

# Taming China's "Wild West": Ethnic Conflict in Xinjiang

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**Abstract:** This article examines the smoldering ethnic conflict in China's far western, and predominantly Muslim, province of Xinjiang. It stands as a first step toward understanding the separatist desires of Muslim Uyghurs, with hopes of reconciling their cries for greater autonomy with the Chinese central government's iron-fisted control of the region. After examining the historical underpinnings of the "ethno-genesis" of Uyghur ethnic identity, the article considers the current conflict through the work of Louis Kriesberg, endeavoring to offer some prescriptive advice that may help to stifle the potentially devastating force of ethnic separatism in China.

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## Introduction

*Stand Up! I say; Raise your head and wipe your eyes!; Cut the heads off your enemies; Let the blood flow! ---Abdukhalig*<sup>1</sup>

In February 1997, as China's dignitaries gathered to attend the state funeral of Deng Xiaoping, bomb blasts ripped apart three buses in Urumqi, the capital of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR).<sup>2</sup> These attacks were symbolically coordinated as the ultimate demonstration of both contempt and disrespect for the Chinese central government. Ten days later another bus bomb exploded in Beijing's busiest shopping district. These bombings stand as the high-water mark of Uyghur resistance against the iron-fisted Chinese control of the region. The Uyghurs, the "indigenous" Muslim inhabitants of Xinjiang,<sup>3</sup> have long been struggling for greater political autonomy. In recent years, however, their struggle has increasingly employed violent means. For its part, the Chinese central government recognizes Xinjiang as the number one internal threat to Chinese national security and stability.<sup>4</sup>

In his article about the situation in Kosovo, *The Lesser Evil: The Best Way Out of the Balkans*, Richard Betts notes: "Perhaps the best illustration by analogy of choices for Kosovo comes from the untidy periphery of contemporary China. Is Kosovo's future best exemplified by Tibet, Hong Kong, or Taiwan?"<sup>5</sup> While this analogy is useful for Betts' purposes, many China watchers have approached this question from the opposite end of the looking glass.

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<sup>1</sup> This comes from the most famous poem of the most famous Uyghur poet, Abdukhalig. In "Awaken! (*Oyghan*)," (1933) Abdukahaliq laments the state of the Uyghurs and calls for them to rise up against their oppressors. Quoted in Justin Jon Rudelson, *Oasis Identities: Uyghur Nationalism Along China's Silk Road*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), p. 148. Violent sentiments similar to those expressed in "Awaken" still fuel the conflict in Xinjiang.

<sup>2</sup> Amy Woo, "China-Xinjiang: 'Great Wall of Steel to Quell Ethnic Unrest'" *Inter Press Service*, March 11, 1997, see also "8 Separatists Executed In Chinese Northwest," *Washington Post*, May 30, 1997.

<sup>3</sup> This paper employs the modern definition of "Uyghur." In addition to the Uyghurs, Xinjiang has long been inhabited by the Muslim Kazakhs, Krgyz, and Tajiks. The Uyghurs believe that their ancestors were the indigenous peoples of the Tarim Basin. Although often portrayed as a united front, the Uyghurs are divided by religious conflicts, territorial loyalties, linguistic discrepancies, commoner-elite alienation, and competing political loyalties. See Dru C. Gladney, "China's Interests in Central Asia", in Robert Ebel & Rajan Menon eds, *Energy and Conflict in Central Asia and the Caucasus* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), pp. 211-213. See also Rudelson, *Oasis Identities*, pp. 1-38, for a full discussion of the Uyghur ethnicity.

<sup>4</sup> This statement reflects off-the-record comments of an American diplomat in 2000.

Indeed, fears of an “Asian Kosovo” in Tibet, Taiwan, or most realistically, Xinjiang, send spine-tingling chills throughout the Chinese security community.<sup>6</sup> When the United States entered Afghanistan in 2002, reports indicated that China moved up to 40,000 troops into Xinjiang to quell separatist activities and maintain security in the region.<sup>7</sup> This deployment, dramatic by any standards, fits into Beijing’s campaign to erect a “great wall of steel” against separatists in Xinjiang and demonstrates the central government’s seriousness about the Xinjiang problem.<sup>8</sup> Fears of a domino effect that would send ripples of instability throughout Tibet, Taiwan, and Inner Mongolia, have prompted China’s leaders to take dramatic steps to ensure that this smoldering situation does not erupt into a large scale conflict.

Louis Kriesberg’s examination of how emerging conflicts become overt provides a comprehensive theoretical framework for understanding the situation in Xinjiang. Starting from the fundamental recognition that struggles need not be waged violently or destructively,<sup>9</sup> examining Xinjiang through Kriesberg’s lens lays out a framework for both preventing further escalation in Xinjiang and moving towards a win-win resolution. Kriesberg emphasizes that in order to minimize the negative and maximize the positive aspects of a situation, it is imperative to have an understanding of the sources of a particular conflict as well as “its process of escalation, deescalation, and settlement.”<sup>10</sup>

A critical evaluation of the historical roots underlying the contemporary situation in Xinjiang helps provide “a context and a way of interpreting current inequalities and

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<sup>5</sup> Richard K. Betts, “The Lesser Evil: The Best Way Out of the Balkans”, *The National Interest*, Summer 2001, p. 59.

<sup>6</sup> One of the primary objectives of the Great Western Development Plan, a program to promote greater economic prosperity in China’s western poverty belt, confronts the disturbing possibility of a “Chinese Kosovo”: The aim of the government’s program to develop China’s western provinces is to prevent China’s foreign enemies using poverty to create a Kosovo-style crisis in the region . . . Providing ethnic minorities in those regions with more economic development would help guarantee the inviolability of China’s borders and political and social stability in the region.

“The Hinterland: Plan to Avoid ‘Asian Kosovo’”, *China Economic Review*, March 13, 2001.

<sup>7</sup> “China Moves Four Army Divisions Into Xinjiang to Quell Separatists”, *Japan Economic Newswire*, Jan. 12, 2002. Even more recently, the U.S. invasion of Iraq provoked new concerns that separatist groups such as the East Turkestan Islamic Movement might seize this opportunity to make trouble in Xinjiang. Ching Cheong, “Chinese Leaders Put Military on War Alert; It wants to Prevent Separatists and Others From Exploiting Gulf Situation to Create Social Disorder”, *Straits Times*, Mar. 22, 2003.

<sup>8</sup> Amy Woo, “China-Xinjiang: ‘Great Wall of Steel to Quell Ethnic Unrest’”, *Inter Press Service*, March 11, 1997.

