



Confronting China's Atrocities in Xinjiang

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Every week, it seems, brings fresh news of China's human rights abuses against its Muslim minority. The latest devastating disclosure comes courtesy of German researcher Adrian Zenz, who has meticulously documented a coordinated campaign by Chinese authorities to demographically control the Uyghur Muslim population of the western Chinese region of Xinjiang through forced sterilizations, abortions and "coercive family planning."

The results are nothing short of ruinous for Uyghur identity within the People's Republic of China (PRC)—and for the survival of the Uyghurs themselves. Although they account for just two percent of China's total population, Uyghurs made up 80 percent of all intrauterine contraceptive device procedures within China in 2018. Birth rates in Xinjiang have plummeted, accordingly. According to Dr. Zenz, the birth rate in the region saw a staggering decline of nearly 24 percent last year alone. And in Kashgar and Hotan, two major cities in Xinjiang, a mere three percent of women of childbearing age actually gave birth. It's no wonder that some experts have termed what is now happening in Xinjiang a form of "demographic genocide."

But this campaign of coercive sterilization is only the latest in a long list of official atrocities. Since it began nearly four years ago, the PRC's campaign to pacify its majority-Muslim province of Xinjiang (which authorities in Beijing see as being particularly susceptible to radicalization) has taken on truly horrifying proportions. The campaign includes, among other things, pervasive monitoring, curbs on Islamic traditions and the mass detention of more than a tenth of the region's total Uyghur population of 11 million in mass internment camps, where inmates are said to be "brainwashed" and re-educated to ensure their compliance with China's enforced state ideology.

To its credit, the Trump administration has made these abuses an issue of public concern during its time in office. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, for instance, has repeatedly condemned China's actions in Xinjiang, and has blasted Beijing's latest campaign as reflecting an "utter disregard for the sanctity of human life and basic human dignity."

The condemnation isn't simply rhetorical; U.S. Customs and Border Protection, for instance, has interdicted imports of goods manufactured by slave labor in Xinjiang, and the Departments of State, Treasury and Commerce have issued a joint advisory in an effort to get U.S. businesses to disengage from supply chains running through Xinjiang. Furthermore, the recent passage of the Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act, which President Trump signed into law late in mid-June, gives the administration additional tools with which to respond to China's campaign of repressions. More punitive measures are therefore very likely in the offing.

On the part of the U.S., at least. The international community, by contrast, has done far less. In Europe, China's pressure on the Uyghurs has generated its fair share of outrage in recent years. But this scrutiny has produced precious little tangible action aimed at penalizing the PRC, despite recent calls from the European Parliament to do precisely that.

The silence from the Muslim world has been even more deafening. With practically no exceptions, Muslim leaders have stayed mum about the plight of their co-religionists in Xinjiang, preferring continued commerce with Beijing over the potential economic disruption that could be caused by broaching the issue.

Chinese President Xi Jinping Kevin Frayer/Getty Images

And at the United Nations, experts say, a new report on China's coercive Xinjiang campaign continues to languish on the desk of High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet, presumably due to institutional fears over roiling that organization's relations with the PRC, which holds a permanent Security Council seat.

Which brings us back to the United States, where China has emerged as a major issue in the current presidential campaign. The Trump administration's approach to the issue is already well-established. The need for "great power competition" with the PRC has been a core tenet of administration foreign policy for years, and that effort has kicked into high gear in recent months with the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic.

That focus, in turn, is likely to remain if President Trump perseveres this fall, and will thus translate into still more pressure on Beijing for its odious domestic practices. Even before COVID-19, the administration took great pains to produce a strategic document that harmonized every single federal agency to a singular objective: "prevailing in strategic competition with the PRC." This has effectively laid the groundwork for an aggressive China agenda in a second Trump term.

For his part, presumptive Democratic presidential challenger Joe Biden has rightly condemned Beijing's persecution of the Uyghurs as "among the worst abuses of human rights in the world today." But he has so far remained silent on the practical steps that his administration would be willing to take to respond to these abuses, were he to be elected in November. He has also claimed, in various campaign ads and public pronouncements, that the Trump White House has so far been too soft on the Chinese Communist Party and its general secretary, Xi Jinping—suggesting that he would pursue an even more muscular policy toward the PRC.

All of which raises the question: Just what would a Biden White House do differently to hold Beijing to account over its reprehensible human rights practices? For voters worried over China's growing domestic repression and global aggression, it is a question very much worth asking.

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