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The Perception of the 2009 Ürümqi Conflict across the Islamic World

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The Ürümqi riots of July 2009 were a political earthquake that jolted China's confidence and image, inflicting particular damage on Beijing's deepening ties with the Islamic world. Since then, the bloodshed from Xinjiang's ethnic and religious strife has escalated to the point that China's rulers constantly feel forced to prove that they can protect their own citizens – especially the Han Chinese – at home and around the world. As a result, China increasingly resembles a wounded Colossus – a burgeoning Great Power plagued by internal conflicts despite its looming influence in global affairs.

Because both sides in the Uyghur-Han conflict are aggressors as well as victims, it is difficult to adopt a consistent moral judgment in favor of one group and against the other (Meng and Zhu, 2003). The Han colonize Uyghurs' lands, marginalize their culture, persecute their religion, and monopolize the region's economy (Ruddelson 1997, Millward 2009, Bovington 2010). Uyghur retaliation is increasingly violent, indiscriminate, and far-flung – including suicide attacks against unarmed civilians not only in Xinjiang, but in distant targets such as Kunming, Guangzhou, and the heart of Beijing.

The inherent injustice and brutality of the conflict have split the Han and Uyghur communities in China and paralyzed foreign audiences who want no part of the quarrel. China's ruling establishment is filled with critical voices who argue that force alone will merely enflame ethnic and religious protest (Li 2007, Ma 2010, Liebold 2012). The government's Uyghur opponents realize that terrorism and separatism are hopeless causes that can aggravate their subjugation and hasten their extinction as a people. Neither side has found reliable backing abroad. Uyghurs hear ready expressions of sympathy, but little concrete support for armed struggle and none for independence. Beijing has learned that

official endorsements of its territorial claims and anti-terrorist rhetoric are routinely coupled with denunciations of its human rights violations and discriminatory social policies.

The global Islamic community is divided just as deeply as China and the rest of the world over the conflicts in Xinjiang. The issues are too complex, the blame is too widely shared, and the solution is too uncertain for Muslim leaders and citizens to rally behind a common position. China is too powerful to be demonized like Israel, India or Serbia. And the Uyghurs are too capable of retaliation to be seen as a vanquished people such as the Palestinians, Kashmiris or Bosnians.

Some of the most intense disagreements over Xinjiang have arisen in Turkey, Pakistan, and Indonesia – the handful of countries where Muslim politicians tried to manipulate the 2009 Ürümqi riots and subsequent conflicts for domestic benefit only to pave the way for diplomatic countermeasures that strengthened Beijing's hand while isolating Uyghur extremists more than ever. In each nation, the ruling coalition eventually agreed that their long-term strategic and economic relations with China were too important to jeopardize even if local voters and media were eager to imagine Xinjiang as a reflection of their own racial and religious passions at home (Bianchi 2013a, 2013b).

Turkey: Recalling the lessons of Timur and Beyazit

Turkey launched the earliest and most aggressive attack on China's suppression of the Ürümqi protests. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan accused Beijing of genocide and threatened to censure China in the United Nations Security Council. In fact, this bitter exchange had surprisingly little effect on Sino-Turkish relations because Turkey quickly abandoned efforts to change the status quo in Xinjiang so that it could win greater economic and diplomatic concessions from China (Mo 2009, Torbakov and Nojenen, 2009, Usla 2009).

By 2009, Turkey had already committed to a major retrenchment of its ambitions in Central Asia after nearly two decades of disappointing efforts to exploit the anticipated vacuum in the former Soviet republics. Just a few months before the Xinjiang riots, it became clear that China and Turkey were making progress on a package of trade, investment, and security agreements that were far more valuable to Ankara than to Beijing. Realizing that economic gains at home required political retreat in Central Asia, Erdoğan's government decided to endorse Chinese policies in Xinjiang and even to curtail the freedom of Uyghur nationalists in Turkey itself.

At the height of Ankara's pan-Turkic enthusiasm in the 1990s, nationalist leaders thought their leverage might extend all the way to China because of their long association with Uyghur refugees around the world. They did not expect China to react so negatively and so effectively to their unwelcome interest in Xinjiang and its neighbors. Chinese diplomats focused on multiple pressure points where they knew Turkey was vulnerable, steadily increasing the tension until Ankara felt overwhelmed and was forced to admit defeat (Adıbelli, 2008).

The most sensitive issue was China's growing influence with Kurdish leaders in the newly autonomous region of northern Iraq. Chinese oil companies were some of the first international firms to court Erbil as it sought to negotiate production contracts independently of the central government in Baghdad (Cordoba, 2013). By acquiring a foothold in Iraqi Kurdistan, China sent Turkey several messages at the same time.

