



CHINA IN CONTEXT AND PERSPECTIVE

China's Xinjiang Work in Turkey

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The mass incarceration, political reeducation, and intensified repression of Uyghurs and other minorities in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region since 2016 has been one of the most controversial developments in the People's Republic of China (PRC) under Xi Jinping's leadership. Triggering critical scrutiny by media, academics, rights groups, governments, and international organizations, the crackdown has damaged China's national image and turned the Xinjiang crisis into a major point of friction with the democratic world. Important confrontations are being played out in Turkey, home to a sizeable Uyghur diaspora that is a source of both information about and political campaigning against Beijing's endeavors in Xinjiang. This working paper outlines some of the PRC's tactics to incapacitate Uyghurs in Turkey and to mitigate the negative impact of its Xinjiang policy on its international relations.

The Uyghur factor in Sino-Turkish relations

With its population of about 80 million Sunni Muslims, Turkey is a major regional power in the Middle East and one of the most influential Muslim-majority countries. For the PRC, Turkey is important as a trading partner and as a hub within the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) bordering with the European Union.¹ The two countries' relations are, nevertheless, complicated by the ongoing ethno-political conflict in China's Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. Also known as East Turkestan (ET), this sparsely populated, strategically located, and resource-rich borderland is home to several Muslim minorities, which have been subjected to decades of repressive policies since the 1949 takeover by the Communist Party of China (CPC). Since early 2017, the party-state has resorted to an extreme re-molding of local non-Han societies by, e.g., the detention of some 1.5 million persons in a sprawling reeducation internment system,² ubiquitous surveillance and profiling of the minority population, posting of over one million cadres and civilian workers in private homes, further restrictions on religious, language, and cultural practice, and mass propaganda campaigns.³

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¹"土耳其与'一带一路'的关系" [Turkey's relations with the Belt and Road], Ministry of Commerce of the PRC.

²Adrian Zenz, "Brainwashing, police guards and coercive internment: evidence from Chinese government documents about the nature and extent of Xinjiang's 'vocational training internment camps'", *Journal of Political Risk* 7:7, July 2019.

³For more information see, e.g., Joanne Smith Finley, "Securitization, insecurity and conflict in contemporary Xinjiang: has PRC counter-terrorism evolved into state terror?", *Central Asian Survey* 38:1, pp. 1–26, 2019; Michael Clarke, "China's Uyghur 're-education' centers and the ghosts of totalitarian past", *War on the Rocks* 25 April 2019; Darren Byler, "China's government has ordered a million citizens to occupy Uighur



It is particularly the nearly 12 million Turkic-speaking Uyghurs, whose ethnic and religious identity the CPC considers a security threat to the PRC socio-political order and who have thus been the main target of the draconian policies. As the absence of an independent nation state prompts many Uyghurs to consider Turkey a second homeland, the PRC's Xinjiang policy directly concerns Turkey's Uyghur diaspora of several ten thousand, who migrated from the PRC in several waves via various routes since 1949.⁴ Similarly to transnational Uyghur, Kazakh and other Xinjiang Muslim communities living in the Central Asian republics,⁵ the Turkey Uyghur diaspora's links to their homeland have become a vital source of information about the developments inside East Turkestan. Moreover, in Turkey, Uyghurs enjoy a relatively liberal political climate allowing for freedom of speech and publication, large-scale public demonstrations, establishing advocacy organizations, and lobbying with Turkish policy makers.⁶

Political activism by Turkey Uyghurs has been straining Turko-Chinese relations since the 1980s⁷ and is one of the major factors contributing to the current international backlash against China's repression of Xinjiang's Turkic Muslims, thus significantly damaging the PRC's national image and making the crisis a major irritant in China's relations with the democratic world. Turkey has also been a safe haven for religiously radicalized Uyghur militants and their point of entry to the Syrian battlefield, where they have aligned with ISIS and other militant groupings, some of them supported by Turkey.⁸ Soliciting Turkey's support to suppress Uyghur Islamic militancy is thus another diplomatic priority for China.⁹

The last wave of Uyghurs started arriving in the wake of the growing restrictions on Uyghur language, religious and cultural practices in late 2000s and particularly after the wide-scale crackdown following the game-changing 5 July 2009 massacre in Urumchi.¹⁰ In 2015, Turkish officials in South East Asia issued temporary travel documents to Uyghurs fleeing China illegally via the Yunnan border until this passage closed in summer 2015.¹¹ The influx of Uyghur political refugees continued until the large-scale confiscation of Uyghur passports following the appointment of Chen Quanguo 陈全国 as the regional party secretary in August 2016 and his gradual in-

homes. Here's what they think they're doing", *China File*, 24 October 2018, or Ondřej Klimeš, "Advancing 'ethnic unity' and 'de-extremization': ideational governance in Xinjiang under 'new circumstances' (2012–2017)", *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 23:3, 2018, pp. 413–426.

