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Articles

China's "war on terror" in Xinjiang and the assimilation of the "new frontier"

La "guerra contra el terror" de China en Xinjiang y la asimilación de la "nueva frontera"

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Abstract

This article examines how the People's Republic of China has used the post-9/11 global discourse on terrorism to legitimize repressive policies in the Uyghur region of Xinjiang, annexed as a "new frontier" during the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911). The study argues that, taking advantage of the dominant geopolitical context, the Chinese government retrospectively reconfigured its historical tensions with Xinjiang as a domestic front in the Global War on Terror. Through historical analysis, the study identifies three key dynamics in this process: the redefinition of the Uyghur conflict as a terrorist threat, the subsequent institutionalization of a repressive apparatus and a cycle of state violence and resistance that has enabled an assimilationist turn. The article concludes that China's "people's war on terror" constitutes a central tool in the Chinese Communist Party's strategy to complete the assimilation of Xinjiang and its Turkic-Muslim ethnic minorities.

Keywords: China, Xinjiang, Uyghurs, frontier, assimilation.

Resumen

Este artículo examina cómo la República Popular China ha utilizado el discurso global sobre el terrorismo posterior al 11S para legitimar políticas represivas en la región uigur de Xinjiang, anexionada como "nueva frontera" durante la dinastía la Qing (1644-1911). El estudio argumenta que, aprovechando el contexto geopolítico dominante, el gobierno chino reconfiguró retrospectivamente sus tensiones históricas con Xinjiang como un frente interno en la guerra global contra el terrorismo. Mediante un análisis histórico, el estudio identifica tres dinámicas clave en este proceso: la resignificación del conflicto uigur como amenaza terrorista, la consecuente institucionalización de un aparato represivo y un ciclo de violencia estatal y de resistencia que ha derivado en un giro asimilacionista. El artículo concluye que la "guerra popular contra el terror" constituye

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una herramienta central en la estrategia del Partido Comunista Chino para culminar la asimilación de Xinjiang y sus minorías étnicas túrquico-musulmanas.
Palabras clave: China, Xinjiang, uigures, frontera, asimilación.

Introduction

During a visit by foreign business leaders to the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) on September 2, 2001, Wang Lequan, secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in the region, and Abulahat Abdurixit, chairman of the regional government, presented the media with a picture of stability and harmony in the Uyghur region. At the opening of a trade fair in the regional capital, Urumqi, Chinese officials stated that the situation in Xinjiang was "better than ever before in history", and that the various ethnic groups—particularly the Han people (the majority in China) and the Uyghur national minority (predominant in the XUAR)—were living together peacefully and in "fraternal unity" (British Broadcasting Corporation Monitoring Service Asia Pacific [BBCMSAP], 2001). In their speeches, Wang and Abuhalat echoed the key themes of Beijing's official narrative regarding Xinjiang in the early 21st century: that it was a stable region, free from the separatist tensions that had characterized the 1990s.

Just a few weeks later, the CCP's official narrative regarding the *status quo* in Xinjiang changed drastically. In response to the September 11 attacks in 2001, the Chinese authorities began describing the region as China's domestic front in a then nascent "global war on terrorism" declared by the United States. Under the pretext of combating Uyghur "terrorism", "separatism" and "religious extremism" the government began an indefinite escalation of repressive policies in the region (Agence France-Presse [AFP], 2001a; Bezlova, 2001). More than two decades later, what has been officially declared a *people's war on terror* has triggered a human rights crisis that experts, scholars and human rights organizations describe as a "cultural genocide" of the Uyghur people (Smith Finley, 2021).

This discursive transformation and its consequences form the central focus of this study, which explores how Beijing's appropriation of the global discourse on terrorism has enabled it to reconfigure a region historically conceived as a frontier within the Chinese state. In particular, the study explores how and with what effects the Chinese authorities have appropriated the global rhetoric of post-9/11 terrorism to reinterpret the historical conflict in Xinjiang and legitimize a set of security and cultural assimilation policies directed against the Turkic-Muslim peoples.

The paper starts from the premise that the policies adopted by the Chinese state in Xinjiang beginning in the second half of the 2010s should be understood as part of a broader process of reconfiguring this historic border within the Chinese state. Specifically, it argues that the incorporation of Xinjiang into the discursive framework of the "global war on terror" has allowed Beijing to redefine this long-standing political and territorial conflict as a terrorist threat, thereby legitimizing the expansion of extraordinary measures of political control, social surveillance and cultural assimilation, in a way that promotes a fundamental transformation of the border region.

Using historical analysis, the article explores how, in the aftermath of 9/11, the Chinese state has used global narratives on terrorism to reshape its position in the region—annexed as the "new frontier" during the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911)—and to advance the assimilation of the Turkic-Muslim peoples, notably the Uyghurs, into the Chinese nation-building project. The study analyzes the evolution of Chinese national security discourse and policies in the XUAR against the backdrop of violent sub-state resistance in response to these policies, within a cycle of repression-action-repression.

Methodologically, the study is based on a qualitative approach that combines a systematic analysis of official Chinese government documents, state media reports, statements by Chinese officials at international forums and organizations and specialized academic studies on Xinjiang and the Chinese state's security policies.

At the theoretical level, the article is primarily grounded in securitization theory, which examines how states discursively construct security threats to justify repressive emergency policies invoking extraordinary measures (Buzan et al., 1998; Vuori, 2008). In particular, it focuses on the discursive construction of terrorism and its effects on Muslim populations in the context of the "global war on terror" (Jackson, 2005).

This framework is complemented by others, such as that of "settler colonialism" in Xinjiang (Anand, 2019; Olivieri, 2022; Roberts, 2022), as well as by relevant debates including that of "cultural genocide" (Lemkin, 1944/2005; Smith Finley, 2021), which allow for an interpretation of these policies and the resulting dynamics of territorial and ethnic subordination, as well as the effects of identity dissolution among the native peoples of the XUAR. In this sense, the article argues that the incorporation of Xinjiang into the discursive framework of the "global war on terror" has not only made it possible to reinterpret an internal political conflict as a terrorist threat but has also facilitated the reconfiguration of a historically border region through a project of territorial integration and cultural transformation.

The article begins by establishing a theoretical and methodological framework and then proceeds to four sections that, in chronological order, explore the various phases of the process described above. First, it contextualizes the Xinjiang region and its relation to the Chinese state from a historical perspective that emphasizes its status as a border region. The next section examines Beijing's strategic appropriation of the narrative of the global war on terror to rearticulate historical tensions with the Uyghurs as part of a contemporary terrorist threat. Following this, the study addresses the creation of a control apparatus in Xinjiang designed to suppress any political dissent in the region. Finally, the article analyses the cycle of state violence and resistance that has resulted in a policy of cultural assimilation and ethnic repression—described by Western governments and scholars as *cultural genocide*—and interpreted here as an attempt to dilute Xinjiang's peripheral status and integrate it into the Chinese state, thereby ending its original *new frontier* status.

Theoretical framework and methodological considerations

This paper adopts a discursive social-constructivist approach to analyze terrorism as a security threat. From this perspective, security threats are not understood as objective phenomena derived from material realities such as violence, but rather as the result of political discursive processes through which certain actors—notably states—define,

interpret and communicate risks and threats. Within this field, the study draws on securitization theory (Buzan et al., 1998), which conceives of security as an eminently discursive practice whereby certain problems are transformed into existential threats requiring extraordinary political responses.

