Charting the Course of Uyghur Unrest

[Should be cited as Justin V. Hastings, “Charting the Course of Uyghur Unrest,” China Quarterly (forthcoming 2011).]

Abstract

What explains the course of Uyghur-related violence in Xinjiang and Central Asia since 1990? Using data derived from a variety of sources, I argue that the locations and types of violent incidents were influenced by a combination of Chinese government policies and the political geography of Xinjiang. Specifically, 1990 to 1996 were dominated by logistically complex incidents in a low-level violent campaign in Xinjiang. The Strike Hard Campaign in 1996 brought about an increase in logistically simple incidents in Xinjiang and some violence in Central Asia as Uyghur separatists had trouble moving people, information, and weapons across the well-guarded, difficult terrain of Xinjiang’s borders. China’s rapprochement with Central Asia countries in the late 1990s led after 2001 to a dramatic decrease in Uyghur-related violence in general, but the appearance of logistically creative attacks that required little planning or materials. My findings suggest that Uyghur rebels will have a difficult time mounting a large-scale violent campaign as long as China retains even minimal control of Xinjiang.

What explains the course of Uyghur unrest in the 1990s and 2000s? In this article, after discussing the literature on Uyghur unrest, I look at the factors that have influenced the locations of Uyghur-related violent incidents, the forms that those incidents have taken, and the changes in location and form since 1990 over three phases defined by the nature of Chinese government
policy toward Uyghur ‘separatism.’ The first began with the spectacular uprising in Baren in April 1990. During this time, there was a low level of logistically sophisticated violence in Xinjiang itself. The Chinese government certainly dealt harshly with actual attackers, but largely depended on social and economic policies to dampen unrest. In the second phase, beginning with the 1996 Strike Hard Campaign, the Chinese government cracked down hard, rounding up thousands and executing hundreds of Uyghurs suspected of violence and ‘separatist’ activities, in addition to imposing draconian controls of Uyghur social and religious life. Violent incidents initially increased inside of Xinjiang, but had subsided by 2000. Less complex targeted killings and arson predominated. Several incidents apparently tied to Uyghurs also occurred in Central Asian countries adjacent to Xinjiang before Uyghurs suffered the wrath of regional governments with increasingly friendly security relations with China. The third phase began in 2001, when, following the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States, China publicly aligned itself with the US as a country that also suffered from “terrorism.” The incentives of the Chinese government to portray Uyghur unrest as externally instigated, terroristic in nature, and specifically tied to al-Qaeda, increased. Significant violent incidents in Xinjiang became rare until 2008 and 2009, when there were several creative, even bizarre, incidents that required minimal planning or materials inside Xinjiang itself.

These shifts in the nature and location of incidents over time can only partly be explained by Chinese government policy in and of itself. To explain the course of the unrest fully, however, we must bring in another factor – the political and economic geography of the border areas between China and the countries of Central Asia\(^1\) – not only the physical terrain, but also the transportation infrastructure, and political conditions on either side of the border. This geography, when combined with repression, channels and constrains both the legitimate and
illicit movement of people and goods across the borders, making both the command and control, and logistical functions of Uyghur-related violence more difficult. The relatively small number of land links between Central Asia and China decrease the options that Uyghurs have for moving weapons and people into Xinjiang along legitimate routes, while the difficult physical terrain limits the ability of rebels to smuggle supplies in illicitly. Both legitimate and illicit movements occur in the context of Chinese and Central Asian governments’ policies toward Uyghur separatism, policies that have varied in hostility over the years.

Filling in the Gap

Authors writing on the rise of Uyghur-related violence (or its periodic reappearance despite government suppression) tend to focus on grievances as the drivers of the unrest, either rooted in historical memory, or in more proximate factors. And Uyghurs do indeed have many legitimate grievances, not all of which can be covered here.

The Chinese government has long argued that Xinjiang has been controlled continuously by the central government for hundreds of years, but the idea of a Uyghur state free of Han Chinese control is not new, based as it is on memories of two breakaway republics during the tumultuous 1930s and 1940s. The often violent and disruptive means by which the Chinese Communist Party has consolidated economic and political control over Xinjiang have also been contentious. Since 1954, the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (新疆生产建设兵团) has brought in millions of Han Chinese soldiers and civilians to build cities and engage in mining and agricultural development in less populated areas of the region. The Communist Party apparatus remains under the control of Han Chinese, and there is little chance of the advancement of Uyghur party cadres to high levels, even though Xinjiang is technically a
Uyghur autonomous region. Economic development in Xinjiang has also been associated with natural resource exploitation that have not benefited Uyghurs, environmental degradation (particularly of the Tarim River). Advances in standards of living has been uneven, with continued Han in-migration, and Uyghurs facing higher poverty rates than Han Chinese, as well as discrimination in the labor market. Even China’s Open Up the West Campaign, begun in 2000, which was ostensibly aimed at mitigating many of these problems, was designed to consolidate gains made in assimilating Xinjiang in the 1980s and 1990s.

Economic and political control of the region and the influx of Han Chinese are not the only grievances present. While Islam is in theory allowed in Xinjiang, in reality the Chinese government controls it tightly – limiting the number of Uyghurs allowed to go on hajj, requiring training of imams to take place in the state-run school in Urumqi (乌鲁木齐), and prohibiting non-state-led cultural events (mäshräp). If the Chinese government does not support the practice of Islam, identity as Muslims, in addition to shared language, ethnicity, history, and cultural practices, can serve to bind Uyghurs to each other and separate them from Han Chinese, leading to the possibility of violence and escalation in tense situations.