⁴The exact number of Uyghurs in Turkey is not known. Most informants agree on a figure around 50,000, while a senior Uyghur exile politician's recent estimate is 35,000 (Murad Sezer, "Without papers, Uyghurs fear for their future in Turkey", Reuters, 27 March 2019).

⁵Gene Bunin, "On Xinjiang, Atajurt, and Serikjan", *Art of Life in Chinese Central Asia*, 18 March 2019.

⁶Similarly to the Turkish context, the Uyghur diaspora's promotion of contentious and negative attitudes towards the Chinese party-state, its transnational connections to Xinjiang, and their potential to support the Uyghur opposition abroad have triggered the recent refocus of the CPC united front work in Saudi Arabia. Mohammed Al-Sudairi, *The Communist Party of China's United Front Work in the Gulf: The "Ethnic Minority Overseas Chinese" of Saudi Arabia as a Case Study*, King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies, March 2018, pp. 28–33.

⁷Yitzhak Shichor, *Ethno-Diplomacy: The Uyghur Hitch in Sino-Turkish Relations*, East-West Center, 2009, pp. 17–28.

⁸Jacob Zenn, "The Turkistan Islamic Party in Double-Exile: Geographic and Organizational Divisions in Uighur Jihadism", *Terrorism Monitor* 16:17, 7 September 2017, pp. 8–11.

⁹Mathieu Duchâtel, "China's foreign fighters problem", *War on the Rocks*, 25 January 2019.

¹⁰John Millward, "Introduction: Does the 2009 Urumchi violence mark a turning point?", *Central Asian Survey* 28:4, pp. 347–360, 2010.

¹¹Humeyra Pamuk, "Turkish help for Uighur refugees looms over Erdoğan visit to Beijing", Reuters, 27 July 2015.



roduction of extreme social control measures in early 2017. Arrivals largely stopped in summer 2017, when Xinjiang became a sealed open-air prison. Moreover, after the Egyptian authorities, presumably due to Chinese pressure,¹² arrested scores of Uyghurs and deported at least twelve of them to China in July 2017,¹³ up to several thousand Uyghurs previously living in Egypt also found their way to Turkey. They were followed by possibly another several thousand Uyghurs from Saudi Arabia, who allegedly fled fearing that the local authorities would follow the Egyptian example.¹⁴

The Turkey-China-Uyghur conundrum heated up on 9 February 2019, when the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) government finally reacted to mounting criticism from other Turkish parties and growing public outrage over the crisis in ET. The immediate cause was a report that the famed Uyghur musician and poet Abdurêhim Héyit had died in detention in Xinjiang,¹⁵ which, however, subsequently turned out to be false. Meanwhile, the Turkish Foreign Ministry condemned the “torture and political brainwashing in internment camps” and “eliminating the ethnic, religious and cultural identities of the Uighur Turks and other Muslim communities” in Xinjiang as a “great shame for humanity.”¹⁶ This was the first reaction by a Muslim-majority country to the Xinjiang crisis and also Turkey’s first such strongly-worded rebuke since the July 2009 massacre in Urumchi, when the then prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan called the bloodshed “practically genocide.”¹⁷ This year’s statement was followed by AKP’s criticism at a press conference in Ankara on 11 February 2019¹⁸ and by Turkey’s foreign minister at the UN Human Rights Council on 25 February 2019.¹⁹

The statements unsettled Turkey’s courting of China in recent years,²⁰ which coincides with the country’s strategic rapprochement with Russia.²¹ China retaliated by issuing a security warning to its citizens travelling to Turkey,²² by closing down its consulate in Izmir,²³ and by arresting four Turkish businessmen in China on tax eva-

¹²Mohamed Mostafa and Mohamed Nagi, *They Are Not Welcome. Report on the Uyghur Crisis in Egypt*, Egyptian Commission for Rights and Freedoms and Association for Freedom of Thought and Expression, 2017, pp. 6–7.

¹³Nour Youssef, “Egyptian police detain Uighurs and deport them to China”, *The New York Times*, 6 July 2017.

¹⁴Unconfirmed figures. Several Uyghur informants in Istanbul unanimously stated the number of refugees from Egypt to be around five to six thousand, and from Saudi Arabia around two to three thousand. Interviews with informants, Istanbul, May 2019.

¹⁵Micha’el Tanchum, “Turkey’s strong rebuke of China’s Uighur policy reveals inherent limit of Sino-Turkish cooperation”, *The Turkey Analyst*, 20 February 2019.

¹⁶Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Turkish and English version), 9 February 2019

¹⁷“Başbakan: Çin’de olanlar ‘adeta soykırım’” [Prime minister: what happened in China is practically genocide], *Hürriyet*, 10 July 2009.

¹⁸“Son dakika: Çeli’ten önemli açıklama: ‘Kaşıkçı cinayetinde...’” [Last minute: Çelik’s important statement: in the Kaşıkçı crime...], *Hürriyet*, 11 February 2019.

