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Explaining the Chinese Framing of the "Terrorist" Violence in Xinjiang: Insights from Securitization Theory

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Abstract

This paper critically examines the Chinese framing of the "terrorist" violence in Xinjiang. Drawing on the Copenhagen school of securitization theory, it examines how the historical perception of the region as a primary source of security threats to inner China has led today's China to continue with representing the Han Chinese-Uyghur discord as an existential threat. In framing the ethnic conflict as a security issue, China has capitalized on the global "war on terror" of the early 2000s to transform the unrest into acts of Islamist terrorism to legitimize its counter-insurgency policies in Xinjiang. However, both the 2009 Urumqi riots and the 2014 Kunming attack lead us to conclude that the securitization strategy fails to quell the unrest. Not only have the Strike-Hard campaigns served to radicalize Uyghur nationalists, but also Han Chinese are not convinced that the Chinese government can contain the "terrorist" threat. Yet securitization blinds the leadership to the dysfunctional ethnic policy.

Keywords: framing, securitization, Sinicization, Uyghur terrorism, Xinjiang

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In July 2015 the police in Shenyang, the capital of China's north-eastern province of Liaoning, shot dead three Uyghur men whom they alleged were members of a little-known terrorist group called "Hijrah Jihad" (Ramzy 2015). China's state media in November 2015 reported an attack in a coal mine in Xinjiang's Baicheng county that was estimated to have killed more than 50 people and attributed it to terrorism. However, the deadly attack indeed took place in mid-September and the Chinese media did not disclose it until shortly after a series of terrorist attacks in Paris on 13th November 2015 (Forsythe 2015a; Radio Free Asia 2015a, b). An empirical puzzle to be addressed in this paper is: Why is the Chinese government prone to framing Uyghur dissenters not as criminals but as terrorists?[1]

This article is not primarily about what causes the ethnic conflicts in Xinjiang, how they have escalated over the years, and how they can be managed.[2] It rather aims to explain why the Chinese government has discursively constructed the ethnic unrest in Xinjiang, north-western China, as terrorist attacks against, and hence an existential security threat to, the state rather than as popular uprisings against local authorities. To answer this key question, this paper argues that securitization theory offers a better account than assimilationist/pluralist theory, as discussed in Dreyer (2015, 297ff), in understanding the logic behind China's firmly entrenched policy towards Xinjiang from the Qing era onwards. It describes how the construction of security or securitization has taken place discursively and evaluates, using the violent incidents linked to the Uyghurs in Urumqi in 2009 and in Kunming in 2014 as case studies, how effective Beijing's securitization policy is in quelling the unrest in the region.[3]

Securitization theory has not been fully explored in the existing literature on ethnic unrest in Xinjiang, with the possible exception of Cui and Li (2011). However, we do not concur with them on three major aspects. First, while they argue that the securitization framework fails to explain why securitization occurs (Cui and Li 2011, 146; emphasis in original), we contend that the same framework can explain why securitization happens in Xinjiang. Second, they primarily, albeit not exclusively, focus on the developments in the region after 2000. In contrast, we draw on a path-dependence approach to argue for the significance of explaining securitization from a historical perspective, dating back to the eighteenth century. As pointed out by Peoples and Vaughan-Williams (2015, 96; emphasis added), an issue can be framed readily as an existential threat "if [the] objects associated with [it] carry historical connotations of threat, danger and harm, or where a history of hostile sentiments exists." Finally, they assert that the Western Regional Development Programme is part of the Chinese de-securitization strategy (Cui and Li 2011, 151-53). To the contrary, we hold that the same programme is consistent with the Chinese securitization approach towards the region.

The remainder of this paper proceeds in five sections. It starts with a brief discussion of securitization theory. Why and how Xinjiang has been securitized, from the Qing conquest in the mid-eighteenth century to the post-Mao era, will be respectively provided in sections 2 and 3. The

historical focus will give greater insight into the recent unrest in section 4. In conclusion, this paper will argue that securitization spurs radicalism in Xinjiang,

Securitization and Security

According to the Copenhagen School's securitization theory, an issue is securitized when it is presented as an "existential threat, requiring emergency measures, and justifying actions outside the normal bounds of political procedure" (Buzan et al. 1998, 24). Securitization follows the politicization of an issue, and is "the move that takes politics beyond the established rules of the game and frames the issue either as a special kind of politics or as above politics" (Buzan et al. 1998, 23). Securitization is a "self-referential practice," meaning that the issue in question is not necessarily a real threat; it is only presented as such (Buzan et al. 1998, 24). As a "speech act" (or security utterances), securitization casts the issue in terms of the division between friends and enemies (Balzacq 2005; Wæver 1995; Williams 2003). The act of discursively designating something as a security threat warrants taking action against it. Securitization implies the existence of a securitizing actor as well as a referent object: the former declares that the latter is existentially threatened. It is, most of all, a way for a state to legitimize the use of "emergency" or "extraordinary" measures (i.e. the use of force) in order to preserve the social order to which it and its citizens mutually agree in their social contract. The state must be at pains to consciously persuade its target population to allow it to securitize an issue and to "override rules that would otherwise bind it" (Buzan et al. 1998, 26), by presenting to them that the issue in question could not be resolved by "normal" political means. An issue is successfully securitized as soon as the audience accepts or acquiesces to this discourse.