Arguments about Uyghur unrest based on grievances can perhaps explain why certain targets are attacked, but are less helpful in explaining the long-term trajectory of the violence, or why certain types of attacks – bombings instead of assassinations – take place, given that long-standing grievances tend to be fairly constant over time. Given this gap in the debate, in the article I focus on explaining the course of Uyghur unrest by looking at two of the aspects of the unrest that are somewhat well documented but understudied – the types of violent incidents, and the locations of those incidents, whether in Xinjiang or elsewhere. This article is not about the grievances that cause those incidents. While there is great deal of attention focused on the
security threat Uyghur violence may (or may not) pose, this article is also not about the formal organizations, such as the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, which may or may not be behind them (or even exist), or about those organizations’ connection to external groups such as al-Qaeda. Rather, I am interested in what it takes, from a logistical and planning point of view, to produce different kinds of violent incidents, and how the hostility of different governments and the geography of Xinjiang and Central Asia have combined to constrain the ability of rebels to carry out logistically sophisticated attacks, forcing violence, when it does arise, into incidents that require little or no logistical support or planning.

Data

The innate lack of transparency within the Chinese state, combined with political sensitivity about what goes on in Xinjiang, makes it impossible to collect satisfactory data on Uyghur separatist activities or specific violent incidents. Given the paucity of information, some of the discussion in this article is necessarily speculative. The incidents about which we do have information either come from Western observers who have done in-depth research, the Chinese government itself (largely published in a 2002 white paper on Uyghur separatism and a 2004 yearbook on public security in Xinjiang), or are big enough that the Chinese government has had a difficult time covering them up. For the purposes of this paper, data on violent incidents in China and Central Asia are taken from START’s Global Terrorism Database, Chinese government white papers and security almanacs (安全通志) and contemporaneous English- and Chinese-language newspaper and wire service reports.

All of these data sources are biased: the Chinese government has incentives to represent the nature of Uyghur unrest in the harshest possible light, picks and chooses which incidents to
report, and often attributes separatist motives to seemingly unrelated violence. Databases of terrorist incidents, meanwhile, are almost entirely drawn from Western sources. This poses a problem for incidents that take place in non-Western countries, especially in countries, such as those of Central Asia, that are largely off the radar of the Western media.

Despite these problems, Chinese government reports are one of the few primary sources with anything approaching a systematic, year-on-year description of public security incidents in Xinjiang. Uyghur sources, particularly websites, are understandably more concerned with cataloguing instances of government repression than recording the details of possible separatist incidents, making it difficult to use them as sources for an article with a focus on changes in patterns of Uyghur unrest. More generally, Uyghur sources are not necessarily any less biased than Chinese sources. One of the most extensive Internet collections of Uyghur-related news, for instance, in September 2010 showed on its front page several videos of the 2009 Urumqi riots accompanied by the headline “Uyghur People will remember the massacre in Urumqi July 5th, 2009 for ever!”

Chinese reports on incidents of Uyghur unrest are likely to be biased along three dimensions. First, the Chinese government could wrongly attribute an incident to Uyghurs, or could wrongly attribute separatist intent to acts of violence committed by Uyghurs, leading to miscategorization (and thus an inflation in the number) of supposed incidents, and the impression that the Uyghur experience in Xinjiang is dominated by violence. Second, Chinese sources often lump together all Uyghur ‘separatist’ incidents, whether violent or not. This leads to cases where government reports consider distributing leaflets in the same breath as violent acts. Third, the Chinese government could attribute a given separatist incident to the wrong group; in its official documents, it often conflates the names of different groups, or refers to them generically (such
as, for example, “East Turkestan terrorist organization” (东突恐怖组织) in its official statements. 24

I attempt to resolve problems with quality and bias of the data in several ways. First, primarily using Chinese government sources runs the risk of unconsciously adopting the attitudes and the terminology of the Chinese government. I have thus striven to use politically neutral terminology where possible. In particular, I refer to specific violent incidents as ‘separatist’ in nature only when there is explicit evidence that they are. Second, by focusing exclusively on the number and type of violent incidents in Xinjiang and Central Asia without regard for which Uyghur group was responsible, I navigate away from the more unreliable aspects of Chinese government data, and sidestep debates about Uyghur grievances and the security threat (or lack thereof) posed by Uyghur separatists. This article is thus about the possible external constraints on the ‘production’ of violent incidents in Xinjiang rather than why the perpetrators are producing that violence. Even acts of resistance grounded in legitimate grievances (such as those committed by the French Resistance in World War II) are still subject to limits on what they are able to do. Third, I look at patterns of violence in specific significant incidents rather than solely in the aggregate, allowing for greater detail about incidents for which there is less uncertainty as to provenance. Fourth, where possible, I compare the hard data provided by the Chinese government with its claims about the overall nature of Uyghur unrest. Particularly in Phase III, using the government’s own information, Uyghur rebels have been surprisingly ill equipped given the threat they supposedly presented.

Finally, concentrating on acts of violence gives us some measure of analytical clarity. As discrete incidents, they are more easily quantified than other types of resistance such as subversive discourse. As violent incidents, they are also more likely to result in reporting (and
thus data) by both Chinese and Western sources than non-violent acts. Care will be taken in this article, however, not to assume that violent incidents are the sum total of Uyghur resistance to Chinese rule; given the relatively small number of incidents even at the height of the unrest in the mid-1990s, violence is almost certainly not even the main outlet. It would thus be a mistake to characterize the Uyghur relationship with the Chinese government as predominantly violent. It would also be a mistake to deny that China’s policies toward Uyghurs in Xinjiang, inasmuch as they include mass arrests, summary trials, and executions, are not themselves acts of violence.