<sup>9</sup> Kriesberg makes this point with a nod to Morton Deutsch, who has written extensively on this issue. Louis Kriesberg, *Constructive Conflicts: From Escalation to Resolution*, (New York: Roman & Littlefield, 1998) p. 21. See also Morton Deutsch, *The Resolution of Conflict: Constructive and Destructive Processes* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1973).

<sup>10</sup> Kriesberg, *Constructive Conflicts*, p. 4.

differences.”<sup>11</sup> To that end, the second section of this paper provides a brief historical overview of the Xinjiang situation. The third section moves from the historical underpinnings to an examination of the Xinjiang problem through Kriesberg’s foundational conditions for social conflict. After exploring the “tinder and spark” underlying a potential flare-up in Xinjiang, section four highlights several resolution strategies and impediments to peaceful forward progress. Using Kriesberg to analyze the Xinjiang conflict is an attempt to bridge conflict resolution theory and practice, while also advancing understanding of the challenging and complex situation in Xinjiang.

## **Background: The Xinjiang “Problem”**

Given that “conflict” has many different meanings (both connotative and denotative), the definition of the term “conflict” serves as the necessary point of departure for any theoretical discussion of conflict. Kriesberg employs a relatively expansive definition: “a social conflict exists when two or more persons or groups manifest the belief that they have incompatible objectives.”<sup>12</sup> He notes, however, the wide range of definitions both in common usage and academic discourse: “In common speech and in academic analysis, social conflict sometimes means parties having incompatible positions, sometimes it refers to parties thinking they have incompatible goals, sometimes it means parties trying to coerce each other, and other times it means parties using deadly violence against each other.”<sup>13</sup> In fact, a brief examination of the historical underpinnings of the current situation in Xinjiang demonstrates that the Xinjiang conflict actually fits into all of these definitions.

The Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR), an area once called the “pivot of Asia,”<sup>14</sup> occupies approximately one-sixth of China’s landmass, contains some of the world’s largest oil deposits, borders eight countries (Mongolia, Russia, Kazakstan, Krygyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India), and houses China’s nuclear test site, Lop Nor. In addition to its vast resources and strategic significance, Xinjiang (literally “New Frontier”) is

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p. 47.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p. 2.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, p. 3.

<sup>14</sup> Owen Lattimore, *Pivot of Asia: Sinkiang & the Inner Asian Frontiers of China & Russia* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1950).

home to approximately eight million Muslim Uyghurs.<sup>15</sup> In recent years the Uyghurs, one of China's fifty-five recognized ethnic minorities,<sup>16</sup> have rallied around a steadily solidifying ethno-political identity. In the early 1990s the calcification of Uyghur identity combined with the dissolution of the Soviet Union spurred Uyghurs into action. Calls for greater autonomy ultimately culminated in a number of violent clashes between Uyghur groups and Han Chinese authorities. A brief examination of the historical interaction between the Uyghurs and Han Chinese provides context for the current situation and helps illuminate why the potential for future conflict still exists.

Although there are differing narratives on how Xinjiang fell under Chinese control, Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) colonialism incorporated the region into the Chinese empire in 1759. Chinese rule initially meant few changes for the inhabitants of the area now known as Xinjiang, but periodic rebellions, often materializing as Islamic "holy wars" against the Chinese infidels,<sup>17</sup> demonstrate that the region did not accept Chinese domination happily. While China has nominally controlled the region since the Qing Dynasty, on two different occasions local leaders threw off Chinese rule and established short-lived independent states in Xinjiang.<sup>18</sup>

Since the People's Liberation Army (PLA) marched into Xinjiang in 1949, however, China has maintained strong political control. Uyghur-Han ethnic tensions have always lurked below the surface, but until recently they never manifested in violent resistance. In the early 1990s Uyghur grievances increasingly materialized in the form of public protest and sporadic violence. From the bus bombings in both Xinjiang and Beijing, to assassinations of Han Chinese officials, Uyghur resistance to Chinese rule has turned deadly. Abulahat Abdurixit, chairman of the XUAR government, admitted in 1999 that "since the 1990s, if you count explosions, assassinations and other terrorist activities, it comes to a few thousand incidents."<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Xinjiang Tong Ji Nian Jian, 1997, p. 50.

<sup>16</sup> Central Intelligence Agency, World Fact Book, at <http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook>. Han, the state-recognized majority nationality, comprise approximately 91.9% of China's almost 1.3 billion people.

<sup>17</sup> See Donald H. McMillen, *Chinese Communist Power and Policy in Xinjiang, 1949-1977* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1979), p. 7.

<sup>18</sup> In 1862, a massive uprising led by Yaqub Beg wrested control from the Qing authorities and established an independent Kashgar Emirate that lasted until Yaqub Beg's death in 1877. The Kashgar Emirate has been called the "greatest Turkic threat ever to the Chinese leadership." Rudleson, *Oasis Identities*, p. 27. The even shorter-lived East Turkestan Republic (1944-49) stands as the most significant independence movement in the region in the last 100 years. Just after the communists marched into the region in 1949, however, leaders of the East Turkestan Republic died in a mysterious plane crash as they were on their way to meet with communist leaders. Ibid, p. 30.

<sup>19</sup> Nicolas Becquelin, "Xinjiang in the Nineties", *China Journal*, July, 2000 p. 87.

What prompted the manifestation of ethno-political conflict in Xinjiang? Kriesberg outlines four interdependent conditions that lead to the emergence of a social conflict: identity, grievance, forming contentious goals, and believing redress is possible.<sup>20</sup> These conditions, the “tinder and spark that ignite a struggle,” provide a conceptual framework for understanding the current conflict. The convergence of Kriesberg’s four conditions in the early 1990s explains why Uyghur cries for greater autonomy, or even independence from China, have grown in both number and amplitude.

### III. Kriesberg’s Four Conditions in Xinjiang

#### A. Identity

“To understand how struggles erupt, escalate, de-escalate, and become resolved, we must know how identities are formed and reformed, and how they shift in salience.” (Kriesberg, 60).

Perhaps the most significant factor leading to the emergence of conflict in Xinjiang has been the creation and calcification of Uyghur ethnic identity. In fact, the Uyghur identity is actually a twentieth century phenomenon. Although a collection of peoples known as “Uyghur” has existed in the region since the 8<sup>th</sup> century, as Dru Gladney points out, “this identity was lost from the 15<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.”<sup>21</sup> The modern definition of “Uyghur” incorporates vastly disparate Muslim Turkish oasis peoples into one overarching ethnic nationality.<sup>22</sup>

The ethnogenesis of modern Uyghur ethnicity stems largely from policies imposed upon the peoples of Xinjiang by the Han Chinese. Early Stalinist minority policies of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) emphasized specific minority nationalities and endeavored to incorporate them into one big happy family under the umbrella of Chinese nationalism.<sup>23</sup> In

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<sup>20</sup> Kriesberg outlines these factors and explores them in-depth in chapter 3 of *Constructive Conflicts: From Escalation to Resolution*, pp. 58-99.

