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# **Uyghur ‘Terrorism’ | The Impacts of Chinese Propaganda**

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### **Introduction**

The abject mistreatment of the Uyghur population in Western China has become the target of international condemnation in recent years. For the past decade, China has dominated political discussions around the world, thanks in large part to their economic rise and expansionist ideals. Yet as their position on the global stage continues to grow, so has the international attention towards their internal affairs, specifically their unglamorous track record on human rights (Shambaugh, 2015). Despite their attempts to obscure the true facts, investigative journalists have uncovered the brutal extent that the Chinese government has undertaken in attempting to persecute the ethnic minority group known as the Uyghurs, living in the province of Xinjiang. The use of detainment camps for political indoctrination, now labelled re-education centres, has been the major violation to catch media attention in the West, but they are hardly the only method practised by China to oppress the Uyghur community. Mass arrests on civilians, forced labour, the suppression of Uyghur religious practices, forced sterilisation and torture and rape are just some of the known acts of terror to be inflicted on the minority population (Çaksu, 2020, p. 178).

While criticism has emerged from various countries towards China's actions, this condemnation has not been distributed evenly around the world. Muslim-majority countries in particular have been eerily quiet on the issue, to the dismay of Uyghur activist groups (Cohen, 2020). Despite their usual solidarity with Muslim communities around the world, numerous notable Muslim states, such as Pakistan and Iran, have not shown the same support towards the Uyghurs as they have previously demonstrated towards Muslims in Myanmar or Israel (Sharma, 2023). Other Muslim majority states, such as Indonesia, are also trepidatious towards upsetting China on the matter (Murphy, 2020). When asked about their hesitancy towards showing support for the Uyghurs, state officials from these countries have fallen back to reiterating China's official position on the matter, which is that the severity of these actions have been exaggerated by Western media and China's counter-terrorist policies only serve to fight political extremism and provide re-education (Gulfiye, 2023).

Although the nation may not have complete control over its global perception, China has successfully manipulated the international discourse enough that Muslim majority countries feel comfortable distancing themselves from the plight of the Uyghurs and still saving face with their own citizenry while working with China (Cohen, 2020). It is evident, therefore, that Chinese propaganda has significantly influenced the ongoing struggles of the Uyghur community by discouraging Muslim nations to their cause. Propaganda has always been a cornerstone tactic of the Chinese state since its inception, due to its pivotal role in maximising internal control and maintaining diplomatic relations abroad (Shambaugh, 2015, p. 101).

This paper will therefore examine the role that Chinese propaganda has played in the continued persecution by the Chinese government towards the Uyghurs. It will argue that propaganda serves a defensive function for the Chinese state, by reframing its discriminatory treatment of Uyghurs as counterterrorism. This narrative change grants the Chinese government greater leeway to enact more stringent policies, under the banner of combating extremism, while also freeing Muslim countries of any moral obligations towards the Uyghur community.

### China's Campaign of Intolerance

Despite only garnering worldwide media attention in recent years, the territory officially known as the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) has been of enormous economic and political significance to the People's Republic of China since the founding of the state in 1949 (Dwyer, 2005, p. 2). Xinjiang constitutes approximately one-sixth of the nation's landmass and provides China with a number of critical natural resources which helps sustain its economic growth. These include one third of China's oil reserves as well as most of China's uranium, significant coal deposits, and many other minerals (Dwyer, 2005, p. 2). Furthermore, Xinjiang borders on eight other Central Asian countries and has been recently utilised by the Chinese state as a population safety valve for resettling Han Chinese from central China. Due to these factors, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has invested heavily into the area over the course of several decades and views maintaining total control of the region as a high priority for the state (Dwyer, 2005, p. 3).