Figure 1. Number of Targets in Violent Incidents in Xinjiang, 1990-2009

Figure 1 shows the number of different targets in violent incidents publicly reported in Xinjiang from 1990 to 2009. I take logistically complex incidents to be those that require a long or involved planning process, acquisition of quantities of professional-grade explosives or
manufactured bombs, or relatively high degrees of command and control because of the coordinated movements and attacks required. Such incidents, in short, require either time or materials, or both. For the purposes of coding the incidents, I include insurrections (such as the 1990 Baren (巴仁) incident), bombings, and coordinated attacks (large numbers of people attacking a target with multiple types of weapons by surprise) in this category. I take logistically simple incidents to be those that require fewer manufactured materials (either guns or explosives), and little command and control (and only short periods of time for planning). Into this category fall riots, assassinations, and ‘creative’ attacks such as arson and poisoning or attacks with homemade explosives (although this is a more subjective category), neither of which require the acquisition of guns or manufactured explosives. I consider a single apparent incident to have multiple targets if different sites attacked are far enough apart in time or physical distance to have required, in my judgment, significant additional planning and/or materials over and above what is required for attacking a single target. Targets are a preferable measure of violent activity since the primary sources often talk of waves of incidents spread over several months rather than individual attacks, making it easier to quantify total targets rather than total incidents. These are surely not all the incidents that took place (the Chinese government itself claims there were over 200 separatist attacks from 1990 to 2001, far higher than what is shown), but it is probably safe to assume that there actually was a surge in incidents from 1996 to 1998, and a lull after 2000, even if we do not know the overall numbers.

**Phase I (1990-1996)**

Although there had been periodic outbreaks for several years beforehand, notably in a protest against nuclear testing in Lop Nur in 1986, the current unrest began with the Baren
incident in April 1990, when hundreds of armed Uyghurs invaded Baren, attacked local
government offices, and for several days fought off the Chinese military sent to stop them.
Chinese sources are cagey about where the Uyghurs’ weapons actually came from, although they
make clear that the Uyghurs bought them, and in some sense were forced to move more quickly
than they would have otherwise because their plot was on the verge of being discovered.28

The Baren incident was the most spectacular Uyghur attack up to that point (or for some
time since), and was logistically complex. According to Chinese records, the rebels established
an “East Turkestan Islamic Party” in 1989, months before the Baren incident; their plan was to
secure Baren as a strategic beachhead, and from there build an “East Turkestan Republic.” The
rebels held at least four major planning meetings leading up to the insurrection, one of which
was devoted to the question of procuring supplies – both weapons and (white) uniforms. Several
rebels were tasked with procuring guns, explosives, and ammunition. Toward the end of March
1990, the rebels also ran a training camp to prepare people for the fight ahead. Fundraising
consisted of levies on conspirators and robbing cadres in the weeks leading up to insurrection.
The stolen money was then used to buy weapons and vehicles for transportation.29

The main part of the rebels’ plan was to send several hundred people to besiege the
government offices in Baren. This they did, quite successfully, for a number of hours starting on
5 April, and in the process netted five guns. A large group of rebels also attacked and burned a
bus carrying policemen to Baren, killing the policemen with knives, and seizing their guns and
ammunition. Back at the government offices, the besiegers claimed to have enough weapons to
carry out a massive attack, and backed this up with an armed attack that used guns and
explosives. When the People Liberation Army units finally arrived and began restoring order,
most of the groups of rebels they subdued and captured (after sometimes violent shootouts) were
armed, although not excessively so. One group of nineteen rebels was found to have to have over one thousand yuan in cash, one knife, three homemade bombs, thirty bullets, and two horses, but only one pistol.\textsuperscript{30}

This pattern of depending largely on weapons seized from Chinese government police and militias, and on homemade weapons (especially homemade explosives) rather than professionally manufactured guns seems to have held throughout the rebellion. Rebels seized fourteen guns from police, among other things, as well as four police vehicles, while hundreds of homemade bombs were made in a blacksmith shop in Kashgar (喀什) and transported to Baren for use before the rebellion.\textsuperscript{31}

The Baren incident was followed, for the most part, by a series of bombings in various cities around Xinjiang – a standard, if low-level violent campaign. The danger that the Chinese government was facing should not be exaggerated – both the 2002 white paper and the START database only log one multi-location bombing attack taking place in 1991, and another multi-location bombing, in Urumqi, in 1992. The bombs’ targets were not exceptional: the 1991 explosions took place at a Kuqa (库车) county government office and an XPCC unit, while the 1992 bombings targeted busses in Urumqi.\textsuperscript{32} Less explosive incidents also took place: between June 1991 and March 1992, there were apparently six attacks with firearms on Han residents of Hotan (和田) prefecture, in the south of Xinjiang.\textsuperscript{33}

There was apparently some level of organization and long-term planning in the attacks during this period. Chinese government sources claim that seventeen rebel cells (of uncertain nature) were broken up in 1992, including six in Aksu (阿克苏) prefecture alone.\textsuperscript{34} Aside from materials for the bombs (and the expertise to put them together), the rebels needed money to buy those materials. November 1991 thus saw a robbery in Shayar (沙雅) county where the money
taken (500,000 yuan) was apparently used in 1992 for rebel activities. Among these activities were two bus bombings in Urumqi on 5 February, bombings that seemed to have an unusual level of planning and organization behind them. Five months after the attacks, police in Yecheng county, Kashgar prefecture claimed to have uncovered a training site connected with the attacks, while in October, Kashgar also saw the confiscation of handguns, detonators, and other objects related to the bombings. All told, in 1992, the police detected 47 plots, and confiscated 20 guns, 415 rounds of ammunition, 87.75 kilograms of explosives, and 12 explosive devices. They also arrested 535 people on suspicion of separatist activities.