Why would an issue be considered an "existential threat"? Security is concerned with collective survival (Hansen 2000, 289, 290), so for a state to securitize the issue, the issue has to directly threaten its basic existence. In the case of China, we will see that security threats have been more about civilizational hierarchy than about power differentials. Non-Sinicized (i.e. less "civilized" in the eyes of Confucian Chinese) people in the frontier region have been historically perceived as an existential threat to China. In the age of imperial China, they refused to acknowledge the superiority of Chinese rule, threatening Chinese identity as well as the legitimacy of the Chinese emperor's claim to be the "Son of Heaven." They and China were often at war with each other. The Xiongnu, a Turkish nomadic tribe, was in sporadic conflicts with Han China (206 BC – AD 220) over the control of the Tarim Basin (Millward 1998, 25-26; 2007, 18-25). At the apex of their material power, both Ming and Qing China launched offensive campaigns against non-Sinicized nomadic tribes in the north to secure or even extend Chinese borders. In contrast, in early modern East Asia China managed to maintain peaceful inter-state relations with the Sinicized states of Korea and Vietnam for centuries (except for the Chinese invasion and occupation of Vietnam in 1407-27) and only had a major armed conflict with Japan (the Imjin War of 1592-98)

until the late nineteenth century (Johnston 1998; Kang 2010; Wang 2011). The loss of territorial integrity in the "century of national humiliation" (1839-1949) has additionally made separatism an existential threat to the collective survival of the contemporary Chinese state. Influenced by this historical trauma, national unity and full sovereignty are deemed essential to the collective survival of the state against hostile foreign forces. The growth of diverse ethnic identities other than the overarching Chinese identity is considered an existential threat to the state as a collective entity.

Regarding security per se as intersubjectively constructed, we highlight the role of contextual factors, which were historically associated with the Uyghurs' relations with external powers and the Chinese governments of the past, in making the securitization by the Han Chinese-dominated Chinese government possible as well as acceptable to Han Chinese, the main audience at whom the threat articulation is addressed (McDonald 2008). We argue that since the mid-eighteenth century China has seen Xinjiang principally through the lens of national security. The forcible annexation of Xinjiang by Qing China in 1759 was to enhance the dynastic empire's security against the Mongols. Nowadays, this historical factor still serves to prioritize the governing of the region from a military angle as well as the use of hard power to assimilate the Uyghurs into the broadly defined Chinese nation. Both the Sinicization of Xinjiang, which encourages mass migration of Han Chinese into the region, and allegations of clandestine connections between global Islamic jihadists and radical Uyghur insurgents form the two main planks of Beijing's securitization strategy.

Nonetheless, securitization is not seen by Buzan et al. (1998) and Wæver (1995) as a positive value, especially when it is put in place by an undemocratic country where securitization risks being used to legitimize the employment of special security forces in civilian activities. In addition, there are concerns over "threat inflation" in the process of securitization (Kaufmann 2004) as well as critical studies on the securitization of criminal activities, and additionally HIV/AIDS pandemics, which show scepticism about the contributions of securitization to controlling crimes and reining in the spread of the disease (see, e.g. Elbe 2006; Emmers 2003). With these caveats in mind, we will critically assess the degree of success with which the Chinese state has legitimized the securitization of Uyghur unrest to its Han population, and with which the Chinese securitization strategy contributes to the quelling of ethnic unrest. Particular focus will be on whether securitization, on the one hand, alienates the Uyghurs further from the Chinese nation and government and, on the other, heightens the expectation and demand from Han Chinese in the restive region for improved security while the government fails to deliver the goods to the target audience. That is crucial because, as argued by Watson (2012, 298), "few studies of securitisation have attempted to demonstrate the effects that securitising discourse has on the targeted [sic] audience" (see Balzacq 2005, 173; Schäfer et al. 2016, 80 for a similar claim).

Why Securitize Xinjiang

To understand where the Uyghurs and the Han Chinese stand in the social unrest taking place today in Xinjiang, we must first look into their historical interactions. We will see that the Uyghurs' recent nationalist claims have been closely related with social and historical construction of Xinjiang as a security zone and of the Uyghurs as an ethnic group often subject to external influence in the past two centuries.

Qing China's Expansion into Xinjiang and Weakened Control

China has had a long history of dealing with Xinjiang from a security point of view. Although the Chinese government claims that Xinjiang has been part of China for the past two thousand years, dating back to the setting up of military colonies in the "Western Region" by the Han dynasty (206 BC-AD 220) (Information Office of the State Council of the PRC 2009), China's effective control over the region has been intermittent over the centuries. Xinjiang was, in reality, not incorporated into China until the Qing conquests of Inner Asia, including Mongolia and Tibet, in the eighteenth century. The conquests and expansion were undertaken out of the imperial court's heightened concern over the potential menace the tribes could collectively pose to its frontier security. The Qing dynasty was highly concerned over the danger of the unification of the Tibetans, the Mongols and the Zunghars into an anti-Qing political force, especially in light of the likelihood of a Zunghar-Russian alliance (Millward 1998, 27-28). A brutal extermination of the Zunghars in the late 1750s unleashed Chinese colonization of and settlement in the region, to which the Qing army referred as "Xinjiang," which literally means the "New Dominion" (of Gansu). Permanent garrisons of Qing troops were established in the newly conquered region in the northern Yili (aka Ili) region which not only was the Zunghar power base but also bordered Russia. This militarization was accompanied by an influx of Chinese immigrants into northern Xinjiang, which primarily aimed to achieve the economic self-sufficiency of the militarized region because Qing emperors and Xinjiang officials had faced continued questioning from dissenting voices in the Han Chinese literati class about the value of Xinjiang to the state (Di Cosmo 1998; Fletcher 1978, 58-61, 65; Millward 1998, 44-75; Millward 2007, 97-108). The Qing's decision to elevate Xinjiang's status to a "normal" province in 1884 was largely a move to consolidate its direct control over the region amid the 1860s Muslim rebellions in the northwest and Russian incursions.