**Figure 1: Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR)**



Source: Encyclopædia Britannica

This ambition for absolute control has placed the Chinese state in opposition with the local ethnic groups in the region. Xinjiang, or East Turkestan as it is provincially known by its inhabitants, is home to over 13 million Uyghurs, who comprise 44% of the total population, as well as smaller populations of Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Oyrat Mongols and Sibes (Dwyer, 2005, p. 3). The Uyghurs are a Turkic-speaking, Sunni Muslim ethnic community

who have become the primary targets of ethnic discrimination within the country. In previous decades, the region of Xinjiang had experienced a significant degree of autonomy, before it was ultimately incorporated by the People's Liberation Army into the newly formed Chinese state in 1949 (Clarke, 2019, p. 32). Following the collapse of the USSR and the emergence of several new nations in Central Asia, such as Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, a new wave of ethnonationalism emboldened the separatist movements of non-Han ethnic minorities within China's borders. At the forefront of these ethnic groups were the Uyghurs, who voiced their resentment towards the attacks against their religion and culture by the Han majority state (Mumford, 2018, p. 19). Since then, the Chinese government has faced a periodic series of disturbances in the region. To combat this perceived threat to its national security, the People's Republic of China has instigated a stringent series of policies that seek to ensure tight political control, encourage Han Chinese resettlement and repress any and all manifestations of opposition (Clarke, 2019, p. 32). The resulting situation has become so severe that the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights has considered labelling China's actions as "crimes against humanity" in their most recent report (OHCHR, 2022, p. 44).

The extent of China's discriminatory treatment of the Uyghurs has been shown to be thorough and widespread. Even at the most mundane levels of employment, education and healthcare services, there is palpable ethnic discrimination perceived by Uyghurs from the state. The fact that the majority of the upper echelon positions in government institutions are held by the Hans Chinese further substantiates these perceptions (Singh, 2010, p. 2). However, the discriminatory treatment subjected to the Uyghurs extends far beyond mere political favouritism of the Han Chinese majority. Throughout the region of Xinjiang, the Uighur population has become increasingly subject to egregious human rights violations, that include, but are not limited to, arbitrary detention, torture, unjustified religious restrictions and increasingly widespread surveillance of their day-to-day life (Murphy, 2020, p. 8). These violations quickly escalated after May 2014, when the Chinese state launched a renewed 'Strike Hard Campaign against Violent Terrorism' in Xinjiang (Mumford, 2018, p. 19). This not only massively scaled up military presence within the region, but also introduced stringent restrictions on the freedom of movement and assembly of the local population. As of today, Xinjiang bristles with an abundance of military personnel, security cameras, and checkpoints. Regular identity checks have become commonplace, and movement between cities, in particular during festive periods, is often limited by the police (Potter, 2013, p. 73). Furthermore, the "Strike Hard" campaign has also made it illegal for Uyghurs to maintain contacts with people in 26 "sensitive countries," including Turkey, Malaysia and Indonesia (Murphy, 2020, p. 9)

**Figure 2: Official list of “26 Sensitive Countries”**

Afghanistan	Libya	Thailand
Algeria	Malaysia	Turkey
Azerbaijan	Nigeria	Turkmenistan
Egypt	Pakistan	United Arab Emirates
Indonesia	Russia	Uzbekistan
Iran	Saudi Arabia	Yemen
Iraq	Somalia	
Kazakhstan	South Sudan	
Kenya	Syria	
Kyrgyzstan	Tajikistan	

Source: Human Rights Watch

According to reports from UN Human Rights Watch in 2018, the number of people placed under arrest within Xinjiang has increased three-fold compared to the previous five-year period, which constitutes a system of “mass arbitrary detention, torture, and mistreatment of Turkic Muslims” (Wang, 2018). In that same year, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination reported that the Chinese government had detained up to one million Uyghurs in ‘political education camps’ under the auspices of countering terrorism. These estimates may even be outdated, as various Uyghur human rights organisations claim there to be anywhere from two to three million detainees currently held against their will (Çaksu, 2020, p. 178).

