 2016, has led to an acceleration of securitization measures and policies that penetrate all levels of Uyghur society (Roberts, 2018, 2020). Many scholars like Leibold (2019) note that “the arrival of Chen Quanguo marked a significant turning-point in the party’s Xinjiang strategy” (p. 5), as many of the methods used to pacify the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) have also been implemented in Xinjiang since then (Zenz & Leibold 2017).

### **3. Theoretical Framework**

In order to present the theoretical framework within which this paper’s main issues will be addressed, and are framed, it is important to establish the most appropriate international relations theory for analysing the case of the Uyghurs. First, the constructivist theory will be defined and analysed. Then, as key concepts within the constructivist framework, identity, cultural identity, belief system and ideology will be defined. The concepts of ethnicity, ethnic groups, minorities, and cultural hegemony will also be defined. Finally, the securitization theory will be used to explain how the policies implemented in Xinjiang can be understood and analysed.

#### **3.1. Constructivism**

The constructivist theory of IR will be used as the guiding theory to understand Xi Jinping’s policies in Xinjiang directly affecting Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities. Constructivism is the most useful theory to approach this research project’s main theme as it is a “paradigm emphasizing the role that norms and identities have in ‘constructing’ the character of international relations” (Bova, 2012, p. 24). According to Agius (2013) constructivism “brings to the fore the importance of ideas, identity, and interaction in the international system” (p. 88). Thus, constructivism is concerned with how these elements socially construct the world and security threats. With that in mind, Goldstein and Pevehouse (2013) contend that constructivism analyses how states shape their interests through their relations with each other. This core feature of constructivism is essential in order to understand Xi’s interests and policy changes, as they depend on the new relationship and interaction that China has with its neighbours and its place in the international system. China’s position in the world has shifted rapidly in the last decades and with it its interests domestically and externally. Moreover, regarding this aspect,

“constructivism puts into context the actions, beliefs, and interests of actors and understands that the world they inhabit has been created by them and impacts on them” (Agius, 2013, p. 88).

Hence, constructivism is the most appropriate theory for this research project as it places great importance in actor’s agency, a major element that guides individual decision making as well as the existing structures that influence actor’s capacity to act. Since actors are human beings that are active and possess ideas, identities, beliefs, and values of their own, shaped by their environment, they can also shape the world around them.

### **3.1.1. Constructivism’s key concepts**

In this sense, the role of the identity is essential both for constructivism and for this project, as, according to Agius (2013), it is a basic concept that explains who actors are and what their interests and preferences are, which in turn play a decisive role in the actions they take. First, identity is defined by Castells (1999) as “the process of constructing meaning on the basis of a cultural attribute, or a related set of cultural attributes, which is given priority over all other sources of meaning” (p. 28). Within identity, and as part of the process of interaction and the construction of meaning, we find the belief system, which can be defined as “the set of substantive values and understandings of the world that an individual holds” (Bova, 2012, p. 78). Values, ideas, and beliefs are, according to Liu et al. (2015) at the core of culture’s components and part of what identities are made of. Likewise, at the highest level of the belief system we find ideology, which Bova (2012) defines as “an integrated set of assumptions and understandings about how the social, political, and economic world both is and should be structured and organized” (p. 78). In the case of China, as a one party-state led by Xi Jinping, the role ideology plays is basic, as it defines and sets political priorities and policy goals based on the main ideological pillars of the Marxist-Leninist theory. However, as it will be analysed, the leader’s own ideology is very influential as well.

In addition, both belief system and ideology are key in identity formation, as well as culture, as these understandings of the world are socially constructed by collective meaning within each culture (Agius, 2013; Castells, 1999; Liu et al., 2015). Consequently, they are prone to cultural bias. Furthermore, it must be highlighted that, according to Liu et al. (2015) “cultural identity is a process; it is never complete; it is always in flux, contextual, and subject to transformations” (p. 73). Thus, as society changes and evolves, so does the culture of each country and people’s identities, as the meaning and shared understandings of the world change with them. It is because of this that, according to Agius (2013), culture is regarded by constructivists as playing

a decisive role in constructing how states and actors view and understand security, as it “refers to standards that we set as acceptable to us” (p. 93).

Similarly, constructivism argues that it is in the changing nature of ideas and identities by individual actors and non-state actors that change occurs in international relations and in state relations (Bova, 2012). Thus, it is easier to explain “major changes in a state’s foreign policy goals and image in the world that arise from internal changes and new self-concepts rather than external constraints or opportunities” (Goldstein & Pevehouse, 2013, p. 98) when we understand the role identity plays in actor’s behaviour. Because of this, in China’s case it seems like the most appropriate theory to analyse Xi’s policies regarding the Uyghurs and the changing motivations of the PRC in terms of foreign policy, security and domestic politics.

### **3.2. Ethnicity, minorities, and cultural hegemony**

As it is within a culture that identities are created and shaped, according to Castells (1999) individuals or groups of individuals can possess multiple identities, but the existence of a variety of identities can create tensions. Problems might arise when, as Liu et al. (2015) argue, within a dominant culture, existing subcultures – which are smaller and distinct from the dominant one – differentiate their identity in terms of ethnicity, which “is frequently the basis of a subculture within a larger national culture” (p. 71). The term ethnicity is difficult to define accurately, as according to Hutchinson and Smith (1996) there is no agreed definition due to the complex components human cultures present. However, Hutchinson and Smith (1996) define ethnicity as “a named human population with myths of common ancestry, shared historical memories, one or more elements of common culture, a link with a homeland and a sense of solidarity among at least some of its members” (p. 6). Within this definition it is important to highlight ethnic group, as “large groups of people who share ancestral, language, cultural, or religious ties and a common identity” (Goldstein & Pevehouse, 2013, p. 162).

As a consequence of social categorization and identity formation, individuals who identify themselves as belonging to group memberships, ingroups, such as an ethnic group, tend to perceive other groups, outgroups, as being the opposite of what they are, creating an “us versus them” dichotomy (Liu et al., 2015, p. 256). As a consequence, this process can lead to ingroup biases, as most people tend to categorize favouring their ingroups over outgroups (Goldstein & Pevehouse, 2013; Liu et al., 2015). When the differences between ethnic groups are pronounced, negative perceptions towards the outgroup can lead to discrimination and dehumanization,

which can be aggravated when there are inequalities in the distribution of power among groups, as it is often the case (Goldstein & Pevehouse, 2013; Liu et al., 2015).

Thus, as identities are constructed within power relations, when an actor belonging to a dominant ethnic group holds complete power over state institutions, it can become a source of ethnic conflict or tension, as it can have “greater influence over the ingroup/outgroup dynamics in their society” (Liu et al., 2015, p. 256). This latter phenomenon is defined by Castells (1999) as, “legitimising identities” –which are inserted by dominant institutions to expand their domination vis-à-vis social actors – that generate a civil society which sometimes reproduces an identity that justifies sources of structural domination and oppression (p. 30). In order to legitimise this identity imposed by the dominant group, actors and institutions employ ideology to create cultural hegemony, which Antonio Gramsci referred to as a set of ideas and values that have the capacity to impose the ruler’s view over the entire society, gaining their consent (Goldstein & Pevehouse, 2013; Lears, 1985). Often, this situation affects ethnic minorities, who, being in a position of lesser power and because they generally exist within a dominant ethnic group, suffer disadvantages, and see their ethnic identity marginalised and suppressed by the ruling group.