According to securitization theory, a problem or situation "becomes a security issue not necessarily because there is a real threat, but because it is presented as such" (Buzan et al., 1998, p. 24). This representation, in turn, serves to justify the adoption of "extraordinary measures" outside the usual political procedures (Buzan et al., 1998, pp. 24, 33). Security discourses are therefore constructed on a "grammar of security" with *Schmittian* connotations, in as much they legitimize exceptional decisions in emergency contexts (Aradau, 2004, p. 392; Williams, 2003, p. 522).

The social-constructivist approach offers a productive framework for analyzing political discourse surrounding terrorism, a concept that is fundamentally contested and lacks a consensus on its definition (Schmid, 2004). Critical studies of terrorism have emphasized that the concept is not limited to describing a specific form or tactic of political violence, but also functions as a descriptor whose meaning and application depend on historical contexts, power relations and specific discursive strategies (Jackson, 2005; Jarvis, 2009). From this perspective, the designation of certain acts or actors—notably rebel or insurgent movements (Bhatia, 2005)—as *terrorism* or *terrorists* does not stem from a neutral or objective description of reality, but rather from a political practice that determines how conflicts are interpreted and managed. The use of the language of terrorism thus reflects the securitization logic through which political discourse can rationalize and facilitate certain emergency measures, clearly demonstrating the "productive power" of words (Yee, 1996).

In the context of the "global war on terror" launched in the wake of the September 11 attacks (2001), various studies have pointed out that the discourse on terrorism has served as a powerful interpretive framework for redefining political conflicts, in a sort of "macro-securitization" that has also affected China (Buzan & Waever, 2009; Vuori, 2024). In this context, the narratives and labels associated with the category of terrorism have proven particularly effective in delegitimizing forms of dissent or political resistance, justifying the adoption of repressive counterterrorism policies and facilitating the dehumanization of certain social groups, particularly Muslim populations (Dixit, 2016, pp. 40-43; Gunning, 2007, p. 377; Jackson, 2007; Jarvis, 2009, p. 19).

In the case of Xinjiang, the subject of this article, the theory of securitization applied to terrorism discourse in an authoritarian context (Vuori, 2008) provides a framework for examining how the Chinese state has incorporated the global security narratives that followed 9/11 to reinterpret a preexisting political conflict—that of its historical tensions with the Turkic-Muslim minorities in the region—within a broader legitimizing discursive framework. To provide context and clarify the implications of this discourse in the form of coercive measures, the article draws on the literature on the governance of border regions and dynamics of territorial integration in China, which describes the Chinese state's approach to the Uyghur region as a historical process of state expansion and demographic transformation through policies of internal migration, economic development and political control, aimed at progressively integrating the region into China's national project (Bovingdon, 2010; Leibold, 2020).

For some authors, this situation has a clearly colonial nature (Anand, 2019; Olivieri, 2022; Roberts, 2022; Smith Finley, 2022), as evidenced by the pattern of settlement

by the Chinese majority in the region. From this perspective, the security policies implemented in the region—facilitated primarily by the discourse of "terrorism" and the resulting portrayal of Turkic-Muslim minorities as communities suspected of terrorism, can be interpreted as instruments designed to consolidate state authority in a historically peripheral and politically sensitive "colonial" territory and, ultimately—as the article explains—to integrate it into the Chinese civilization-state definitively.

Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative approach based on a historical-discursive analysis of primary and secondary sources. The main corpus of analysis consists of official Chinese government documents, including white papers, legislation and security guidelines, as well as public statements by Chinese Communist Party officials at national and international forums. These sources are supplemented by information from Chinese state media, reports from international organizations and academic studies specializing in the XUAR and the Chinese state's security policies. The analysis of these sources seeks to identify how Chinese authorities have framed the threat of terrorism in the Uyghur region in their discourse and how this interpretive framework has evolved.

Specifically, this study explores three dimensions of this securitization process: the adoption of the discourse on terrorism in the post-9/11 context, the institutionalization of security policies based on this framework and the implementation of increasingly intrusive mechanisms of repression, surveillance, social control and internment targeting the Turkic-Muslim ethnic minorities in Xinjiang. This approach allows for a joint analysis of the evolution of the Chinese state's discourse on the region and its translation into specific governance practices, revealing securitization as a parallel process that combines a reconfiguration of the discourse with its materialization in policies and tangible transformations in the management of the XUAR, its people and its border identity.

History, identity and state dilemmas on the "new frontier"

The Chinese government's official narrative maintains that the territory where the XUAR is located today, in the northwest of the country, has been a "multireligious" and "multiethnic" region since "ancient times" and an "inseparable" part of a "unitary" China since the time of the Western Han Dynasty (206 a. C.-9 d. C.; Li, 2014; The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2019). In contrast to this assertion, various academic studies agree that the incorporation of the territory and inhabitants of what is now known as Xinjiang into the modern Chinese state did not occur *de facto* until the time of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), ruled by the Manchus (Bellér-Hann, 2008; Millward, 2007; Perdue, 2005).

Some Chinese states, notably the Han and Tang dynasties (618-907), once controlled parts of present-day Xinjiang by establishing political, military and commercial alliances and exchanges with local governments. Nevertheless, between the 10th and 17th centuries, China lacked a continuous, stable and extensive control over the region, which evolved independently, establishing itself politically and culturally on the periphery of the "Middle Kingdom". This reinforced a divide that was already evident geographically, given the 4 000 kilometers separating Beijing from Kashgar, the cultural, political and religious epicenter of the Uyghur world. During that long period,

Xinjiang's history unfolded independently of China's, and the region became a crossroads of peoples, cultures, religions and languages, serving as a major artery at the heart of the ancient Silk Road (Betts et al., 2019; Millward, 2007).

This period witnessed a transformation of the Tarim Basin oases and their people, as they shifted from being home to a predominantly Indo-Buddhist society to becoming Islamized and adopting Turkic culture and languages (Kamberi, 2005; Kudara, 2002). This evolution—undoubtedly facilitated by the region's remoteness from the centers of Chinese power—explains the distinctive character of Xinjiang's native inhabitants, who are geographically, ethnically and culturally closer to Central Asia than to East Asia and the civilizations that emerged in the Yellow River and Yangtze River basins.

It was the Qing Dynasty that, beginning in the 18th century, through its military expansion into Central Asia, gradually incorporated the region, which was officially established in 1884 as the imperial province of Xinjiang, meaning "New Frontier" or "New Territory" (Perdue, 2005). Between 1660 and 1770, the Qing Empire doubled its territory and, broadly speaking—except for present-day Mongolia—established the borders of modern-day China, including the Xinjiang region (Hostetler, 2001, p. 34). This process also led to the formation of the modern Chinese nation-state (Jacobs, 2016). The Qing Empire incorporated the peoples and cultures of its geographical and cultural periphery into the Han Chinese majority; later, under the People's Republic of China (1949-present), these were classified into 55 ethnic groups (*minzu*), initially categorized as "nationalities" and later regarded as "ethnic minorities". These included the Turkic-Muslim minorities of the XUAR, notably the Uyghurs.