¹⁹“Turkey, High-Level Segment – 2nd Meeting, 40th Regular Session Human Rights Council”, UN Web TV, 25 February 2019.

²⁰Shannon Tiezzi, “Why is Turkey breaking its silence on China’s Uyghurs?”, *The Diplomat*, 12 February 2019.

²¹Micha’el Tanchum, “Turkey’s purchase and the path to a post-American alliance architecture”, *The Turkey Analyst*, 22 April 2019.

²²“我驻土耳其大使馆再次提醒中国公民: 注意人身财产安全” [Chinese embassy in Turkey reminds Chinese citizens again: pay attention to personal and property safety], *Guanchazhe 观察者*, 11 February 2019.

²³“中国政府决定暂时关闭中国驻伊兹密尔总领馆” [Chinese government decides to temporarily close China consulate general in Izmir], PRC Embassy in Ankara, 26 February 2019.



sion charges.²⁴ Subsequently, Turkey did not attend the second BRI forum in Beijing in late April 2019, despite having taken part in the first summit in May 2017.²⁵

On the other hand, Turkey has not extended substantial political support to the East Turkestan cause since the mid-1990s.²⁶ The Turkish president did not publicly comment on the recent escalation of the repression of ET's Turkic Muslims, nor did Turkey raise the issue during the Organization of Islamic Countries' (OIC) summit in Abu Dhabi in March 2019, which, on the contrary, commended China for "providing care to its Muslim citizens."²⁷ Shortly before, Saudi crown prince Muhammed bin Salman had stated support for China's "counter-terrorism and anti-extremism measures" during his visit to Beijing on 22 February 2019.²⁸ Turkey's will to prioritize closer ties with China over involvement in the ET crisis was sealed during Erdoğan's visit to Beijing on 2 July 2019, when he made it clear that he would not let the Uyghur issue compromise ties with China.²⁹ Likewise, Turkey signed neither the letter by the UN ambassadors of 22 countries condemning³⁰ nor the counter-letter by 50 ambassadors commending³¹ China's Xinjiang policy. As in the past,³² Turkey's position is, therefore, currently best characterized as the AKP's balancing act: courting China's trade and tourism while symbolically tolerating its Uyghur population.

Propaganda and united front work

Along with pro-democracy, Taiwan, Tibet, and Falungong campaigners, the "Xinjiang work" (涉疆工作) has been among the priorities of the CPC's political influence operations abroad even before Beijing's extremification of its Xinjiang policy through Chen Quanguo since August 2016.³³ In general, the PRC's ethnic propaganda abroad seeks to portray the state of ethnic affairs in a positive light and to isolate minority leaders and movements that might threaten the regime's political stability.³⁴ China remained silent for more than a year after the mass incarceration and political reeducation of Xinjiang minorities first caught international attention in September 2017.³⁵ Launching a propaganda campaign only prior to the United Nations' Universal Periodic Review in November 2018, the CPC initially denied the existence of the reedu-

²⁴Burak Coşan, "Türk mermercilere Çin'de gözaltı" [Turkish marble traders detained in China], *Hürriyet*, 10 March 2019.

²⁵Lili Kuo, "Belt and Road forum: China's 'project of the century' hits tough times", *The Guardian*, 25 April 2019.

²⁶Shichor, *op. cit.*, pp. 28–36.

²⁷*Resolutions on Muslim communities and Muslim minorities in the non-OIC member states*, Organization of Islamic Countries, 1–2 March 2019.

²⁸Josie Ensor, "Saudi crown prince defends China's right to put Uighur Muslims in concentration camps", *The Telegraph*, 22 February 2019.

²⁹"习近平同土耳其总统举行会谈" [Xi Jinping talks with Turkish president], *CCTV*, 2 July 2019.

³⁰Catherine Putz, "Which countries are for or against China's Xinjiang policies?", *The Diplomat*, 15 July 2019.

³¹Bai Yunyi 白云怡 and Xie Wenting 谢文婷, "再添 13 国! 50 国大使联名支持中国涉疆立场, 多国讲述联署原因" [Add thirteen more countries! Fifty countries' ambassadors jointly support China's stance on Xinjiang, many countries reveal the reasons for signing], *Global Times*, 27 July 2019.

³²Hay Eytan Cohen Yanarocak, "Turkey and China: merging realpolitik with idealism", *The Turkey Analyst* 8:15, 2015.

³³The CPC terms these groupings the "five poisons" (五毒) and considers them the top political security threats for the regime stability. James To, "Beijing's policies for managing Han and ethnic-minority Chinese communities abroad", *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 41:4, 2012, pp. 192–194.

³⁴Anne-Marie Brady, "We are all a part of the same family": China's ethnic propaganda", *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 41:4, 2012, pp. 159–181.