### **3.3. Securitization**

Securitization theory will also be used to interpret the latest policy shifts that have characterised Xi’s first and second mandate. The securitization model, developed by the Copenhagen School in the book *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Buzan et al., 1998), starts by defining the concept of security as being “about survival” (p. 21). Thus, a security concern on an issue must be presented as an existential threat (Emmers, 2013). Within this conceptualization, the notion of security is broadened, including five categories of security: political, societal, environmental, economic, and military (Buzan et al., 1998). For this research project, societal security and political security will be closely examined, especially since according to Buzan et al. (1998), they are closely related. Societal security can be defined as being “about large, self-sustaining identity groups” (Buzan et al., 1998, p. 119), thus, it focuses more on collective identities. Political security is defined as concerning “the organizational stability of states, systems of government and the ideologies that give them legitimacy (Buzan et al., 1998, p. 8).

The process of securitization allows matters to move from the politicized scope, that is, when it is handled inside the standard political system, to the securitized sphere, “through an act of securitization” (Emmers, 2013, p. 133). According to Buzan et al. (1998) securitization can be

understood as the most drastic and “extreme version of politicization” (p. 23). Hence, when an issue is securitized, the topic abandons the public policy realm and enters a new level where the matter becomes critical for the survival of the state or the regime. As such, it is portrayed as either an existential threat or a vital issue that must be protected from internal and/or external threats (Buzan et al., 1998). This depiction of a certain topic or element allows the state to go beyond the political rules established and to adopt extraordinary measures which would not be tolerated if the matter were not a security one (Emmers, 2013).

Within the process of securitization, it is important to define the main elements involved. The first are the securitizing actors, defined by Buzan et al. (1998) as “actors who securitize issues by declaring something – a referent object – existentially threatened” (p. 36). Thus, governments, political elites, civil society, or the military can be securitizing actors (Emmers, 2013). Consequently, the second element, the referent objects, are “things that are seen to be existentially threatened and that have a legitimate claim to survival” (Buzan et al., 1998, p. 36). A referent object can be the state, the economy, national sovereignty, collective groups, the environment, or an ideology (Buzan et al., 1998; Emmers, 2013). The process of securitizing a matter, according to Emmers (2013) is comprised of two stages. The first stage involves the “speech act” defined as the representation of an issue, people or entities as posing existential threats to referent objects and thus, to security (Buzan et al., 1998). This methodology uses security language, rhetoric, discourse, and special narratives which frame the designated topic as an existential threat (Emmers, 2013). It can be understood that according to this model, security is assumed to be socially constructed and it is, therefore, a subjective matter (Emmers, 2013). Therefore, this framework follows a constructivist approach.

The second stage is completed when the securitizing actor succeeds in convincing its audience – usually public opinion, political elites, and military personnel – “that a referent object is existentially threatened” (Emmers, 2013, p. 134). Then, the securitizing actor can enforce extraordinary measures. However, Emmers (2013) notes that in the case of undemocratic, authoritarian societies, the extent to which the audience has power to authorize or disagree with a securitization move is limited, due to the lack of freedom of expression. Thus, the consensual aspect is reduced to the political elites, state institutions and the military (Emmers, 2013). This makes securitization even more dangerous in these cases, as according to Emmers (2013), “the process can be abused to legitimize and empower the role of the military or special security forces in civilian activities” (p. 136). Nevertheless, the securitization act is still successful if the limited audience needed to implement the extraordinary measures is convinced (Buzan et al.,

1998). In fact, the implementation of measures is not a necessary requirement for an issue to become a security matter, only the audience's recognition that there is a threat (Buzan et al., 1998; Emmers, 2013).

#### **4. Objectives, Research Questions and Hypothesis**

The main objective of this project is to analyse Xi Jinping's policies in Xinjiang from 2017 to 2020. China's policies in Xinjiang and their impact on the Uyghur population have been widely analysed and studied in the past, since the Mongol period of occupation, the Ming, Qing Dynasties, and finally since the beginning of Communist rule in 1949. However, the latest series of policies implemented by Xi Jinping during his second mandate, consisting of massive detention camps or "re-education camps", use of artificial intelligence as surveillance and tracking mechanisms of the population in the Xinjiang area and violation of human rights of these citizens have been less analysed, especially from the perspective of Xi Jinping's foreign policy interests and objectives. Thus, the main goal of this research project is to analyse and understand Xi Jinping's policies in Xinjiang and how these fit within his foreign policy interests domestically and geopolitically in the region surrounding it. Connected to this goal are several specific objectives this project seeks.

The first specific objective is to analyse Xi Jinping's policies in the Xinjiang region (from 2017-2020), focusing on the "re-education" camps and the repressive measures imposed on the Uyghur population, in order to understand the strategic project in the region and the political, economic, and ideological interests behind them. The second one is to study how the "three evils" of separatism, extremism and terrorism are managed in the Xinjiang region and what relationship exists between these, and the global and internal anti-Islamic narratives in China and the US "War on Terror". The third is to analyse how OBOR (One Belt One Road) deepens political, economic, and strategic ties, the increase in power and the economic dependence that has been generated with multiple countries, and which facilitates Xi Jinping's implementation and perpetuation of its policies of repression and mass arrests in Xinjiang. The fourth is to analyse the foreign policy and economic intentions behind the policies of repression in Xinjiang.

Linked to these objectives and with the aim of narrowing the research project are the following research questions that will be sought to answer: What policies has Xi Jinping implemented in the Xinjiang region since his arrival in power? Why has there been an accelerated shift in securitisation and repression policies in Xinjiang since 2017? What are Xi Jinping's strategic reasons/motivations behind this change in its policies for managing the region and China's

internal security? What role does the OBOR play in the implementation of these policies? How does the policy of securitisation, stabilisation, and repression of the Uyghur population in Xinjiang fit into the “China Dream”, Xi Jinping’s foreign policy in China and his geopolitical objectives in the area?

Regarding the initial ideas, this research project’s initial, main hypothesis is that the intensification of Xi Jinping's policies on the Uyghur issue in Xinjiang appears to be the latest manifestation of repressive policies in the area, aimed at eliminating the threat posed to the stability, unity and survival of the regime and the country's development by the existence of this ethnic minority in the strategic area of Xinjiang. The secondary hypotheses are, first, that the OBOR, China’s growth and increase in power, on the one hand soft, with political, cultural, and economic influence in numerous states, and on the other, hard in terms of military capacity, would be one of the main factors that has facilitated this abrupt change of attitude, as a window of opportunity, since the country has more capacity to carry out these acts without facing condemnation from the entire international community. Second, that the rise of Islamic terrorism since the 2000s globally and the incidents in recent years of protests and revolts against the communist party regime in the Xinjiang region, would be the triggering elements and the pretext for Xi Jinping's adoption of mass arrests and other repressive policies.

## **5. Methodology**

To analyse and understand Xi Jinping’s strategic objectives and motivations regarding the recent policies implemented in Xinjiang and the Uyghur population, this project will follow the case study methodology. Before the analysis of the most recent policies implemented by Xi in Xinjiang, a previous identification of the main scholars and works on the Uyghur and Xinjiang history has been conducted. Regarding this, for the understanding of the evolution of the policies and the historical context affecting the region of Xinjiang, the works by James A. Millward in his book *Eurasian Crossroads: A History of Xinjiang* (Millward, 2007), Michael Dillon in *Xinjiang: China’s Muslim far Northwest* (Dillon, 2004) and Frederick Starr (ed) in *Xinjiang: China’s Muslim Borderland* (Starr, 2004) have been revised, providing solid background knowledge on the topic, among others. These works provide a thorough review and analysis of the policies implemented both prior and during Communist rule in Xinjiang along with the main problems and challenges that have arisen as a consequence of them and the historical evolution of the region throughout time. Apart from these works, scholars such as Dru C. Gladney in his book *Dislocating China: Reflections on Muslims, minorities, and other subaltern subjects* (Gladney, 2004b) and others, have been considered to understand the main

characteristics that differentiate the Uyghurs from other Muslim minorities in China. For the analysis of Xi Jinping's policies in Xinjiang affecting the Uyghurs and other minorities, several perspectives from various scholarly journals will be considered, including economic, geopolitical, geostrategic, foreign policy, as well as ideological and social ones. This is because the Uyghur issue is a multidimensional and complex topic whereby many factors come together and need to be analysed in an interconnected way.