By establishing the province of Xinjiang as a political-administrative unit, the Qing Dynasty fostered the emergence of a nascent collective national identity among the inhabitants of the Tarim Basin oases, the heartland of the Turkic-Muslim minorities.

In the early 20th century, the ethnogenesis of modern Uyghur identity took place; it emerged and evolved dialectically and in resistance to China's efforts to assimilate the indigenous populations of the new frontier (Bovingdon, 2010; Gladney, 1990, p. 20; Klimeš, 2015). The Uyghur identity, driven by intellectual movements such as Pan-Turkism, Jadidist reformism and political Islam, among others, and led by an indigenous intellectual elite (Klimeš, 2015), materialized in the official recognition of the Uyghur nationality in the 1930s. Paradoxically, this development was driven by the Chinese authorities, who followed the Soviet model and recommendations (Gladney, 1990, p. 12).

Throughout this process, the modern nation of the sedentary Turkic-Muslim peoples of the Tarim Basin adopted the name *Uyghur* as its ethnonym, in reference to an ancient empire based in northwestern Mongolia (744-840) and to one of the many subsequent ruling elites, the Qocho Uyghur Empire, which was of Turkic-Buddhist nature and ruled parts of present-day Xinjiang (932-1450) before its conversion to Islam (Kudara, 2002; Millward, 2007, pp. 51-53; Rudelson, 1997, pp. 5-6). The new Uyghur national identity was based not only on Islam—a religion shared with other modern Chinese ethnic minorities such as the Hui and the Kazakhs—but also on a sedentary attachment to the land, a sense of native identity and a historical and cultural connection to Greater Turkestan in Central Asia, Tibet and Mongolia (Gladney, 1990, p. 11; Tursun, 2008, pp. 93-94).

Since the incorporation of the territory of the present-day XUAR into modern China during the Qing Dynasty, the relations between the Chinese state and the region's native peoples have presented markers of a fundamentally "colonial" nature, linked to Xinjiang's status as a border region (Anand, 2019; Olivieri, 2022; Roberts, 2022). The administration of Xinjiang has been characterized by a tense relation between the Chinese government and the indigenous peoples, who today constitute Turkic-Muslim minorities within the People's Republic of China. This relation has alternated between periods of semi-autonomy and "frontier" governance, in which the Chinese authorities allowed the Uyghurs to maintain their identity, distinctiveness and sociocultural attributes, and attempts at assimilation through measures such as increasing the Han population in the region or imposing Chinese culture on minority groups (Roberts, 2022, p. 99). These include the most recent phase, in which Beijing appears to be seeking the assimilation of the Uyghurs and other Turkic-Muslim minorities.

The Qing Dynasty, for example, alternated between periods of colonial administration and attempts at assimilation. When, at the end of the 19th century, the Manchus regained control of the region after decades of Muslim rebellions, they sought to integrate the local population into the Confucian-based Chinese social model and to impart other aspects of the Chinese language and culture—an effort that failed and only served to accentuate the feelings of distinctiveness and uniqueness among the Turkic -Muslim peoples vis-à-vis the Chinese nation (Schluessel, 2020). Between the end of the Qing Dynasty in 1911 and Mao Zedong's proclamation of the People's Republic of China in 1949, Xinjiang once again drifted away from the Chinese state's centers of power, coming under the rule of local warlords from the Han ethnic group—then a minority in the region—during a period of semi-independence, chaos and instability characterized by military mutinies, local rebellions and growing Soviet influence (Forbes, 1986).

This period witnessed not only the formalization and consolidation of the Uyghur national identity, but also two modern attempts to achieve independence for the so-called East Turkestan, the term by which Uyghur nationalist historiography refers to the region (Brophy, 2016; Wang, 2018; Tursun, 2008, pp. 93-94). These movements, in addition to underscoring the return of the "new frontier" to its natural state as a semi-independent periphery of the Chinese center (Bellér-Hann, 2008), opened the possibility of co-governance and political autonomy for Xinjiang based on its cultural specificity (Benson, 1990).

Once within the People's Republic of China, there have been several attempts—some more traumatic than others—to integrate Xinjiang into the Chinese state. For the CCP, the integration of the territory and the assimilation of the local peoples have been top priorities since what was officially designated as the "peaceful liberation" of the region in late 1949. Although the communist regime's initial steps seemed to open the possibility of a voluntary and respectful integration of minorities within a so-called "Uyghur Autonomous Region", beginning in 1956, the CCP established that the ultimate goal for Xinjiang was to rewrite its history and assimilate the Uyghurs and other ethnic minorities into the Han nationality (McMillen, 1979, pp. 113-126).

This assimilationist drive became evident during periods such as the Great Leap Forward (1958-1962) and the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), during which the ethnic and religious distinctiveness of the peoples of Xinjiang was perceived as an obstacle to the state's project, leading to campaigns aimed at weakening the social and cultural structures of the Uyghurs and other minorities (Bovingdon, 2004; Catris, 2022).

At the same time, a state policy of colonization was launched in the region through the mass relocation and settlement of Han Chinese citizens, aimed at consolidating Beijing's control over a traditionally unstable region. To this end, the CCP established the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps in 1954, a sort of paramilitary colony modeled after the *bingtuan* that the Han dynasty had first used to venture into the region (Millward, 2007). Under the People's Republic of China, the assimilationist approach and the shift in the demographic balance have turned the Uyghurs into "strangers in their own land" (Bovingdon, 2010) and have altered the essential nature of Xinjiang, which has gone from being a frontier on the periphery to becoming integrated into China in support of its rise and development, based on its privileged position as China's land gateway to the West.

Xinjiang is now an integral part of the Belt and Road Initiative as a major artery connecting Central Asia and China. This so-called New Silk Road, launched in 2013, emerges as the culmination of a series of policies that—except for a brief return to gradualism and moderation in response to the cultural specificity of ethnic minorities during the reform and opening-up (*gaige kaifang*) period of the 1980s (Clarke, 2007b)—have continued the project of "Sinicization" in Xinjiang. A relevant example in this direction was the "Great Western Development" (*xibu da kaifa*) program established in 1999, which facilitated Xinjiang's consolidation within the Chinese state, thereby diluting its peripheral and distinct status through mass migration of the Han population and the construction of infrastructure (Clarke, 2007a; Moneyhon, 2003; Olivieri, 2018, p. 35).

While facilitating Xinjiang's integration into the Chinese state and advanced the region's political and cultural assimilation, these initiatives also contributed to unrest and frustration among ethnic minorities due to economic inequalities, ethnic and religious discrimination, urban development at the expense of agricultural land expropriation and associated environmental damage—all of which sparked patterns of violent resistance against the Chinese state among the Uyghurs (Becquelin, 2000; Smith Finley, 2013, p. 19).

As the 21st century began, and with the region stabilized following a period of ethnic tensions, Chinese authorities appeared determined to continue a policy of development-based gradual assimilation of Turkic-Muslim ethnic minorities that would eventually lead to the "peaceful" dissolution of the "new frontier" and its integration into China. However, the 9/11 attacks in 2001 and the subsequent global war on terror launched by the United States radically altered the international security landscape, in the way of introducing the variable of counterterrorism into Beijing's political calculations regarding the future governance of Xinjiang.