Chinese companies could not only lock Turkish firms out of Xinjiang and outmaneuver them throughout Central Asia, they could even beat them to the punch in their own back yard where the Turks thought they had an unassailable advantage. Worse yet, China now had direct influence with long-time allies of the Kurdish rebels who were enjoying safe havens just across the border with Turkey. Beijing left no doubt about its intentions – if Ankara encouraged troublemakers in Xinjiang, it could expect to see Chinese-supported Kurds moving into Turkey's southeastern provinces (Adıbelli, 2007).

On the Mediterranean front, China reminded Turkey of its growing leverage in Cyprus and Greece. Ankara was under constant attack in the United Nations (UN) for its military occupation of northern Cyprus and it was desperate to keep China out of the argument. At the same time, the debt-ridden Greek government was inviting China to spend millions of dollars to transform the port of Piraeus into its European shipping hub. Not only was China becoming a virtual neighbor of Turkey, it also was serving as the leading patron of an archenemy that was still determined to settle old scores in Turkish-controlled Cyprus (Smith, 2014).

To the north, China could pressure Turkey in Bosnia and the Balkans. Turkish settlers and refugees from Eastern Europe form powerful constituencies throughout Thrace and western Anatolia. They are far more numerous than the descendants of Central Asians and more deeply concerned about the fate of their European relatives than of distant groups that speak Turkic languages they do not understand. For right-of-center politicians, Balkan Turks are particularly important swing voters because they are most concentrated in districts that are strongholds of the secularist parties.

Erdoğan and his right-wing rivals are more likely to attract these voters with racial issues than with religious appeals, but not if Ankara appears impotent in Balkan affairs. China's bitter opposition to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) involvement in the former Yugoslavia made it difficult for Turkish governments to assert influence in the Balkans and it made a mockery of their ambitions in Xinjiang. How could Ankara expect voters to back pro-Uyghur efforts in Xinjiang when China obstructed its efforts to help kinsmen much closer to home? In the Balkans – just as with Iraq and Cyprus – Beijing showed it could punish any incursion into Chinese lands by moving at will on all of Turkey's borders.

A few years after the 2009 riots in Xinjiang, a leading Turkish diplomat told me that Erdoğan's accusations of Chinese genocide reminded him of Beyazit I, the Ottoman Sultan who was trounced by Timur at the Battle of Ankara in 1402. In his opinion, Beyazit was consumed with arrogance – so convinced he would soon surround Constantinople that he ignored his eastern flank and taunted Timur with insults, never imagining that his rival's army could march all the way from Samarkand to defeat the Ottomans and capture the Sultan in his Anatolian heartland (Kinross, 1979, Gibbons, 2013). The Chinese, this diplomat contended, were the modern-day equivalent of three Timurs because they knew how to threaten Turkey from several directions at once. Like Timur, China had taught Turkey's leaders a harsh lesson in humility as well as in geostrategy.

Some of Erdoğan's closest allies grasped these lessons and helped to limit the damage to Sino-Turkish relations. Before and after the Ürümqi protests of 2009, two men ensured that negotiations with China stayed on track – Abdullah Gül, Erdoğan's old comrade in the ruling party leadership, and Ahmet Davutoğlu, the government's chief foreign policy advisor. Thanks to the persistence of Gül and Davutoğlu, Beijing and Ankara made mutual concessions on Xinjiang, allowing them to move rapidly toward major economic deals and even toward military and strategic measures that had seemed inconceivable just a few years earlier.

The turning point was a deft agreement that Turkey would not harbor pro-independence groups from Xinjiang if the Chinese embassy in Ankara would hold regular meetings with Turkish opposition party leaders who would speak on behalf of Uyghur interests (*Haberx.com,* 2010). In an added measure of goodwill, China also pledged to halt all sales of hajj related products to Turkey – particularly travel gear, clothing, prayer rugs, and religious souvenirs – so that local manufacturers could

rebuild a lucrative and symbolically important market they had lost to Chinese competition (Becerekli, 2010, *World Bulletin,* 2011a, 2011c).