## **6. Analysis**

The following analysis will begin by examining how the securitization of Xinjiang's unrest has allowed the main policies that have been implemented in the XUAR since 2017 to be enforced. Within this, the main factors that also facilitated the acceleration they have experienced ever since, and the measures will be analysed. The subsequent sections will then analyse in more depth the political, ideological, economic, geopolitical, and strategic domestic and foreign policy strategy and interests that explain Xi's motivations behind Xinjiang's accelerated securitization.

### **6.1. Securitization of Xinjiang: Acceleration since 2017**

As it has been discussed, the party started changing its strategy towards the Uyghurs especially after 9/11, shifting the frame and increasingly using the state-controlled media and party propaganda to convince the population that Uyghurs are a threat to the peace and stability of the country (Li, 2019; Tazamal, 2019). Thus, they have been carrying out a securitization move progressively. The PRC and its leaders, now Xi Jinping as main securitizing actor, have securitized as referent objects; the state, its regime and with it its ideology, in the political sphere; the Han population and the rest of the ethnicities, excluding the Muslim ones, in the societal category, as well as the economy. However, the former is especially regarded as being existentially threatened by the three evils, which embody the state's speech act under the slogan that Chinese authorities have constructed (Hao, 2018). The three evils are, on the one hand, the basis of their discursive framework, employed to persuade their internal audience; to the extent that they need, and also the international community; so that they can adopt the exceptional measures they deem necessary without much opposition (Smith, 2019). On the other hand, the three evils are embodied by the Uyghurs as an ethnic group, since, as it will be analysed, their ethnocultural characteristics have been flagged by the CCP as being prone to religious extremism and terrorism (Roberts, 2018, 2020). Thus, in this sense, the Uyghurs represent the existential threat, as the CCP has portrayed them as such by embodying the three evils (Smith,

2019; Roberts, 2020). In addition, the three evils also represent the forces that can bring down the regime, especially separatism through extremism, which has been a concern since the 1990s with the rise of protests in Xinjiang and the latter emphasised by Xi (Klimeš, 2018).

In this sense the tactic of securitising precisely the state and the regime as in existential danger, within the framework of the WOT allows them to implement the policies of repression in Xinjiang with solid justification and extra legitimacy, as it is within the umbrella of US-initiated policies (Tazamal, 2019). This securitization process has been increasing since mid-2017. Around that time, when the international community began to gather evidence from journalists and reports from organisations such as Human Rights Watch, of an increase of surveillance systems in the province and a rapid growth in the number of internment facilities built in the region, China denied the claims (Raza, 2019). Despite satellite images of the evolution of internment camps around the XUAR started to be documented and published online by agencies like Reuters and independent researchers like Shawn Zhang (see annex 6 and 7), and the PRC was accused at a UN hearing from the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination in August 2018, due to concerns of independent experts on the issue, China kept denying the existence of the camps, with the Chinese Delegation of the Permanent Representative of the PRC to the UN expressing that:

There was no arbitrary detention or lack of freedom of religious belief, while the view that Xinjiang was a “no rights zone was completely “against the fact”. There were no such things as “re-education centres”, or “counter-terrorism training centres” in Xinjiang”. (United Nations, 2018, Replies by the Delegation, para. 17)

However, when evidence of the camps and the number of detainees was undeniable, the PRC recognised the camps’ existence in October 2018, claiming they were “vocational training camps” (Roberts, 2020). After this, the PRC began to broadcast on state TV, the CCTV documentaries on the camps, framing them as “vocational training centres” and explaining that their purpose was to fight the three evils of radical extremism, religious terrorism, and ethnic separatism (Aljazeera News, 2019). In addition, they framed it as part of the fight of the “global war on terror”. Nevertheless, they were also portrayed as being to educate and reform the Uyghurs, so that they can have a more prosperous future. In state-controlled media, promotional videos of the camps showing happy Uyghurs singing and dancing and doing cultural activities can be seen, far from the reality (Ajazeera News, 2019). Through this discourse and propaganda, they manage to persuade the audience and win their support, something that although not as

necessary as in a democratic country is still important for the party to avoid protests like Tiananmen or those in Xinjiang. This is why the public misinformation campaign as part of the successful securitization process is to some extent relevant for the CCP (Aljazeera News, 2019), to present an image of the regime's legitimacy and determination to protect the rest of the population from a threat that affects everyone, not just the state. Especially since the party needs some degree of legitimacy of the regime by its population given past experiences of protest and discontent (Ferdinand, 2016). Regarding this aspect, it is necessary for the PRC to earn some support by its population, as it relies on the economic progress and constant improvement of society's lives to justify the lack of civil and political liberties and ensure the survival of the regime (Ferdinand, 2016). Also, to show that the regime is not just the best option in economic and social terms, but additionally at the security level, as the protector and defender of the Han people and the Chinese nation.

### **6.1.1. Main factors and measures**

At the end of Xi's first mandate, in early 2017, several policies were introduced that facilitated the acceleration in Xinjiang's securitization. First, it should be noted that the appointment of Chen Quanguo as Party Secretary of the XUAR has been one of the main drivers of this acceleration, as under his leadership security measures previously adopted in 2014 rapidly accelerated and escalated to a new level (Leibold, 2019). Chen, a former soldier who turned to politics and who was previously in charge of administering the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), gained a distinguished reputation for his innovations regarding ethnic policy which were tested in the region (Zenz & Leibold, 2017). In Tibet, Chen was pioneer in establishing what is discussed below as recruitment of local, native population to watch their neighbours and relatives, in addition to the convenience police stations and high-tech surveillance systems that proved to be very successful to monitor Tibetans (Zenz & Leibold, 2017). Chen's hardline approach managed to bring the province back under PRC's control, which is why after the latest violent incidents in 2015, Xi Jinping saw him as an essential part to accelerate securitization in the region, as the previous strategy by his predecessor, Zhang Chunxian was unable to stop unrest (Leibold, 2019; Zenz & Leibold, 2017).

The measures are part of, as Leibold (2020) asserts, "a sophisticated, multi-layered network of mass surveillance in Xinjiang, part of Xi Jinping's grand strategy for achieving 'social stability and enduring peace'" (p. 46). Since taking office, Chen started to advertise a large number of security jobs, specifically, "a total of 31.687 security-related positions were advertised, more than a three-fold increase over the previous year" (Zenz & Leibold, 2017). With the aim of

increasing the state's capacities to conduct surveillance activities in Xinjiang, he also began to expand the surveillance technology system with an increase in the installation of surveillance cameras and augmented the number and pace of construction projects throughout the region (Roberts, 2020; Zenz, 2019). According to a Reuters article from 2018, the first facilities discovered using analysis techniques of satellite imagery exposed "that the footprint of the built-up area almost tripled in size in the 17 months between April 2017 and August 2018" (see annex 6) (Wen & Auyezov, 2018). Moreover, the authors claimed that "collectively, the built-up parts in these 39 facilities now cover an area roughly the size of 140 soccer fields" (Wen & Auyezov, 2018). However, the latest figures calculated and published by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) within their Xinjiang Data Project have discovered and classified up to 385 detention facilities throughout the XUAR region (Ruser, 2020). This evidence, found also by scholar Adrian Zenz analysing public construction bids, "provide solid evidence of facility construction at city/prefecture, county, township and village levels" (Zenz, 2019, p. 118).