China and 9/11: the creation of "terrorism" in Xinjiang

In the weeks and months following the September 11 attacks in 2001, the Chinese authorities incorporated the global language of counterterrorism into their official discourse, a process that helped redefine the historical political tensions between China and the Turkic-Muslim ethnic minorities in Xinjiang as a terrorist security threat. This shift in official discourse was both a precursor to and a catalyst for a radical transformation in the region's political governance. The accusations of "cultural genocide"

currently leveled against the CCP for its policies in Xinjiang and the human rights violations in the region cannot be understood without considering the impact the 9/11 attacks had on Muslim populations worldwide. In Xinjiang, it paved the way for the establishment and consolidation of a counterterrorism apparatus that, by 2026, dominates Chinese policies toward the XUAR through a network of discourses, institutions, regulations and security practices.

The reframing of historical tensions in the region as an issue of "terrorism" did not arise in a vacuum, as Beijing had already begun to securitize Xinjiang during the 1990s by identifying "separatism" and "illegal religious activities" as fundamental threats to the regime's stability. During the 1990s, in particular, the CCP abandoned the moderate ethnic policies that had characterized the period of reform and opening-up (*gaige kaifang*) in Xinjiang in contrast to the excesses of the Cultural Revolution (Kumul, 1998).

This relatively tolerant approach toward the region's religious and cultural distinctiveness came to an abrupt end amid internal challenges to the authoritarian regime, exemplified by the 1989 Tiananmen protests, the resurgence of Uyghur nationalism and the collapse of the Soviet Union on the other side of the "new frontier" (Roberts, 2022). This context of potential instability strengthened the more conservative factions within the CCP, which favored stricter policies in Xinjiang.

By the late 1990s, the CCP already viewed Islam as a subversive force in Xinjiang and Uyghur "secessionism" as a threat to national security (Human Rights Watch [HRW], 1998). This development intensified the crackdown on Uyghur religious practices and cultural expressions. Although still far from the dystopian surveillance apparatus that the Chinese state has implemented in Xinjiang since the mid-2010s, authorities began in the second half of the 1990s to systematically monitor mosques and control imams, to restrict Islamic holidays such as Ramadan and the *Hajj*—the pilgrimage to Mecca—as well as other Uyghur social and cultural expressions that the CCP believed promoted a Turkic-Muslim national identity (Rudelson, 1997; Tursun, 2008). Also during these years, the Chinese government started a crackdown on CCP members who practiced Islam, whilst mass propaganda, re-education and early forms of intrusive surveillance were employed to reinforce control over the region (AFP, 1997; BBCMSAP, 1996).

The securitization and subsequent crackdown in Xinjiang during the 1990s led to an increase in sub-state ethnic violence in an environment already strained by economic development and high levels of Han migration, ushering in a cycle of repression, resistance and escalating securitization that laid the groundwork for the subsequent reinterpretation of the conflict in terms of terrorism following the 9/11 attacks.

At the time, the forms of violent resistance included the targeted killings of police officers, Chinese government officials, or "patriotic" religious clerics who followed the official state line on religious matters (Shichor, 2006). This period also saw the ethnic riots in Ghulja in February 1997 (Amnesty International, 1999; Dautcher, 2004), which brought to light the tense situation in a region that had until then been largely unknown to the international public. State repression also led to an increase in insurgent activity in the form of organized attacks on police stations, government buildings and, on occasion, Han Chinese civilians (Millward, 2004).

Far from a response to a rise in political Islamism or international jihadism, this wave of violent resistance—unprecedented in Xinjiang since the arrival of Communist troops in the 1950s (McMillen, 1979)—was more closely linked to the cultural and religious repression that accompanied the securitization of the region and the growing

socioeconomic inequalities that favored an expanding population of Han Chinese settlers at the expense of the native minorities (Bellér-Hann, 1997; Bovingdon, 2004). Toward the end of the decade, a strategy combining economic incentives and repressive *yanda* ("strike hard") campaigns had significantly reduced violent Uyghur resistance, with dissidents fleeing into exile in Central Asian countries.

The stabilization of Xinjiang—confirmed by Chinese officials in the run-up to 9/11 and reflected in a drastic decline in violence between 1999 and 2001—did not prevent Chinese leaders from using the September 11 attacks as a strategic opportunity to legitimize their repressive policies on the "new frontier". Immediately after the attacks, Chinese authorities adopted the vocabulary of "terrorism"—rarely used before 2001—into their official discourse, a crucial linguistic shift that reframed the tensions in Xinjiang as a terrorist threat to Chinese and global national security.

In the weeks following 9/11, Beijing invoked the threat of "terrorism" to reconceptualize and reinvent the history of tensions with the border region. Thus, Uyghur nationalism and separatism, previously labeled as *secessionism* (*fenliezhuyi*), were replaced by the concept of *terrorism* (*kongbuzhuyi*) in official Chinese discourse (Dwyer, 2005). In this narrative reconfiguration, the Chinese state began to associate various forms of Uyghur identity expression—notably Islam, but also other cultural practices such as the *meshrep*—with the notion of "religious extremism", which was conceptualized in official discourse as the ideological foundation of terrorist violence (HRW, 2003). Thus, following 9/11, *terrorism*—which until then had been absent as a threat on China's national security agenda—began to take center stage in Chinese official narratives, and always in connection to historical and contemporary tensions with Xinjiang's native minorities.

The process of discursive redefinition—through which the language of terrorism began to reshape the interpretive framework defining the Uyghur issue—was quickly institutionalized in official Chinese government documents. In early 2002, just months after 9/11, the Chinese authorities published, in English and aimed at an international audience, the official document "East Turkestan forces cannot get away with impunity", in which the CCP redefined the region's historical tensions as a problem of "terrorism" ("'East Turkistan' terrorist forces", 2002).

At the same time, Chinese state media launched a disinformation campaign to exaggerate the subversive and insurgent nature of the unrest in the region throughout the 20th century (Shichor, 2006). Despite the inconsistencies and problems with the official Chinese narrative (Bovingdon, 2010; HRW, 2005), it gained relative international acceptance when the United States officially designated the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) as a terrorist organization in exchange for China's support for Washington's global counterterrorism policies (Teufel, 2005), a decision that the UN Security Council echoed.

Regardless of protests from human rights organizations, which denounced Beijing's efforts to portray a largely peaceful dissident movement as "terrorist" (HRW, 2005), the designation of the ETIM—a previously unknown group—as the visible face of a then-nonexistent "Uyghur terrorism" gave rise to an academic and media narrative that portrayed this tiny organization as a global jihadist threat (Millward, 2004; Roberts, 2012). Despite experts' skepticism regarding the nature, tactical capabilities

and ties of Uyghur militants to al-Qaeda or the Islamic State (Fishman, 2011; Mabry, 2015), the Chinese authorities have continued to exploit the threat of "Uyghur terrorism" posed by ETIM to justify their security policies in Xinjiang ("Combating ETIM is China's core", 2024).

In this context, the global counterterrorism rhetoric provided Beijing with a useful framework for reinterpreting a conflict historically linked to the governance of a border region. After 9/11, China integrated the Uyghurs into the global narrative of terrorism, the clash of civilizations, and the Islamic threat (Bovingdon, 2010). By reframing a border conflict—between the center and the periphery—in Xinjiang as a matter of global terrorism, the Chinese state did not respond to a tactical shift by Uyghur dissidents, whose use of violence had all but disappeared after years of repression in the 1990s. Rather, Beijing was able to adapt and take advantage of a new international geopolitical context in which—with the United States at the helm—extraordinary security measures, such as torture and military intervention, were justified against minority populations suspected of supporting Islamic terrorism.