The following year saw a continuation of the government’s efforts. Throughout the province, there were 76 separatist incidents, with 191 people arrested, and 21 rebel cells (in possession of guns and explosives) uncovered. In southern Xinjiang, there were seven bombings, four assassinations, and twelve cases of pro-independence propaganda leafleting. The most spectacular of the attacks was a series of twenty bombings, assassinations, and leaflettings in Kashgar prefecture beginning on 17 June, with a bomb attack against a Kashgar agricultural company office and continuing for the next three months in Yengisar, Shache, and Yecheng counties, and Kashgar city. The 2002 white paper claims that there were ten separate explosions during this time, suggesting that half the attacks used explosives. Government sources allege that the primary perpetrators were the “Islamic Revolutionary Party,” although seven groups were rolled up in total in the aftermath of the bombing campaign.

Nineteen-ninety-four was a relatively quiet year, with thirty reported incidents, but qualitative evidence suggests that the Chinese government perceived Uyghur unrest as escalating dramatically beginning in 1995, when thirty-two “counter-revolutionary groups” were uncovered, the most since the 1980s. Attacks marked a return to form in 1995, with an
explosion in Urumqi in January (and the arrest of three Uyghurs with three more pre-assembled bombs), a riot in Hotan in July, and protests in Yining (伊寧) in August to protest a crackdown on máshräp.\textsuperscript{41} This does not mean that all of the groups were in fact violent, organized Uyghur separatist groups. Chinese governments classified 54.1% of the groups uncovered between 1990 and 1995 as violent ‘typical’ groups, which seems to mean that they persisted organizationally across a number of incidents, and had a recognizable name and some sort of command and control structure. Non-violent cultural groups made up 11.9% of the organizations broken up (not all of which may have been separatist in nature, given the Chinese government’s attitude toward Uyghur groups), with more \textit{ad hoc} violent cells making up the remaining 34%.\textsuperscript{42}

What is interesting is the relatively small stock of some weapons that armed Uyghur rebels apparently had during this period. From 1990 through 1995, “incomplete” statistics revealed that Chinese police captured 83 small arms, of which fifteen had been imported from other countries. They also captured 10,000 rounds of ammunition, more than two tons of explosives, and 248 small bombs (of which 200 were homemade), as well as weapons-making tools.\textsuperscript{43} In the aggregate, some of the materials were clearly available in large quantities – two tons of explosives is enough to create problems for a long time – but even if the actual numbers were doubled, averaging those materials across the dozen or more cells that were discovered every year, among hundreds of people, over a five year period, any given rebel cell appears considerably less well supplied. By contrast, the US Central Intelligence Agency airdropped over one thousand pallets of guns, ammunition, and other supplies into Tibet to support guerrilla fighters there between 1959 and 1961, and the Tibetans were still outgunned by the PLA.\textsuperscript{44}

The profusion of explosives and blasting caps, and the relatively small number of professionally manufactured guns or explosive devices, suggest that local mines may have been
valuable sources of some materials, but rebels had difficulty acquiring firearms within Xinjiang itself, and so had to resort to foreign sources. In this first stage of the unrest, Uyghurs were able to launch standard, sophisticated attacks – bombs that targeted transportation, government officials, and buildings – with a fair amount of planning, including multiple meetings, coordination of hundreds of people, and training camps. Indeed, in Phase I, the number of targets hit in logistically complex incidents exceeded the targets hit in logistically simple incidents (see Figure 2). Already in this phase, however, rebels’ material resources were stretched and constrained. If some Uyghurs wanted to start a large-scale rebellion, they would have to get manufactured guns and bombs from somewhere.

Figure 2. Number of Targets in Major Violent Incidents in Xinjiang by Phase and Logistical Complexity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time Period</th>
<th>Targets in Logistically Complex Incidents</th>
<th>Targets in Logistically Simple Incidents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phase II (4/5/1996-9/11/2001)</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase III (9/12/2001-12/31/2009)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Phase II (1996-2001)**

Chinese authorities became increasingly concerned with the unrest in Xinjiang in early 1996. Jiang Zemin chaired a Politburo meeting on 19 March 1996 that discussed the problem. The resulting “Minutes of the Central Politburo Committee Meeting Concerning Safeguarding Xinjiang’s Stability,” designated illegal religious activities and ethnic separatism as the two
greatest threats to Xinjiang’s stability. The often violent implementation of the Politburo’s
pronouncement quickly followed on 5 April; it was the beginning of Xinjiang’s most
comprensive “Strike Hard” campaign to date.47

Figure 3. Phase II Targets by Year, Location, and Logistical Complexity48

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Targets in Logistically Complex Incidents in Xinjiang</th>
<th>Targets in Logistically Simple Incidents in Xinjiang</th>
<th>Incidents outside of China</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1996 (4/5-12/31)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001 (1/1-9/11)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The months after the beginning of the Strike Hard campaign actually saw a rise in
logistically sophisticated incidents in Xinjiang (see Figure 3). This is not surprising. The
literature on insurgencies has found that the crackdown itself can create new grievances, and
violence might actually increase as elements within the newly angered population turn to
violence.49 Not only are more disaffected people available for recruitment, but the separatists
themselves can frame state repression as depriving their entire constituent population of rights.
Some insurgencies, in fact, will pursue a strategy of provocation in their violent campaigns as a
means of causing the state to overreact.
By the middle of 1998, significant incidents of almost all kinds declined to almost nil, the last major incident of 1998 being a series of arson attacks in Hotan in May.\textsuperscript{50} Organizing and planning apparently continued, as the Chinese government claimed to break up 195 cells of some sort in 1998, and 76 cells in 1999, with two particularly “violent” organizations based in Kashgar and Hotan.\textsuperscript{51} Two trends are of interest. First, the onset of the Strike Hard campaign was almost immediately followed by a rise in logistically simple incidents, particularly assassinations; these incidents outpaced complex attacks in terms of the number of targets hit in every year between and 1996 and 2001, with the exception of 1997. Second, 1997 saw the emergence of violent incidents outside of Xinjiang. They continued through the end of Phase II at a low level in Turkey, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan, and included arson, gun attacks, and assassinations. While some incidents were probably separatist in nature, such as the 2000 killing of a moderate Uyghur leader in Kyrgyzstan, some analysts are skeptical that some of the violent incidents are tied to Uyghur separatism.\textsuperscript{52} It does suggest, however, that Uyghurs were able to procure weapons in Central Asia.