In addition, another key factor that has facilitated this acceleration, according to Zenz (2019), is the fact that from 2014 to 2016 the XUAR authorities were already testing different methods of re-education, tactics of detention and experimenting with different programs to indoctrinate Uyghurs and eradicate the three evils. The results of these experiments and facilities construction, carried out at all levels of territorial administration – following the implementation of the 2013 "transformation through education" idea linked to "de-extremification – provided positive results that interment of subjects into these "re-education facilities" served the purpose of ideological change, as it was proven (Zenz, 2019).

As part of Chen's plan to stabilise and control Xinjiang's Muslim minorities, he mandated to build "convenience police stations" across the region in large quantities, which were previously used in the TAR, which allow security forces to monitor Uyghur's behaviour (Zenz & Leibold, 2017; Leibold, 2020). To complement surveillance of the population, Uyghurs have been assigned the task of watching and reporting their own neighbours, family, and friends through informal police recruitment, in case suspicious behaviour or extremist inclinations are detected (Zenz & Leibold, 2020). In addition, a new policy was introduced in 2016, whereby party officials are tasked to pay unnotified, regular visits to Uyghur families and stay with them to observe their behaviour and look for illegal materials (Leibold, 2020; Raza, 2019; Roberts, 2018).

The massive deployment of high-tech surveillance cameras on all streets and in public spaces including mosques across the XUAR – with facial recognition software to track individuals and eye scan – has been complemented with the establishment of a biological database system (Roberts, 2018, 2020). With the forceful collection of DNA from the XUAR population – gathered through the promotion of medical checks, the confiscation of passports and the compilation of genetic samples such as fingerprints – the CCP seems to be compiling both digital, human and the biological data of the population and incorporating it to an all-encompassing data system (Human Rights Watch, 2017, 2018). According to Human Rights Watch (2018), the database where all this information is stored is the “Integrated Joint Operations Platform (IJOP)”, which also collects information through phone apps from police officers visiting Uyghurs, citizen’s Internet, and social media records (Roberts, 2018, 2020). In fact, the latter tools have been key in the tracking and arresting many Uyghurs through the secret installation of apps such as Zapyra with spyware software incorporated (Alecci, 2019). Overall, the data compiled in IJOP is being used by Chen to build a complete profile of every Uyghur citizen and evaluate each person based on a set of categorization parameters that classify their “degree of ‘safeness’, hence determining the person’s fate” (Roberts, 2020, p. 207).

These policies’ acceleration has also been facilitated by the Counterterrorism Law of 2015 and the XUAR “De-extremification Regulations” of April 2017 (Roberts, 2020; Zenz, 2019). Indeed, two violent incidents at the end of 2016 and beginning of 2017 “provided the perfect justification for Chen’s administration to begin a re-evaluation of the state’s ‘counterterrorism’ strategy in the region” (Roberts, 2020, p. 208), which led to the establishment of stricter regulations. The former Counterterrorism Law of 2015 legalised the access to all kinds of private information of Uyghurs, ranging from bank accounts to private text messages and criminalised all kinds of cultural, religious expression under the vague definitions of terrorist activities and extremism (Roberts, 2018, 2020). However, the De-extremification Regulations laws are considered by many scholars such as Zenz (2019), as being the main factor behind the escalation that has led to the mass detention and building of internment camps, as they “target virtually all public expressions of Islam in the region and provide a legal basis for policing Uyghurs’ thoughts, appearance, and behaviour” (Roberts, 2018, p. 246). This is due to the increased emphasis on the concept of extremism and extremist conducts, which will be further analysed in the following section. It should be noted that, as Zenz (2019) argues “the increasingly widespread application of ‘transformation through education’ to Uyghur or

Muslim population groups arose in tandem with the ‘de-extremification’ (qujiduanhua) campaign" (p.113). Just after the De-extremification Regulations were published, from March 2017, the rate of construction acceleration and arrests increased (Zenz, 2019). In addition, Article 14 implied the need to conduct de-extremification via “transformation through education”, applying integrated education methods (Zenz, 2019), a concept that will be analysed in the next section.

Thus, the creation of this legal framework, which started in the early 2000s and was extended as tensions escalated in 2015, with the latest implementation of the 2017 regulations, has facilitated the legalisation, justification, and acceleration of the construction of re-education camps and the mass detainment of people flagged as infringing the new laws (Roberts, 2020). In fact, according to Zenz (2019) these regulations accelerated construction projects and mass arrests, as before its publication and after, in the months following its release, construction offers, and detention orders escalated exponentially.

Another reason for the acceleration might also be due to the underperforming results the OBOR gave in its first three years since it was launched. As reported by Pantucci and Young (2016) Xinjiang’s trade volume as compared to the country’s total with Central Asia remained unchanged; thus, it had not managed to encourage trade with neighbouring Central Asian countries. In their article, Pantucci and Young (2016) showed that Xinjiang’s total trade volume since 2013 remained representing 10% as proportion of China’s total trade with Central Asia, which in fact meant a reduction as compared to previous years where Xinjiang’s volume accounted for up to 15%. This coincides with the same period of time in which there was an escalation of violent attacks within and outside Xinjiang. Therefore, it is possible that this climate of unrest and ethnic violence with its epicentre in Xinjiang discouraged potential trade partners that China wanted to attract precisely to stabilise and integrate Xinjiang with China.

### **6.1.2. From thought to policy: Xi’s Dream within PRC politics**

As has been shown, communist ideology is the fundamental pillar of the PRC. Since its inception, it has been adapting to the circumstances of the moment, as He (2019) argues, “changes in China's national identity have led to changes in the country’s foreign policy” (p. 254). Thus, despite being marked by the ideology of the regime and its main tenets, since it is a deeply utilitarian and pragmatic country, it adapts as its environment changes. According to He (2019), as the international system and its relationship with it and other states has changed, as has its position in it and its own capabilities, its national identity has progressively changed

(Farwa, 2018). This denotes that it has evolved along with the surrounding context. In order to fit in better, it has had to change its approach, its identity and with it its ideology has had to adapt to the times (Farwa, 2018), as well as its ultimate goals already dictated by leaders before Xi such as the centennial goals. Moreover, as it can be seen, all securitization measures are part of Xi Jinping's major political objectives, which, as they are guided by his ideology, have strong ideational and philosophical connotations. First, the centennial goals are the two main political goals that are strongly linked and embedded with the "China Dream", one of the main concepts guiding Xi Jinping's first and second term. On the one hand, the centennial goals can be divided into two goals: one connected to the hundredth anniversary of the CCP in 2021, whereby according to the original promoter of this idea, Sun Yat-sen (considered the founding father of the Republic of China), the Chinese nation and its peoples would have achieved a moderate and prosperous society by that date (Clarke, 2020; Przychodniak, 2017). The other centennial goal is linked to the hundredth anniversary of the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 2049, when China's development process as a nation is supposed to have achieved maximum prosperity, a harmonious, modern society following China's road to socialism (Clarke, 2020; Przychodniak, 2017). These two goals have been introduced within Xi's China Dream rhetoric.