This phenomenon, observed in other countries such as Russia with its Chechen minority, allowed China to find a justification and give itself carte blanche to accelerate the assimilation of Xinjiang and ultimately blur the new boundary within the state. Just months after this shift in rhetoric, various international organizations began reporting mass arrests in Xinjiang, the imposition of severe penalties for acts of nonviolent political dissent and an increase in the use of the death penalty (Bhattacharya, 2003; HRW, 2003). This highlighted a shift in China's security policies in Xinjiang based on an alleged Uyghur terrorist threat.

Taken together, these developments show how the adoption of the language of terrorism in the wake of 9/11 allowed the Chinese state to securitize the conflict in Xinjiang further, legitimizing the expansion of extraordinary security policies and strengthening Beijing's control over a region historically viewed as a political and territorial frontier.

Counterterrorism without terrorists: the consolidation of the state control apparatus in Xinjiang

After strategically supporting the global war on terrorism and adopting terrorism as a central theme in its discourse on Xinjiang, the CCP proceeded to reshape its governance in Xinjiang in accordance with the counterterrorism paradigm. This involved translating this new narrative framework into a series of institutions, policies, and control practices aimed at strengthening state governance over the Uyghur region. In this process, the discursive construction of terrorism translated into concrete mechanisms of governance and control. This shift was justified based on the threat of Uyghur terrorism—a systematic narrative construction that, however, had no real manifestations for much of the 2000s.

The lack of objective evidence regarding a terrorist threat did not prevent the discursive construction of Uyghur terrorism as an existential problem that justified extraordinary control measures. As early as 2003, regional authorities identified "terrorist forces" as the "greatest danger" to social stability in Xinjiang (BBCMSAP, 2003). Based on this assessment, Beijing proceeded to establish a network of administrative,

military, security and legislative structures designed to consolidate its control over the region, project it to the outside world as China's front line in the global war on terror and present China as a reliable international partner committed to that cause (BBCMSAP, 2004).

In early 2002, the Chinese Ministry of Public Security established a National Counterterrorism Coordination Team (Zhang, 2013), which was later integrated into a newly created Counterterrorism Bureau. In December 2003, this agency published the first list of alleged jihadist organizations linked to the "East Turkestan" cause, which included eleven alleged "terrorists" ("China issues list," 2003). The list put a name and a face to a diffuse and abstract threat, though not without undermining the CCP's credibility, as it included Uyghur organizations such as the newly founded World Uyghur Congress, which China classified in 2004 as an organization "dedicated to terrorist and separatist activities", despite its peaceful nature (AFP, 2004). In the words of Zong Jian, deputy secretary of the CCP in Kashgar, "anti-government activities, religious extremism and terrorism were essentially the same thing" (Associated Press [AP], 2004), a stance that made it clear that the Chinese government planned to treat all Uyghur political dissent and cultural assertiveness as a matter of terrorism.

In this new context, the Chinese government pushed for the militarization of the region under the pretext of fighting terrorism. The institutionalization of this narrative surrounding the terrorist threat was quickly reflected in the reorganization of the state security apparatus in Xinjiang. After 9/11, hundreds of troops from the People's Armed Police were transferred from the regional capital, Urumqi, to Kashgar, and four divisions of the People's Liberation Army were deployed to reinforce the military presence in southern Xinjiang, the demographic and cultural heartland of the Uyghur population.

In 2008, the Chinese Central Military Commission elevated the status of the People's Armed Police contingent in Xinjiang from "assistant corps command" to "full corps command" (Reuters, 2008b). The move effectively placed this paramilitary force at the forefront of the fight against terrorism and assigned the People's Liberation Army a deterrent role (Li, 2017; "China 'stages' large military drill", 2013). At the same time, Chinese authorities sent 1 750 CCP cadres to the southern part of the region in November 2001 with the aim of "getting to know" the residents (AFP, 2001c). This measure served as precursor of a decades-long state-led campaign to transfer large numbers of Chinese officials to Xinjiang, aimed at penetrating Uyghur society, and which, in its most recent invasive forms, has included sending Han Chinese into Uyghur households to monitor them and promote their cultural assimilation (AP, 2018), in line with Maoist traditions of mass mobilization (Zhang, 2022), and with a clear assimilationist agenda.

In parallel with this structural transformation, the Chinese government began to establish a legal framework to support the fight against terrorism. As early as December 2001, shortly after the 9/11 attacks, the authorities amended the Criminal Code to classify the creation and possession of "terrorist information" as crimes (People's Republic of China, 2001), which led to the first arrests of Uyghur citizens on charges related to information deemed to be terrorist in nature. In 2005, the government began drafting an anti-terrorism law, which was finally enacted in 2015 and amended in 2018 (The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2024).

The framing of Uyghur terrorism as a security threat was not limited to the domestic sphere either, but was projected abroad through an active regional policy in Central

Asia. The most significant move in this direction—led by China and aimed at controlling any political dissent or Uyghur nationalism—was the creation of the Shanghai Five, comprising China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Tajikistan, which became the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in 2001 after Uzbekistan joined. The forum, designed to strengthen regional security following the collapse of the Soviet Union, allowed Beijing to secure the support of its partners in the fight against the so-called "three forces" of "terrorism, separatism and religious extremism".

China also signed bilateral agreements with several Central Asian countries, including Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan (BBCMSAP, 2002b, 2007) aimed at controlling Uyghur populations in these countries. In this context, the Central Asian nations—which share cultural affinities with the region's ethnic minorities—ceased to be a haven for Uyghur political and cultural activity in the diaspora.

From a strategic perspective, this network of agreements enabled China to isolate—or at the very least hinder—the political and cultural ties between East Turkestan and Greater Turkestan, a crucial step toward separating the border from a religiously and culturally akin region—a space that is a natural extension of the Turkic-Muslim identity. Strategically speaking, this policy helped reinforce the Chinese state control over a sensitive, difficult-to-integrate periphery.

Using a similar strategy—in which Beijing offered economic assistance in exchange for intelligence cooperation or the deportation of Uyghurs—China struck multiple agreements with other Asian countries such as Pakistan, Afghanistan, Nepal, Laos and Cambodia (Brady, 2009; Hoshur, 2010; Reddy, 2004). From Central Asia to Europe, the global war on terror became, at this stage, a source of insecurity for Uyghurs communities abroad ("Targeting Chinese dissidents," 2006; "Cutting off support for Uigurs," 2007), who found themselves under the rule of local governments eager to gain favor with a rising economic power.

In parallel with the institutional expansion of the counterterrorism apparatus, the discourse on terrorism began to reshape the day-to-day management of social, religious and cultural life in Xinjiang. Domestically, and within a new context of international legitimization, the Chinese state intensified its repression of the religious and cultural practices of the Uyghur people under the pretext of fighting terrorism. This made it clear that the regime's primary objective was not so much to neutralize a tangible security threat as it was to establish a system of structural control over the Uyghur population.