The detainment of this many people is accomplished by China’s large network of newly built internment camps built throughout the Xinjiang region. Despite initially denying the existence of these camps, the Chinese government was forced to acknowledge their existence in October 2018 due to the overwhelming amount of evidence brought forth by various organisations, including satellite photographs and leaked videos that showed the buildings (Çaksu, 2020, p. 177). State officials in Beijing continue to reiterate that the intention of these centres is for ‘re-education’, despite these structures clearly being built for the purpose of interment. Reports about the buildings have revealed that inmates are monitored 24 hours a day and are deprived of any semblance of privacy. All rooms are equipped with iron gates and windows are sealed shut with iron bars and netting (Çaksu, 2020, p. 179). Imprisonment is not simply restricted to these re-education centres however, as Uyghur towns and villages also essentially function like internment camps. Individuals who are caught praying, fasting, wearing a hijab or even simply growing a beard are immediately arrested, as they are considered religious extremists. Uyghurs have also been subjected to

even more evasive violations, including being forced to eat pork and drink alcohol in order to break their fast (Çaksu, 2020, p. 184).

**Figure 3: Red Flags for Detainment in Xinjiang**

Owning a tent	Telling others not to swear	Speaking with someone who has travelled abroad
Owning welding equipment	Telling others not to sin	Having travelled abroad yourself
Owning extra food	Eating breakfast before the sun comes up	Merely knowing someone who has travelled abroad
Owning a compass	Arguing with an official	Publicly stating that China is inferior to some other country
Owning multiple knives	Sending a petition that complains about a local official	Having too many children
Abstaining from alcohol	Not allowing officials to sleep in your bed, eat your food or live in your house	Having a VPN
Abstaining from cigarettes	Not having government ID on your person	Having WhatsApp
Wailing, public grieving or otherwise acting sad when your parents die	Not allowing officials to take your DNA	Watching a video filmed abroad
Wearing a scarf in the presence of the Chinese flag	Wearing a hijab (if you are under 45)	Going to a mosque
Praying	Not letting officials download everything you have on your phone	Listening to a religious lecture
Not allowing officials to scan our irises	Fasting	Not making voice recordings to give to officials
Speaking your native language in school	Speaking your native language in government work groups	Speaking with someone abroad (via Skype, WebChat, etc.)
Wearing a shirt with Arabic lettered writing on it	Having a full beard	Wearing any clothing with religious iconography
Not attending mandatory propaganda classes	Not attending mandatory flag-raising ceremonies	Not attending public struggle sessions
Refusing to denounce your family members or yourself in public struggle sessions	Trying to kill yourself when detained by the police	Trying to kill yourself when in education camps
Performing a traditional funeral	Inviting multiple families to your house without registering with the police department	Being related to anyone who has done any of the above

Source: Çaksu, (2020)

## **Media Manipulation**

The brutality of China's mistreatment towards its Uyghur community has finally begun to garner the appropriate amount of attention from the international community. In October 2023, fifty-one UN member states issued a joint declaration that condemned the Chinese government's atrocities against Uyghurs and other Turkic communities and called on Beijing to end its systematic human rights abuses in the Xinjiang region (Charbonneau, 2023). While this attention is much appreciated by Uyghur activists, its sudden emergence does raise the question as to why it has only materialised with such vigour in recent years, despite China's discriminatory actions occurring over a far longer period of time. Furthermore, perhaps more remarkable than the current upsurge of Western criticism towards China are the states remaining silent on the issue, even as new evidence continues to mount. To date there are several Muslim majority nations who have yet to voice any criticism towards China's persecution of practising Muslims, including Pakistan, Indonesia and Iran. Instead, these countries have continued their economic and political relationships with the autocratic state, completely unabated by the outcry of the local Uyghurs.