Although the Strike Hard campaign did indeed seem to be correlated at first with a rise in violence, by mid-1998, the Chinese government’s measures began to work, and violence declined precipitously. An effective crackdown, by increasing fear, reduces the political space and time in which rebels have to plan sophisticated operations, inasmuch as the chance of being detected by the Public Security Bureau rises over time and with greater numbers of people involved in the operations. And the Chinese government is able to bring massive resources to bear. The PLA’s Lanzhou Military Region, which contains Xinjiang, fields approximately 220,000 troops and several radar stations for border defense.\textsuperscript{53} Nationwide, there are approximately 400,000 internal security force personnel and 260,000 border defence force
Moreover, the hukou (戶口) household registration system allows the government to track down Uyghur suspects fairly easily. Every crackdown since 1996 has been accompanied by reports of human right violations -- the mass roundups of Uyghur suspects, quick trials (followed by quick executions), and, more importantly, the breakup of dozens of organized cells and the seizure of their weapons, usually a combination of guns, homemade explosives, knives and peripheral materials. Every seizure decreases the materials available to rebels as a whole (in the abstract, since the rebels have never appeared to be particularly united, the effect of one seizure on another group is probably low), requiring that groups replenish their supplies. With increased state repression in Xinjiang itself decreasing opportunities for new weapons procurement, a logical next step would be to import weapons from the countries bordering Xinjiang to the west and south, all of which are weaker states than China.

This logic applies to Uyghur rebels (or more generally, refugees) as well – people who would otherwise be subject to repression move to neighboring countries with lower levels of state hostility. The insurgency literature has generally found that rebel groups under attack often take refuge in neighboring countries, thus prolonging and intensifying rebellions: out of reach of the target country, the groups can regroup and plan attacks, acquire weapons more easily, and raise funds in a politically open environment. Unlike many other rebel movements, however, the transnationalization of Uyghur unrest did not result in a prolongation of the violence. The reason for this is simple: there must be some sort of way for rebels to move people, weapons, and information from the refuge country to the target country, and Xinjiang’s physical geography and cross-border transportation infrastructure are such that smuggling is very difficult in the face of concerted, competent state hostility. Xinjiang borders seven countries: Mongolia, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. In theory, the large number of
adjacent countries should provide many opportunities for Uyghur rebels to find refuge, and to move people, weapons, and information back into Xinjiang from abroad. What is astonishing, then, is that Uyghur rebels seem to have been unable to take advantage of the fantastically long border between Xinjiang and the outside world, the varying degrees of disintegration of the bordering countries – Afghanistan is obviously suffering from its own large-scale insurgency, while Tajikistan and Pakistan are weak states – and the mountainous terrain that should be difficult for China to police.

Here the geography of Xinjiang comes into play. Russia and Mongolia have borders with Xinjiang that are either short and economically insignificant (in the case of the Russian border) or far from the lands traditionally occupied by Uyghurs in western and southern Xinjiang, thus mitigating their usefulness for smugglers (in the case of both the Russian and Mongolian borders). The Afghan border with Xinjiang forms the eastern tip of the Wakhan Salient, which is nearly impenetrable, even for foot traffic, and has not had a legal border crossing for over one hundred years.

Tajikistan had no legal overland connection with China until June 2004 (that is, long after the end of Phase II), when a road at Kulma Pass (阔勒买) opened for approximately half of each year (and then for only fifteen days per month, although this was extended to the entire six month period in 2008). The rest of the Tajik-Chinese border is mountainous, although there are some passes through the mountains that can be traversed on foot (and as a result are of the greatest concern for analysts who are worried about drugs being smuggled into China from Tajikistan). The Tajik side in the southern part of the border with China, Gorno-Badakshan, is itself cut off from the rest of Tajikistan by snow three months of the year. The illicit
transportation of weapons, explosives, and the like by foot across the Tajikistan-China border is thus possible, but the sustained transportation of large quantities is questionable.

Kyrgyzstan’s border with Xinjiang is nearly as mountainous as Tajikistan, but features two fairly heavily used crossings through passes (Irkeshtam (伊尔克什坦) and Torugart (图噜噶尔特)) in the mountains. The border between Xinjiang and Pakistan is traversed by the Karakorum Highway, which is closed much of the year due to snow, and is the highest (and most expensively constructed) international paved highway in the world.

Kazakhstan is the only Central Asian Republic with large expanses of flat terrain along its border with Xinjiang, and as a result the majority of trade between China and Central Asia flows through the Kazakhstan-Xinjiang border checkpoints. This is especially true of the Qorghas (霍尔果斯) border checkpoint, where in June 2007, 1,300 people per day were crossing into China from Kazakhstan. The checkpoint itself sees 340,000 tons of goods moved every year, and the bazaar at the border employs hundreds of people directly, while many more provided services to border crossers. Kazakhstan also contains the only rail connection between China and Central Asia.

