

A Region on the Rise

An Examination of the PRC's Domestic Policy Towards the Xinjiang Region

Jacob Rusoff

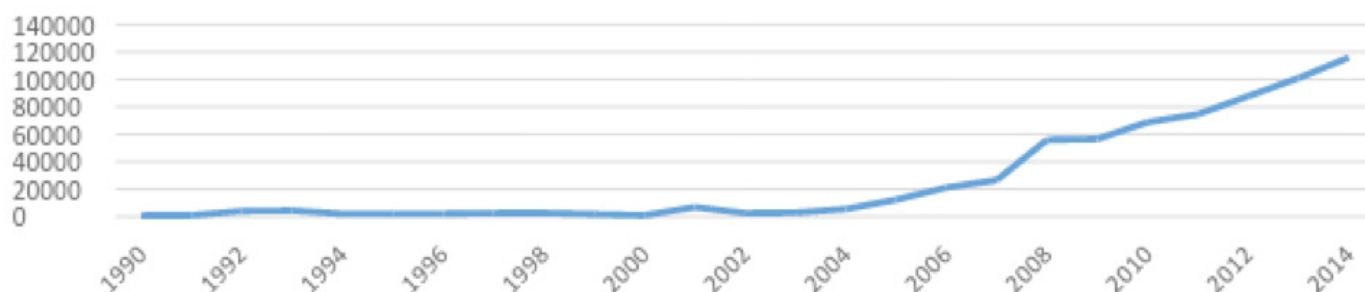
Introduction

The People's Republic of China (PRC)¹ is a vast country stretching from the China Sea in the Pacific Ocean to the Tian Shan mountain range, within the heart of Central Asia. The country has a lustrous and longstanding history of wealth, culture, and domestic unity, and it is said that at the height of the empire, "the Chinese cultural sphere stretched over a continental area much larger than

any European state, indeed about the size of Continental Europe." (Kissinger 7). Yet this longstanding influence certainly could not have been achieved without the advent of the Silk Road. The Silk Road made long-distance trade from Xi'an to the Mediterranean possible, as it passed through Central Asia (China Internet Information Center 2015). As a result, the Chinese Empire and the Central Asian

region symbiotically flourished for centuries (Melvin 62 & 88). Today, the geopolitical and economic identities of both China and the Central Asian countries have greatly evolved, and as a result, we are now beginning to witness unprecedented dynamics occurring within the region. The Central Asian countries have begun to liberalize their economies and welcome foreign investment from any and all suitors (Paswan

China FDI Outflows (Millions of USD)



any European state, indeed about the size of Continental Europe." (Kissinger 7). Yet this longstanding influence certainly could not have been achieved without the advent of the Silk Road. The Silk Road made long-distance trade from Xi'an to the Mediterranean possible, as it passed through Central Asia (China Internet Information Center 2015). As a result, the Chinese Empire and the Central Asian

1). China has increasingly expanded its sphere of influence; it has done so through increased soft and hard power, through foreign infrastructure investments (Pitlo III 2015) (Appendix 1) and through direct military involvement (Glaser 2012) (Baloch 2015). Today Central Asia and China find themselves closer than ever before, and at the epicenter of this relationship stands Xinjiang.

¹ While it is important to distinguish The PRC from The ROC, from here on out, for convince sake, I will refer to The PRC as simply China.

The Xinjiang region is located in north-west China. The region shares a border with Afghanistan,

Russia, Mongolia, India and Pakistan, along with three of the Central Asian countries: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. The domestic geopolitical significance of the region has rapidly increased with the economic growth of China. This paper will briefly discuss the history of the Xinjiang region, and then go on to critically analyze the strategic use of identifying the region as an autonomous region. Thereafter, ethnic-based civil unrest and demographic changes will be examined. Lastly, the economic importance of Xinjiang to China's shifting domestic policies will be discussed and explained.

History

Xinjiang has always been an ethnically diverse region, dating back thousands of years (Information Office of the State Council of The PRC 2003). Xinjiang did not begin to truly flourish until the development of the Han Dynasty. In 121 BCE, the Han formally spread their control over Xinjiang by creating prefectures into what is now modern day Xinjiang, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan (IOSC PRC 2003) (Appendix 2). To this day, the Chinese records take particular caution describing this as a unification of

graphical importance of the region, trade routes through the Xinjiang and into Europe were developed forming what would become the Silk Road. The Silk Road fostered economic prosperity and as a result, ethnic groups were attracted to the region. A significant shift in the ethnic makeup of the region took place in 840 CE with the influx of Uyghurs, a predominantly Turkic-Muslim ethnic group, into Xinjiang (IOSC PRC 2003).