China's extraordinary ability to avoid major criticism from the West for years, as well as its continued support from Muslim majority countries may initially seem incomprehensible. However, this political manoeuvring is only accomplished through China's aptitude to manipulate media narratives to its own advantage. For over twenty years, China has deployed a widespread propaganda campaign against the Uyghur community in an effort to reframe their aggressive authoritarian practices as mere counter-terrorist policies (Clarke, 2019, p. 32). In the past, this tactic of reframing separatist sentiments in Xinjiang as terrorist activities was enough to convince the United States to include ETIM on its list of recognised terrorist organisations (Potter, 2013, p. 77). Even today, this strategy of media manipulation has proven successful enough that Muslim countries feel sufficiently comfortable to continue in their economic partnerships with the People's Republic of China without suffering from any major internal backlash on their decision (UHRP, 2020). Chinese propaganda therefore plays a major role in the continuation of Uyghur oppression and must be properly examined in order to understand the complacency of Muslim majority nations such as Iran, Pakistan and Indonesia towards the plight of the Uyghur community.

## **China's Propaganda Apparatus**

According to the classical definition put forth by famous French sociologist Jacques Ellul in 1965, propaganda is "a set of methods employed by an organised group that wants to bring about the active or passive participation in its actions of a mass of individuals, . . . unified through psychological manipulation and incorporated in an organisation." (Ellul, 1965, p. 61). While the term carries a strong negative connotation in the West and is associated with illegitimate regimes, this perception is not shared in China. Traditionally, Chinese culture does not see propaganda as a derogatory term but rather as a description of a necessary procedure in state making (Shambaugh, 2007, p. 29).

This process of psychological manipulation via mass media can be traced back throughout China's imperial history. Numerous Chinese dynasties have deliberately sought to attain ideological conformity under their rule through the banning of unorthodox doctrines and texts. For instance, the infamous emperor Ch'in-shih Huang-ti, founder of the Qin dynasty and the first emperor of a unified China, decreed that all undesirable books throughout his empire must be burned. Furthermore, Chinese rulers frequently perpetuated

the notion that the role of the emperor was to be a mediator between heaven and earth, thus granting themselves a quasi-divine social status. These are some of the earliest examples of state propaganda in China, where the social elite deliberately utilised different forms of media for psychological manipulation of the local population (McCarty, 2000).

This cult-like admiration granted towards the emperors became an attribute greatly admired by Mao Zedong, who also wished to be an object of reverence within China. As numerous scholars have thoroughly documented, indoctrination and propaganda were a hallmark of the Communist party following their seizure of power in 1949 (Shambaugh, 2007, p. 26). A wide variety of thought control techniques became implemented by the Maoist state as part of its propaganda strategies. These have included, but not limited to, mass mobilisation campaigns; total control of the educational curriculum, control over the content in newspaper articles and editorials, the development of a nationwide system of loudspeakers, and supremacy over broadcast media. In addition, "objectionable" sources of information, such as books and magazines that dissented from the party's official position, were quickly suppressed and destroyed (McCarty, 2000).

Propaganda continues to play a significant role in Chinese politics and culture, despite having significantly decreased since the Maoist era. Even if its firm grip over China's citizenry has loosened, the aspirations of the CCP Propaganda Department (CCPPD) has remained unaltered. China's propaganda system is a sprawling bureaucratic establishment, extending into virtually every medium concerned with the dissemination of information. This includes everything from radio and television stations, publishing houses and magazines, news and media departments; universities and schools, libraries and museums, and even film production studios and theatres. This expansive network of control helps guarantee that virtually every conceivable medium which transmits and conveys information to the people of China falls under the bureaucratic purview of the CCPPD (Shambaugh, 2007, p. 28).

However, as China's involvement in world affairs continued to grow throughout the twenty-first century, its sensitivity to its image abroad has also increased. According to global public opinion surveys, the international perception of the state has become quite mixed (Shambaugh, 2015, p. 99). Although China's economic success in recent years has granted it positive notoriety abroad, its reputation has also become damaged by its oppressive political system and human rights track record. As a result, a newfound emphasis on "external propaganda" has emerged in China's foreign policy. Beijing has launched a massive PR blitz in recent years, spending billions of dollars globally on a range of initiatives, in an effort to change attitudes (Shambaugh, 2015, p. 99).