<sup>21</sup> Dru C. Gladney, “Relational Alterity: Constructing Dungan (Hui), Uygur, and Kazakh Identities across China, Central Asia, and Turkey”, *History and Anthropology* Vol. 9, No. 2: (1996) pp. 445-77.

<sup>22</sup> For a full discussion of Uyghur ethnic identity see Rudelson, *Oasis Identities*.

<sup>23</sup> Mao Zedong and other CCP leaders utilized the family metaphor to advance greater Chinese nationalism: “All nationalities within the boundaries of the People’s Republic of China are equal. They shall establish unity and mutual aid among themselves, and shall oppose imperialism and their own public enemies so that the PRC will become a *big fraternal and cooperative family* composed of all its nationalities.” *Common Program of the Chinese*

1955 the CCP recognized the Uyghurs as an official ethnic minority and created the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR), replete with promises of racial harmony, political autonomy, and self-determination. The creation of the XUAR placated the indigenous residents of Xinjiang in the short-run, but the political reality never lived up to the promises made the Uyghurs. In fact, the most prominent consequence of the early CCP policies of minority appeasement in Xinjiang, has been the resurgence of Uyghur ethnic identity in the past fifty years.

### *Perceived Homogeneity*

In Kriesberg's examination of identity as a prerequisite factor for social conflict, he stresses the role homogeneity plays in fostering the formation of a self-identified collectivity. (Kriesberg, 61) The Uyghurs are by no means homogeneous, however, the increasingly obvious juxtaposition with the Han Chinese has helped create the perception of homogeneity among peoples identifying themselves (or identified by the state) as Uyghur. After the CCP consolidated power in Xinjiang, authorities launched a large-scale program of Han resettlement, thereby dramatically increasing the Han population in the region. By 1979, almost half of Xinjiang's eleven million people were Han. This tremendous demographic shift evoked the ire of many Uyghurs who resented the influx Han settlers.<sup>24</sup>

Massive Han in-migration, intended to promote Uyghur assimilation into the greater Han framework, actually helped further solidify the Uyghur identity. Whereas the various groups of oasis Turks once defined themselves in contrast to groups from other oases, the influx of Han Chinese provided a relational "other" that helped coalesce the various oasis peoples into the previously inchoate Uyghur identity.<sup>25</sup> This process promoted a collectively perceived homogeneity among Uyghurs that bridges some of the long-standing divisions in the Uyghur community.

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*People's Political Consultative Conference*, art. 50 (Sept. 29, 1949), reprinted in Albert P. Blaustein, ed., *Fundamental Legal Documents of Communist China*, (South Hackensack, New Jersey: F.B. Rothman, 1962) p. 51.

<sup>24</sup> Resentment actually flowed both ways. Rudleson notes that Han Chinese view Uyghur culture to be "backward, poor, weak, superstitious, and worst of all 'feudal.'" Rudelson, *Oasis Identities*, p. 124.

<sup>25</sup> Kriesberg emphasizes, "In defining themselves, groups also define others; and in defining their opponents they also define themselves. . . . [I]ndeed identity is in good measure established in contrast to others." Kriesberg, *Constructive Conflicts*, p. 64.

Deng Xiaoping's policies of economic liberalization also advanced the sense that Uyghurs share a common destiny. The opening of Xinjiang's borders to trade fostered the notion that Uyghurs belonged to the Central Asian pan-Islamic community. This had the corollary effect of further distancing Uyghurs from their Han Chinese "brothers." Indeed, it is significant to note that the region's capital, Urumqi, is geographically closer to Tehran than Beijing.<sup>26</sup> Thus, the economic reforms of the 1980s and 1990s designed to bring prosperity to impoverished minorities and encourage greater integration into the Han mainstream, instead fostered an ethnic resurgence. Gladney points out that "[o]ne of the unexpected consequences of economic reforms in China has been ethnic revitalization."<sup>27</sup> A former director of the CCP United Front Work Department also acknowledged this phenomenon:

The imbalance between the economic and cultural development of different areas and different races is widening. On the one hand, the Han and minority peoples are getting closer in terms of economic and cultural connections, and on the other the consciousness of minorities, their sense of pride, nationalism and self-respect is getting stronger and stronger.<sup>28</sup>

China's recent economic reforms have strengthened and enhanced ethnic differences,<sup>29</sup> while the state's promotion of Han-centered "racial" nationalism has effectively alienated minority peoples.<sup>30</sup> One of the unintended byproducts of these policies has been a solidification of Uyghur ethnic identity, and an increasing perception of homogeneity within the Uyghur community.

### *Ease of Communication*

Communication among members of a population can also serve as a critical building block for group identity.<sup>31</sup> Advances in communication technology and improved transportation links in

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<sup>26</sup> It may also be significant to note that due to Han in-migration Urumqi is now over 95% Han Chinese. Graham E. Fuller & S. Fredrick Starr, *The Xinjiang Problem*, (Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, 2003) p.17.

<sup>27</sup> Dru C. Gladney, "Economy and Ethnicity: The Revitalization of a Muslim Minority in Southeastern China", in Andrew G. Walder ed., *The Waning of the Communist State* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995) p. 264 [hereinafter Gladney, "Economy and Ethnicity"].

<sup>28</sup> Barry Sautman, "Ethnic Law and Minority Rights in China: Progress and Constraints", 21 *Law & Policy* 208-302, p. 285.

<sup>29</sup> Gladney, "Economy and Ethnicity", p. 264.

<sup>30</sup> Sautman, "Ethnic Law and Minority Rights", p. 285.