Activities such as the study of sacred texts or fasting during Ramadan were denounced and punished as attempts to spread separatism (AFP, 2001d; BBCMSAP, 2003). Pilgrimages, intercommunal rituals and worship at shrines or *mazar* were likewise restricted or banned (Hoshur, 2009). Many mosques were demolished, placed under surveillance, or closed during these years (Guljekre, 2006). In addition, the political re-education of imams, the confiscation of unauthorized religious texts and censorship of the Quran were intensified (HRW, 2005; Pik-Kwan Chan, 2001). By this stage, the Chinese government had also attempted to ban the wearing of the veil and other Islamic symbols (York, 2004).

The "iron-fisted" campaigns that had quelled dissident separatism in the 1990s also resurfaced, now focused on suppressing "illegal religion" and arresting "Muslim separatists" in the context of the fight against terrorism. The authorities also directed

their counterterrorism efforts against Uyghur culture and media, denouncing the infiltration of "ethnic separatist forces" into literary and digital production (BBCMSAP, 2002a). By the late 2000s, several Uyghur writers had been arrested (The Dui Hua Foundation, 2003), while a comprehensive system of surveillance and repression of religious practices was taking hold in Xinjiang (HRW, 2005).

This securitization apparatus, operating within the anti-terrorism discourse, continued to expand throughout the decade, especially during periods of high international visibility for the regime, such as in the run-up to the 2008 Olympic Games. The Chinese regime claimed at the time that Xinjiang-related terrorism was the greatest threat to the country (AFP, 2007), and warned of scenarios involving kidnappings, nuclear attacks and acts of sabotage surrounding the Olympic Games ("China stages terrorist drill", 2007; Reuters, 2008a). In this context, the authorities organized a series of pre-Games security operations targeting alleged terrorist cells, illegal Koranic schools and jihadist training camps, resulting in dozens of arrests and deaths ("82 suspected terrorists", 2008; Xinhua, 2008). These actions were regarded with skepticism.

In a paradigmatic case, local witnesses denied that a raid on an alleged ETIM camp was in fact a raid, revealing that the incident stemmed from a dispute over mine ownership (Poch, 2007). Doubts were also raised about an alleged attempted hijacking attributed to ETIM, whose official explanation was deemed inconsistent (Elegant, 2008). Episodes of this kind, in which the official account of events raised more questions than it answered, reflect the pattern of contradictory Chinese state narratives that has characterized Chinese discourse on "Uyghur terrorism" (Demick, 2011; Wong, 2011).

After years of counterterrorism policies in the absence of terrorism, the first notable episode of political violence was reported in August 2008, when two Uyghurs ran over several members of the Chinese armed police with a truck in Kashgar, killing 16 officers ("They hacked police", 2008). Although Chinese authorities portrayed the incident as a terrorist attack inspired by global jihadism ("E. Turkistan group 'behind' terror attack", 2008), the official account was questioned due to a lack of transparency regarding the sequence of events and the identity and intentions of the attackers (Wong, 2008). This episode of violence emerged after years of intensifying securitization, suggesting that, far from stabilizing Xinjiang, the logic of securitization had actually contributed to the escalation of a conflict that had previously been contained. As expert Nicholas Becquelin noted at the time of the attack, the blanket criminalization of all dissent—which for years had characterized the Chinese state's counterterrorism campaign—had ultimately radicalized segments of the Uyghur population, who were aware that even the peaceful expression of their political views would be punished as terrorism (cited in Parry, 2008).

In contrast to the Kashgar incident, the ethnic riots in Urumqi were not, in any case, an organized attack, but rather an episode of collective violence that thrust Xinjiang onto the international stage in July 2009. The regime blamed "thousands of terrorists" directed from abroad for organizing the violence (The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2019; Xinhua, 2009). However, the riots only erupted following a crackdown by Chinese security forces during a demonstration against the killing of two Uyghur migrants at a factory in Guangdong (Xinhua News Agency, 2009). Following the clash with security forces, a wave of attacks by Uyghur radicals broke out, primarily targeting the Han population, resulting in at least 197 deaths (Hu & Lei, 2009; Marquand, 2009). The incident confirmed that

China's post-9/11 strategy—while it had succeeded in capitalizing on the international situation to legitimize the crackdown in Xinjiang on the global stage—had deepened grievances among the local population, mistrust between various ethnic groups and Uyghur resentment toward the Chinese state.

The contradictions arising from the establishment of an institutional, military and legal framework designed to consolidate state control over Xinjiang in the aftermath of 9/11 and culminated in the Urumqi riots in 2009 would become increasingly prominent over the years, heightening instability in the region and laying the groundwork for the far more intrusive security policies that would characterize the coming decade.

Repression, insurgency and "people's war"

As the rhetoric of terrorism translated into an institutional security apparatus in Xinjiang, the process of securitization in the region entered a cycle of violence and radicalization characterized by local dynamics of state repression and Uyghur resistance. The Urumqi riots intensified the region's underlying tensions. They marked the beginning of a new, much more assertive and forceful phase in the Chinese government's counterterrorism policies toward the XUAR.

In response to the events of 2009, Beijing exponentially expanded its security apparatus in the region (Zenz & Leibold, 2017a) and intensified its raids against alleged terrorist groups and religious activities deemed illegal, most of which took place in the context of the war on terror (Branigan, 2009; Qiao, 2011). Unlike the period between 2001 and 2008, when the harshness of state policies met with no resistance from the Uyghurs, this new wave of repression triggered a spiral of insurgent violence—including the use of terrorist tactics—unseen since the 1990s. Following a series of indiscriminate attacks by Uyghur radicals between 2011 and 2014, the Chinese government declared a "people's war on terrorism" in Xinjiang, which marked the beginning of a shift toward the assimilation of the native population and a process that would lead, years later, to extraordinary security policies, such as the massive internment of hundreds of thousands of Uyghurs in "re-education" camps under the rhetorical pretext of their "de-radicalization".

In practice, China's counterterrorism strategy began to redefine a broad spectrum of social and religious life in Xinjiang. Since 2010, the Chinese authorities intensified their campaigns to demolish mosques, as well as the political re-education of imams. The range of religious expressions considered manifestations of "religious extremism" or "terrorism" was expanded, criminalizing practices such as praying, studying or reciting the Quran; celebrating Mawlid or Ramadan; or choosing names considered "excessively religious" for newborns (Abdilim, 2013; Hoshur, 2016). The Chinese state interference in religious affairs also included the prohibition of forms of dress or styles considered "abnormal" by the authorities, such as face veils, the burqa, tight headscarves worn by young women, beards on middle-aged men, or clothing bearing the crescent moon and star symbol (Cui, 2015; Sulaiman, 2015).

The intensified repression that followed the Urumqi riots centered on two main pillars. First, the outlawing of the private transmission of Islam to minors and within families, with a ban on teaching religion at home or in schools not authorized by the government, under accusations of religious extremism or threats to national security.

Second, an assimilation strategy aimed at imposing traditional Chinese culture, patriotic values and loyalty to the CCP in educational and religious settings (Irade, 2016; Radio Free Asia's Uyghur Service, 2018).

An aggressive program of secularization of the population was also promoted, with measures aimed at eradicating religion in schools, universities and Uyghur family, social and cultural spheres (Chang & Bai, 2014; Reuters, 2013, 2016). This reflected a strategy that, beyond counterterrorism, involved the cultural transformation of the region and its integration into the Chinese state. Some of these measures included promoting alcohol and tobacco use in Muslim communities, or requiring the abandonment of religious practices as a condition for marriage or access to state services (Hoshur, 2015a; Sun, 2017).