The Chinese Dynasties' power fluctuated for centuries as they fought with neighboring empires; however, they continually emphasized their sovereignty over Xinjiang and continually grappled to maintain it (China Education Center Ltd. 2015). The Sui Dynasty (581-618 C.E.) appointed public officials, divided the region into prefectures for administrative purposes, and even invested in basic infrastructure, such as building city walls (IOSC PRC 2003). The Tang Dynasty (618-906 C.E.) instituted the "equal field system", which installed land ownership, taxation, and labor laws (IOSC PRC 2003). The Qing Dynasty (1644-1912 C.E.) suppressed multiple incursions and briefly fought with the Russian Empire to uphold their claim over territory (IOSC PRC 2003) and formally established the territory as

Chinese Dynasties' power fluctuated for centuries as they fought with neighboring empires; however, they continually emphasized their sovereignty over Xinjiang and continually grappled to maintain it.

China rather than a territorial conquest, an attempt to greater legitimize their sovereign claim over Xinjiang (The Australian Centre on China in the World, 2012). With greater security in Xinjiang as a result of the Chinese army's presence, and given the geo-

a province of China, officially naming it Xinjiang, meaning "new boundary." (Bovingdon 24). All of the Dynasties were very pragmatic in exercising administrative control over the region. Their approaches were form-fitted to agree with local circumstances,

a strategy which ultimately assisted in quelling anti-Chinese insurrections from within Xinjiang.

Autonomous Region

In 1955, six years after the foundation of the People's Republic of China, Xinjiang was converted from a province to an autonomous region (Bhattacharji 2012). Autonomous regions are one of the three types of administrative divisions directly under control of the central government². Each autonomous region in China, of which there are five³, are created for the purpose of a designated minority (The Constitution of The People's Republic of China, Chapter I, Article 4). Autonomous regions grant territories that have large non-Han ethnic populations certain constitutional rights which are not afforded to provinces, in an attempt to promote social harmony and national unity (Wu 2014). Autonomous regions are also headed by a chairman who must be of the nationality exercising regional autonomy; the chairman of Xinjiang is, and must be, a Uyghur (The Constitution of The People's Republic of China, Chapter III, Section VI, Article 114) (Jia 2014). Furthermore, the autonomous regions have the power of financial autonomy and are not obligated to forfeit their tax revenue to the central government (The Constitution of The People's Republic of China, Chapter III, Section VI, Article 117).

From the surface it may appear as though these regions are 'autonomous' while in actuality this is hardly the case. These regions are in fact still under the tight grip of the Chinese Communist Party (CPC) and the Chinese central government. For example, nearly all of the powers granted to the local gov-

² The others being, provinces and municipalities (The Constitution of the People's Republic of China, Chapter I, Article 30, 2004)

³ Guangxi, Inner Mongolia, Ningxia, Xinjiang, Xizang (CIA, 2015)



Suzhou Water Town, China © Kirsiah McNamara

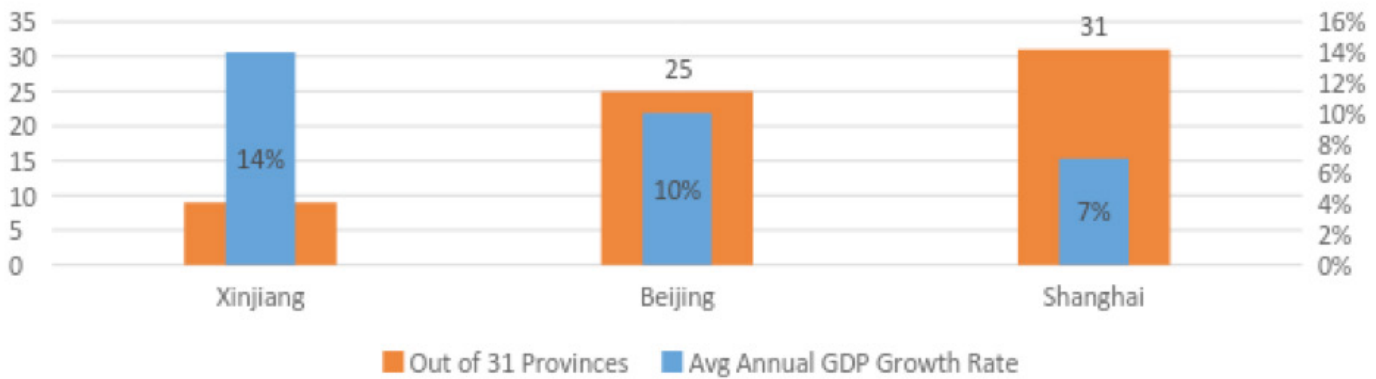
ernments of autonomous regions are followed by caveats, such as "with the approval of the State," or "for approval [by the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress] before they go into effect." (The Constitution of The People's Republic of China, Chapter III, Section VI, Article 120 & 115). This sentiment was further illustrated in a 2009 white paper published by the Chinese Government, stating "every ethnic autonomous area is an inseparable part of the country. Organs of self-government in ethnic autonomous areas must follow the leadership of the central government." (Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China 2009). Ultimately, the chairmen tend to act more as figure heads and rather than examples of political diversity. True power over the autonomous regions are largely vested in the provincial party secretaries who, while not constitutionally avowed, are and have always been of Han descent (Conception 19). Therefore, it appears as though the designation of 'autonomous regions' was not an altruistic attempt to promote social harmony and national unity, as mentioned above, but rather a strategic and tactically motivated attempt to offer a façade of self-determination to ethnic minorities, such as the Uyghurs, whose rights are continually violated by the central government in order to ensure China's territorial sovereignty over politically contentious areas.