³⁵"China: free Xinjiang 'political education' detainees", Human Rights Watch, 10 September 2017.



cation camps altogether and subsequently termed them “education training centers” (教育培训中心).³⁶

In propaganda aimed at Turkish constituencies, the PRC first makes use of its own Turkish-language media outlets. These are, for instance, the Turkish version of China Radio International (CRI) with its website³⁷ and a YouTube channel called *Beijing Time (Beijing Saati)*³⁸ or the Turkish version of Xinjiang’s main state media outlet, *Tian-shanwang*.³⁹ Other efficient tools are the Turkish-language versions of the websites of the PRC embassy in Ankara and consulate in Istanbul. These PRC channels portray the situation in Xinjiang as a campaign against religious extremism, radicalism, and terrorism. PRC diplomats also communicate directly with Turkish media. For instance, China’s consul in Istanbul Cui Wei 崔巍 has explained in Turkish the PRC’s position on Xinjiang to Turkish media, specifically stating that “schools” (*okul*) have been established in Xinjiang in order to counter religious radicalism, which provide instruction in language, law, and vocational skills.⁴⁰

The PRC embassy and consulates also perform public diplomacy. For instance, in May 2019 the Istanbul consulate awarded scholarships to Turkish students studying Chinese and to PRC students studying in Turkey.⁴¹ An unknown proportion of the latter category are Uyghur, who in general tend not to discuss their contacts with PRC institutions with other Uyghurs. During Ramadan in May 2019, both the PRC Ankara embassy and Istanbul consulate hosted communal fast-breaking meals (*iftar*) for Turkish and Uyghur guests.⁴² It is worth noting that in Xinjiang, observing Ramadan and associating with other persons is currently considered an illegal religious activity and a basis for lengthy prison sentences on charges of religious extremism. China performs such activities in Islamic countries in order to construct a national image as a country tolerant and supportive of its minority population practicing Islam. Other PRC public diplomacy actors in Turkey are the four Confucius Institutes established since 2006.⁴³

China’s interests are also channeled through friendship associations. One is the Turkish Chinese Friendship Foundation (土耳其中国友谊基金会; *Türk Çin Dostluk Vakfı*) with primarily Turkish membership.⁴⁴ Another is the Turkish Uyghur Industry and Commerce Association (土耳其维吾尔工商协会) established in 2010 and involving some 100 businesses and 200 overseas students, both Han Chinese and Uyghur. Its founder Sabir Bughda was a non-voting delegate to the 2015 national session of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (中国人民政治协商会议),⁴⁵ and keeps close ties with PRC diplomats in Turkey, which makes him a figure unpop-

³⁶“China Review – 31st Session of Universal Periodic Review”, UN Web TV, 6 November 2018.

³⁷*China Radio International Online Türkçe*.

³⁸*Beijing Saati, CRI Türk*

³⁹*Tanrıdağ*.

⁴⁰“Çin İstanbul başkonsolosu: cami yıkıyoruz, 100’e yakın tarihi cami de restore ediyor” [China’s Consul General in Istanbul: we do not destroy mosques, nearly 100 historical mosques are being restored], *Demirören Haber Ajansı*, 2019.

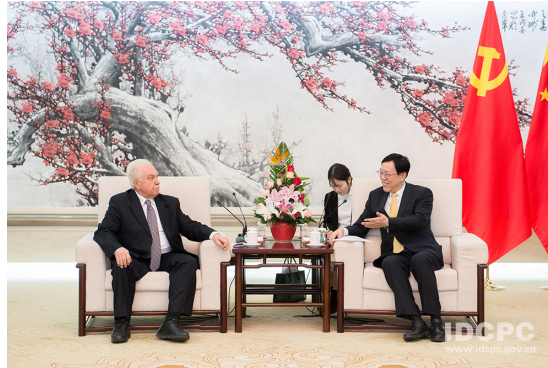
⁴¹“中国驻伊斯坦布尔总领馆向土中大学生颁发奖学金” [The PRC Consulate General in Istanbul awards scholarships to university students], Xinhua, 10 May 2019.

⁴²Interviews with informants, Istanbul and Ankara, May and June 2019.

⁴³孔子学院总部 – 国家汉办 [Confucius Institute Headquarters – Hanban], 2019.

⁴⁴*Turkish Chinese Friendship Foundation*.

⁴⁵“一次列席，一生荣誉：解密政协会议海外列席组” [Being a non-voting delegate once honors one for life: the overseas non-voting delegates in the spotlight], Xinhua, 3 March 2015.



CCP International Liaison Department Deputy Director Li Jun 李军 receives Patriotic Party President Doğu Perinçek. Beijing, February 2019.⁵¹

ular with a significant proportion of the Uyghurs in Turkey.⁴⁶ In general, China's public diplomacy targets businesspeople, students, and other constituencies that can function as a bridge between the two countries. According to one source, there are nearly 2000 PRC students, 1000 companies, and 10000 PRC passport holders operating in Turkey.⁴⁷ As Uyghurs tend not to disclose their contacts with PRC actors to other Uyghurs, it is difficult to assess the number of Uyghurs coopted by these groupings.