The China Dream is a concept that was introduced into the Chinese Constitution in 2017 as part of Xi Jinping's "Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era" after his second term began in October 2017, although it began to be publicly used during his first term (Hayes, 2020; Przychodniak, 2017). The China Dream as a whole encompasses both domestic and foreign policy under Xi Jinping's leadership, in the domestic sphere, it aims at the attainment of a democratic, rich, and prosperous society while in the external sphere it aims for the great power position that the US occupies (Clarke, 2020; Hayes, 2020). It should be noted that since the appointment of Xi Jinping for his second term in October 2017 at the 19<sup>th</sup> CCP Congress, Xi's Dream was reinforced, as well as China's roadmap (Barrass & Inkster, 2018; Przychodniak, 2017). The China Dream is the ideological concept that refers to the economic and political development of China both internally and externally, while also aspiring to achieve the "rejuvenation of China" or the "Chinese renaissance" (Hayes, 2020, p. 32) as a main actor in the international arena (Clarke, 2020). According to Hayes (2020) the Chinese rejuvenation was incorporated into the China Dream in the PRC's official discourse as both possess a deeply nationalistic significance, a key characteristic of Xi Jinping's ideology and ruling style. Essentially, in Xi's and the CCP's imaginary, China's status downgraded after the Opium Wars and entered a period of a "century-long free fall" (Xiang, 2016, p. 53) which is regarded by the

PRC as the “century of humiliation” (Hayes, 2020, p. 32). Thus, the China Dream is Xi’s ambitious strategy to regain China’s place in the international system through socialism and expand its model as it takes the US’ position. In this sense, it also signifies China’s core interest.

On the other hand, as a result of its rapid economic growth, its identity as a state in the system had to change, driven by new circumstances, from revolutionary to an integrated member of the international community (He, 2019). Especially since the main objective was to develop the country as a nation and to create a prosperous state for the population, but also outward-looking as dictated by the centennial goals. Since the 2000s it has not only sought to be integrated into the community, but to dominate it, to be the hegemonic state, since it now has the capacity to, which it could not be before. This is something that is also established in Xi's ideology and thinking. In his speeches and conferences, he has referred to occupying China's rightful place, restoring its “national greatness” (Clarke, 2020, p. 337), and this is part of the country's new generation of thinkers and leaders (Przychodniak, 2017). Xi believes that they have to rise to the occasion and take the opportunity to lead the international system now, this was reinforced after being appointed for a second term, when he stated that socialism with Chinese characteristics had “blazed a trail for other developing countries who want to speed up their development” (Barrass & Inkster, 2018; China Daily, 2017). This is connected to the overall China Dream and the radical change in terms of foreign policy that came when Xi took power in 2013.

With Hu Jintao, the PRC maintained a “low profile” in terms of foreign policy and its participation in global governance, however, as it evolved and grew, the CCP’s leadership reached a consensus that it was urgent to achieve better results and their goals (Przychodniak, 2017). Because of this, Xi came up with the China Dream and the centennial goals, declaring that they “must...push forward the great cause of socialism with Chinese characteristics and strive to achieve the Chinese dream of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” (Barrass & Inkster, 2018; China Daily, 2013). Now with a new leadership, the strategy has shifted “from ‘Keeping a Low Profile’ to ‘Striving for Achievement’” (Zhou & Esteban, 2018, p. 2). As it can be seen, from these shifts in domestic and foreign policy, the role of Xinjiang and the Uyghurs changed simultaneously. In order to attain its goals, it was concluded that the strategy followed to control the Uyghurs had to shift and the concept of “ideational governance” emerged, whereby the CCP through its new “re-education” campaign aims at changing, controlling, and shaping Uyghur’s religious beliefs, values, and their loyalty to the party to maintain stability (Klimeš, 2018).

Thus, despite the 2014 Central Ethnic Work Conference decided not to formally adopt Xi's idea of “ethnic mingling”, with the securitization frame and the three evils alluding to the fact that it is a matter of eradicating religious extremism and terrorism, it is capable of implementing a similar policy (Leibold, 2019). Instead of ethnic mingling, with the policies of mass detention in the camps it manages to carry out a policy of forced assimilation of Han culture, forced integration, eliminating the cultural and ethnic traits of the Uyghur culture, what Roberts (2020), and other scholars like Fallon (2019) call "cultural genocide". According to article II of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, a genocide is a series of acts “committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial, or religious group, as such” (United Nations Office of Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect, 1948). Following this definition, Raphael Lemkin (who originally formulated the term) argued that it is not just the mass killing of members of a group and its instantaneous destruction, but that genocide is typically implemented progressively employing methods to systematically eradicate the group’s cultural identity, way of living (Roberts, 2020), and the “essential foundations of the life of national groups” (Lemkin, 1944, p. 79).

Hence, under the framework of the three evils and law reforms as part of securitisation, it can realise its goal of ethnic homogenisation and ultimately eradicate distinguishing features so that they all adopt a single goal and think alike (Klimeš, 2018), with a common goal above individualism, which is at the basis of communist ideology and Xi’s dream (Ferdinand, 2016). Moreover, since the de-extremification laws have a stronger focus on extremism (Klimeš, 2018) – which has been the evil more emphasised in order to establish the definition of terrorism with the new legal framework – allowing a broad and ambiguous interpretation of extremism linked to terrorism that directly targets almost all Muslim Uyghur cultural practices, making their religion and culture an extremist threat within the securitization move and justifying the massive internment campaign (Tazamal, 2019).

It can force the Uyghur to renounce their ethnic identity and adopt a Han-like one, forcing them to integrate into society and thus to push forward other projects such as the OBOR (Ferdinand, 2016). Therefore, the policies implemented since 2017 by Xi since the end of his first term and the beginning of his second have an ideologically motivated component. As discussed above, they stem from Xi's Thought on Socialism developed since his first term in office. There, it is implied that in order to eliminate ethnic unrest, all ethnic groups within the PRC must adhere to communist ideology, adopt its goals, common thinking, and worldview (Hao, 2018). They must think as one, as part of the Chinese nation, with the communist ideology (Ferdinand, 2016).

As scholars like (Roberts, 2020) point out, this "brainwashing" project and social reengineering of people is the most effective way Xi's leadership sees to counter terrorist threat perceived both domestically and externally. Nevertheless, as it was mentioned in previous sections, internment camps, political re-education programmes and attitude change began with Mao and continued (in a much lower, less pervasive way) with subsequent leaders. Therefore, re-education initiatives are not a new phenomenon, only the scale and sophistication of the system is innovative. The link to the China Dream is clear, as it has the aim of making Chinese society prosper and for that all ethnic groups must be united in that sense (Hao, 2018; Leibold, 2019). The party needs to ensure the balance and unity of all provinces and ethnic groups as it depends on this for its survival, a goal that emerged with Mao but had to be put aside until the time was right (Klimeš, 2018; Leibold, 2015).

The connection between Xi's Thought on Socialism and his new Ethnic Minority Work reveals the common goal to unify ethnic groups to achieve harmony and prosperity, as Hao (2018) claims, the fundamental principle of Chinese characteristics as stated by Xi is "to safeguard national unity" (p. 7). Moreover, Hao (2018) claims that Xi's belief is that "only by tightly linking one's own destiny with the fate of the Chinese nation can each nationality have a promising prospect" (p. 7). Because of this, the "de-extremification" campaign is linked to the "transformation through education" one (Leibold, 2019). It follows that of the ideological and basic survival of the state and within the policies that govern the different areas of government, ethnic policies play an essential role. There has to be unity and harmony between the ethnic groups, especially Muslims, otherwise the state fears that they might disappear (Hao, 2018; Klimeš, 2018), which is why under Mao they decided to push the idea of autonomy and leave some freedom of religious and cultural identity at the beginning, fearing protests and rebellions from the local people would arise if not, as happened in the past. However, the situation of the CCP is no longer weak and now with the power and strength they have gained and in view of the incidents showing more resistance and violence to the state, it is perceived that they must change tactics to tackle the problem at its root (Leibold, 2019). Moreover, when China faces internal problems, it becomes weaker and as a consequence more exposed to external threats; thus, when they have the capacity and the moment is right, they do not hesitate to crush any dissidence that can endanger the regime's survival. An example of this is the White Lotus Rebellion that took place in the times of the Qing Dynasty contributing to their decline. Therefore, in order to fulfil the regime's objective, so that the society can prosper and achieve

its economic, foreign policy and superpower objectives they have implemented the re-education campaign.