<sup>31</sup> Kriesberg, *Constructive Conflicts*, p. 62.



the 1980s and 1990s have given Uyghurs new opportunities to mobilize. Modernization, although a slow process in Xinjiang, has translated into rail and road routes that have dramatically improved transportation links throughout the region. In addition to promoting greater communication among Uyghur communities, improved transportation links have facilitated a steady flow of non-Chinese tourists to the region—a development that Justin Rudleson claims has strongly affected the Uyghur self-perception about their current condition.<sup>32</sup>

In addition to the developing infrastructure in Xinjiang, the advent of the internet has also advanced the Uyghur cause. In a movement that some have dubbed ‘cyber-separatism,’ the past ten years have seen a proliferation of pro-Uyghur anti-Chinese web sites. While these web sites are maintained largely by Uyghur émigrés, almost none are designed for Uyghurs in Xinjiang, as few have any information in Uyghur or Chinese.<sup>33</sup> Given the fact that few Uyghurs in Xinjiang ever see these websites, one may conclude that the Uyghur cyber-separatist movement is actually a calculated attempt to draw in a “third side” into the conflict, i.e. the international community.<sup>34</sup>

### *Clear and Stable Political Boundaries*

The presence or absence of clear and stable political boundaries may also influence the coalescence of group identity. While the borders of China have not changed since the incorporation of Tibet in the 1950s, the fragmentation of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s and the resulting emergence of independent Central Asian states helped cultivate the idea of an independent East Turkestan. Indeed, many Uyghurs saw the new independence of their Central Asian neighbors as an opportunity to carve out an independent niche for themselves.<sup>35</sup> This is

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<sup>32</sup> Rudleson, *Oasis Identities*, p. 60. “For the first time, Uyghurs are in close contact with wealthy Asians and have begun to compare them with the Hans. . . . Uyghurs frequently assume that the Japanese must hate the Chinese at least as much as the Chinese hate the Japanese. Likewise, nationalistic Uyghurs often say that they like the Japanese because the Japanese hate the Han Chinese.” Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Dru C. Gladney, *Cyber-Separatism and Uyghur Ethnic Nationalism in China*, (Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2003) available at <http://www.csis.org/china/030605gladney.pdf>

<sup>34</sup> See William Ury, *Getting to Peace*, (New York: Viking Press, 1999) for an exploration of the “third side” theory in conflict resolution.

<sup>35</sup> “China: Xinjiang Government Head Supports Opposing Terrorism, Separatism”, *BBC Monitoring Service*, Oct. 9, 2001 (*Ta Kung Pao*, Oct. 2, 2001) (quoting Abulahat Abdurixit, chairman of the XUAR People’s Government). The return of Hong Kong to Chinese control in 1997 also prompted many Uyghurs to believe (almost inexplicably) that upon Hong Kong’s return, Xinjiang would gain independence. The pervasiveness of this strange

one of the primary reasons that the Chinese government has gone to great lengths to ensure stability in Central Asia. In an attempt to counter the dangerous political undercurrents in the region, Beijing has joined Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Russia, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan in the “Shanghai Six,” which, among other functions, serves as a unified front against separatists and extremists.<sup>36</sup>

### *Organizational Potential*

Inability to organize has been one of the most significant stumbling blocks for the Uyghur movement. The resurgence of Islam in Xinjiang, however, has probably served as most potent facilitator for Uyghur organization. In the 1980s expanded religious freedoms in Xinjiang led to the construction of hundreds of new mosques and reopening of old ones. The mosques provided new gathering spaces for the Uyghur community, established a religious network, and helped strengthen Uyghur Muslim identity. In the early 1990s, tides began to turn. Recognition of the mosques’ powerful organizing potential led the Chinese central government to reverse its policy of tolerance, and consequently police shut many mosques down. The Chinese government’s policy reversal prompted several large scale protests, and fanned the smoldering fires of Uyghur dissent.<sup>37</sup>

The reality is that Uyghurs are spread across a number of relatively small oasis towns in Xinjiang. Until the advent of the internet, the prospects for organizing a large-scale separatist movement were quite slim. Even now, given the primitive stage of economic development in most Uyghur communities, the internet is not a particularly useful medium for organizing Uyghur dissent.<sup>38</sup>

The ethnogenesis of Uyghur ethno-political identity over the past fifty years stands as the single most powerful factor underlying the current conflict in Xinjiang. Indeed, if the forces of

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rumor at once demonstrates both the Uyghur yearning for greater political autonomy, and the widespread popular resentment of Han Chinese domination. Gardner Bovingdon, “Uyghur Resistance to Han Rule”, *Modern China*, Vol. 28, No. 1, (2002).

<sup>36</sup> Robert Marquand, “Central Asians Group to Counterweigh US”, in *Christian Science Monitor*, June 15, 2001, at <http://www.csmonitor.com/durable/2001/06/15/p8s1.htm>.

<sup>37</sup> See Adreas Ruesch, *Repression in Beijing’s Muslim Backyard: Muzzled Anti-Chinese Protest in Xinjiang*, at [http://www.nzz.ch/english/background/background1998/background9807/bg980725china\\_uigurs.html](http://www.nzz.ch/english/background/background1998/background9807/bg980725china_uigurs.html)

<sup>38</sup> The Uyghur case poses an interesting contrast to the Fa Lun Gong movement in China, which has successfully utilized email and the Internet to organize extremely large protests against the Chinese government’s suppression.

history had taken the region in a slightly different direction, the disparate oasis peoples now identifying themselves as Uyghur may have never come together to form a distinct ethnic entity capable of demanding specific rights and articulating collective grievances against the dominant Han Chinese.

## **B. Grievance**

*“Contending groups usually account for their entering a conflict by reference to the injustice of their circumstances.”* (Kriesberg, 67)

Kreisberg points out, “the more deprived people are, the worse they feel.” (Kriesberg, 67) A more appropriate formulation of this statement would be: “the more deprived people *perceive* they are, the worse they feel.” Such has been the case for the Uyghurs in Xinjiang. In fact, the steady influx of Han Chinese into the region and the consequent shift in Uyghur self-perception stands at the heart of most Uyghur grievances.

Although the most recent Chinese census figures demonstrate a textured ethnic tapestry in Xinjiang,<sup>39</sup> some estimates indicate that 250,000 Han Chinese make the journey west each year.<sup>40</sup> Han Chinese now account for 95% of the population in the region’s capital, Urumqi, and Uyghurs are increasingly concerned about becoming a minority in their own autonomous region.<sup>41</sup> To make matters worse, according to quality of life indicators such as education, unemployment, life-expectancy, and poverty-rates, Uyghurs lag far behind their Han Chinese counterparts.

### *Uyghur Economic Deprivation*

Recent central government initiatives to ameliorate economic disparities in the region have actually highlighted and perpetuated the problem. Many of the large infrastructure construction projects initiated by the central government provide jobs for migrant workers (not local

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<sup>39</sup> The 8.7 million Uyghurs make up 47% of Xinjiang’s population, the Han Chinese account for 41% (7.5 million), while the remaining 12% is comprised of Kyrgyz, Kazakhs, Tajiks, Uzbeks, and several smaller ethnic groups.

<sup>40</sup> John Pomfret, “Go West, Young Han”, *Washington Post*, Sept. 15 2000, p. A01.