Among the various rebels, Yaʻqūb Beg, a former warrior from Khoqand, founded an emirate in Kashgaria in 1865. Pursuing diplomacy with Russia, Britain and the Ottoman Empire to shore up its legitimacy, his kingdom survived until his force was defeated by Zuo Zongtang in 1878.[4] The Russians capitalized on the turmoil to occupy the Yili valley in 1871 (Hsü 1965, 12-46; Kim 2004; Millward 2007, 116-58; Paine 1996, 110-31). The Qing attempt to recover Yili from Russia first led to the signing of the Treaty of Livadia (1879), which, among others, in effect ceded about 70% of the Yili valley, including the strategic Tekes River and the Muzart and Talki Passes, to Russia. The announcement of the treaty caused much consternation among Chinese senior officials and the two countries had prepared for war. Having renounced the 1879 treaty, the

Qing sent a second mission for renegotiation for a new treaty in July 1880. Assailed by fiscal and diplomatic woes after the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-78, the Tsar eventually agreed, in the Treaty of St Petersburg (1881), to return all of Yili minus its westernmost part, in return for a larger indemnity (Hsü 1965, 47-78, 95-188; Millward 2007, 133-36; Paine 1996, 132-73).

By the end of the Yili crisis, Qing officials recognized that Russia, contiguous to China, posed a more direct threat to China than other European powers (Paine 1996, 165). Although the provincialization of Xinjiang gave new impetus to Sinicization, aided by the introduction of Han Chinese bureaucrats and Confucian education to the non-Chinese province, Qing's effective rule was hampered by fiscal weakness principally brought about by the Boxer indemnity (1901) (Millward 2007, 136-46, 148-54).

Soviet Influence in Xinjiang in the Twentieth Century

The Guomindang (GMD) Republican leader Chiang Kai-shek justified Sinicization by arguing that all ethnic minorities were merely "branches" of the Chinese nation and that their variance in culture and language was due to their distance from the mainstream Han Chinese civilization (Benson 1990, 7; Millward 2007, 207-08). His government, however, could only exercise nominal control over the region, which fell into the hands of local Chinese warlords such as Yang Zengxin, Jin Shuren, Ma Zhongying and Sheng Shicai. The latter, in particular, sought military and financial support from the Soviet Union (until 1942) (Dillon 2004, 19-22; Millward 2007, 210-11).

Amid various Turkic-Muslim rebellions since the 1930s, two East Turkestan Republics (ETRs) were established, first in 1933-34 and then in 1944-49. The first was crushed by Ma, a Chinese Muslim from Gansu (Dillon 2004, 20-21; Millward 2007, 199-200). The "Ili rebellion" of 1944 (Benson 1990) that led to the formation of the second ETR arose immediately from Turkic Muslims' anti-Chinese sentiment but was given Soviet material and organizational support. The GMD government could only manage to form three short-lived coalition governments with the ETR between 1945 and 1949 (Benson 1990, 67-176; Millward 2007, 215-24). There has been speculation over the complicity of Stalin or the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in a mysterious plane crash in Serbia in August 1949 that killed five ETR representatives who were flying to Beijing for a meeting with Mao Zedong. A replacement delegation, headed by Saifuddin Azizi, the future chairman of China's Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, pledged allegiance to the CCP and the People's Republic of China (PRC) (Benson 1990, 175-76, 178-79; Forbes 1986, 177-95, 222; Millward 2007, 227-29, 233-34).

The Chinese Communist government was more determined than its Qing and Republican predecessors to integrate Xinjiang into the polity in the light of Stalin's use of economic and military assistance to extract oil and mining concessions in the region (Benson and Svanberg 1998,

21; Millward 2007, 255-56). Extensive campaigns to promote population movement of Han Chinese into Xinjiang were launched, with the establishment in 1954 of the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (commonly known as Bingtuan for short in Chinese), a Han quasi-military organization in a non-Han region (McMillen 1981; see also Benson and Svanberg 1998, 153-54; Millward 2007, 251-54; Seymour 2000, 172).[5] Answerable directly to Beijing and the army, the Bingtuan amalgamated the functions of economic production, civil administration and regional defence, and was set up in strategically crucial areas in the region (Clarke 2011, 46). Xinjiang's security was under heightened danger when Sino-Soviet relations turned sour in the 1960s. A famine in the early 1960s, caused by the Great Leap Forward, led to a mass exodus of 67,000 Kazaks and Uyghurs from northern Xinjiang into Soviet Kazakhstan in April 1962. The depopulated frontier area exposed China to security threats from the Soviet Union, forcing the Bingtuan to set up new enclaves there (Benson and Svanberg 1998, 104; Bovingdon 2010, 60; Millward 2007, 263-65; Seymour 2000, 173).

The Contemporary Relevance of History

The brief historical overview above shows that the framing of unrest in Xinjiang as an existential threat to the state by present-day China has historical roots. The Qing, Republican and Communist governments have shared governing ideology and policy with regard to Xinjiang; and consequently governed it primarily from the prism of national security with the aim of warding off hostile external forces. The administration of the region has, since the end of 1750s, been dominated by military figures or organizations. Outbursts of Uyghur rebellions during this historical period were derived more from foreign influence or warlords' misrule, rather than from any consistent Islamic or ethno-nationalist impulse. This has generated a deep-rooted thought among Chinese ruling elites that the antagonism between the Uyghurs and the Han Chinese has not been caused by inter-ethnic rivalry. "East Turkestan" is claimed to have been naturalized in Xinjiang where it was never native (Pang and Hu 2011). Enemies are to be identified outside Xinjiang as well as China. The predecessors of the CCP defined and classified the "Xinjiang security question" for it, and that security question continues to influence the CCP policy today.