Figure 4. Countries Bordering Xinjiang with Length and Number of Legal Border Crossings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bordering Country</th>
<th>Border Length (in km)(^{61})</th>
<th>Year-round Border Crossings(^{62})</th>
<th>Seasonal Border Crossings(^{63})</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Afghanistan</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kazakhstan</td>
<td>1533</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kyrgyzstan</td>
<td>858</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country</td>
<td>Population</td>
<td>Killings</td>
<td>Wounded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mongolia</td>
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<td>Pakistan</td>
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<td>Russia</td>
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<td>Tajikistan</td>
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Uyghur rebels (or even non-politically motivated smugglers) are stuck with two options when moving themselves or weapons into Xinjiang from Central or South Asia, both of which have significant downsides. First, they can cross the borders outside of legal checkpoints, thereby avoiding concentrations of Chinese state power. The terrain along the vast majority of the border, however, is quite difficult to cross, which is why there are so few legitimate highways in the first place. Xinjiang’s borders with Pakistan, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan are entirely mountainous, raising the costs in terms of time, money, and support structures needed for illegal movement to very high, perhaps even impossible levels.

Second, smugglers can attempt to move illicit goods along the highways that pass through Chinese immigration and customs officials at legitimate border checkpoints. For all of the optimism about the skyrocketing trade between China and Central Asia, there are surprisingly few legal border crossing points between Xinjiang and other countries – just six, in fact, are open year-round. The result is that smugglers who are in fact trying to move goods into Xinjiang along legal routes are limited in how much they can carry at any given time, for fear of being discovered, and are channeled into a few chokepoints around which the Chinese government can concentrate scrutiny and personnel. What was apparently one of the largest gun-running rings ever discovered in China (although seemingly unrelated to Uyghur separatism), for instance, in 2005, consisted of smugglers moving guns one or two at a time in the linings of bags.
and suitcases in vehicles that used the Karakoram Highway to travel from Pakistan to Xinjiang (and on to Qinghai).  

Although data on Uyghur weapons smuggling is almost entirely unavailable, the relative lack of attacks, especially logistically sophisticated incidents, suggests that whatever smuggling attempts there were from the outside into Xinjiang were either not successful, or did not move large quantities of weapons into the region. The best-known smuggling case from 1996 to 2001, was an incident in April 1998 where border police found a stash of weapons hidden in containers of wool coming across the border from Kazakhstan at the Qorghas border checkpoint. The Chinese government proclaimed it to be the biggest Uyghur smuggling event ever uncovered, and announced that the same smugglers had moved weapons into China seventeen times before. What is interesting about this ‘huge’ smuggling incident, then, is the relatively small number of weapons involved. The smugglers were attempting to bring in 19,000 rounds of ammunition, which is certainly a lot, but only six pistols and one folding submachine gun. Even multiplied by seventeen, this is not a particularly large arsenal, certainly not enough to start a large- or even medium-scale rebellion, particularly given the effectiveness of Chinese police in confiscating weapons whenever they broke up cells. The 2004 Xinjiang security yearbook notes that during crackdowns in 1998, security forces captured 30 people who had been smuggled back into Xinjiang from abroad, along with 29 automatic weapons from abroad. In 2000, likewise, police in Kashgar prefecture broke up a cell containing 10 people who had come in from abroad. Interestingly, the emphasis in the description of the material seizures in 2000 is on propaganda materials rather than weapons.  

Clearly rebels were trying to move weapons and people back into Xinjiang, and were sometimes successful, but were unable to do so in large enough numbers to maintain a traditional
guerrilla campaign. The rebels were thus left with a situation where they were stymied from organizing sophisticated violent incidents inside Xinjiang, and denied the ability to bring in weapons from outside, resulting in an increase in logistically unsophisticated incidents in Xinjiang, and the appearance of incidents outside the region.

Phase III (2001-2009)

Almost concurrently with the Strike Hard campaign in 1996, China began encouraging security cooperation with Central Asian countries with the formation of the Shanghai Five and its focus on “separatism, fundamentalism, and terrorism,”67 and resolving border disputes in the region.68 After 11 September 2001 and China’s declaration that its fight against Uyghur separatism was part of the global war on terror, Central Asian governments’ policies toward Uyghur separatism turned nearly as hostile as those of China itself. In 2002, the Shanghai Five’s successor, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), announced the creation of a regional anti-terrorism agency, and China conducted its first military maneuvers with another country. Notably, it conducted joint border security exercises with Kyrgyzstan, exercises that could only have been targeted at stopping illicit movement of Uyghur rebels (and drug traffickers) between the two countries.69 In 2003 and 2006, China conducted further military exercises with SCO members, emphasizing border security and attacks on mock terrorist training camps, in an apparent bid to build political support for cracking down on Uyghur rebels.70

The effect of the heightened hostility after 2001 in both Central Asia and China was twofold. First, the exodus of Uyghurs continued – a number of Uyghurs were captured in Afghanistan and sent to Guantanamo Bay during the US’s Operation Enduring Freedom (although many of them claimed they were not in Afghanistan for military training), and Hasan
Mahsum, the purported leader of the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, was killed in a firefight with the Pakistani military in 2003 in Pakistan’s Northwest Frontier Province.\(^7^1\) In both cases, clearly the Uyghurs in Afghanistan and Pakistan had access to sufficient weaponry and time to participate in an insurgency there. They did not, however, seem to have the ability to move those weapons back to Xinjiang. While it is possible, even probable, that Uyghurs are better at moving themselves and goods through the mountainous borders between Xinjiang and Central Asia than the Chinese government thinks, due to long experience travelling throughout the region, the political space to plan these smuggling operations needs to exist as well. Through their own crackdowns, Central Asian governments thus likely reduced the time and space Uyghurs had for applying their cultural knowledge to smuggling operations from Central Asian countries into Xinjiang.\(^7^2\)