<sup>41</sup> Fuller & Starr, *The Xinjiang Problem*, p. 16.

workers) and in spite of preferential policies for ethnic minorities,<sup>42</sup> jobs often go to Han workers rather than indigenous Uyghurs. Employment and social discrimination adds to Uyghur frustrations and resentment of the Han. One young Uyghur in Xinjiang vents: “Look, . . . I am a strong man and well-educated. But [Han] Chinese firms won’t give me a job. Yet go down to the railway station and you can see all the [Han] Chinese who’ve just arrived. They’ll get jobs. It’s a policy, to swamp us.”<sup>43</sup> This sentiment drives the Uyghur resistance against the Han Chinese.<sup>44</sup>

### *Uyghur Political Deprivation*

In addition to the Uyghurs’ economic deprivation, they also suffer the indignity of lacking any political control in their own “autonomous region.” Indeed, the primary Uyghur political grievance stems from unfulfilled promises of autonomy and self-determination made by communist leaders in the 1950s.<sup>45</sup> Linda Benson points out that the goal of Uyghur separatists “is true autonomy, the kind promised in the 1950s by the People’s Republic of China but never really delivered.”<sup>46</sup> While some Uyghurs have been promoted within the Communist Party to senior administrative posts, the XUAR is overwhelmingly governed by Han Chinese. In fact, “autonomy” in Xinjiang seems to be little more than political rhetoric. The Uyghurs in Xinjiang have little voice in day to day affairs of the region, and even less in determining the region’s long-term political destiny.

### *Uyghur Religious Deprivation*

The growing economic, social, and political disparities in the region have led to the growing feeling of marginalization by Uyghurs. In addition, the increasing level of integration between the Han Chinese and Uyghurs highlights the severity of Uyghur deprivation. As their sense of

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<sup>42</sup> See Barry Sautman, “Preferential Policies for Ethnic Minorities in China: The Case of Xinjiang”, in William Safran ed., *Nationalism and Ethnoregional Identities in China* (London; Frank Cass, 1998) p. 88.

<sup>43</sup> “Go West, Young Han”, *Economist*, Dec. 23, 2000.

<sup>44</sup> Kriesberg points out that “Survey data from many societies indicate that persons with low occupational status or at a low economic levels tend to be generally dissatisfied. . .” Kriesberg, *Constructive Conflicts*, p. 67.

<sup>45</sup> Kriesberg notes that unfulfilled promises made by leaders may result in a discrepancy between expectations and reality. “That discrepancy can be the source of conflict, between the aggrieved and those they think are culpable for the failure.” Kriesberg, *Constructive Conflicts*, p. 72.

<sup>46</sup> Woo, (quoting Linda Benson, professor of history at Oakland University and author of *The Ili Rebellion*).

grievance deepens, many Uyghurs embrace their ethnic identities and also turn to Islam. Since the mid-1990s, however, Chinese authorities have tightened restrictions of Uyghur Islam, which is now subject to far stricter controls than Islam among other peoples in China. In the past few years Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have both documented religious repression in Xinjiang.<sup>47</sup>

In 2002 Amnesty International reported that many Islamic clergy in Xinjiang have been forced to undergo political education. “According to official sources, by the end of last year, 8000 imams had been ‘trained’ to give them ‘a clearer understanding of the party's ethnic and religious policies.’ Some Muslim clerics have been detained for teaching the Koran. Fasting during the holy month of Ramadan was banned in schools, hospitals and government offices.”<sup>48</sup> Chinese officials have also targeted mosques near schools for closure because they are deemed to be a “bad influence” on young people.<sup>49</sup>

Thus in the face of severe economic disparities, lack of political power, and religious oppression, the Uyghurs have a growing sense of deprivation—both in absolute terms and relative to the Han Chinese. This sense of marginalization serves as very powerful fuel for ethnic resentment and tends to the smoldering fires of ethnic conflict lurking just below the surface in Xinjiang.

### C. Forming Contentious Goals

*“For a conflict to emerge, the cause of the grievance must be attributed to the conduct of other persons. The members of an aggrieved party must formulate a goal directed at those others that if achieved they believe would reduce their grievance.”* (Kriesberg, 78)

Given the wide variety of circumstances surrounding conflicts, contentious goals are infinitely various. Kriesberg distinguishes between the direction of change sought: toward greater

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<sup>47</sup> *China's Anti-Terrorism Legislation and Repression in the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region*, (Amnesty International, 2002) at [http://web.amnesty.org/aidoc/aidoc\\_pdf.nsf/Index/ASA170102002ENGLISH/\\$File/ASA1701002.pdf](http://web.amnesty.org/aidoc/aidoc_pdf.nsf/Index/ASA170102002ENGLISH/$File/ASA1701002.pdf) [hereinafter *China's Anti-Terrorism Legislation*]; see also *China: Human Rights Concerns in Xinjiang*, (Human Rights Watch, 2001) at <http://www.hrw.org/backgrounder/asia/china-bck1017.pdf>

<sup>48</sup> *China's Anti-terrorism Legislation*, p. 15.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

integration, or toward greater separation. (Kriesberg, 78) In fact, it is extremely difficult to categorize Uyghur goals. In terms of geography, education, economics, and culture, the Uyghur community is still incredibly diverse. There are, however, three broad tendencies within the Uyghur community that encompass the entire spectrum of contentious goals—from integration to complete separation.

### *Assimilationists*

On the integrationist end of the spectrum, a very small percentage of Uyghurs accept Beijing's aspirations as their own, and they "seek nothing more than for the government to remove existing impediments to their equal access and to abolish the many forms of discrimination that prevent Uyghurs and other Turkic peoples from full participation in the Chinese political and social order."<sup>50</sup> Assimilationists are generally willing to allow Uyghur "language, identity and culture dissolve in the interests of broader assimilation into the dominant and more advanced Han culture."<sup>51</sup> Such a perspective closely parallels the central government's wishes for the eventual assimilation of "problematic" Uyghur characteristics into the Han Chinese framework. From the outset, the Chinese policy towards the people of Xinjiang has been one of gradual integration with the implicit expectation of assimilation at a later date.<sup>52</sup> The Uyghur assimilationists buy into this program.

### *Autonomists*

Autonomists believe that the goals of preserving Uyghur identity, culture, ethnicity, and traditions can only be achieved if Beijing grants Xinjiang a greater degree of political autonomy. Essentially, this means little more than granting Uyghurs what was promised in the

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<sup>50</sup> Fuller & Starr, *The Xinjiang Problem*, p. 22.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.; Assimilation "implies that members of minority groups have absorbed the characteristics of the dominant group to the exclusion of their own and become indistinguishable from members of the majority." (The English term *assimilation* corresponds to the Chinese term *tonghua*, literally "to make the same.") Colin Mackerras, *China's Minorities: Integration and Modernization in the Twentieth Century*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 7.