Second, the principal securitizing measures used by the Qing to address the ostensible threat were colonization and settlement, and the main audience of the securitization were Manchu and Han Chinese officials in China proper, who were concerned over the resultant fiscal burden on Chinese provinces. Pro-frontier security leaders resorted to speech acts to persuade the key audience of the salience of the threat and of the need to mobilize and deploy extraordinary measures to address the defined threat. The Chinese government post-1949 has, by and large, followed this age-old security-oriented strategy to rule the restive region. However, unlike the Manchus, who as an ethnic minority did not conceive of a unified Chinese nation, Han Chinese Communist elites argue that the Uyghurs are part of a unified nation defined by nationalist ideology, ruling out any possibility for the minority region to secede from the state (Clarke 2011, 152).[6]

How Post-Mao China Securitizes Xinjiang

Deng Xiaoping re-instated the Bingtuan in 1981 in response to the deteriorating economy of the region as well as factional civil war within the organization during the disastrous Cultural Revolution (Holdstock 2015, 58-59; Millward 2007, 265-74). Economic development has, since the 1990s, become the primary tool of political assimilation; heavy investments have been made in the region through the Western Region Development Programme, aiming to develop trade, cotton production as well as the energy sector. The logic behind this is the prevailing developmentalist ideology that attributes political turmoil to poverty. In line with this policy change was a transformation in late 1998 of the Bingtuan into a commercial corporation, named Xinjiang Construction Corporation (XCC), with an extended mandate yet fewer military responsibilities (Cliff 2009). Beijing re-employs or even enhances Sinicization, stirring waves of migration of Han Chinese as well as capital into Xinjiang to develop the rich natural resources there, to pacify the autonomous region and to firmly integrate it into the Chinese state. In the event of the failure of this economics-in-command policy, heavy-handed yet pro-Han Strike-Hard campaigns, first announced in April 1996, would ruthlessly follow suit (Dillion 2004, 84-109; and see the case studies below).

The Political Economy of Sinicization

The Chinese Sinicization efforts to develop the region economically have not been in vain. In the last "White Paper on Xinjiang's Development and Progress," it was revealed that the region's gross domestic product in 2008 was 19.6 times higher than it was in 1978 (Information Office of the State Council of the PRC 2009). However, this impressive growth has largely eluded the local Uyghur population, and has for the most part benefited Han migrants. Although statistically speaking the proportion of Han Chinese in Xinjiang's total population remained virtually unchanged between 1982 and 2010, hovering around 40% (Table 1), the non-permanent "floating population" employed in the energy and cotton production sector was unaccounted for (Becquelin 2004, 368-69; Clarke 2011, 155). More crucially, in-migration by Han Chinese has been accompanied by an influx of better-educated Han Chinese professionals, resulting in a staggering growth in the share of well-educated people in Xinjiang's total population (Table 1).[7] The largest ethnic group in the region notwithstanding, the Uyghurs have often found themselves reduced to a minority in the most developed areas and professional sectors of Xinjiang (Millward 2007, 304). Functioning as the "guardian of Han socioeconomic stability in the entire region" (Cliff 2009, 100), the incorporated Bingtuan (XCC) has been tasked with expanding Han Chinese influence into the Uyghur-dominated southern Xinjiang by virtue of infrastructure projects, without promoting ethnic integration in the region (Zhu and Blachford 2016, 34-38).

A Paradox: Post-9/11 Securitization Breeds Radicalism and Terrorism

The securitization of Xinjiang paradoxically fails to bring peace and security to the region. Since 1990, civil unrest and violent Uyghur nationalist movements have spread across the region, with the most serious ethnic confrontations being the Baren uprising (April 1990) and the Ghulja protest (February 1997) in the northern city of Ghulja (aka Yining).[8] The Chinese authorities have, since the turn of the twenty-first century, employed a speech act that accuses "East Turkestan terrorist groups" of instigating these incidents (Gunaratna et al. 2010, 47-88). Among them, the most notable one is the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), a shadow organization whose role, and even proof of existence, today are unclear, however.[9] The currently popular Chinese notion of "three gangs of forces" (sangu shili), namely (ethnic) separatism, (religious) extremism and terrorism, did not enter into Chinese discourse until after 9/11.[10] Although as late as September 2001, Wang Lequan, the then CCP Secretary of Xinjiang, expressed that violence and terrorist incidents did not take place very often in Xinjiang (Cliff 2009, 89), the Chinese government accused "Eastern Turkestan" organizations of having ties with Osama bin Laden and the Taliban in November 2001 (Permanent Mission … 2001) and released its first official account of terrorism in Xinjiang in January 2002 (Information Office of the State Council of the PRC 2002). While it is unclear whether ETIM and the associated Turkestan Islamic Party (TIP) were really responsible for most of the terrorist acts attributed to them by the Chinese government, their operations in the politically volatile states of Afghanistan and Pakistan are more striking and worrying to China. The militants, initially embedded into the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) in Afghanistan, were forced to move to the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) in north-western Pakistan after the American invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. Uyghur extremists have allegedly fought with the Taliban, the IMU, TIP and ETIM in Afghanistan and Pakistan for years (Gunaratna et al. 2010, 54-56; Rehman 2014; Small 2015, 75, 83).

Beijing also tends to mould the developing Uyghur ethno-nationalism in terms of Wahhabist Islam and pan-Turkism, rendering all incidents involving the Uyghurs as a security issues. What has caused Beijing's mounting concern is Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islami (the Party of Islamic Liberation). A radical Central Asian Islamic group, it calls for the formation of a single state, the Caliphate, by uniting all Muslim countries, while currently remaining committed to non-violence (Karagiannis 2006; Karagiannis and McCauley 2006; Mackerras 2012, 504). In short, whereas nationalist Uyghurs (and the Soviet Union) were viewed as a latent security threat to Chinese sovereignty before 9/11, the close connection between transnational Islamic radicalism and the Uyghurs has been perceived as a more imminent threat to China since 9/11.