### **6.1.3. The Role of the One Belt One Road Initiative: the interconnectedness of geopolitics, security, and economic development**

Since the launch of the One Belt One Road Initiative (OBOR) in 2013 during Xi's first term – also referred to as the BRI – there have been numerous analysis discussing its deeper geopolitical, geostrategic and security implications and the importance Xinjiang has within them. The BRI, according to Ma (2019) “is a massive trade and infrastructure project that aims to link China to dozens of economies across Asia, Europe, Africa, and Oceania”. In her article, Ma (2019) explains that the BRI is comprised of two parts, the first one, the belt, is the revitalization of the ancient Silk Road overland route that connected Europe and Asia with Middle Eastern regions and was a key commercial route for traders, while the road is in fact a maritime route that crosses several oceans (see annex 4 & 5). As of 2019 it is estimated that the BRI will connect 70 countries through the BRI's broad railroads, oil and gas pipelines, shipping lanes and ports (see annex 5) (Ma, 2019). It is also the main tool of the Striving For Achievement (SFA) that marks the new foreign policy adopted by Xi Jinping, and is linked to the Chinese Dream (Przychodniak, 2017). It is connected because the launch of OBOR fits within and helps achieve both Xi's and the party's political, ideological, economic, geopolitical and security goals.

Regarding geopolitics, one of the main objectives of the BRI is to counter the US' influence in Asia, which has been perceived as a threat to China's geopolitical area of influence since the former announced its policy of “US Pivot to Asia” in 2011 (Clarke, 2020). The US' logic was also a geopolitical one, aiming at countering China and Russia's influence and increasing their influence in the reconstruction of Afghanistan (Clarke, 2020). This move was perceived by China as threatening and pressuring its safe zone. By heightening “China's threat perception” with the later announcement of the TPP agreement and the unsolved Malacca Strait issue, the CCP's leadership determined a way of countering these threats through a peaceful, non-confrontational approach (Farwa, 2018, p. 49). Xi's OBOR matches this bold solution, as it expands both China's security and economic sphere of influence through the creation of cooperation and trade networks. As Zho and Esteban (2018) argue, “in this context, the BRI can be seen as a ‘Pivot to Europe’ strategy to counterbalance the US's ‘Pivot to Asia’” (p. 6). Connected to this is the Malacca Strait issue, which has been worrying Chinese policymakers since Hu's era, the OBOR offers the possibility to avoid relying on the Malacca Strait route to

import oil from Middle Eastern countries, which in the event of an increase in tensions with the US, could endanger China's main mean of oil imports (Hao & Liu, 2012). This due to the fact that, as it was mentioned in previous sections, Middle Eastern oil and its transportation through the Malacca Strait is controlled by US's allies in the Asia-Pacific region (Hao & Liu, 2012). The OBOR's planned pipelines that would go through Xinjiang as a key transit area and supply eastern China with Central Asian oil would solve this key problem as well as the China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor (Farwa, 2018; Zho & Esteban, 2018). Especially, since China has been increasing its oil deals with countries like Kazakhstan, with abundant oil, since the 90s through the purchase of big shares in their oil companies (Wiemer, 2004). It could also be an opportunity for China to open its oil export market, as there have been recent discoveries of more oil reserves in the XUAR (Reuters, 2020).

Also, this shows that OBOR fits into the idea that China has been changing its identity as its relations with other states have changed. It can be seen that it was already adopting the identity of an integrated member and now with Xi, this is becoming increasingly clear, as constructivism explains, that the behaviour and actions of the state are also due to how it changes. Moreover, as Farwa (2018) explains, there is "a strong link between security, economy and the Chinese culture" (p. 49).

In terms of economy, the strengthening of trade relations with the countries that join the initiative and which contract loans with the PRC, allows it to reinforce its political power over them, avoiding the possibility of them taking a stand against the policies in Xinjiang, as both parties gain benefits from the agreements (Hafez, 2020). An example of this is Pakistan, which as a key player in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) within the BRI, serves to illustrate how a Muslim-majority country does not disagree with and in fact welcomes the "counter-terrorism policies" that China has adopted, the main reason being the numerous agreements and loans that China has provided to the country as part of the OBOR infrastructure that is intended to be created, despite risking sparking tensions with India (Ma, 2019). Still, there are other countries such as Turkey that continue to be critical of PRC policies and denounce the treatment of the Uyghurs (Lipscomb, 2016). However, dissenting countries are dwindling in choosing to criticise and instead join the Xi Jinping-led OBOR bandwagon, for as Lipscomb (2016) says, economics weighs more in the end as does money and China has taken notice of it. Thus, another key role is to increase its political and soft power to balance out opposition to the project and its internal policies in Xinjiang (Zhou & Esteban, 2018). In addition, it needs to increase its economic links to increment its strength, and thus its rise and

to gain allies in its immediate sphere of influence, in order to lead in an area where Russia and especially the US also compete for influence and geopolitical and commercial relations (Hayes, 2020).

Therefore, as Pantucci and Young (2016) argue, Xinjiang is both a “key motivator behind the BRI concept”, since it is necessary for its energy security and to boost trade and commerce with Central Asian countries, and its stability a precondition too (Klimeš, 2018), as with the opening it is necessary to stabilize and secure more control of the Xinjiang area, especially since it is going to open up more to the outside world as the project progresses, with the consequence of leaving the frontiers exposed and vulnerable to jihadist, Salafist influence of bordering countries like Afghanistan which could inspire the spark of another wave of violence and separatism (Hayes, 2020). In this sense, the escalation of securitization is needed so that the population is submissive to the party to avoid the three evils, thought ideological indoctrination (Klimeš, 2018). Thus, in terms of geostrategic and geopolitical interests, Xi’s policies of mass incarceration and indoctrination of the Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities are aimed at securing both Xinjiang’s stability and China’s overall internal stability, especially with a view to extending its power and influence in the Centra Asian region (Farwa, 2018). As Farwa (2018) asserts, “territorial integrity and national unity of the PRC are the major constitutes of its policies towards the region” (p. 52). If Xinjiang integrates economically through the BRI’s boost and strategic opening, there will be finally economically as developed and unified within the rest of the provinces and their development level (Clarke, 2020). In addition to this, according to Roberts (2020), evidence has been found of re-education camp interns being sent to forced labour centres to produce in factories for international textile or technology firms such as Nike or Apple. These transfers would be on the one hand to try to hide the mass internment campaign and monetize the entire system to contribute to the economy and reintegrate Uyghurs once they have been “educated” (Roberts, 2020).