<sup>52</sup> Political integration is the process through which an ethnic group shifts loyalties, expectations, and political activities toward a new center, whose institutions welcome the group under an umbrella of jurisdictional protection. June Teufel Dreyer, *China's Forty Millions* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976), p. 1.

1950s. In theory, the legal structure for autonomy is already in place. Both the Chinese Constitution and the Law on Regional and National Autonomy (LRNA) grant Xinjiang a substantial degree of self-determination.<sup>53</sup> In practice, however, the Uyghurs have an extremely limited political voice.

In 2001 China ratified the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Article 1 declares that “All peoples have the right of self-determination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social, and cultural development.”<sup>54</sup> Autonomists would like to see the enforcement of this agreement as it applies to Xinjiang. Most autonomists argue that this translates directly into a greater Uyghur presence in government as well as the ability to control resources in the region.

### *Separatists/Splittists*

On the other end of the spectrum, there is a group of Uyghurs who feel that the only way the basic goals of the autonomists can be met is by complete independence from China. While most Uyghur separatists are secular, there are indications of a growing number of Muslim separatists that couch much of their rhetoric in religious terms. Given the Chinese government’s zero tolerance for separatist activities, it is difficult to gauge the level of full-blown separatist sentiment in Xinjiang—few are willing to openly admit such desires.<sup>55</sup> Some sources estimate that from mid-September 2001 until the end of 2001 at least 3000 people were rounded up in a political crackdown in Xinjiang.<sup>56</sup> Amnesty International reports that during the same period “at least 20 people tried on politically driven charges were sentenced to death and executed, and many more sentenced to prison terms.”<sup>57</sup> Although it is difficult to

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<sup>53</sup> In the PRC’s early years, the Party line maintained that Xinjiang, Tibet, and Mongolia should be “autonomous states,” ultimately voluntarily uniting with China in a federated republic. Communist leaders recognized that minorities on China’s frontiers harbored both deep nationalist desires and strong fears of forced assimilation, and policy was thus crafted to assuage these fears. However, both the option of secession and the promise of self-determination quickly evaporated once the rhetoric outlived its usefulness.

<sup>54</sup> *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*, available at Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, [http://www.unhcr.ch/html/menu3/b/a\\_ceschr.htm](http://www.unhcr.ch/html/menu3/b/a_ceschr.htm)

<sup>55</sup> Gardner Bovingdon notes that given the fierce crack-down on separatist elements in Xinjiang, Uyghurs do not feel comfortable discussing politics: “There is widespread concern that even relatively tame remarks might be twisted into criminal complaints.” Bovingdon, “Uyghur Resistance to Han Rule”, p. 47.

<sup>56</sup> China’s Anti-Terrorism Legislation, 19.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

determine the accuracy of these numbers, they do suggest that, at least according to the Chinese government, there is a significant level of separatist activity in Xinjiang.

Regardless of whether Uyghurs advocate greater assimilation, increased autonomy, or independence for Xinjiang, almost nobody is satisfied with the status quo. Despite the Chinese government's portrayal of Uyghur integration into the greater Chinese family of ethnicities, Uyghur resistance to the current order is alive and well.

#### **D. Believing Redress is Possible**

*“At least one part [must] believe that it can do something to change an adversary and/or the adversary's conduct, thereby attaining more of what it wants.”* (Kriesberg, 87)

The temporal connection between the rise of Uyghur separatist activity and the disintegration of the Soviet Union is by no means coincidental. The fall of the Soviet Union and the emergence of independent Central Asian states gave Uyghurs an injection of hope that the independence of the former Soviet Republics in Central Asia would spill over into China, “establishing if not an independent ‘Uyghurstan,’ at least perhaps a unified ‘Eastern Turkestan,’ that would stand alongside Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan as independent Turkic republics.”<sup>58</sup>

For its part, the Chinese central government also recognized the shift in Uyghur activism provoked by the Soviet collapse. In 1991, just after the aborted Moscow coup, Vice-President Wang Zhen rushed out to the XUAR.<sup>59</sup> Wang seized the opportunity to advocate greater national unity, exhorting the entire nation to “form a steel wall to safeguard socialism and the unification of the motherland.”<sup>60</sup> Thus, in many ways 1991 marked a fundamental shift in the way many Uyghurs perceived their situation—they began to believe that greater autonomy was not only possible, but just around the corner.

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<sup>58</sup> Dru C. Gladney, “China's Uyghur Dilemma”, in *Project Syndicate*, Feb. 19, 2002, at [http://www.project-syndicate.cz/series/series\\_text.php4?id=770](http://www.project-syndicate.cz/series/series_text.php4?id=770).

<sup>59</sup> See J. Richard Walsh, “China and the New Geopolitics of Central Asia”, in *Asian Survey*, Vol. 33, No. 3, Mar. 1993, pp. 272-84.

<sup>60</sup> The central government has recently used similar rhetoric to combat separatists in Xinjiang. See generally Amy Woo, “China-Xinjiang; “Great Wall of Steel” to Quell Ethnic Unrest”, *Inter Press Service*, Mar., 11, 1997.



### *Appeals to International Sympathy*

In the early 1990s many Uyghur activists had one eye trained on the newly independent Central Asian nations, and the other on Tibet. Growing international support for the Tibetan cause buoyed Uyghur hopes for greater political self-determination. Unlike their Tibetan neighbors to the south, however, the Uyghurs do not have a globetrotting celebrity statesman to sell their cause worldwide. Efforts to raise the international profile of the Uyghur plight have materialized largely in the proliferation of pro-Uyghur anti-Chinese websites calling for freedom, democracy, and independence for Xinjiang (most of these websites and a large portion of the Uyghur literature refer to the region by the non-Sinified name East Turkestan).<sup>61</sup> Perhaps the most significant voice for the Uyghur cause, Erkin Alpetkin, has served as the General-Secretary of the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO). Alpetkin, a Uyghur in exile, has been very active in the UNPO and often speaks to the press in an effort to shine the light of international scrutiny on the situation in Xinjiang.

Unfortunately, the post 9/11 world is not very receptive to Muslim groups with a history of violence. After the September 11 attacks against the United States, China has used the increased emphasis on eradicating global terrorism to rally international support for its campaign against Uyghur separatists.<sup>62</sup> Shortly after September 11, a Chinese foreign ministry spokesman took the opportunity to stress that the Uyghurs are “terrorists” not “freedom fighters,” and he further expressed hope that “our fight against the East Turkestan forces will become part of the international effort against terrorism . . . .”<sup>63</sup> In the past three years, Uyghur cries alleging human rights abuses, religious and political oppression, and arbitrary arrest and detention have fallen largely on deaf ears.