The most significant among pro-China voices in Turkey is *Aydınlık*, a media outlet of the Patriotic Party (*Vatan Partisi*, 爱国党), a nationalist-leftist force with no representatives in Turkey's parliament after the last general election in 2018. The party has been a long-term ally of the PRC in Turkey, with *Aydınlık* frequently replicating the PRC's official discourse on the Xinjiang issue. During his visit to Beijing in February, the Patriotic Party's President Doğu Perinçek met with Li Jun 李军, a deputy director of the CPC Central Committee's International Liaison Department (ILD) with extensive experience in united front work targeting foreign political figures.⁴⁸ At the meeting, Perinçek praised the PRC's ethnic and social policies and criticized "separatism".⁴⁹ The Patriotic Party also assists in united front activities, as it did, for instance, by organizing a meeting of important Turkish entrepreneurs interested in business with China in May 2019.⁵⁰

⁴⁶"两会上的维族面孔：在土耳其经商被疆独分子骂" [The Uyghur face of the Two Sessions: a merchant in Turkey insulted by Xinjiang separatists], *Guanchazhe 观察者*, 13 March 2015; Erkin Tarim, "Xitay konsuli Chyen Poning sabir bughdani qobul qilishni Uyghurlar arisida ghulghula payda qildi" [Chinese consul Qian Bo's reception of Sabir Bughda sparks outrage among Uyghurs], *Radio Free Asia*, 18 November 2016.

⁴⁷Ali Merthan Dündar, "From cultural diversity to cultural affinity: Turkey as a mediator between East and West", *Journal of East Asian Studies in Turkey* 2:3, 2019, p. 60.

⁴⁸For Li Jun's past united front work in the Czech Republic, see Martin Hála, "Tichý host na činském gala" [A silent guest at the Chinese gala], *Sinopsis*, 21 November 2016. For more on the ILD's united front work with foreign political allies and a summary of Li Jun's presence, see Martin Hála and Jichang Lulu, "A new Comintern for the New Era: The CCP International Department from Bucharest to Reykjavik", *Sinopsis*, 16 August 2018.

⁴⁹"李军会见土耳其爱国党干部考察团" [Li Jun meets Patriotic Party's delegation], CPC Central Committee's International Liaison Department, 22 February 2019; "Çin'den Perinçek'e teşekkür: bölücülüğe karşı tutum Türk-Çin ilişkilerinin temeli!" [China thanks Perinçek: opposition to separatism is the basis of Turko-Chinese relations!], *Aydınlık*, 22 February 2019.

⁵⁰"Çin Türkiye zirvesinde ilginç sözler" [Interesting remarks at China-Turkey summit], Oda TV, 2019.

⁵¹Image source: ILD, *op. cit.*



Among Turkish media, Yön Radyo has been previously covered as a model case of the CPC outsourcing its propaganda to local actors.⁵² Other examples are ODA TV and Ulusal TV, both rather marginal media, which, however, cover the Xinjiang issue in agreement with China's official position. The PRC has also managed to disseminate its version of reality through Turkish journalists taken on official press visits to Xinjiang, for instance when Turkish ATV's Erdal Kuruçay praised China's policies in an interview with *CRI Türk* during a press tour in January 2019.⁵³ As the Turkish foreign ministry announced at the end of July 2019 that it would send an observation team to Xinjiang to examine the Uyghurs' situation,⁵⁴ the PRC will likely be able to insert more of its narrative into the Turkish public debate in near future.

In general, China's involvement in Turkish media is growing, as is that of Russia, which is a result of Turkey's emerging "alternative alliance" with the two countries⁵⁵ at the expense of its relationship with the US. Coverage of the Xinjiang issue in Turkey shows synergies between the PRC's and Russia's proxies. One instance are the articles and statements of Erkin Öncan, an editor of the Turkish version of *Sputnik News* and also a contributor to *Global Times*⁵⁶ who is a vocal advocate of China's position in Xinjiang.⁵⁷ Similarly, the above-mentioned *Aydınlık* also features rich pro-Russian content, while Turkey's involvement in the Xinjiang issue frequently receives the attention of Russia's proxies outside Turkey.⁵⁸

Legal instruments

China also relies on legal mechanisms to incapacitate the Uyghur diaspora and subvert its activities. An extradition treaty was signed between Turkey and China at the first BRI forum on 13 May 2017,⁵⁹ which stipulates, e.g., that the extradition can be refused when the party receiving the request considers the offense for which extradition is requested a political offense, or when it has granted asylum to the person sought, when it believes that the extradition request has been made for the purpose of prosecuting or punishing the person sought on account of race, sex, religion, nationality or political opinion, or that the person's position in judicial proceedings may be prejudiced for any of those reasons.⁶⁰ Currently, a draft bill to ratify the treaty awaits approval by the Turkish parliament.⁶¹

⁵²Jichang Lulu, "China's state media and the outsourcing of soft power", CPI, 15 July 2015.