The CCP’s fear of a loss of control of Xinjiang’s population and the territory – domestic interests – is thus linked and Xi Jinping’s foreign policy. In fact, Xi’s foreign policy interests respond to domestic and security interests in Xinjiang. There is a link between both domestic and foreign policy interests, as it is among its objectives to increase China’s influence in Central Asia and its overall geopolitical area, to become a “strong power in the region” (Farwa, 2018. P. 52) and to do this they depend on social stability and ethnic harmony between ethnic groups (Hao, 2018). In this way it can be seen that foreign policy, the SFA with the OBOR tool, responds to the internal interests of achieving stability, ethnic harmony and maintaining the

unity of the state and the regime. One helps to achieve the other, they are interrelated, one sets the guidelines and the other helps to achieve the objective. It could also allow it to create key commercial links and agreements to achieve the China dream, the centennial goals, and at the same time reinforce the economic, political and strategic power it already has over these countries to gain support and reduce external criticism of its policies in Xinjiang (Hafez, 2020). On the other hand, Xi has already made statements that his intentions are not to impose his model and export it like the USA, but to be a main player; a global power as Przychodniak (2017) says, that invites other developing states to join his initiatives and projects, adopting the same approach voluntarily so that they develop like China. The way to do this is by persuading them with good and attractive economic offers and facilitating economic loans, in this sense OBOR is a great example of this (Ma, 2019). Also, through other multilateral organisations such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the SCO led by China, which attract developing countries both in its area of influence and in the surrounding areas that are of strategic interest to it. The goal is to be a superpower but China style.

## **7. Conclusions**

This research project has confirmed the main hypothesis, proving that the Uyghur issue is the 'final solution' to all the problems that Xinjiang is perceived to cause to the PRC's political goal accomplishment, which is embodied in Xi Jinping's Chinese Dream. The dream represents all the ideological, political, geopolitical, economic and security interests that the PRC now has, and which is linked to the Chinese ethnic minority theory of ethnicity unification to achieve the desired prosperity (Hao, 2018). To achieve it, as a main foreign policy tool Xi developed the One Belt One Road Initiative, which plays a dual function. On the one hand, it is aimed at getting the long-term desired development for the XUAR so that it finally achieves its integration within the rest of China. This is done through an opening of frontiers and infrastructure development that is expected to attract foreign investment to the region with its Central Asian and Middle Eastern partners more directly and with other regions as well.

On the other hand, it is a precondition, as by broadening and promoting investment and trade to the area, it is necessary for the PRC to ensure that Uyghurs are sufficiently aligned with the Communist ideology and its values. For this to happen Xi determined that the best solution was to conduct a massive interment campaign of, as reports and estimates suggest, approximately 1,060,000, circa 11.5% of the adult population of Xinjiang (Zenz, 2019). On another note, among the multiple reasons that have driven the acceleration of the securitization measures we find: the 2014-16 previous testing phase, whereby after getting the results of what is the best

form of sampling and data, in 2017, they can with all the data collection and the de-extremification regulation protecting them in the legal field in addition to the justification of the attacks and the increase of violence they sell to the population and the international community with their securitization narrative of three evils within the global war on terrorism supported with an advertising and marketing campaign of disinformation, now carry out the mass internment and indoctrination and cultural erasure of the Uyghur (Roberts, 2020).

The strategic role that OBOR plays, in addition to China's overall fast growth, provides the regime with more political connections and economic, strategic, and commercial support with the countries that sign and to which it lends money, so that it can ensure the energy security so necessary for the country's large industries by solving the problem of importing oil from the Strait of Malacca. It also helps to raise its status and influence at the international level. all this to achieve the China dream, the centennial goals and rejuvenation within Xi Jinping's thought as part of the PRC. In terms of strategic positioning, it is important to note that China is a permanent member of the UN Security Council with veto power, something that allows it to stop any resolution that is attempted to be passed to intervene in its internal affairs, as well as counting Russia as an ally.

Finally, the adoption of the WoT rhetoric and the securitizing discourse of counterterrorism as well as the convenient use of the escalation of unrest and violence in the region to support its narrative, have all provided an ideal pretext to justify the repressive measures that have taken place.

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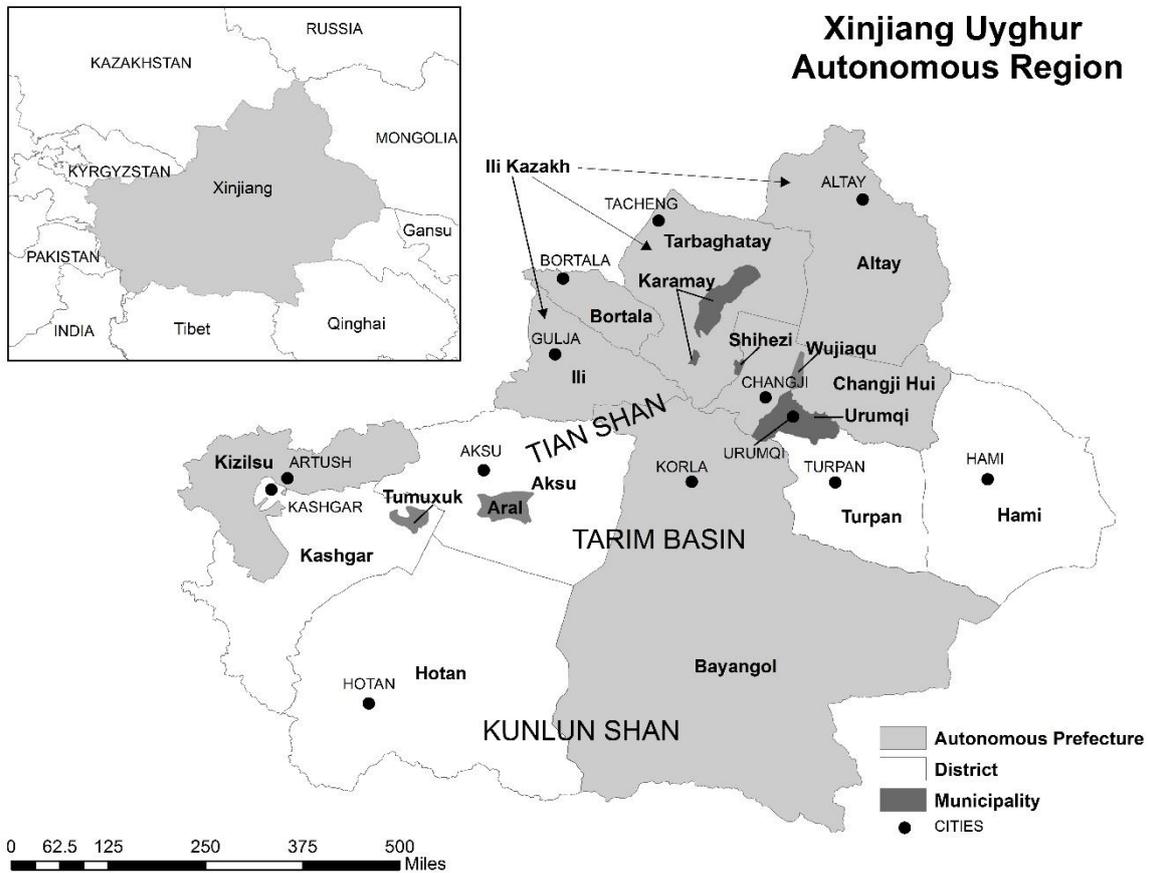
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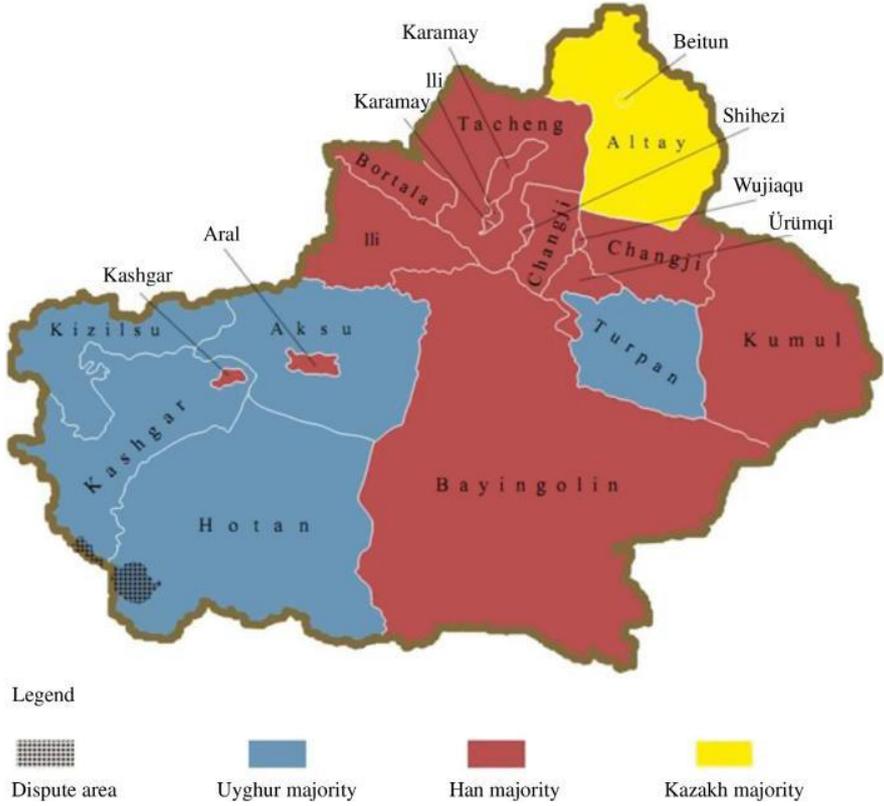
## 9. Annexes

