



Understanding and responding to China's brutal Xinjiang campaign

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The world is witnessing a modern-day nightmare in Xinjiang, China. Estimates vary, but by some counts over 2 million Uyghurs, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, and other Muslims are detained in "vocational skill education training centers," the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) Orwellian moniker for reeducation camps. The Party justifies these facilities on deradicalization grounds and asserts that Islamic extremists must be rehabilitated ideologically.

In actuality, Muslims are the victims of terror in these camps. They live in conditions that are difficult to fathom. Public rapes and medical experiments are common, and ideological indoctrination infuses life from sunrise to sunset. The scope of the brutality is breathtaking, and is reminiscent of some of the worst moments of the 20th century.

Chen Quanguo, the party boss of Xinjiang, ominously ordered in 2017 to "round up everyone who should be rounded up." A recently leaked internal CCP document, "Bulletin No. 2," reveals that Chinese authorities expanded this order to Chinese Uyghurs living abroad. The bulletin suggests that expat Uyghurs suspected of extremist motivations should be arrested "the moment they cross the border" and "be placed into concentrated education and training for examination."

But how should the United States respond? While authoritarian regimes often do oppress their own people from a position of strength, gross human rights violations can also signal state weakness. Looking past the nightmare in Xinjiang reveals three exposed flanks of the Party: moral, financial, and strategic. To Washington's credit, it has exploited the first two openings exceedingly well.

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has accused the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) of playing God. "When the state rules absolutely, it demands its citizens worship government, not God," Pompeo asserted last year. "That's why China has put more than one million Uyghur Muslims... in internment camps." The House of Representatives has backed up this diplomacy by passing legislation that lays the groundwork for targeted financial sanctions against CCP officials.

The U.S. is also taking steps to ensure it is not financially complicit in enabling these atrocities. Sen. Chuck Grassley (R-Iowa) is investigating the World Bank after learning that the institution used American taxpayer contributions to fund vocational centers in Xinjiang, and has introduced legislation to ensure the World Bank does not repeat this failure in oversight. Likewise, Sens. Ted Cruz (R-Texas) and Richard Blumenthal (D-Conn.) put forth a policy proposal earlier this year recommending that any U.S. company with a business contract in Xinjiang must disclose this association in its filings with the Securities & Exchange Commission. Rep. James McGovern (D-Mass.) and Sen. Marco Rubio (R-Fla.) are also pushing the Trump administration to block imports of textiles produced by forced labor in the reeducation camps.

Much work, however, is left to be done in the third bucket. Competing with the CCP will require innovative tactics that strike at China's strategic weaknesses. Here, Xinjiang represents more than a hotbed of horror; it is also a vulnerability for America to exploit.

It is impossible to understand the terror in China's westernmost territory without accounting for Xi Jinping's One Belt, One Road (OBOR) initiative. OBOR is far more than discrete infrastructure and energy investments throughout Eurasia; it is the Party's concept of global hegemony. Xi is seeking to reorient global economics away from Washington and toward Beijing. Each discrete OBOR project is part of a larger strategic gambit to displace America as the key economic power in that geographic region.

Yet, in order for the party to succeed in this effort in Eurasia, OBOR's most critical market, it must establish and secure land routes through Xinjiang. And that, in turn, mandates that Xinjiang and its inhabitants remain docile.

Here, Chinese authorities face a problem. "Xinjiang," or "new land," was incorporated into the Middle Kingdom comparatively recently, in the late 1800s, under China's final dynasty, the Qing. Before then, nomads and tribes had populated the region, which was a vital outpost on the Silk Road of antiquity. Mao Zedong ensured the CCP did not lose Xinjiang in his 1949 revolution, but maintaining dominance over a people who desire independence has required much bloodshed. Today, Xinjiang's restive nature has become a key challenge for the CCP, which has harnessed its deradicalization programs as instruments of pacification in a larger effort to remake Xinjiang in its own image for commercial purposes as well as ideological ones.

Policymakers would do well to ponder the implications.

Because Xinjiang represents a vital hub in China's larger OBOR framework, the CCP is distinctly vulnerable to pressure in this area. Congress should use the opening not only to target a subset of goods originating in Xinjiang, but to sanction commerce passing through the region. This move would ratchet up the costs to Beijing of its domestic policies, and in the process the United States can take a stand against the OBOR — and in support of millions of Chinese citizens now living in terror.

NOTE: The post has been updated from the original to correct the date that Xinjiang was incorporated into the Middle Kingdom.

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