⁵³"İpek Yolu heyeti, Xinjiang'lı din görevlileriyle bir araya geldi" [Silk Road delegation meets with Xinjiang religious officials], *China Radio International Online Türkçe*, 15 January 2019.

⁵⁴"Turkey to send observation team to China's Xinjiang for Uighur Turks", Reuters, 30 July 2019.

⁵⁵Fatih Sadırlı, "Türk medyasında Çin örgütlenmesi" [Chinese organizations in Turkish media], *Gerçek Hayat*, 5 March 2018.

⁵⁶Enkin Öncan, "False claims", *Global Times*, 10 January 2019.

⁵⁷Xie Wenting 谢文婷 and Bai Yunyi 白云怡, "The untold truth about Xinjiang", *Global Times*, 20 March 2019.

⁵⁸Andrew Korybko, "The US Won't End Its Discredited Fake News Campaign About The Uighur", *Oriental Review*, 2 April 2019.

⁵⁹"Dışişleri Bakanı Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu'nun Sayın Cumhurbaşkanımıza refakatle Çin Halk Cumhuriyeti'ni ziyareti, 12-15 Mayıs 2017" [Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu accompanied President Erdoğan during his visit to People's Republic of China, 12-15 May 2017], Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Turkey.

⁶⁰*Türkiye Cumhuriyeti ile Çin Halk Cumhuriyeti Arasında Suçluların İadesi Andlaşması / Treaty on Extradition between the Republic of Turkey and the People's Republic of China / 土耳其共和国和中华人民共和国引渡条约*, 13 May 2017.

⁶¹"Kanun Teklifi Bilgileri (2/1798)" [Information on Draft Law (2/1798)], Grand National Assembly of Turkey, accessed 11 August 2019; "条約与协定汇总 (截至 2018 年 10 月)" [Summary of treaties and



Nevertheless, the PRC has been successful in harrasing the Uyghur community through extradition requests, which oblige Turkish security organs to detain them and examine the individual according to China's accusations. In some cases, China's extradition requests target political figures, such as the revered leader Abduqadir Yapchan, who was freed in early May 2019 after repeated detentions on China's request.⁶² Another case, which makes less political sense, was the detention of a Uyghur restaurateur whose business near the PRC's Istanbul consulate is regularly frequented by Chinese officials and who is married to a Han woman.⁶³

In an interview with the author, a Uyghur man related that he had been detained for almost thirteen months between October 2017 and November 2018 and that the Turkish authorities explained to him that this was an action upon an extradition request by China. He has not been issued any documents that could prove these claims. During his detention, he had been transferred to a deportation center in Erzurum. He stated that there were scores of other Uyghurs held there with him.⁶⁴ A Uyghur student and a poet said he was detained for four days between April 28 and May 1, 2019. During his detention, he was repeatedly asked whether he was involved in anti-Chinese activities, whether he had organized these on social media or whether he had any links to ISIS in Iraq and Syria, all of which he denied. These questions led him to think that the detention had happened upon China's request.⁶⁵ Another Uyghur intellectual was detained for two months in the fall of 2018 and for a further two months in the spring of 2019.⁶⁶

Coercion by security forces

The PRC authorities also target Uyghurs using direct psychological pressure tactics. Previous studies⁶⁷ and reporting⁶⁸ have covered the PRC's security organs' extensive monitoring, harassment, and intimidation of the Uyghur diaspora all over the world. These PRC incapacitation efforts often benefit from the fact that the party-state security apparatus exerts strict control over the Uyghur diaspora's relatives and friends in Xinjiang. The "indirect strategy," whereby actor A exploits actor B's fear of actor A's use of force against an uninvolved actor C to whom actor B is emotionally attached, is thus an example of the "indirect strategy" which defines terrorism and terrorist acts.⁶⁹

Multiple Uyghur informants in Turkey⁷⁰ stated that they had been contacted over the phone by security personnel who were at the moment present in their homes

agreements (as of October 2018)], Guangdong Province People's Procuratorate, 12 December 2018; "2018年中国对外缔结条约概况" [External treaties concluded by China in 2018], Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, 29 April 2019.

⁶²Abdullah Bozkurt, "Abdulkadir Yapuqan, China's most wanted Uyghur, freed in Turkey", *Nordic Monitor*, May 2019.

⁶³"Uyghur restaurateur detained in Turkey", *South China Morning Post*, 5 February 2019.

⁶⁴Informant A, Istanbul, May 2019.

⁶⁵Informant B, Istanbul, May 2019.

⁶⁶Informant C, Istanbul, May 2019.

⁶⁷*The Fifth Poison*, Uyghur Human Rights Project, 2019.