This publicity blitz has significantly intensified under President Xi Jinping. The Chinese government has initiated a variety of soft power initiatives to shape public perception of China, including organising "mega-events" such as the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics and the 2010 Shanghai World Expo as well as pursuing foreign policies aimed at enhancing the nation's reputation as a responsible superpower (Li, 2018, p. 91). China Central Television, the country's top state television network, has also expanded internationally. In 2000, it debuted CCTV International, its first 24-hour English Channel, and it currently carries programming in six languages globally. Media outlets such as CCTV constitute the major weapons in what Beijing views as a "discourse war" with the Western world, by pushing back against anti-Chinese sentiments and controlling national headlines before they become international news (Shambaugh, 2015, p. 103).

In light of this historical legacy of media manipulation, it is evident that China's current campaign against the Uyghur community is an extension of its long-standing use of propaganda, rather than a new phenomenon. China has continuously relied upon its capacity



to influence mass media throughout its history and has developed considerable skill in recent years at maintaining its diplomatic relations through this ability to re-frame its actions in a more agreeable light (Shambaugh, 2007). As will be explained further, China has utilised this expertise to present their actions in Xinjiang as justifiable counter-terrorists measures.

### **Separatism or Terrorism?**

China's efforts to manipulate the international discourse surrounding its treatment of Uyghurs did initially succeed in producing results among Western states. Following the attacks in New York on September 11, 2001, China saw a valuable opportunity to accomplish its interwoven objectives of improving its international relations and curtailing separatist ambitions at the same time. In the immediate aftermath of the attacks on American soil by al-Qaeda, China promptly voiced its strong support for the United States and initiated closer cooperation on international counter-terrorism efforts (Potter, 2013, p. 73). While in the past, until the late 1990s, opposition within the Xinjiang province was always framed as separatist or 'splittist' in nature by China, the 9/11 attacks served as a stimulus from Beijing to reframe these instances as acts of terrorism (Clarke, 2019, p. 32). Eager to garner international support in the wake of this disaster, the United States reciprocated China's gesture by officially identifying the 'East Turkestan Islamic Movement' (ETIM), the primary separatist group operating in western Xinjiang, as a terrorist organisation (Potter, 2013, p. 73).

Despite being a relatively unknown group beforehand, the ETIM became blamed for over 200 'terrorist incidents' between 1990 and 2001. These instances included a number of high-profile attacks, including the October 2013 SUV attack in Tiananmen Square and the April 2014 Kunming railway station mass stabbing attack. The emergence of the al-Qaeda-aligned Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) in Syria starting in 2012 further strengthened China's narrative that Uygur militancy was a vital part of international "jihadist" forces (Clarke, 2019, p. 32-33). China's engagement with the so-called global war on terror marked a substantial change in its foreign policy, as it meant a shift from treating Xinjiang sovereignty as an entirely domestic issue to characterising it as part of a larger, international threat (Potter, 2013, p. 77).

This notable shift is made evident by examining the word usage during this time period in Chinese media. By comparing online sources before and after 9/11, the rhetoric used to describe Uyghur nationalists shifted drastically from "separatists" to "Islamic terrorists" (Dwyer, 2005, p. x). Furthermore, this shift in the discourse was far more notable in English-language search results, suggesting that the intended audience was English-language media rather than domestic outlets (Dwyer, 2005, p. 52). Sensing that Western media acquired a great need for discourse on terrorism following September 11, China became very eager to fill that need with its own separatist conflicts in Xinjiang (Dwyer, 2005, p. 57).