At the same time, the security apparatus began to systematically target the Uyghur cultural and intellectual elites. The Urumqi riots arguably marked a turning point in the persecution of these groups. A prime example of this strategy to decapitate Uyghur identity was the 2014 life sentence handed down to scholar Ilham Tohti, who was accused of separatism (Gao, 2014).

Tohti, known for his moderation and for acting within the framework of the Chinese constitution, had criticized Xinjiang's economic policies and increasing securitization, warning that, far from resolving the structural problem of the region's integration into the Chinese state, these policies were contributing to the escalation of violent separatism and jihadism (G. E., 2014; Musa, 2008; Ramzy, 2010). Like Tohti, numerous Uyghur intellectuals, journalists and cultural figures—especially those critical with the state policies—were detained and charged with crimes against national security (Abdilim, 2010; Tursun, 2011). The criminalization of the study and dissemination of Uyghur history, literature and culture—including online—became a central element of Xinjiang's policies. It further revealed an assimilationist drive aimed at eroding the Uyghur identity, an effort presented in official discourse as a matter of counterterrorism.

In this context, the intensification of the securitization process helped create new dynamics of confrontation between the Chinese state and segments of the Uyghur population. Driven in part by the increasing repression that followed the Urumqi riots, and at times fueled by the influence of global Salafist-style militant Islamism, Xinjiang experienced a second wave of violence—similar to that seen in the mid-1990s—between 2008 and 2017. The cycle began with the aforementioned attack in Kashgar in August 2008 and culminated in a mass stabbing spree on the streets of Guma County (Pishan) in 2017 (Ng, 2017). During this period, more than a hundred violent incidents linked to Uyghurs were recorded both in Xinjiang and in other parts of China.

These incidents took various forms—ranging from spontaneous outbreaks of violence during protests to premeditated, indiscriminate attacks against civilians—and were fundamentally linked to the social, religious and ethnic tensions that had converged in the Urumqi riots. Thus, on many occasions, the violence arose as a direct reaction to state repression. Numerous incidents described by Chinese authorities as "terrorist attacks" were in fact spontaneous outbreaks of violence triggered during identity checks, raids or religious restrictions (Yang, 2011; Zhuang, 2014).

The enforcement of the ban on the veil and similar garments for women, for example, was a frequent trigger for clashes with the security forces (Grammaticas, 2013). Incidents of collective violence were also reported following the escalation of tense situations, as occurred in Urumqi in 2009. Religious restrictions, the arrest of imams,

and the imposition of cultural norms sparked protests that, on more than one occasion, resulted in the killing of protesters by the police (Choi, 2011; Haas, 2015; Qiu, 2013). Added to this were anti-terrorism raids—notably frequent since 2013—which resulted in the arrest or death of alleged dissidents under circumstances lacking transparency (Boehler, 2013; Hoshur, 2013).

Alongside this spontaneous and reactive violence, an organized resistance also emerged that carried out targeted attacks against government officials, police officers, other security personnel and religious figures aligned with the CCP (Cui, 2014). Uyghur radicals carried out attacks such as the deadly vehicle-ramming attack in Kashgar in 2008, as well as the use of incendiary bombs and explosives against police stations (Meng, 2014; "San shi lianhuan kong", 2013; Wan, 2013). They also attacked roadblocks and government or CCP buildings (Buckley, 2013), as well as the Han Chinese population residing in Xinjiang, including merchants, farmers and migrant workers (Hoshur, 2015b).

Organized violence also took on unmistakably terrorist forms. Uyghur attackers carried out indiscriminate attacks against pedestrians, including explosions in public places (Hoshur & Sulaiman, 2014), mass stabbings such as the one at the Kunming train station in March 2014, which left 35 dead—including four attackers—and 143 injured (Sina News, 2014); or vehicle-ramming attacks such as the one that occurred in Tiananmen Square in 2013 (Cui, 2013).

Faced with this escalation of violence and growing instability, the Chinese leadership chose to further intensify the securitization agenda and the state of emergency. In May 2014, with the wave of violence at its peak, Chinese President Xi Jinping urged the government to take "decisive action" to "ruthlessly suppress the momentum of the terrorists" (Xinhua, 2014a). Subsequently, regional leader Zhang Chunxian declared a "people's war" against "malicious violence and terrorist attacks" and warned that the confrontation would be "very intense" ("Xinjiang's Party chief wages", 2014).

In accordance with these instructions, the National Counterterrorism Group launched the *yanda* (strike hard) campaign against "terrorist and religious extremist groups" (Xinhua, 2014b). Initially planned to last one year, the campaign was first extended through 2015, then through 2016 and 2017 (Cui, 2016), thereby establishing a state of emergency in the region—the prelude to the most decisive phase in contemporary Chinese governance in Xinjiang, a period of social control and mass re-education aimed at altering the relation between the Chinese state and its "new frontier", always within the framework of anti-terrorist securitization discourse.

Transforming the "new frontier": surveillance and assimilation

While the earlier phases of the securitization process in Xinjiang—under the guise of the terrorist threat—were marked by a gradual escalation of state repression and eventual insurgent violence, beginning in 2017 the Chinese leadership opted for a more radical strategy aimed not at counterterrorism but at the structural transformation of the region's governance. This phase thus marked a turning point in the process

of reconfiguring the border, as "counterterrorism" narratives and dynamics came to manifest themselves in systematic forms of surveillance, internment and large-scale social control.

In line with Xi Jinping's core directives to "arrest" and "sentence" (Tobin, 2022, p. 10), the Chinese government's policies in Xinjiang began this drastic shift in early 2017. The change coincided with the appointment of Chen Quanguo—the architect of the earlier "stabilization" of Tibet (Zenz & Leibold, 2017b)—as the CCP secretary for the region. Chen ordered Chinese security forces to "bury the corpses of terrorists and terrorist groups in the vast sea of the people's war" (quoted in "Chinese police hold," 2017).

Chen's words symbolized the beginning of a period in the region's recent history in which, under this forceful rhetoric, China deployed a vast network of surveillance and police control in the XUAR consisting of hundreds of checkpoints, thousands of police stations and tens of thousands of strategically placed security cameras (Chin & Bürge, 2017; Gan, 2017; Zenz & Leibold, 2017a). According to Zhu Hailun, Chen's right-hand man, this model of "social management" would ensure control over the Uyghur population "without gaps, without blind spots, without blank spaces" (quoted in Pengpai Xinwen, 2017).

In practice, the new logic of securitization has led to the creation of one of the most extensive surveillance systems in the contemporary world. Within this framework, the Chinese state apparatus implemented a series of highly intrusive practices aimed at surveilling Turkic-Muslim minorities and identifying individuals deemed "anomalous" or "deviant" by the authorities (Leibold, 2020).

These measures included restrictions on movement, facial and voice recognition, GPS-based vehicle tracking, monitoring of residences and objects via QR codes, collection of biometric data for a social credit system, confiscation of passports and the forced installation of spyware on cell phones under the pretext of protecting "national security" (HRW, 2017a; 2017b). The Chinese regime centralized this system of mass surveillance into an Integrated Joint Operations Platform designed to collect personal data and information on the daily lives of millions of Uyghurs and generate alerts detecting "suspicious" activities related to religious "extremism", such as growing an "abnormal" beard or not using a cell phone (Wang, 2019).