Ethnic-Based Civil Unrest

The dynasties managed administrative control over Xinjiang, promoting economic development, increasing quality of life, and ensuring security. In return, the Uyghurs, amongst other non-Han ethnic groups, provided legitimacy to the sovereign through their explicit support (IOSC PRC 2003). While some ethnic tension occurred over time⁴, this relationship

rights of the Uyghurs while committing gross human rights violations against them (Concepcion 20-21). In 1995, the Chinese government banned Meshreps (a traditional Uyghur social gathering), fearing that they could serve as a forum for separatist rhetoric, and suppressed them violently (Concepcion 20-21). In 2015, the Chinese government passed a law banning the practice of religion in public venue, as well as banning religiously-motivated internet posts

GDP Growth (2010-2014)



remained fairly stable up until the 20th century.

In the early 20th century, nationalist movements swept the globe; the Uyghurs twice attempted to form an independent state of their own and failed on both occasions (Concepcion 19). In 1949, following the communist revolution and the creation of the PRC, domestic stability was reestablished and the consolidation of power in Xinjiang was made a priority. The new communist government introduced programs to increase Han immigration to Xinjiang (Concepcion 19), otherwise coined as Hanification (The Economist 2004). However, the threat of Uyghur secession only increased following the fall of the Soviet Union, as the Central Asian countries subsequently obtained their independence. As a result, the Chinese government, from the 1980's to the present, has diminished the political and religious

which could serve to, “undermine national unity.” (Schachtel 2014). The Chinese government has also curtailed the Uyghurs’ judicial guarantees (The Constitution of The People’s Republic of China, Chapter II, Article 36 & 37). Uyghurs are frequently imprisoned without due process, “sentenced to lengthy prison terms for essentially non-violent activities,” and tortured to extract confessions (Concepcion 20). The Chinese government has received vast criticism from the international community as a result of these human rights violations; as a result, the Chinese government remains committed to labeling the Uyghurs as terrorists in an attempt to legitimize their actions (The Australian Centre on China in the World 2012) (Human Rights Watch 2015).

The heavy-handed crackdown by the central government has only exacerbated the situation in Xinjiang and is likely the main reason for the increase in ‘terrorism’ there. In 2014 alone there were

⁴ Inter-marriage between ethnicities was very rare and often led to both individuals being ostracized by their families. (Bellér-Hann, 2008)

From 2010-2014, Xinjiang's GDP grew at an average annualized rate of 14% - the 9th highest rate out of the 31 provinces measured, higher than both Beijing and Shanghai.

multiple 'terrorist' attacks in Xinjiang⁵. Many blame the increase in violent conflict on both the direct human rights violations conducted by the Chinese government and also on the increased Hanification of the region (Wong 2014) (Human Rights Watch 2015).

