XINJIANG & COUNTER-TERRORISM: LEGITIMISING OPPRESSION IN THE NAME OF SECURITY

BY
PROFESSOR MAHESH RANJAN DEBATA

ORGANISED BY CENJOWS
21 AUGUST 2025

XINJIANG & COUNTER-TERRORISM – LEGITIMIZING OPPRESSION IN THE NAME OF SECURITY
BY PROFESSOR MAHESH RANJAN DEBATA
ORGANISED BY CENJOWS ON 21 AUGUST 2025

Introduction

The lecture critically examined China's counter-terrorism policy in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR). It argued that Beijing's security approach extends beyond countering genuine terrorist threats, serving instead as a mechanism to reshape ethnic, cultural, and religious identities. By deploying narratives of "terrorism, separatism, and extremism," China has constructed an expansive security framework legitimizing both repression and large-scale social engineering.

1. Counter-Terrorism as a Pretext for Control

China's counter-terrorism framework in Xinjiang extends far beyond addressing genuine threats of violence. It is built upon an expansive definition of national security, enabling the state to target a broad spectrum of actors:

- **Expansive Classification of Threats:** Peaceful dissent, demands for autonomy, religious practices, and even cultural expression are often equated with extremism or separatism.
- **Three Evils Doctrine:** Beijing frames its policies around combating separatism, extremism, and terrorism. This framework merges cultural identity and political expression into a single narrative of national security, providing justification for strict control.
- **Primary Targets:** Uyghur Muslims constitute the largest group affected, while Tibetans and other ethnic minorities are subjected to similar surveillance, ideological control, and cultural assimilation measures.

2. Historical Evolution of Policy in Xinjiang

China's governance strategy in Xinjiang has evolved over decades, marked by distinct phases of escalation:

- **1983 – "Strike Hard" Campaign:** The first large-scale security operation (yanda) introduced harsh policing, mass arrests, and suppression of dissent.
- **Early 1990s:** Rising democratic aspirations and calls for autonomy triggered heightened military and administrative control.
- **Post-9/11 Period:** The global "war on terror" provided Beijing with an opportunity to frame Uyghur activism and dissent as part of international Islamic extremism, reducing global scrutiny of its policies.
- **5 July 2009 Urumqi Riots:** A pivotal turning point that accelerated the militarization of Xinjiang, embedding security forces into nearly all aspects of civilian life.

- **Xi Jinping Era (2011 onwards):** A significant intensification occurred through **mass internment**, predictive policing, digital surveillance, and coercive social re-engineering, all justified under the guise of counter-terrorism.

3. Hanification and Systematic Social Engineering

A defining feature of Xinjiang's governance is Hanification, aimed at integrating minority populations into a Han-dominated cultural framework.

- **Mass Re-education Camps:** Estimates suggest that more than one million Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities have been detained in facilities intended to reshape ideological alignment and diminish ethnic and religious distinctiveness.
- **High-Tech Surveillance:** Xinjiang serves as a laboratory for digital authoritarianism:
  - Widespread use of AI-powered facial recognition
  - Collection of biometric and DNA data
  - Predictive policing algorithms to pre-empt dissent
  - Integration of social credit systems to control behavior
- **Cultural Suppression:** Religious practices, native languages, and cultural traditions are systematically curtailed. Acts such as attending mosques, maintaining traditional attire, or teaching Uyghur history can be interpreted as indicators of extremism.

4. Propaganda and Narrative Management

China has established an extensive domestic and international propaganda apparatus to reshape perceptions and neutralize criticism:

- **Domestic Narratives:** State-controlled outlets portray Xinjiang as a model of peace, prosperity, and stability, highlighting infrastructural development and counter-terrorism "success stories."
- **Global Influence Operations:**
  - **Social Media Campaigns:** State-backed influencers project curated narratives to international audiences.
  - **Arabic-Language Outreach:** Chinese media outlets promote themes of **anti-colonialism**, solidarity, and non-interference to appeal to Middle Eastern and North African nations.
  - **Educational Diplomacy:** Confucius Institutes and scholarship programs are expanded to soften China's image abroad while limiting critical discourse.
- **Strategic Framing:** By positioning its actions within the framework of **national sovereignty** and anti-imperialist solidarity, Beijing has successfully muted opposition from several Global South countries.

5. International Response and Geopolitical Dynamics

The international community's response to developments in Xinjiang remains **fragmented and largely ineffective**:

- **UN Reports Undermined:** Findings on human rights violations are often overshadowed or dismissed through China's diplomatic influence and veto power in multilateral forums.
- **Silence of the Islamic World:** Despite the predominantly Muslim identity of Xinjiang's Uyghur population, many Middle Eastern states avoid criticizing Beijing, prioritizing economic partnerships and investments which is often described as the "hypocrisy of the Ummah."
- **Economic Leverage:** Through projects like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China has created deep economic interdependencies, discouraging criticism from trade partners and strategically aligning developing nations with its narratives.

6. Key Takeaways

- **Strategic Integration:** Xinjiang is projected as an inseparable and indivisible part of China's territorial integrity.
- **Counter-Terrorism as Cover:** The security narrative serves to legitimize widespread repression, surveillance, and cultural assimilation.
- **Testing Ground for Authoritarianism:** The region demonstrates an advanced model of digital authoritarian control combining technology, propaganda, and ideology.
- **Global Inaction:** Fragmented international responses and China's economic influence enable continued consolidation of control.

Conclusion

The situation in Xinjiang illustrates the convergence of security imperatives, nationalism, and geopolitical strategy. Counter-terrorism operates as a legitimizing framework for policies designed to reshape cultural identities, control demographics, and safeguard state interests. Through a combination of coercion, propaganda, and economic leverage, China has created a governance model that secures Xinjiang's integration while limiting effective international pushback. The developments in Xinjiang highlight broader concerns about state-driven narratives, digital surveillance, and human rights in an era of rising authoritarianism.