This process of structural transformation has facilitated the institutionalization of a system of mass detention aimed at preemptively neutralizing any potential form of dissent. In a context of continuous and absolute panoptic surveillance (Foucault, 1975), and with Chen calling for "detaining everyone who needs to be detained" (Ramzy & Buckley, 2019), Beijing proceeded, beginning in 2017, with the forced and extrajudicial mass internment of hundreds of thousands of people, mostly Uyghurs and members of other Turkic-Muslim minorities, such as the Kazakhs (Greitens et al., 2019/2020). This campaign was designed by Zhu, a CCP official in Xinjiang with years of experience in the region's southern oasis cities and a reputation for aggressively targeting Uyghur religion and culture (Chavkin, 2019; Khatchadourian, 2021).

Various studies estimate that at least one million people have been held for years in this network of dozens of detention centers (Batke, 2019; Ruser, 2020). Human rights organizations and experts have described these facilities as "a complex system of incarceration and control of minorities" (Vanderklippe, 2019) or as a "mass policy of indefinite detention without trial, mass internment, and incarceration" (Uyghur Human

Rights Project, 2019). Evidence has emerged of coercive measures against detainees in these facilities, including indoctrination, torture, sexual abuse, birth control, forced sterilizations and forced labor programs (AP, 2020; Lehr & Bechrakis, 2019; Uyghur Tribunal, 2021; Xu et al., 2020).

Mass internment seeks not only to neutralize alleged potential terrorist threats, but also to forcibly transform the identity of the internees. They are subjected to re-education programs designed to reshape the identity of Turkic-Muslim minorities, distancing them from their fundamental cultural references—notably Islam—to foster greater affinity with the Chinese language and culture and ensure ideological loyalty to the CCP (Chavkin, 2019; García-Noblejas Floriano, 2025; Mauk, 2019; Ramzy & Buckley, 2019).

In this regard, the most recent policies implemented in Xinjiang can be understood as part of a broader process of forced integration of a region that the Chinese state has historically viewed as a strategic periphery, thereby confirming the colonial nature of China's project in the region (Olivieri, 2022, p. 77). Based on this logic, the policies implemented in Xinjiang are part of a form of forced assimilation that, in the view of scholars, activists, human rights defenders, lawyers and lawmakers, constitutes a case of "genocide" or "cultural genocide" ("Canada's parliament declares", 2021; Leibold, 2019; Roberts, 2020; Smith Finley, 2021; Zenz, 2019).

According to Roberts (2022, pp. 95, 98-99), the camps appear to be deliberately seeking a "complete pacification" of the region through the destruction of the Uyghur "collective identity", the breakdown of solidarity among its people, and a reduction in its population. At this point, the securitization of tensions in Xinjiang has come to be framed as a broader project of social and cultural transformation, aimed at redefining the relation between the state and the population in this border region—a move that would lead to a critical historical transition for Xinjiang from a border status toward its full assimilation into the Chinese geographical and cultural sphere.

As in previous phases, these policies have been publicly justified using the language of counterterrorism. In official Chinese discourse, and within the logic of securitization, the detention facilities are presented as "education and vocational training centers" (Lao, 2019) intended to "de-radicalize" detainees as part of a preventive counterinsurgency strategy. According to a white paper published by Beijing, the camps are part of an "intensive effort to combat terrorism and radicalization" that is said to be in line with the United Nations Charter and Security Council resolutions, intending to eliminate "the conditions that foster the spread of terrorism" (The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2019). The war on terrorism continues to serve as a justification that the Chinese authorities use to rationalize their policies in Xinjiang, which are viewed as "the necessary means to combat Islamic or religious extremism" (Miles et al., 2018). The Chinese government has responded to accusations of "genocide" by calling them "malicious slander" used by Western countries to "destabilize Xinjiang and contain China" (Liu & Zhang, 2021).

Conclusion

The elevation of terrorism to the status of a primary threat to global security in the wake of 9/11 profoundly transformed the Chinese government's security narratives and practices in Xinjiang. Following the attacks, and against the backdrop of the international proliferation of domestic-style counterterrorism campaigns, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Mary Robinson, cited Xinjiang as a troubling example of the trend in many countries to "use the pretext of combating terrorism to suppress freedom of expression and legitimate, nonviolent dissent" (AFP, 2001b).

More than two decades after China exploited the attacks and the ensuing global war on terror to intensify the securitization of the Uyghur region, the *people's war* on terrorism driven by Beijing has radically transformed Xinjiang with profound and lasting effects on the Uyghurs and other Turkic-Muslim minorities. These measures go beyond merely legitimizing, under the banner of countertorrism, or intensifying the political and religious repression that had already been established in the region in the 1990s.

This article has stated that this transformation should be understood, among other things, as a process of reconfiguring what was once a "new frontier" and through which Xinjiang has gone from occupying a peripheral and ambiguous position within the Chinese geopolitical landscape to becoming the subject of a forced, monitored and disciplined integration that seeks to blur its cultural and territorial otherness.

From a constructivist perspective, this study has illustrated how security threats—including terrorism—do not stem solely from material realities such as the historical tensions between the Chinese state and Turkic-Muslim peoples, but are produced, articulated and stabilized through discursive frameworks that shape the political responses to them. Significantly, in the case of Xinjiang, many of these policies were implemented in contexts where insurgent violence was limited or sporadic. This reinforces the interpretation that "Uyghur terrorism" functioned more as a discursive framework legitimizing deeper political transformations than as an objective descriptor of tensions in the region.

The securitization and subsequent transformation of Xinjiang has unfolded gradually: first through the discursive construction of terrorism in the wake of 9/11, then through the consolidation of an institutional counterterrorism apparatus and finally through the adoption of increasingly intrusive forms of social control and mass re-education aimed not only at suppressing all forms of political dissent but also at eradicating a broad spectrum of social, religious and cultural practices of the Uyghur people (Byler, 2022; Roberts, 2020).

This process has not only intensified the historical pressure that the Chinese state has exerted on Turkic-Muslim minorities in Xinjiang but has also contributed to a spiral of violent resistance—a form of last grasp dissidence—against the state of absolute repression imposed in the XUAR. In its most recent phase, the securitization of Xinjiang has evolved into a more ambitious project: coercive social engineering aimed at reshaping the ethnic and religious identity of the Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslim minorities, assimilating them into the Han Chinese national narrative (Leibold, 2019; Xu et al., 2020; Zenz, 2019). Thus, the policies implemented in Xinjiang are reminiscent of the dynamics of colonial and frontier governance (Olivieri, 2022), in which

the securitization of peripheral populations serves to legitimize projects of forced integration and cultural transformation. Ultimately, this is a state-led attempt to transform the "new frontier"—historically a space of contact, difference and tension—into a homogeneous and functional extension of the Chinese state. The "people's war" against terrorism in Xinjiang is therefore not a repressive campaign against a specific threat, as Beijing continues to claim (Feng, 2021), but rather a structural process of internal colonization carried out through security measures and technologies of control and as part of a broader process of border reconfiguration.

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