Alleged Links between Uyghur Separatists and Global Jihad

The 9/11 attacks allowed China to jump on the bandwagon of the "war on terror" and to frame disgruntled Uyghurs as terrorists. After 9/11 the Chinese government has reframed the Baren and Ghulja violent incidents of the 1990s as terrorist attacks (Bovingdon 2010, 120;

Holdstock 2015, 160; Information Office of the State Council of the PRC 2002).[11] There is, however, evidence that ETIM members have been increasingly associated with Al Qaeda and global jihad, as demonstrated by the appointment of ETIM's leader, Abdul Haq, as the leader of Al Qaeda in China by Osama bin Laden in November 2008 (Gunaratna et al. 2010, 58). The most obvious examples of the growing importance of the jihadist discourse in Uyghur separatism can be found in the propaganda videos unveiled online by ETIM. In a video claiming credit for a number of major attacks, released in July 2008, Commander Seyfullah's speech was riddled with references to Islamic propaganda and terms like "blessed jihad" (Davis 2010, 184; see also Small 2015, 84). ETIM has expanded, if not shifted, its ideology from the independence of the Uyghurs to a global jihad for Islam. These ideas are not incompatible; China's growing influence in international affairs has led terrorist organizations outside of Xinjiang to fear that it will follow the path of the US in "protecting the Jews and corrupt Muslim governments" (Gunaratna et al. 2010, 3). China's use of the 9/11 attacks to accentuate its harsh policies towards the Uyghurs helped to legitimize a jihad against Beijing (Gunaratna et al. 2010, 121). As displayed below in the case study 2, terrorism is increasingly perpetuated by self-radicalized individuals who are influenced by terrorist propaganda available on the Internet.

The continuous securitization process after a twelve-year hiatus (1997-2009) can be best exemplified by two violent conflicts in recent years: the 2009 Urumqi riots and the 2014 Kunming attack. Focus is on how and why securitization has paradoxically intensified pressure on the Uyghurs to resort to increasingly violent and radical measures in their ongoing struggle against Chinese rule.

Case study 1: The July 2009 Urumqi riots

Summary of the event

On 5th July 2009, Uyghur protesters gathered peacefully at the People's Square in the region's capital, Urumqi, in response to a fatal brawl between Han and Uyghur workers in southern China's Guangdong province that left two Uyghurs dead and more than 100 injured (Wong 2014b). The initially peaceful protests soon descended into a clash between the protesters and the police (Holdstock 2015, 183-88). The final death toll stood at 184 people, including 137 Han Chinese, 46 Uyghurs and one Hui, as well as 1,600 wounded (Shan and Chen 2009, 15). Referring to the incident as a "massacre," the World Uyghur Congress (WUC) (2009) attributed the protest to the Chinese government's "inaction" after many Uyghurs workers were killed or injured in the factory violence.

Unprepared for the resurgence of violence later on 7th July, the police and Xinjiang's regional government were singled out for criticism by Han Chinese residents for failing to anticipate and prevent the second riot. They congregated in the streets of Urumqi, forming mobs seeking out Uyghurs for retribution (Foster 2009; Holdstock 2015, 191-92).

Re-building the securitization process

Chinese President, Hu Jintao, who was concurrently the chair of the CCP's Central Military Commission, had to cut short his trip to the G8 Summit in L'Aquila, Italy, to return home to manage the violence. To dominate the speech act, the Chinese government shut down international mobile phone networks in Xinjiang and blocked access to the Internet in the region for ten months (Bovingdon 2010, 171; Hogg 2010). Rebiya Kadeer, chairwoman of the diaspora-led WUC since 2006, was the primary target of Beijing's securitization move, accused of organizing the riots through instructions given by phone to her relatives and friends in Xinjiang (Bovingdon 2010, 168; Holdstock 2015, 189). It is interesting to note that the government did not mention ETIM or any other specific terrorist organizations by name in the "White Paper on Development and Progress in Xinjiang," published a few months after the riots. The government only referred broadly to "the terrorist, separatist and extremist forces" (Information Office of the State Council of the PRC 2009).

Why did Beijing target Rebiya Kadeer and the WUC? What they have in common is that they are both external to China. Portraying the threat as originating outside China fitted in with the official discourse of a "harmonious society" in which the Uyghurs and the Han would get along well with each other under the leadership of the CCP; it also refuted the counter-argument by diasporic community that the popular uprising was the result of bad governance. In this struggle between Chinese society and its external enemies, the Chinese government posed as a rampart to the threat as well as the only one able to resolve the crisis by resorting to extraordinary measures. The government securitized these events in order to put these extraordinary measures in place. Thomas Cliff argues that the Chinese government needs instability in order to justify its hard-line policies in the region. He claims that "certain government and public security institutions within Xinjiang are dependent upon the perception of instability for their livelihood" (citing in particular the Bingtuan as a military and political entity) (Cliff 2012, 86). This also fits in with Kilic Bugra Kanat's argument that "war on terror" can be used as a "diversionary strategy" in order to "deflect public attention from recurring domestic troubles, to solve the problem of legitimacy and to rally their citizens around the flag of their regime" (Kanat 2012, 1).

Pan-Turkism has also contributed to China's threat construction. The Turkish then-Prime Minister (President since 2014) Recep Tayip Erdoğan's impulsive comment on the Urumqi incident, naming it "genocide" (Babayan 2011, 19; Gu 2011, 2; Hou 2016, 143; Shichor 2015, 68), also added fuel to China's growing concern over the rise of pan-Turkism and Turkey's leadership role in the Turkish-speaking world (Gu 2011; Hou 2016; Wu et al. 2009). Turkey had historically been the centre of the Uyghur diaspora activism, offering sanctuary to Uyghur (political) refugees (Holdstock 2015, 36, 122; Shichor 2009).[12]

In November 2009, the central government launched a new Strike-Hard campaign to respond to criticism from Han Chinese that guilty Uyghurs were not being prosecuted (Blanchard 2009). As before, this type of campaign facilitated swift legal actions against the Uyghurs: collective trials were favoured over individual arrests and sentences. According to the human rights group Human Rights Watch, this led to mass disappearances of the Uyghurs across Xinjiang, with up to 1,500 people detained and nine people sentenced to death by Chinese courts (Branigan 2009; Bristow 2009; Human Rights Watch 2009).