China coupled political flexibility with economic incentives to convince Turkey that partnership was wiser than confrontation. Beijing's trump card was its huge trade surplus with Turkey and Ankara's urgent desire to offset the burden with new Chinese investments in industry and infrastructure (*Global Times,* 2009, *Türkiye Gazetesi,* 2010). China was eager to expand its economic presence in Turkey because it could serve as a convenient platform for re-exporting Chinese products to the European Union (EU) – where Ankara enjoyed privileged trade access – as well as to the Middle East and Africa (*Dunya Ekonomisi,* 2012, Özyürek and Abbak, 2012). When Turkey received assurances that it could make similar investments in China, including Xinjiang, the bargain was sealed (Parkinson, 2012, *Sunday's Zaman,* 2012).

Eventually, contracts were signed in several other fields, including high-speed railways, nuclear power plants, and clean energy development (Parkinson, 2010, Erol, 2012, Bayraktar, 2012). Many of these deals had been on the drawing board for years, but the most surprising progress came in discussions on military and geostrategic planning – areas where Western powers had long assumed they enjoyed an unassailable priority in Turkey's calculations (*World Bulletin,* 2011b, Barriaux, 2012).

As early as September 2010 – only 15 months after the Ürümqi riots – Turkey invited China's air force to join military exercises that previously had included only NATO and Israeli partners. Turkey decided to bar Israeli participation because of their bitter clashes over the blockade of Gaza, and American pressure prompted many NATO countries to cancel their appearances in sympathy with Israel. In response, Turkey promptly invited China to fill the vacancies, giving the Peoples Liberation Army (PLA) its first opportunity to fly missions outside of its own territory (Pfeffer, 2010, Wolf, 2010). Nearly 60 years after Turkish and Chinese troops had faced off in Korea, their pilots were flying joint missions over Konya. The Turks assured the Pentagon that they would keep the most recent US technology in hangers far from Chinese view, but the psychological impact was irreversible. The speedy growth of Sino-Turkish cooperation stunned the NATO alliance and threatened to upset military balances from one end of Eurasia to the other (Megalommatis, 2008, McCauley, 2009, Feffer, 2010).

In 2013, Erdoğan hinted that he had an even bigger card up his sleeve. In a live television interview, he threw everyone off balance by saying he was ready to forget about the EU if Russia and China invited Turkey to join the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Responding to

the subsequent uproar, Erdoğan shrugged off the incident, claiming that he was merely describing the teasing sessions he enjoyed with Vladimir Putin. For years, Putin had needled him about Turkey putting up with mistreatment from the EU and getting nothing in return. This time, Erdoğan said, he wanted to give Putin a dose of his own medicine by daring him to make a better offer – an offer everyone knew was premature and perhaps impossible given the difficult Sino-Russian negotiations over expanding SCO membership (*Anadolu Ajansi,* 2013).

Pakistan: mullahs are better than ransom

Unrest in Xinjiang has long strained Sino-Pakistani ties because Beijing believes that Uyghur insurgents operate from bases in northwest Pakistan near the border with Afghanistan. China repeated these accusations with growing intensity after the 2009 Ürümqi riots and in response to subsequent clashes in Xinjiang, Beijing, and Kunming (*Agence France Presse,* 2011, Wines and Walsh, 2012). In addition, China has criticized Pakistani authorities for failing to protect Chinese civilians working throughout the country, particularly near Islamabad where religious radicals held several Chinese hostage and in Baluchistan where tribal insurgents regularly attack and kidnap foreigners building energy-related infrastructure and the new deep-water port at Gwadar (French 2007, *Indian Express,* 2011).

Nonetheless, Chinese and Pakistani leaders realized that history was drawing them closer together and neither side wanted to jeopardize that process. The Obama administration's frustrations in the Afghanistan war led it to push the fighting into Pakistan with catastrophic results for the civilian population and their already negative feelings toward the US (Lakshmanan, 2012). Meanwhile, Washington was tilting more openly than ever toward New Delhi – a strategy that most Asian commentators interpreted as aiming to counterbalance China's growing power (Asghar, 2010, Bajoria, 2010).

In this context, Beijing and Islamabad expected that America's withdrawals from Afghanistan and Iraq would create countless dangers that neighboring countries would have to manage by themselves. For China and Pakistan, the stakes were far greater than the fate of the two war-ravaged semi-colonies of the United States. The same problems that connected China and Pakistan in Xinjiang also pointed to their vital joint interests in the future of a more integrated Eurasia – not only in South Asia, but also in Central Asia and the Middle East (Rahman and Hameed, 2010).