For many Uyghurs, the fact that the international community has not embraced the Uyghur cause, by no means indicates that Uyghurs do not believe that redress is possible. Indeed, the proliferation of web sites calling for greater autonomy, increased democracy, or independence

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<sup>61</sup> See e.g. Uyghur Human Rights Coalition, at <http://www.uyghurs.org/>; Uyghur American Ass’n, *Freedom for the Heart and Soul of Eastern Turkestan*, at <http://www.caccp.org/et/>; Uyghur American Ass’n, *Brief Introduction to East Turkestan and Uyghurs*, at <http://www.uyghuramerican.org/>.

<sup>62</sup> See generally “China: Agency Reports Stepping Up Crackdown on “East Turkestan” Rebels”, *BBC Monitoring Service*, Dec. 21, 2001 (*Zhongguo Tongxun She News Agency*, Dec. 20, 2001), LEXIS, News Group File; see also John Pomfret, “China Also Wants U.S. Help Against ‘Separatists,’” *Washington Post*, Sept. 19, 2001, p. A11.

<sup>63</sup> Erik Eckholm, “China Seeks World Support in Fight with Its Muslim Separatists”, *New York Times*, Oct. 12, 2001, p. A7.

in Xinjiang is proof that many Uyghurs believe that something can be done. Just what that “something” might be is a more difficult question to tackle.

Kriesberg’s four foundational factors provide an excellent framework for analyzing the “whys” and “hows” of the conflict in Xinjiang. Application of his framework allows one to pin down some of the underlying factors and move towards a more complete understanding of the Xinjiang problem. The analysis that Kriesberg’s framework yields also provides a solid foundation from which both sides can minimize the destructive elements of the conflict and ease the situation towards a mutually beneficial resolution.

#### **IV. The Road Towards a Positive Resolution**

*“Often violence is regarded as the ultimate recourse to be used in settling a conflict. In actuality, conflicts are often waged in many noncoercive ways; and when coercion is applied it can be done in diverse nonviolent ways.”* (Kriesberg, 100)

The foregoing examination demonstrates that all four of Kriesberg’s prerequisite conditions for social conflict exist in Xinjiang. How, then, can the forces pulling Xinjiang deeper into conflict be harnessed and put to use for more constructive purposes? The Chinese government’s aggressive anti-separatist campaign has been quite effective in quashing dissent and preventing social or political unrest in Xinjiang. The Uyghurs, therefore, have never been able to mount the critical mass necessary to “force” Beijing to the table.<sup>64</sup> William Zartman notes this is a typical scenario in internal conflicts:

The most striking characteristic of internal conflict is its asymmetry: one party (government) is strong and the other (insurgents) is weak . . . Thus a rebellion is a dual protracted struggle,

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<sup>64</sup> In Zartman’s terms, the relative disparities of power between the Chinese central government and the Uyghurs are so severe that the Uyghur activists have never been able to force the situation into a mutually hurting stalemate (MHS). See William Zartman, “Ripeness: The Hurting Stalemate and Beyond”, in Paul C. Stern & Daniel Druckman, eds., *International Conflict Resolution After the Cold War* (Washington D.C.: National Academies Press 2000) pp. 225-250.

striving for both ends and means: a struggle for attention, redress, and legitimacy, inseparably interwoven with a struggle for the power to pursue those ends.<sup>65</sup>

There is little chance that the asymmetry inherent in the Uyghur-Chinese government interaction will disappear. The recent ascendancy of China's "fourth generation" of leadership, however, presents the Uyghurs with an excellent opportunity. China's new leaders are younger, have more experience in the international arena, and are generally viewed as willing to explore new concepts and ideas. Uyghur leaders should seize this opportunity to reach out to the central government and initiate dialogue on improving the situation in Xinjiang.

### **Strategies for Progress**

Kriesberg asserts that parties involved in a conflict may employ three basic inducements: coercion, reward, and persuasion. (Kriesberg, 101). Given the current power structure, Uyghur leaders need to recognize that to achieve their goals neither coercion nor reward will advance their cause; they must rely on persuasion. Successful management of the Xinjiang problem and movement towards a constructive strategy for de-escalation requires, first and foremost, strong Uyghur leadership. Unfortunately, this has long been an issue of contention for the Uyghur community. Uyghur intellectuals must rise to the occasion by condemning acts of violence and terrorism, couching their arguments within the existing Chinese legal framework and international law, and presenting Beijing with a united front. Uyghurs need to convince Beijing that greater political and cultural autonomy will actually strengthen Xinjiang's ties with greater China and diffuse the aggressively separatist elements in Uyghur society. Framing this argument in economic terms, the Uyghurs should point out that one of the greatest impediments to foreign investment in the region is political instability. Empowering the Uyghurs culturally and politically should help stabilize the situation and facilitate greater economic rewards for both the Uyghurs in Xinjiang and the central government.

The Chinese government needs to acknowledge the true sources of Uyghur dissatisfaction, and take concrete steps to reach out to Uyghurs with the prospect of increased political autonomy and economic opportunity. The Great Western Development Program in Xinjiang is

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<sup>65</sup> William Zartman, "Dynamics and Constraints in Negotiations in Internal Conflicts", in William Zartman, ed. *Elusive Peace: Negotiating an End to Civil Wars* (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1995), pp. 3-29.

a step in the right direction, but concrete steps must be taken to ensure that economic benefits accrue to Uyghurs as well as Han Chinese. Moreover, economic progress must be accompanied by broadening the political and cultural autonomy of the Uyghurs. In fact, this is the only way that they will ever accept the bitter pill of Chinese rule.

### **The Failure of Coercive Inducements—A Downward Spiral of Violence**

Before either side can move forward, both the Uyghurs and the Chinese government need to break free from the cycle of violence and repression that has dominated the central-local relationship for the past fifteen years. Terrorist violence committed by Uyghur separatists and the central government's response has created a cycle of violence that yields no benefit to either side. Especially throughout the 1990s, periodic outbursts of separatist violence shook Xinjiang.<sup>66</sup> Beijing blames Uyghur separatists for riots, assassinations, and hundreds of bombings since 1990.<sup>67</sup> In 1996, the central government responded to the escalation of violence in Xinjiang with the "Strike Hard" anticrime campaign, designed to eradicate crime and crack down on Uyghur separatists.<sup>68</sup> The Xinjiang Public Security Bureau<sup>69</sup> announced that after launching the campaign, in the span of two months it captured more than 2,700 terrorists, murderers, and other criminals.<sup>70</sup>

Rather than stemming the growing tide of Uyghur separatism, the "Strike Hard" campaign actually incited separatists, increasing Uyghur anti-government protests and violence to levels unprecedented since the Communists took control of the region.<sup>71</sup> In February 1997, hundreds of Uyghurs took to the streets in Yining waving blue East Turkestan flags and shouting "God is Great" and "Independence for Xinjiang."<sup>72</sup> The "Yining incident," the largest publicly known

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<sup>66</sup> See e.g., Rudelson, *Oasis Identities*, pp. 171-2.