**Figure 4: Search Results for “Separatists” versus “Terrorists” (June 13, 2004)**

Concept	Uyghur Separatist		Uyghur Terrorists	
	English	Chinese	English	Chinese
Term(s)/year	"Uyghur Separatists"	"Weiwuer(zu) fenliezhuyizhe"	"Uyghur Terrorists"	"Weiwuer(zu) kongbufenzi"
1980	128	0	6	0
1990	391	2	58	1
2000	867	5	209	6
<b>2001</b>	<b>1160</b>	<b>5</b>	208	<b>6</b>
2002	927	3	188	1
2003	801	2	214	0
2004	795	2	158	0

Source: Dwyer, (2005)

Ignorance towards the Xinjiang province, as well as the Chinese political environment, rendered Western media an easy victim to this manipulation of discourse, allowing itself to be misled by Chinese media reports on the relationship between the Uyghur community and Islamic militants (Dwyer, 2005, p. 57). As a result, many Western media outlets unintentionally conflated all instances of Uyghur nationalism with “terrorism”. For instance, Chinese media outlets, such as its English-language tabloid, *Global Times*, justified the nation's hardline approach to Uyghur nationalism as necessary steps to prevent Xinjiang from turning into ‘China’s Libya’ or ‘China’s Syria’ (Clarke, 2019, p. 33). This covert linguistic campaign worked well; many Western media sources that had previously paid little to no attention to the events in Xinjiang began to equate many of the fringe separatist groups with terrorist organisations (Dwyer, 2005, p. x). Thus, the Chinese state media skilfully used Western gullibility to strengthen China's hold over the Uyghur region. By taking this action, China was able to both facilitate the implementation of its desired policies in Xinjiang and successfully enhance bilateral ties with the United States (Dwyer, 2005, p. 66).

It is only nearly two decades after the 9/11 attacks, that Western political and media scrutiny has returned to China’s counter-terrorism policies (Mumford, 2018, p. 19). Several human rights organisations and activist groups have noted that official Chinese publications on "terrorism" are filled with mostly unproven accusations, listing more than 50 "Eastern Turkestan separatist groups," some of whose mere existence is called into question (Dwyer, 2005, p. 52). The limited presence of Uyghurs in jihadist groups outside of China, as well as the fact that their attack targets are always within China’s borders, have prompted counterarguments that these fighters are better defined as separatists seeking self-determination rather than promoters of an international jihadist agenda (Mumford, 2018,

p. 18). As a result, the international community has grown more sceptical of China's terrorist claims in recent years. A major development for the Uyghur population in Xinjiang was the decision by the United States to remove ETIM from its terrorist list in 2020, marking an unmistakable schism between China and the US on their perception of the Uyghur community (Aljazeera, 2020). As of now, the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) is the only Uyghur-affiliated organisation that is recognised by the United States and the United Nations (UN) as a terrorist organisation (Yee, 2017, p. 57).

### **The Lack of Muslim Outrage**

While Uyghur activists have reason to celebrate the uptake in global sympathy to their cause, the community still receives little to no support from Muslim nations much closer, geographically and culturally, to Xinjiang. Despite the overwhelming evidence of religious persecution occurring in Xinjiang, the Chinese government nevertheless maintains active partnerships with a number of South Asian Muslim nations, including Pakistan, Indonesia, and Iran. These three nations are particularly noteworthy, as in the past they have frequently championed the rights of Muslim minorities abroad and have considered defending Islam as a fundamental component of their national identities. Nevertheless, it appears that the Uyghurs within China are not given the same consideration, as they have expressed no strong desire or willingness to speak out against China on the international stage (UHRP, 2020). Instead, the perception that Uyghur activists are all affiliated to terrorist groups is perpetuated by each of these nations and used as their justification for keeping away from addressing the phenomenon. Furthermore, not only have these states remained silent in favour of China's narrative, but they have actively worked to placate the Chinese state on this issue, as each of these countries have regularly used the narrative of Uyghur extremism as justification for their continued involvement with China (Maina, 2021). In essence, China's narrative of Uyghur terrorism effectively serves as an alibi that grants Muslim nations the opportunity to absolve themselves of any responsibility for the issue. This decision to minimise the atrocities committed against the Uyghur people in order to appease China's demands simply serves to make Uyghur persecution more likely to persist (UHRP, 2020).