Second, within Xinjiang itself Uyghur-related violent incidents seem to have died down for the next six years. Uyghurs in Xinjiang were subjected to the same harsh, even violent, conditions that had existed since the start of the 1996 Strike Hard Campaign, combined with little breathing room in the countries adjacent to Xinjiang, as well as the post-9/11 Chinese government’s attempt to connect them to international terrorism. Some analysts claim the lack of violence in Xinjiang after 2001 shows that China was attempting to demonize what was never a large or threatening movement in the first place.\(^7^3\) It is certainly true that China hopped on the Islamic terrorism bandwagon, although it is also probable it would have continued with its crackdown even if 9/11 had never occurred.

When the Uyghur-related violence did start up again, it was constrained by the ongoing crackdowns in both China and Central Asia that deprived those who wanted to engage in violent acts of easy opportunities to acquire weapons and explosives and move them to targets in
Xinjiang. The result was the appearance of incidents that were more “creative” in how they maximized violent impact given the material and time constraints of attempting to operate in Xinjiang. Three incidents in 2007 and 2008, all three of which may or may not have been connected to each other, illustrate this new creativity.

In 5 January 2007, Chinese police raided what they called a “terrorist camp” in a mountainous location called Kushirap (库斯拉甫) in Akto (阿克陶) county near Kashgar, killing or capturing 35 people, and confiscating homemade explosives. Later investigations called the initial report into question. According to a Spanish journalist, local Uyghurs claimed that the “terrorist camp” raid was actually the result of a mining dispute. Uyghurs near the village of Kushirap had been running a coal mine when a Han Chinese businessman arrived and ordered them to stop because he had purchased the mine. This led to a standoff and then protests that soon attracted 150 Uyghurs from other districts, and took on Uyghur nationalist overtones, focusing on grievances surrounding Han Chinese exploitation of Xinjiang’s natural resources. In the process, they turned violent, and a Han Chinese policeman was killed. Afraid of the consequences of the policeman’s death, dozens of Uyghurs fled into the countryside, where they were hunted down by the Chinese authorities. This version of events comports well with how other Uyghur protests and riots have started, but also explains why the police found homemade explosives – they could simply have been used for mining. Even if Uyghur nationalists took advantage of the situation to create a protest, they evidently did not have sophisticated weapons at their disposal.

In the run-up to the Beijing Olympics, the Chinese government expressed great concern about Uyghur rebels plotting attacks against foreign visitors and government officials during the Olympics, and otherwise disrupting the games. In April 2008, the government claimed to have
broken up a number of plots in the previous four months. In January 2008, for example, they raided several “terrorist nests,” captured ten suspects, and found equipment necessary for making explosives from commercially available compounds, as well as those compounds, including four kilograms of yellow sulfur and one-hundred kilograms of nine other types of chemicals, computer equipment and discs, “holy war” materials, as well as eighteen completed devices. Police claimed that the suspects were planning on attacking the Olympics as well as government and military sites in Beijing and Shanghai. Later, in March and April, police claimed to have raided another organization and rounded up thirty-five suspects in Urumqi, along with 9.51 kilograms of explosive precursors, and eight blasting caps. The organization had apparently been recruiting in a number of cities around Xinjiang.75

Crucially, however, there did not appear to be any professional-quality explosives such as TNT or C4, which are often used as accelerants in terrorist bombs, or any professionally made guns. Assuming the Chinese government actually reported the weapons seizures accurately and completely, it is surprising how ill-equipped the Uyghur groups were, particularly given their apparently grand plans. The chemicals captured would have been enough to make a large number of homemade grenade-type devices, and perhaps a medium-sized bomb, but certainly nothing approaching truck bomb size. Here the Chinese government’s own data contradicts its claims about well-armed Uyghur separatists.

Two definite violent incidents in 2008 that were actually successful were both “creative” in nature. On 4 August, two Uyghurs stole a truck, and ran it into a group of soldiers in Kashgar, killing sixteen of them and wounding sixteen others. They then threw homemade explosives and stabbed the victims. Nine homemade explosive devices, one homemade gun, two machetes, and “holy war” materials were found to be in the suspects’ possession.76 Then, early on the morning
of 10 August, a group of Uyghurs commandeered a taxi (or taxis) in Kuqa (库车), Aksu prefecture, and apparently threw homemade explosives at the Public Security Bureau building (and police cars), the industry and commerce administration building, and possibly several other buildings, killing several police and injuring civilians. In the ensuing fight, eight Uyghurs were killed, two were captured, two blew themselves up, and three escaped.

Despite talk of the resurgence of Uyghur-related violence on the eve of the Beijing Olympics, what is remarkable about the two attacks is how unsophisticated they were, from a planning and logistics viewpoint. In both cases, the attackers’ means of transportation were commandeered vehicles, while the primary weapons used were the vehicles themselves (requiring no prior planning or material preparation), knives, and small grenade-like homemade explosives. The attacks were not coordinated simultaneously across different cities (although the 4 August and 10 August attacks may have been coordinated) as the unsuccessful rebels had apparently intended, and no professional-grade explosive is mentioned as having been used. By “creative” approaches that minimized logistical footprints and operational sophistication, the rebels were able to cause damage in excess of what others had been able to with more sophisticated plots, given the political and geographic constraints under which they were laboring.