It is widely believed that the incentivized Hanification of Xinjiang by the Chinese government has been conducted in an attempt to dilute the Uyghur population and culture. In 1945, Han and Uyghurs made up 6.2% and 82.7% of the Xinjiang population, respectively. In 2008, this demographic had shifted to 39.2% Han and 46.1% Uyghur⁶ (Howell & Fan 123). Many Han have been incentivized to move to Xinjiang for economic benefits. The Xinjiang Production and Construction Corp. (XPCC) is a state-owned enterprise charged with the construction and operation of agricultural communities which has greatly contributed to the Hanification of Xinjiang (Bhattacharji 2012). The areas controlled by the XPCC have a combined population of 2.6 Million, of which 86% are ethnically Han. As a result, the XPCC communities are culturally homogenous, which has subsequently led to an increase in ethnic

wealth disparity⁷ (Bhattacharji 2012). The Chinese government has also incentivized intermarriage. In Qiemo County, Xinjiang, a new policy went into effect in 2014 whereby the government offers \$1,600 a year for five years, priority housing, government jobs, health care benefits, and subsidized education to multi-ethnic families (Wong 2014). The government has stated that incentives are in place to promote a, "harmonious integration"; however, international scholars have rebuked the initiative, seeing it instead as a governmental attempt at assimilating the Uyghurs by white-washing their culture and ethnicity (Wong 2014).

Economic and Geopolitical Importance of Xinjiang

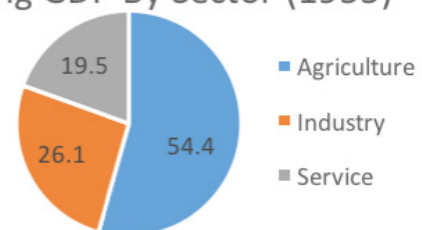
China has forcefully maintained the region, regardless of the ramifications, for three primary reasons: 1) it has always been part of China's political strategy to maintain their historic territory, 2) Xinjiang has vital natural resources, which are necessary to meet china's growing demand, and 3) China has massive economic and geopolitical plans for Xin-

⁷ The XPCC contributes to approximately 17% of the total GDP of Xinjiang. (The Economist 2013)

⁵ In March, over 30 people were killed as Uyghurs attacked a crowd at a train station; in May, over 40 people were killed by a car bombing at a busy market in Ürümqi; in August, over 100 people died when a group of assailants attacked police stations and other governmental offices (Human Rights Watch 2015) (BBC News 2014).

⁶ It is likely that the percentage of Han in Xinjiang is even higher than this number, taken from the census; as it does not include military troops stationed there or undocumented migrant workers. (BBC News, 2014)

Xinjiang GDP By Sector (1955)



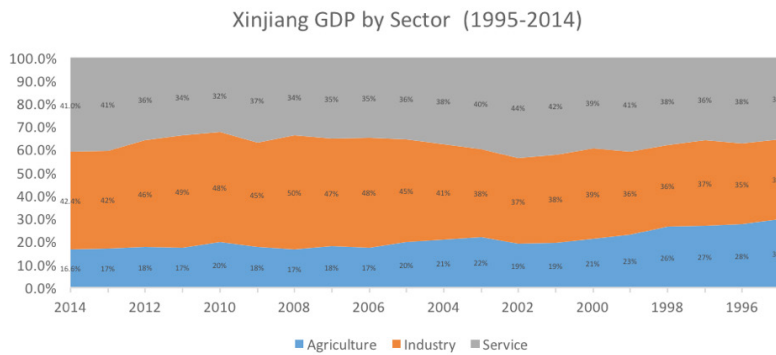
jiang and the Central Asian region.

The Chinese government readily defends a long-standing claim over Xinjiang. In a white paper published by the Chinese

government on the topic of Xinjiang, the foreword immediately stated that, since ancient times, Xinjiang has been an inseparable part of the unitary multi-ethnic Chinese nation (Information Office of the State Council of The PRC 2009). This concept of preserving the historic Chinese territory is heavily rooted within Chinese culture. There is a common Chinese myth in which China was originally founded by the so-called, “Yellow Emperor” (Kissinger 6). What is interesting, however, is that the Yellow Emperor is not said to have created a new empire but rather reestablished one which had fallen into chaos (Kissinger 6). In this myth, the Chinese nation predates history itself without pinpointing a historic singularity. While China’s territory fluctuated over time, with power struggles leading to civil wars and chaos, whenever the dust settled China was always reunified by claims of this ancient history and their heavenly mandate. We have seen China uphold these territorial claims in Tibet (BBC News 2014), and more recently in the South China Sea (Glaser 2012). As a result of this cultural ideology, China has, and will continue to, uphold its sovereignty over Xinjiang regardless of the consequences.

Xinjiang is also seen as a vital and inseparable part of China due to the presence of vital resources there. In just the past decade alone, as population and average wages within China increased⁸, so

⁸ Population has increased 19% from 1991-2014, GDP per Capita has increased 2,191% from 1991-2014 (The World Bank, 2015)



did domestic consumer and industrial demand⁹. With the increase in demand, China has continually looked to secure industrial and energy resources wherever

possible. Xinjiang has massive mineral and ore reserves. Xinjiang’s proven iron reserves total 750 million tons (China Internet Information Center 2015), surpassing the total amount of South Africa’s total proven reserves (United States Geological Survey 85). Xinjiang also has vast fossil fuel resources such as petroleum, natural gas, and coal. Petroleum and natural gas reserves in Xinjiang account for roughly 25% of the domestic total; coal reserves in Xinjiang’s are equal to approximately 38% of the domestic total (China Internet Information Center 2015).