Impact on the Han Chinese

For many Han Chinese, the main audience of the CCP-initiated securitization process, the prejudices that already existed against the Uyghurs only seemed to have been confirmed by the riots. Even though some officials warned against linking all Uyghurs to terrorists, the overall propaganda of Islamic terrorism pointed to the Uyghur ethnic identity. It is therefore not surprising that anti-Uyghur feelings spread across China, especially after reports in August 2009 of Han residents in Urumqi being stabbed with needles or syringes rumoured to have been infected with contagious diseases became widespread. Generating a sense of hysteric insecurity, this was another occasion for the Han population to take to the streets in early September 2009 to protest against the government's ineffectiveness. The demonstration of force was not only aimed at the Uyghurs, but also in the direction of the local leadership of Wang Lequan. The unrest left five people dead and 14 injured (BBC 2009; Bovingdon 2010, 169-70; Holdstock 2015, 194-99).

Wang Lequan, nicknamed "Wang Shicai" – in reference to Sheng Shicai (Holdstock 2015, 195) – had built his popularity, both locally and in Beijing, on his ruthless Strike-Hard campaigns to keep the region safe (Cliff 2012, 87). Failing to do so, his leadership lacked legitimacy and credibility. Consequently Beijing did not procrastinate in acceding to the protesters' requests, with the immediate dismissals of Li Zhi and Liu Yaohua, the party secretary and public security director of Urumqi respectively, in September 2009, followed by the removal of Wang in April 2010 (Bradsher and Yang 2009; Cliff 2012, 90; Holdstock 2015, 195-96). Wang's dismissal was therefore a way for the central government to distance itself from local policy failures. Regardless of the popularity of the dismissals, many Han blamed the government, without distinction between the local and the central, for failing to protect them. Popular support went much more towards those Han who had taken to the streets to retaliate against the Uyghurs. To placate local Han Chinese, even at the risk of worsening the already tense relations between the Han and the Uyghurs, the Xinjiang authorities arrested four Uyghurs – instead of the Han who led the September protest against Wang – for endangering public security. Custodial convictions of the Uyghurs who had participated in the July riots were handed out in October 2009 (Holdstock 2015, 196).

Transition

The 2009 riots in Urumqi were a turning point for the Han-Uyghur relationship. The subsequent Strike-Hard campaign led to an argument that "Uyghur rebels will have a difficult time mounting a large-scale violent campaign as long as China retains even minimal control of Xinjiang" (Hastings 2011, 893). An unprecedented, high-level Xinjiang Work Forum, chaired by Hu Jintao, was convened in May 2010 after the removal of Wang Lequan. It pledged to pour massive investment into the region, focusing on the most restive and less developed southern Xinjiang, as a measure to fully Sinicize the region (Holdstock 2015, 199-202, 213-14; Sautman 2012, 25-26; Szadziewski 2011). The initial consensus that the government had recovered a firm grip on the region has been defied by tragic events since 2013. Three, in particular, have attracted international attention: the Lukqun riot of June 2013, the car accident in central Beijing in October 2013, and the Kunming train station killings of March 2014 (as discussed below).[13]

Case Study 2: The March 2014 Kunming train station attack

Summary of the event

On 1st March 2014, eight masked men and women, armed with long knives and allegedly from Xinjiang, burst into Kunming railway station in Yunnan, south-western China, which was almost free from ethnic unrest, to attack the employees and commuters there, leaving 29 dead and 143 injured (Jacobs and Buckley 2014). Local officials and the Xinhua news agency framed the bloodshed as "a terrorist attack carried out by Xinjiang separatist forces" and, to maximize the effect, as "China's 9/11" (Associated Press 2014; Xinhua 2014a).

China's 9/11: the impact on the Chinese psyche

The Kunming attack shattered the Han Chinese belief that, as long as they stayed outside Xinjiang, they would remain safe (Global Times 2014). Given that Kunming lacks national political significance, the choice of this particular city made this attack even more symbolic. It gave the impression that instead of only threatening the "alien" Chinese power in Xinjiang and the country's political capital, Beijing (as in the car accident in October 2013), Uyghur unrest could penetrate anywhere in China, targeting all Han Chinese. Equating the Kunming attack to 9/11 was an attempt by the Chinese government to legitimize its Xinjiang policies, as extraordinary measures necessary to respond to an extreme threat. It was both a way to garner the international community's support and a new step in the securitization process.

A sign of the failure of securitization?

After the attack, the terrorist group ETIM released a video online featuring its leader, Abdullah Mansour, in which he expressed "support" for the assault, as well as threatening more violence to come. Not surprisingly, the Chinese authorities immediately picked up on this. The Foreign Ministry spokesman Hong Lei claimed, "It has fully exposed the terrorist nature of the

ETIM" (Tiezzi 2014). In the video, however, Mansour surprisingly did not claim responsibility for the attack (Xinhua 2014b), which leaves open the questions of why and how the attack was organized without the direct help of a terrorist group. Although the perpetrators were less likely officially part of any Islamist terrorist group, several facts pointed to a growing level of external Islamist influence on them. As pointed out by Dru Gladney, the black dress of the assailants was not "typical of Uyghurs," "their knives were not Xinjiang knives" and their flag was dark blue with Arabic inscriptions (unlike the light blue East Turkestan flag) (East by Southeast 2014; Moore 2014). These "non-Uyghur" claims were echoed by Jacob Zenn who argued that the involvement of women and the attack on a train station bore resemblance to the Beslan school siege in Russia by North Caucasus militants (Moore 2014).