<sup>67</sup> Melinda Liu, "Trouble in 'Turkestan,'" *Newsweek*, July 10, 2000, p. 45.

<sup>68</sup> Rudelson, *Oasis Identities*, pp. 171-2.

<sup>69</sup> The Public Security Bureau (PSB) is the law enforcement agency charged with maintenance of the criminal law and public administration. See C.W. Chiu, Ian Dobinson, Mark Findlay, *Legal Systems of the PRC* (Hong Kong: Longman, 1991) pp. 93-97 (providing a general overview of the duties and powers of the PSB).

<sup>70</sup> Rudelson, *Oasis Identities*, p. 171.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>72</sup> See John Pomfret, "Separatists Defy Chinese Crackdown; Persistent Islamic Movement May Have Help from Abroad", *Washington Post*, Jan. 16, 2000, p. A17 [hereinafter Pomfret, "Separatists Defy Chinese"]; see also People's Republic of China: Gross Violations of Human Rights in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, (Amnesty International, 1999) (providing an account of the 1997 Yining incident and its context) available at <http://www.web.amnesty.org/ai.nsf/index/ASA170181999>.

“separatist” protest, left at least ten dead and hundreds injured.<sup>73</sup> The past ten years demonstrate that Uyghur terrorism does little more than perpetuate violence. The latest cycle, initiated by September 11 is likely to strengthen rather than stem the tide of Uyghur dissatisfaction and separatist militancy.<sup>74</sup>

Despite the fact that the Chinese government recently branded four Uyghur groups as terrorists,<sup>75</sup> the majority of Uyghurs do not advocate violence against the Chinese government. Uyghur leaders must condemn separatist violence and seek legitimate channels for expressing their frustrations. One of the most persuasive steps that Uyghurs can take to facilitate their goals of greater political self-determination is to renounce violence and express a commitment to peaceful and legitimate expressions of oppositional sentiment. This will also require the central government’s willingness to help establish legitimate channels for Uyghurs to voice their concerns.

### **Give and Take: Compromising Towards Lasting Peace and Stability**

At the most basic level, the Chinese government and the Uyghurs must recognize that their respective goals need not be contradictory. Essentially, Beijing wants two things: stability and access to Xinjiang’s vast resources. Uyghurs need to convince the Chinese central government that expanding the political and economic rights of Uyghurs will facilitate the larger central government goals of stability and long-term economic welfare. Clearly, the current situation is not working for either side.

In response, the Chinese should take away the separatist’s most powerful weapon: the central government’s oppression. The Chinese government needs to recognize that the majority of Uyghurs are not advocating for complete separation from China. The repressive measures that the central government employs to ensure stability in the region actually destabilizes the population and pushes many towards more radical political positions. By relinquishing the “iron fist” for a “velvet glove,” the Chinese government would take a

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<sup>73</sup> Pomfret, “Separatists Defy Chinese”.

<sup>74</sup> Sean Yom, “Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang”, *Foreign Policy in Focus*, available at <http://www.selfdetermine.org/index.html>

<sup>75</sup> Last year the Chinese government issued a report “claiming that Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda, his terrorist network had helped finance and train separatists in Xinjiang.” Jim Yardley, “China Brands Muslim Groups As Terrorists”, *New York Times*, Dec. 16, 2003, p. A15.

significant step towards demonstrating that it is in the Uyghurs' best interests to cooperate with the central government rather than struggle against it.

Uyghurs need to convince the central government that loosening the reins on political power in Xinjiang makes both political and economic sense. Giving Uyghurs a sufficient amount of self-governance—especially at the levels of districts towns and villages—will convince Uyghurs that they have a voice in their cultural and political destiny—one of the most pervasive concerns of Uyghur activists. Loosening the political reins in Xinjiang will give Uyghurs a sense of political empowerment and take away some of the incentive to agitate for independence. Indeed, there is good reason to believe that greater freedom for the Uyghurs in Xinjiang is the surest recipe for long lasting peace and stability.

## **V. Conclusion**

Louis Kriesberg's framework provides an excellent system for analysis of the emergence of ethnic conflict in Xinjiang. In fact, a prominent scholar on the region unwittingly addresses Uyghur resistance in terms that parallel Kriesberg's four factor approach:

The first form of resistance claims a distinct non-Chinese Uyghur identity. The second condemns the inequity of a deeply ethnically segmented politico-economic system. The third identifies the vast distance between the theory and practice of 'minzu regional autonomy,' claiming the system is a sham. Each of these three modes of critique lays the groundwork for the fourth, which regards any form of Han rule over Uyghurs as unacceptable (Bovingdon 2002, 46).

Tracing the evolution of the Xinjiang problem in terms of Kriesberg's four factors: 1) the emergence and solidification of Uyghur identity; 2) grievance, formation of contentious goals; 3) the development of a belief that redress is possible, helps explain why the situation in Xinjiang has become increasingly problematic for the Chinese central government. Indeed, it is becoming clear that the long-time central government policy of celebrating the ethnic identity of Uyghurs in an effort to appease them has had the corollary effect of revivifying Uyghur political consciousness. The Chinese government has gone to great lengths to foster a sense of Chinese nationalism and ethnic unity capable of countering forces of separatism and increasing positive bonds between groups like the Uyghurs and the Han majority. The

perceived Uyghur grievances, however, far outweigh the potentially unifying force of greater Chinese nationalism.

Although there are some indications of diminishing Uyghur separatist activities,<sup>76</sup> in April 2001, Abulahat Abdurixit, chairman of the XUAR, stated, “[T]he sabotage activities carried out by ethnic separatist elements are the greatest threat to stability and public order in Xinjiang.”<sup>77</sup> The campaign against Uyghur separatists has done little but alienate Xinjiang’s local population. If the central government hopes to extinguish the smoldering separatist fires in Xinjiang, Beijing’s war against separatism must be combined with a policy that gives Uyghurs hope for the future. An understanding of the “whys” and “hows” of the conflict in Xinjiang, informed by the work of Louis Kriesberg, is a first step in that direction.

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<sup>76</sup> Dru C. Gladney, “China’s Dilemma”

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.