### Annex 1. Map of Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR)



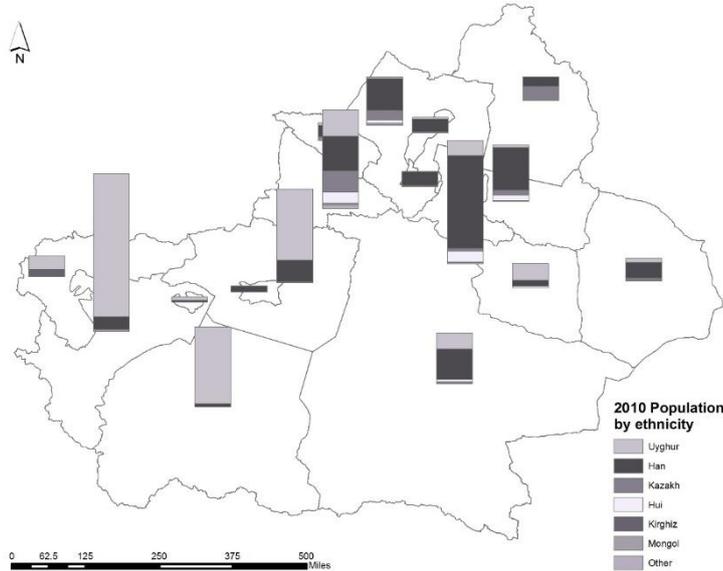
Source: Asia Research Institute, University of Nottingham, Stanley Toops, 2016. Data from Xinjiang 2010 Census, 2012, pp. 2-4.

**Annex 2. Map of ethnic distributions in Xinjiang**



Source: Rongxi Guo, China’s Spatial (Dis)integration, 2015

**Annex 3. Map of the distribution by ethnicity in Xinjiang**



Source:

Asia Research Institute, University of Nottingham, Stanley Toops, 2016. Data from Xinjiang 2010 Census, 2012, pp. 34-73.

# Annex 4. Map of One Belt One Road Initiative and Twenty-first Century Maritime Silk Road

## Reviving the Silk Road

Announced by Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2013, the Silk Road initiative, also known as China's Belt and Road initiative, aims to invest in infrastructure projects including railways and power grids in central, west and southern Asia, as well as Africa and Europe.

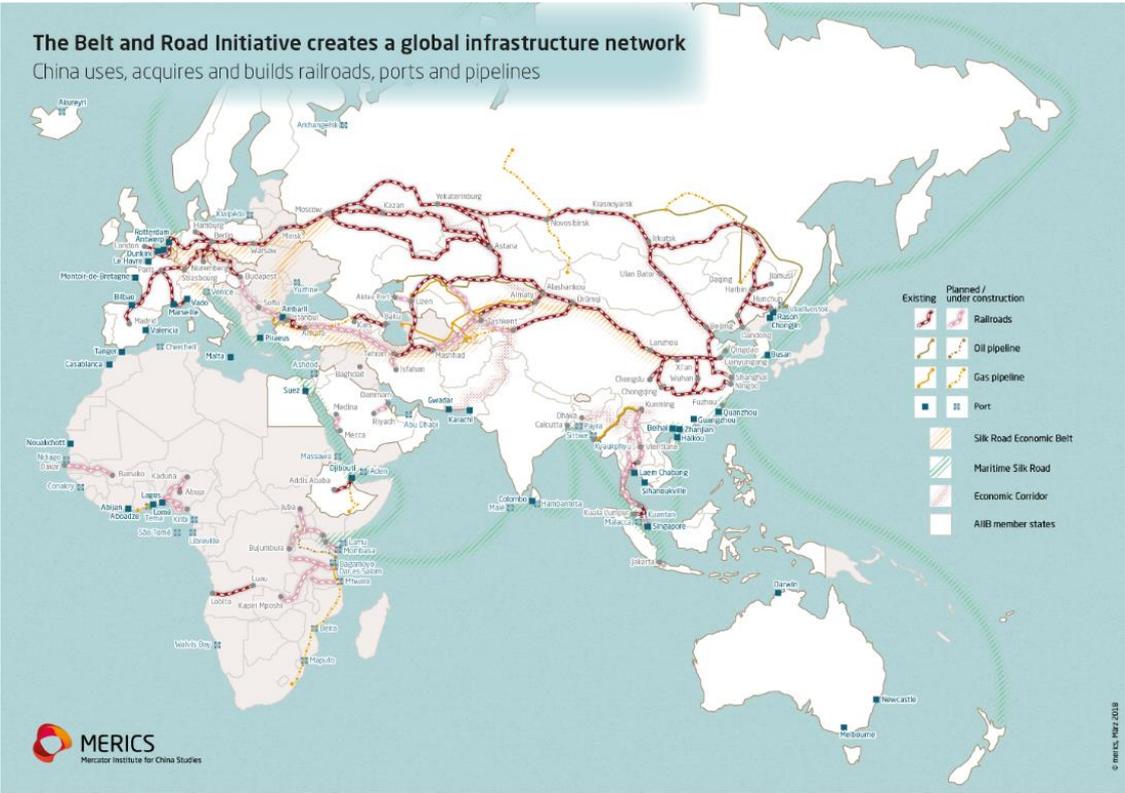


Source: Mercator Institute for China Studies.  
C. Inton, 24/03/2017



Source: Mercator Institute for China Studies. (C.Inton, 24/03/2017. Reuters)

**Annex 5. Map of One Belt One Road Initiative’s overall network**



Source: Mercator Institute for China Studies (MERICs), 2018

**Annex 6. Example of evolution of construction camps throughout Xinjiang. (Final camp in next annex). From left to right: beginning of construction May 2017 and completion September 2017.**



Source: Shawn Zhang, Medium, 20 May 2018, Satellite images from Google Earth

**Annex 7. Re-education Camp in Kashgar.**



Source: Shawn Zhang, Medium, 20 May 2018, Satellite images from Google Earth