Pakistan in particular stands out in its mindful reticence in speaking about Uyghur persecution, despite once being considered a safe haven for Uyghur refugees. Pakistan's polity has frequently displayed a strong passion for defending the rights of Muslims in regions outside their own borders, most notably in Myanmar and Kashmir (Sharma, 2023). However, this comradery has not been extended towards Uyghur Muslims currently under China's thumb. Instead, Pakistani officials have chosen to turn a blind eye to the plight of the Uyghurs, out of deference to China. For instance, when asked by the German paper *Deutsche Welle* to comment on the ruthless treatment of Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang, former Prime Minister of Pakistan, Imran Khan, commented that "We do not talk about things with China in public right now because they're really sensitive. That's how they deal with issues." (Sharma, 2023). In 2019, the World Uyghur Congress denounced another interview between Khan and Al-Jazeera in which he claimed to be "not aware" of the situation of Uyghur Muslims. This was in spite of Pakistan's outspoken advocacy for Kashmir, Palestine, and even Muslims living in the West (Shahid, 2021).

Pakistan's conformity to China's position became most evident in 2022, when it led 68 countries at the 51st session of the United Nations Human Rights Council, and stated that Hong Kong, Tibet and Xinjiang were China's internal affairs and opposed Western interference under the pretext of human rights and national sovereignty (Sharma, 2023). Additionally, Pakistan's ambassador to China was complicit in spreading Chinese propaganda

during his visit to the Xinjiang region when he reported that the situation is not as Western media portrays. Imran Khan's disinterest in China's Uyghur problem is not the first time Pakistani leaders have fallen in line with China's demands. As far back as 2008, General Musharraf made a public demonstration of good will for China's Xinjiang policies when he included a stopover in Urumqi at the request of Beijing during his trip to China (Sharma, 2023).

Similar to Pakistan, Iran has also wilfully ignored the ordeals faced by Uyghur Muslims, despite frequently championing the cause of repressed Muslims worldwide. Since its 1979 Islamic revolution, Iran has quarrelled with other states over their treatment of Muslim minorities. Yet Iran was noticeably absent among the 22 Muslim majority nations who wrote a joint letter in July 2019 to the United Nations Human Rights Council demanding that China uphold its human rights obligations and abandon its arbitrary detention of Uyghurs (Ziabari, 2021). The non-confrontational position of the Iranian state on China's religious persecution was called into question again in February 2023, during Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi's travel to China. Despite outspoken critics, such as reformist Mahmoud Sadeghi, criticising Iran's indifference towards the Uyghurs, members of the government continue to support China's narrative that the Uyghur population is affiliated with terrorist groups such as ISIS and AL Qaeda (Zimmt, 2023).

As the world's most populous Muslim-majority nation, Indonesia has been also notably passive in its position on Uyghur discrimination in China, despite being forthright in its defence of Muslims elsewhere in the world. Given the severity of the abuse and China's clear attempt to eradicate Islamic traditions, one would expect a strong show of Indonesian support for the Uyghurs based on Muslim solidarity. Instead, the Indonesian government has largely accepted Chinese claims that its crackdown is a legitimate response to separatism and terrorism and has chosen to privilege the norm of non-interference over that of Muslim solidarity (Rakhmat and Purnama, 2023).

In October 2022, Indonesia was among 19 countries that chose to reject a motion seeking to discuss the Xinjiang situation at the United Nations Human Rights Council. Other countries that sided with it in this decision were Pakistan, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (Rakhmat and Purnama, 2023). This motion – which failed, 19 votes to 17 – was a crucial moment for the Uyghur diaspora worldwide and marked a major blow for the community. In an attempt to justify this decision, Indonesia stated that the members of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) had promised not to use the UN Human Rights Council as a platform for political rivalry, in this case between China and the West. This reasoning, however, directly clashes with the OIC Charter, which states that its members will “safeguard the rights, dignity and religious and cultural identity of Muslim communities and minorities in non-Member States.” (Rakhmat and Purnama, 2023). To this end, Indonesia has already provided support to Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar, making its lack of support to Uyghur Muslims a blatant case of hypocrisy.