⁶⁸See, for instance, William Yang, "How China intimidates Uyghurs abroad by threatening their families", *DW*, 11 July 2019; Rosie Perper, "China appears to be compiling a massive database of its Muslim citizens abroad to keep close tabs on them", *Business Insider*, 16 August 2018; Megha Rajagopalan, "They thought they'd left the surveillance state behind. They were wrong", *Buzzfeed*, 9 July 2018.

⁶⁹Anne Schwenkenbecher, *Terrorism: a philosophical enquiry*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, p. 38.

⁷⁰Interviews with informants, Istanbul and Ankara, May and June 2019.



bullying their relatives. This tactic serves firstly the purpose of making it obvious that the family is effectively held hostage by the authorities, and secondly it prevents the target from ignoring the call, since he or she sees it comes from home. In 2016 a Uyghur man was persuaded to return home from Istanbul by his father over the telephone. The father had been pressured into making these calls by local police, who threatened to imprison him in case his son did not come home. After the son's return, both him and the father were sent to prison.⁷¹

The practice of blackmailing a Uyghur person of interest abroad by intimidating his or her relatives in East Turkestan is sometimes combined with the security forces pressuring the target to supply specific information or to work for them on a permanent basis. Even though they do not show the use of this indirect strategy, several previously uncovered cases of Chinese espionage among Uyghur refugees indicate the issue's high priority for the PRC authorities. In 2009 in Sweden, a Uyghur man called Babur Mekhsut, who had come to Sweden as a political refugee in 1990s and had since become well connected with the highest echelons of politically active circles among the Uyghur diaspora, was sentenced for supplying information about health, travels, asylum applications, and political involvement of Uyghurs in Sweden, Norway, Germany, and the US to two PRC agents between January 2008 and June 2009, posing as a diplomat and a journalist.⁷² Similar espionage cases from among the politically highly active Uyghur community in Germany were uncovered in 2007 and in 2009, while the PRC organs' efforts to monitor the activities of political exiles were observed in the Netherlands and Australia, which host politically active Uyghur communities.⁷³

Due to the growing political activity of the Uyghur diaspora following the intensification of the Xinjiang crisis in 2017, the scope of the PRC's efforts to penetrate the overseas Uyghur community is likely growing as well. The assumption that refugee espionage is a growing priority for the CPC would be corroborated by the fact that in June 2018, a Tibetan man was sentenced to 22 months in Sweden for spying on the Tibetan refugees on behalf of the PRC's Ministry of State Security.⁷⁴ Within the Uyghur diaspora, there is a widely shared belief that many individuals are spying on behalf of the PRC. In general, the motivations for spying in Turkey are firstly financial, as opportunities to find work are limited. Second, some individuals are driven to cooperate because they do not have proper documents, which prevents them from finding legal work, even poorly paid. Thirdly, many people are coerced into collaboration by the indirect strategy described above, consisting of blackmailing the target by taking hostage their relatives in East Turkestan.

In a rare publicized case, a Uyghur man confessed that he had spied within the Uyghur diaspora in several countries, including Turkey.⁷⁵ In an interview with the author, a Uyghur man described how during six months of his detention he was trained by the

⁷¹“Xitay hökümeti Istanbuldin chaqirtip élip ketken bir qisim Uyghurlarning qamap qoyulghanliqi ashkara boldi” [Uyghurs recalled by China's government from Istanbul imprisoned], Radio Free Asia, 27 May 2019.

⁷²*The Fifth Poison*, pp. 8–9.

⁷³Ibid., pp. 10–13.

⁷⁴Jichang Lulu, “Confined discourse management and the PRC's localised interactions in the Nordics”, Sinopsis, 22 October 2018.

⁷⁵Shöhret Hoshur, “Xitayning sabiq alahide khadimi Yüsüpjan: ‘Afghanistandiki mujahidlar arisida 5 ay turdum, Uyghurlar bilen uchrishalmidim’” [Former Chinese special agent Yüsüpjan: ‘I lived among Afghanistan's jihadists for five months, was unable to meet Uyghurs’]. *Radio Free Asia*, 20 February 2019.



security apparatus and then sent with an assignment to ultimately spy on his father, who is a high-ranking figure in the political circles of the diaspora in Germany.⁷⁶ A Uyghur woman described several attempts by China's security forces to pressure her into spying.⁷⁷ A Uyghur man stated that he had been repeatedly pressured into cooperation by security forces in 2016, when he received multiple phone calls in which police authorities tried to pressure him into spying by subjecting his two detained brothers to beatings and by threatening to smear him as a spy to the Uyghur community.⁷⁸ Another man stated that the security authorities pressured him by sending him pictures of his children over WeChat.⁷⁹ It is often not clear from their testimonies whether the informants were targeted by the Public Security (公安) or State Security (国安) apparatus.