The incident of post-9/11 Uyghur-related unrest most widely reported in Western media — the riots between Uyghurs and Han Chinese in Urumqi that began on 5 July 2009, and continued into 8 July — was not necessarily “planned” as such at all. The immediate cause of the protests that culminated in violence appears to have been Uyghur dissatisfaction at the handling of an incident on 25 and 26 June at a factory in Shaoguan (韶关), Guangdong in which rumors of Uyghur workers sexually assaulting a Han woman led to riots between Han Chinese and
Uyghurs that resulted in the deaths of two Uyghurs. The July riots were followed by further riots on 3 September over Han Chinese dissatisfaction with the government’s handling of the July riots and a wave of syringe attacks that were supposed to have targeted primarily Han Chinese, although the syringe attacks’ provenance is uncertain. Chinese police claimed that agitators from Uyghur advocacy organizations outside of China, especially Rebiya Kadeer in the US, spread information about the Shaoguan incident and encouraged violence through the Internet and cell phones. The Chinese government subsequently cut off Internet access to Xinjiang, and instituted another Strike Hard campaign, in which trials were shortened, and evidence needed for conviction lowered to ensure speedy reprisals. There is no external evidence that this is true, but both the riots themselves and the Chinese government’s claims about their immediate cause illustrate the path that unrest in Xinjiang has taken since 2001 – riots, inasmuch as they are not purposive or organized, require no planning or logistics. Even if, for the sake of argument, expatriate Uyghur groups did instigate the July 2009 protests in Urumqi via the Internet and online chat fora, as with the “successful” 2008 attacks, it suggests that violence is trending in the direction of incidents that do not require overcoming Xinjiang’s difficult geography and moving physical weapons across borders.

As long as China is able to maintain an atmosphere of fear, and keep even marginally effective control of the territory of Xinjiang itself, and is able to convince Central Asian countries to crack down on any Uyghur rebels in their midst, any violent groups will have difficulty planning or procuring supplies for sophisticated acts of rebellion, although the opening of an increasing number of land routes between Central Asia and China may make it somewhat more difficult for China to police the legitimate ports of entry into Xinjiang. The future of
Uyghur unrest may lie in “creative” incidents that require little planning or materials, and against these China has proven less effective.

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1 This is not the first article to consider the importance of Xinjiang’s location or geography in affecting the course of events there. See also Gaye Christofferson, "Xinjiang and the Great Islamic Circle: The Impact of Transnational Forces on Chinese Regional Economic Planning," *China Quarterly* 133 (1993): 133-151; Clifton J. Pannell and Laurence J.C. Ma, "Urban Transition and Interstate Relations in a Dynamic Post-Soviet Borderland: The Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region of China," *Post-Soviet Geography and Economics* 38 no. 4 (1997): 206-229; Frederick Starr, ed. *Xinjiang: China's Muslim Borderland* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2004).


13 See, for example, Liu Zehua, “’Dongtu’ zuzhi baoli shizhi 7-5 shijianzhong baolu wuyi” ("East Turkestan' Organizations' violent nature in the July 5 incident will be exposed without fail"), *Xinhua News Agency* 23 July 2009; Yitzak Shichor, "Limping on Two Legs: Uyghur Diaspora Organizations and the Prospects for Eastern Turkestan Independence," *Central Asia and the Caucasus* 6, no. 48 (2007); Igor Rotar, "The Growing Problem of Uighur Separatism," *China Brief* 4, no. 8 (2004).


Xinjiang Tongzhi: Gong'anzhi Weiyuanhui, Xinjiang Weiwu'er Zizhiqu Difangzhi Bianzuan Weiyuanhui (Xinjiang Gazette: Public Security Gazette Committee, Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Regional Government Compilation Committee), Xinjiang Tongzhi: Gong'anzhi (Xinjiang Gazette: Public Security Gazette). (Urumqi: Xinjiang Renmin Chubanshe, 2004); Information Office, "'East Turkistan' Terrorist Forces Cannot Get Away with Impunity."

See START, "Global Terrorism Database," (College Park: University of Maryland, 2010).

The complete dataset is available from the author on request.

Millward, "Violent Separatism in Xinjiang," pp. 21-22, for example, notes suspicions that the killing of a Chinese diplomat in June 2002 in Bishkek was actually related to a business dispute.


See, for example, Information Office, "'East Turkistan' Terrorist Forces Cannot Get Away with Impunity," (Beijing: State Council, 21 January 2002).

26 The vast majority of incidents are taken from START, “Global Terrorism Database”; Xinjiang Tongzhi: Gonganzhi Weiyuanhui, "Xinjiang Public Security Gazette”; Information Office, "'East Turkistan' Terrorist Forces Cannot Get Away with Impunity”; and Millward, "Violent Separatism in Xinjiang.” The full dataset is available from the author.

27 Pan Zhiping, "'Dongtu' Kongbuzhuyi Toushi” ("'East Turkestan' Terrorism Perspectives"), *Xinjiang Shehui Kexue (Xinjiang Social Sciences)* (2002), p. 61.


29 Ibid.

30 Ibid., pp. 791-793.

31 Ibid., pp. 794-795.

32 Ibid., pp. 81-83.

33 Ibid., p. 84.

34 Ibid., pp. 83, 85.

35 Ibid., p. 83.

36 Ibid., p. 86.

37 Ibid., p. 294.

38 Information Office, "'East Turkistan' Terrorist Forces Cannot Get Away with Impunity.”


40 Ibid., p. 318.

41 Ibid., p. 94. Millward, "Violent Separatism in Xinjiang,” p. 17 notes the effects of the ban on mäshräp.
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