These nations' refusal to support the Uyghur population, while simultaneously denouncing instances of Islamophobia in Western nations and expressing solidarity with Palestinian Muslims in Israel, severely damages their credibility as supposed defenders of Islam. Such hypocrisy makes it very evident that ideology has taken a backseat to the benefits brought forth by their continued partnership with China. The most obvious advantage of placating this propaganda is the continued economic relationships with the Chinese economy. For instance, Pakistan's long-standing defence of China's human rights violations is largely motivated by their prospering economic relations, at the centre of which is the \$62 billion China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) (Sharma, 2023). This Corridor is seen by many

as the centrepiece of China's flagship foreign policy project, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Pakistan has increasingly acquiesced to Chinese demands since the initiation of the project. For instance, due to pressure from Xi Jinping governments, authorities have even begun collecting biometric data on all Uyghurs still living in Pakistan and begun closing Uyghur community centres in Rawalpindi, Kashgarabad and Hotanabad, all of which used to function as safe havens for Uyghur immigrants for years (Sharma, 2023).

In a similar fashion, the oil-dependent, sanctioned economy of Iran has become more and more dependent on China's imports. After the nation's Islamic revolution, along with the Iran-Iraq war, Iran became desperately in need of military and financial support, of which China soon became a primary provider (Zimmt, 2023). The economic sanctions imposed by Western countries in the twenty-first century further pushed Iran into China's grip. Today, China is now Iran's leading commercial partner and the primary buyer of Iranian oil, creating a disproportional dependency on China (Zimmt, 2023). The spotlight raised by the United States towards the Chinese persecution of Uyghurs also serves to dissuade Iran from criticising China, since political aggression towards America trumps the Iranian urge to speak on behalf of all Muslims. While the relationship between China and Iran has been turbulent over the years, Iran's relationship with China provides a valuable ally at a time of diplomatic isolation for the country (Ziabari, 2021).

While there do exist some civil society activists that have expressed concern about the human rights violations occurring in China, Indonesian Muslim leaders continue to criticise Western media for mischaracterizing the situation in Xinjiang, which they regard as an internal matter for Chinese authorities (Murphy, 2020, p. 11). Indonesia's reasons for turning its back on the Uyghur community are varied and include domestic politics, economic interests, China's public diplomacy efforts, a lack of media coverage and potential links between Uyghurs and various Indonesian terrorist groups (Murphy, 2020, p. 7).

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the flagrant lie of widespread terrorism amongst the Uyghur community has served as the foundation for China's persecution of the ethnic group in Xinjiang, which has been proven by numerous media sources and human rights organizations to include such crimes against humanity as forced detention, murder, and torture.

Irrespective of the claims made by the People's Republic of China over their activities in Xinjiang, it is evident that Beijing's true ambitions are not simply combating terrorism, but rather the eradication of Uyghur nationalism and culture from their state. If the stated objectives of the Chinese government were sincerely about opposing extremism, they would likely consider implementing de-radicalization policies in the region, such as permitting nonviolent forms of religious expression and granting economic opportunities to alleviate poverty. Instead, China has reportedly deterred over one million Uyghurs in so-called 're-education camps', which not only includes young men, but also women, children and even the elderly, suggesting far more sinister motives than simply countering terrorism.

The only way foreign states can prevent China from continuing its discriminatory treatment of its ethnic minorities is to keep applying pressure on the autocratic regime to change its behaviour. Currently, China feels too secure in implementing these restrictions in Xinjiang since so many states are reluctant to contradict their official media narrative of combating Islamic terrorism. Muslim countries in particular have an obligation to refute these assertions and champion the voices of the Uyghur people. States such as Pakistan, Iran and Indonesia, who aid China in perpetuating its false narrative of dangerous Uyghurs, ultimately

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facilitate their continued persecution at the hands of the Chinese state. It is difficult to imagine a brighter future for the Uyghur community until these states finally decide to join the western world in denouncing the lies of China.

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