Lastly, Xinjiang has seen an incredible increase in economic output which is poised to grow exponentially as China implements its new massive regional investment plan, the One Road-One Belt initiative (OBOR). From 2010-2014, Xinjiang’s GDP grew at an average annualized rate of 14% - the 9th highest rate out of the 31 provinces measured, higher than both Beijing and Shanghai (Appendix 3). Xinjiang has also witnessed a promising diversification of their economy. In 1955, agriculture, industry and services equated to 54.4%, 26.1%, and 19.5% of the region’s total economic output, respectively (Appendix 4). In 2014, agriculture, industry and

⁹ Chinese Imports on Goods and Services has increased 3,211% from 1991-2014 (annual avg. growth of 133.8%) and Energy Imports, a percentage of total energy usage, has increased 376% from 1991-2012 (The World Bank, 2015) (OECD, 2008) Chinese Imports on Goods and Services has increased 3,211% from 1991-2014 (annual avg. growth of 133.8%) and Energy Imports, a percentage of total energy usage, has increased 376% from 1991-2012 (The World Bank, 2015) (OECD, 2008)

services equated to 16.6%, 42.4%, and 41.0%, respectively (Appendix 5)¹⁰. Growth and economic diversification are only projected to increase with the implementation of OBOR.

OBOR is a Chinese economic initiative to create a “Silk Road Economic Belt” which would connect South East Asia, India, Pakistan, China, and Central Asia to Europe, primarily through infrastructure development (Kennedy & Parker 2015) (Appendix 6). In the first half of 2015, 1,401 FDI contracts were signed by Chinese companies for OBOR projects totaling 37.6 billion USD, which is equal to 43.3% of China’s total FDI output (Zimmerman 7). Approximately 20 billion USD are being allocated for domestic infrastructure projects alone, the majority of which will be invested in Xinjiang (Tiezzi 2014). China has maintained that the investment in OBOR is to help build the regional economy while increasing logistical efficiency from China to Europe¹¹. However, it is largely believed that China also has geopolitical goals which are not being expressly stated (Stratfor 2013). The OBOR will certainly increase China’s soft power throughout Asia, particularly within Central Asia. The OBOR will also provide alternative routes for trade and military mobilization if a full-scale conflict were to ever occur on the eastern coast, which is a possible scenario given the history of cross-strait relations and the increase in conflict within the South China Sea (Stratfor 2013). Regardless of the true motivations of the OBOR to China, it remains clear that China is committed to preserving and developing Xinjiang. As the economic value of Xinjiang increases, China will become continually less

benevolent in dealing with nationalist or separatist Uyghur movements.

Conclusion

China and the Central Asian region have always had close ties, largely due to China’s ancient presence in Xinjiang. Throughout history, China has always maintained sovereignty over their claimed territories as if by some “immutable law of nature,” (Kissinger 6) and Xinjiang is no exception. Xinjiang and Central Asia have gone through massive economic development over the past decades, which has ultimately only made the region more important to China as they seek to find new markets in which to sell their industrial surplus. With investment forecasted to spike within the region due to the OBOR initiative, Xinjiang will only have an even greater importance over the next few decades. While China’s regional geopolitical objectives remain shrouded in a cloudy veil, one thing is certain: China will continue to aggressively suppress potential uprisings in Xinjiang, as they have done on many occasions throughout the past century¹². The upcoming decades will serve to be a formative era for a new Chinese political strategy; there is no doubting that violence and uprisings will continue in Xinjiang and the method with which China handles said conflicts could in part determine their ability to gain power within Central Asia and the world at large.

10 From 1995-2014, the value added of agriculture to the economy decreased 44%. The industrial sector, value added, has increased 22% over the same time period (National Bureau of Statistics of China 2014)

11 It takes 21 days to reach Europe from China by railroad, compared to 5 weeks by sea; however, railroads cost 25% more (Stratfor 2013). Furthermore, there is a growing security threat regarding the distribution of sea lanes given the growth of the China Seas conflicts. (Stratfor, 2013)

12 Xinjiang separatist movements (China Internet Information Center), Tiananmen Square Massacre, 12-3 incident in Macau, Hong Kong Riots of 1960’s and 1970’s, Tibetan unrest.