As part of a historical process of securitization, the framing of the 2009 riots and the subsequent Strike-Hard campaigns merely aimed to reassure the Han Chinese of the state's determination to safeguard their safety and national security. As a result, increasing numbers of Han Chinese were encouraged to settle in the region to solidify Chinese territorial domination and to marginalize, by default, local Uyghurs from any meaningful participation in the decision-making process (Szadziewski 2011). Paradoxically it hastened a process, which had started as early as the Soviet-Afghan war of the 1980s, in which the Uyghur movement is gradually assimilated in the broader global jihad movement. The 2009 riots, one may argue, "forced the most militant Uyghur separatists into volatile neighbouring countries, such as Pakistan, where they are forging strategic alliances with, and even leading, jihadist factions affiliated with al-Qaeda and the Taliban" (Moore 2014). Therefore, by responding to the 2009 riots with an anti-terrorism campaign, we argue, the Chinese authorities augmented the terrorist risk China faced. While it successfully securitized the Uyghur unrest to the majority of Han Chinese populace, its main audience, the costs of this securitization process, as shown in the 2014 killings, outweighed the expected advantages.

Continuing Securitization post-2014

Threat construction continued after the Kunming rampage and the Chinese government went to great pains to silence the critics who expressed reservations about the Chinese securitization accounts. On 14th November 2015 the Chinese Ministry of Public Security wrote on its social media account, "On November 13, the [sic] black Friday, Paris was hit by the most serious terrorist attack in its history, with hundreds of casualties. On the other side of the planet, China's police force in Xinjiang, after hunting for 56 days, finally achieved a tremendous outcome" (cited in Mai 2015). This social media post was later deleted. Prior to that, the Chinese government had made no official reference to the incident, taking place in a coal mine in the county of Baicheng on 18th September. Ursula Gauthier (2015), a Beijing-based French correspondent for the French magazine *L'Obs*, however, argued shortly afterwards that the Chinese government merely used the Paris attacks to justify the capture of the "terrorists" responsible for the Baicheng

attack, which according to her, was only a "localized explosion of rage." With requests for an apology from her and for admission of errors in her article rejected, Beijing accused Gauthier of "pouring fuel on the fire of terrorism and the brutal killing of innocent civilians" and failing "to apologise to the Chinese people for her wrong words and it is no longer suitable for her to work in China" (cited in Phillips 2015; Forsythe 2015b; see also Global Times 2015). She was technically expelled by Beijing when her press credentials and work permit, which expired on 31st December 2015, were not renewed.

The impact of the securitization process on the Han Chinese was well demonstrated in the way they responded to Gauthier's article. According to a Chinese Global Times poll, conducted in late December 2015, an overwhelming majority (94.4%) of the 215,131 respondents supported the expulsion of Gauthier (Huanqiu shibao 2015). The result demonstrated a compellingly strong Chinese opposition to Gauthier's narrative which portrayed the Uyghurs as a "repressed people." Accepting Beijing's framing of Uyghur radicals as "terrorists," the Han Chinese have embraced the securitizing speech act, legitimizing the government's act to expel the non-Chinese Gauthier and to impose a Han-dominated order on Xinjiang.

Conclusions

Securitization theory has drawn our attention to the social and historical "processes of constructing a shared understanding of what is to be considered and collectively responded to as a threat" (Buzan et al. 1998, 26). Frontier security has been historically and collectively perceived by Chinese elites as a matter of the standard of "civilization" (Gong 1984). The more "civilized" Central Kingdom felt threatened by the presence of non-Sinicized people (the "Other") out there in the border area. Even when China was militarily superior to the nomads in the frontier region, Chinese leaders still spared no effort to ensure Chinese security by confronting them militarily. Still unwilling to be Sinicized, political dissenters in present-day Xinjiang are similarly regarded as a non-compliant group that would likely threaten the collective security of China. In the wake of 9/11, dissenting Uyghurs have been framed as "terrorists" who have allegedly established external links with Islamic jihadists in Central Asia and the Middle East.

The Kunming attack, however, demonstrated the failure of the Chinese leadership's previous attempts to eliminate the "terrorist" threat from Xinjiang. This should therefore have given Chinese senior leaders an opportunity to rethink their securitization approach to the Uyghur minority. Nevertheless, Beijing has decided to stand by its policies. Chinese leader, Xi Jinping, stated in May 2014 that "practice has proved that our party's ruling strategy in Xinjiang is correct and must be maintained in the long run" (Wong 2014a). It is echoed by Gardner Bovingdon, who writes, "However much party leaders might wish it, economic growth will not eliminate the discontent … Unfortunately, there is little evidence that China's current leadership has

contemplated serious alternatives" (Bovingdon 2014, 447). While Bovingdon does not go further to explain why the Chinese leadership does not change course, our securitization study has provided an answer. It is primarily due to path-dependence, whereby Chinese leaders have, since the eighteenth century, almost always viewed non-Sinicized Xinjiang from a militarized angle. Sino-centrism and Sinicization have been at the heart of the Chinese mode of thinking in securitizing the Chinese state. The CCP has inherited this socially constructed security ideology from the previous ruling dynasties, which all cast the indigenous people of Xinjiang and the external powers that supported them as existential threats to the Chinese state. In this social construction of security, non-Uyghurs in China proper (in Qing China) and Han Chinese (since 1912) have been the main audience of the threat articulation. Colonial Sinicization has been often employed to consolidate Chinese control over the restive region and to safeguard Chinese border security. A downside of this securitization is that it has downplayed the detrimental effects of socio-economic inequalities between the Uyghurs and the Han Chinese, and aggravated the ethnic animosity to the point that it cannot be tackled by "normal" politics but by anti-terrorist measures. The rise of pan-Turkism and the 9/11 attacks on the US acted merely as contemporary yet secondary catalysts for the socially and historically constructed securitization process in China.