Conclusions

As the Xinjiang crisis continues to create significant problems in China's domestic and international affairs, it is more than likely that the PRC's propaganda, cooptation, legal, and psychological aspects of Xinjiang-related work illustrated above will remain in operation, perhaps intensifying and being supplemented by other strategies. China's future efforts will undoubtedly continue to contribute to the difficult situation of the Uyghurs in Turkey, who are traumatized enough by their problematic residential status, health, accommodation, education, and safety.⁸⁰ The most serious problem by far is the residence issue. Although Turkish diplomats have extended covert assistance to the transfer of Uyghurs from South-East Asia to Turkey and domestic authorities have tolerated Uyghurs' residence in the country, overall Turkey has offered limited support to Uyghurs in terms of granting asylum, residence, and citizenship to Uyghur immigrants. Large numbers of Uyghurs thus remain in a legal vacuum after their Chinese passports expire, or after they arrive in Turkey on temporary documents or illegally.⁸¹ In this situation, they permanently find themselves on the brink of repatriation⁸² and subsequent incarceration in China, because travel to Turkey is considered ideologically problematic by the PRC authorities.⁸³

Another factor worsening the Uyghurs' situation in Turkey is the Erdoğan government's courtship of China. The trend is also likely to continue, firstly due to the AKP's increasingly troubled political position, reflected, e.g., in the party's loss of Istanbul's mayoral post in last June re-run of the March elections.⁸⁴ Turkey's ongoing geopolit-

⁷⁶Informant G, Istanbul, May and June 2019.

⁷⁷Informant E, Istanbul, May 2019.

⁷⁸Informant D, Istanbul, May 2019.

⁷⁹Informant F, Istanbul, May 2019.

⁸⁰Abdürreşit Celil Karluk, "Uyghur Refugees Living in Turkey and Their Problems", in A. Merthan Düandar, ed., *Exchange of Experiences for the Future: Japanese and Turkish Humanitarian Aid and Support Activities in Conflict Zones*, Ankara Üniversitesi, 2018, pp. 86–97.

⁸¹This situation is similar to the status of the "Turkestani" community in Saudi Arabia, to which ethnic Uyghurs belong. Despite their contribution to the Saudi polity and long-term residence, up to 8000 Turkestanis do not hold Saudi citizenship and instead possess the status of a "permanent resident", which grants them some of the privileges of citizens (e.g., it prevents them from deportation) while depriving them of others (such as travel or eligibility for scholarships). Recently Saudi Arabia has been reviewing these privileges with an inclination to cancel them (Al-Sudairi, *op. cit.*, pp. 18–19).

⁸²Ragıp Soylu and Areeb Ullah, "Turkey says Uighur man threatened with deportation will not be expelled", *Middle East Eye*, 29 July 2019.

⁸³"Eradicating Ideological Viruses": China's Campaign of Repression against Xinjiang's Muslims, Human Rights Watch, 2018, p. 4.

⁸⁴"Istanbul election rerun: opposition candidate wins key mayoral race", *DW*, 23 June 2019.



ical divergence from the West and rapprochement with Russia, exemplified by the purchase of the Russian S 400 missile system at the cost of being excluded from the F-35 program by the US,⁸⁵ might be another factor driving the pro-PRC orientation.

Finally, multiple Turkish entities are likely to be increasingly responsive to China's offers of cooperation on trade, investment or tourism due to the worsening condition of the Turkish economy. The recent overruling by the AKP, aided by the abstention of its ostensibly pro-Uyghur coalition partner, the Nationalist Movement Party (*Milletçi Hareket Partisi*, MHP), of the proposal by the opposition Good Party (*İyi Parti*) of a parliamentary inquiry into China's repression of the Uyghurs⁸⁶ indicates that, in the near future, the Erdoğan administration is unlikely to change its lukewarm position on the plight of its Turkic brethren. On the contrary, it is possible that, due to China's lobbying, multiple Turkish political entities will be susceptible to adopting specific measures with negative impact on the Uyghur community, such as the deportation of Uyghurs, laxness in processing Uyghur residence permit applications, curbs on the activities of East Turkestani organizations, suppression of negative media reporting about China, or tolerance for China's harassment of the diaspora. The Xinjiang issue will, therefore, be a litmus test of the extent to which Turkey is willing to conform to the PRC's political interests. The continuation of the uncertain status quo, let alone political trade-offs of Uyghur interests between Turkey and China, will certainly inflict further trauma on the Uyghur diaspora. Their situation in Turkey should, therefore, be closely followed by the international community.

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⁸⁵“Turkey receives first shipment of Russian S-400s”, *Hürriyet Daily News*, 12 July 2019.

⁸⁶“Turkey's ruling party votes down inquiry into China's repression on Uyghurs”, *Ahval News*, 21 June 2019.

[‡]This article was updated on August 13 from an earlier version that mistakenly stated that the OIC summit had been held in Doha. The author is grateful to Mohammed Al-Sudairi for pointing out this mistake.