Securitization has generated a self-perpetuating force whereby the more horrid impact the "terrorist" attacks have on the Han Chinese population, the easier it is for the Chinese government to securitize the issue. The securitization of the Xinjiang unrest, stressing the notion of negative security (us-against-others), not only fails to quell the unrest but quite the opposite, makes it worse. For the most extremist Uyghurs, especially those who have links with, or are inspired by, global jihadists, separation from and retaliation against the Chinese state and the Han Chinese is the only means for them to express their disapproval of China. The same logic applies to the main audience of the securitization process: the Han Chinese. The Chinese government has effectively used the speech act to create a discourse that antagonizes both ethnicities to the point where the Han Chinese not only are induced to accept the threat construction but also proactively demand punitive actions against the Uyghurs from the Chinese government. In dealing with the target audience, the securitizing move, however, has the opposite effect to that initially sought by the Chinese government. Feeling that the government failed to provide security for them, Han frustration and anger was redirected against the Chinese authorities, demanding the ousting of Wang Lequan and instigating new rounds of the Strike-Hard campaign.

To conclude, securitization has enabled the Chinese government to withstand the pressure to defuse inter-ethnic tension by taking serious steps to address the deep-rooted socioeconomic problems of the marginalization and exclusion of the Uyghurs. Securitization serves to legitimize the sweeping crackdown on the Uyghurs to pacify Han Chinese criticism. It, however, plays a part in the radicalization of Uyghur dissidents and galvanizes the radicalized Uyghurs into joining global jihadism, albeit not always formally. This paper shares with the Copenhagen School's warning that securitization must be invoked with much care. Securitization of the non-Sinicized

ethnic minority is, however, so deeply entrenched in China that few leaders can imagine alternative, "normal" strategies for managing and resolving the ethnic conflict.

Table 1. Xinjiang's population

	1964 census	1982 census	1990 census	2000 census	2010 census
Total population	7,270,100	13,081,500	15,156,900	18,459,500	21,815,800
Of which Han Chinese (% of the total)	2,321,200 (31.93%)	5,284,000 (40.39%)	5,695,400 (37.58%)	7,489,900 (40.57%)	8,829,900 (40.47%)
Of which those had college education or above (% of the total)	41,000 (0.56%)	83,700 (0.64%)	279,800 (1.85%)	946,500 (5.13%)	2,315,300 (10.61%)

Source: Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region Bureau of Statistics (2014, 80).

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[1] A frame can be defined as "a persuasive device used to fix meanings, organize experience, alert others that their interests and possibly their identities are at stake, and propose solutions to ongoing problems" (Payne 2001: 39).

[2] The issues have been studied by Barbour and Jones (2013), Clarke (2008), Gunaratna et al. (2010), Hastings (2011), Holdstock (2015), Kuo (2012), Millward (2007), Ryono and Galway (2015), Steele and Kuo (2007) and Starr (2004).

[3] Watson (2012) argues that securitization theory should be understood as a subset of framing.

[4] Zuo Zongtang and his "frontier security" advocates argued that recovering Xinjiang was essential to the protection of Mongolia, which in turn was crucial to the defence of Beijing, the capital. In contrast, Li Hongzhang, who was ruling the area surrounding Beijing, contended that Xinjiang would be 'useless' (Millward 2007, 125-26, 136).

[5] The PRC inherited the term bingtuan, which was in turn derived from tuantian (military farms or military agricultural colonies), from imperial China (Millward 1998, 50; 2007, 22, 104, 251).

[6] The Chinese Constitution forbids secession. Article 4 of it says, "… any acts that undermine the unity of the nationalities or instigate their secession are prohibited."

[7] Large-scale in-migration by Han Chinese mainly took place in the Mao period when the Bingtuan brought in millions of Chinese from the east, in particular Shanghai (Millward 2007, 252-53, 309).

[8] The riot in Baren, a township some 50 km southwest of Kashgar, is discussed in Bovingdon 2010, 123-24; Dillon 2004, 62-65; Holdstock 2015, 50-51; Millward 2007, 325-28. For accounts of the Ghulja protest, see Bovingdon 2010, 125-28; Dillon 2004, 92-109; Holdstock 2015, 111-118; Millward 2007, 331-33.

[9] In his study of ETIM, Sean Roberts (2012, 1) concludes that it "remains unclear whether a militant Uyghur organization even exists that is capable of carrying out substantial and organized acts of terrorism." His study was based on, among others, interviews with four Uyghur "terrorists" in Albania after they were released from the Guantanamo Bay in 2006. His argument is echoed by Jacob Zenn (2013, 88), who contends that "ETIM as a group name likely never existed; rather the name likely referred to Uighur militants in Afghanistan and Pakistan until the formation of the TIP [Turkestan Islamic Party] in 2006."

[10] We used "sangu shili" as a keyword to search for articles in the "China Academic Journals Full-text Database" and found that up to 9th August 2016 there were 32 articles with the earliest one appearing in 2002 and most of them (20/32) clustering in 2009, 2010 and 2015.

[11] The Ghulja incident was reclassified as a terrorist act by the East Turkestan Islamic Party of Allah whereas other sources attributed it to a spontaneous demonstration against Xinjiang's governmental restrictions on cultural practices (Clarke 2008, 279-80, 289, 293).

[12] Mehmet Emin Burğa and Isa Yusuf Alptekin, East Turkestan Republic's key surviving leaders, fled to Turkey from Xinjiang in the early 1950s. They had used Turkey as their headquarters to press for the East Turkestan cause. Turkey was critical of China in its handling of the Ghulja protests in February 1997 (Holdstock 2015, 36, 114, 122; Shichor 2009).

[13] In June 2013 police stations in the township of Lukqun in eastern Xinjiang was attacked by knife-wielding rioters. Thirty-five people were left dead in the episode. State media attributed it to terrorist attack. Four months later a sport utility vehicle exploded after crashing into a crowd of pedestrians in Tiananmen Square in central Beijing, leaving five dead and 40 wounded. The Chinese government blamed ETIM for the terrorist attack and those on the vehicle came from a Uyghur family living close to the Pakistani border (Holdstock 2015, 220-21, 223; Mullen 2013; Small 2015, 176-77).