Like the United States, China was often vexed by Pakistan's seemingly intractable disorder and poverty, which made it impossible for any Great Power to protect its citizens abroad. However, because Chinese diplomats placed a higher value on long-term relations with Pakistan, they tried to devise more creative and productive solutions than their American competitors, who focused on safeguarding and extracting their troops instead of improving the lives of the people in the region. Beyond routinely shaming and rebuking Islamabad's security forces, China stepped up its economic assistance and political support at many times that pointedly coincided with America's deepening estrangement from Pakistan and its steady drift toward India.

While most foreign donors focused on shoring up Pakistan's short-term finances, China's aid targeted infrastructure, military hardware, and disaster relief –efforts that encouraged development instead of deeper indebtedness. Many of the showcase projects were explicitly designed to create a transnational transport network connected to Xinjiang. From the Himalayas to the Arabian Sea, Chinese engineers led work on highways, railways, dams, pipelines, and ports, all destined to spur the flow of energy and trade throughout China and Central Asia (Haider, 2005 a, Khan, 2009, MacDonald, 2011).

Gwadar was to become a key hub bringing Persian Gulf oil and gas overland and easing China's exposure to long maritime routes and chokepoints dominated by the US Navy (Zeng. 2009, Singh. 2013). For both China and Pakistan, the combined economic and military benefits justified the huge costs and dangers that constantly plagued their efforts (Itamar Lee, 2009, Bokhari and Hille, 2011). When Baluchi nationalists ratcheted up campaigns of sabotage and kidnapping, Beijing and Islamabad blamed American and Indian intelligence agencies for the violence (Escobar, 2009). The Afghanistan war had thwarted America's ambitions to build pipelines connecting the Caspian Sea with India while excluding both Iran and China. Many Pakistanis believed that the US was venting its frustrations on their country and deliberately undermining its plans to profit from opening direct links for trade between Iran and China (Haider, 2005b, Kaplan, 2009).

As US-Pakistani relations deteriorated, China strengthened its military ties with Islamabad (Bokhari, 2011, Perlez, 2011). They started a joint venture to build fighter jets and coordinated operations near disputed territories along their borders with India (Harrison, 2010). When Washington agreed to support India's nuclear power development, Beijing offered to build more reactors in Pakistan (Mirza, 2010, Ahmed, 2010, Haniffa, 2011). The inter-Asian arms race surged to higher levels

as New Delhi tested new long-range missiles – dubbed "China killers" – and touted its rapid naval build-up as proof that India had become a Pacific power (*Daily Times,* 2010, Deen, 2010, Patranobis, 2012).

The perception of common enemies encouraged Beijing and Islamabad to contain their disagreements as much as possible, but it did not remove the threats to Chinese citizens in either Xinjiang or Pakistan. Sporadic attacks on terrorist camps near the Afghanistan border and against Baluchi insurgents failed to end the problem. Eventually, Chinese leaders realized that the official channels would never be able to deliver the security they demanded. Quietly, the Chinese embassy began to try a more direct approach to local religious groups with ties to outlaws and dissidents that the government could not reach (Peter Lee, 2009).

Of course, much of the anti-Chinese violence was motivated not by religion, but by ethnic and nationalist grievances or by simple extortion. Nonetheless, China saw multiple benefits in cultivating some of Pakistan's mainstream mullahs and preachers. China could show that, in contrast to Pakistan's Western and Indian critics, it was an Islam-friendly country – indeed that it was an integral part of the Muslim world.

At the same time, Beijing hoped that capitalizing on the prestige of cooperative religious leaders would help to ward off kidnappings in Pakistan and discourage deviant teachings in China. When Chinese citizens were threatened, Pakistani preachers were asked to intercede on their behalf. Several Pakistani scholars were invited to China to teach in Islamic schools and the previously banned Jama'at Tabligh was allowed to resume its work in several Hui communities (Ali, 2009).

Beijing's security problems – both foreign and domestic – pushed it to ever growing displays of its capabilities for rescue and deterrence. These were aimed at multiple audiences, signaling both defensive and offensive powers. From this perspective, China's growing global reach created greater vulnerabilities which, in turn, justified nationalistic demands to project stronger military force.

Somali pirates paved the way for Chinese warships to launch regular patrols in the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf. Libyan rebels set the stage for a grand airlift and naval rescue of 30,000 Chinese citizens that rushed PLA assets to the Mediterranean and placed them on Europe's doorstep. A rising tide of attacks on overseas Chinese has swept across Asia, Africa, Europe, and Latin America, creating a compelling argument that China's military presence needs to catch up with its sprawling commercial and security interests (Duchâtel and Gill, 2012). Ironically, China's hard-line American critics have encouraged its military

expansion by complaining about Beijing's supposed free-riding on the global security that Western nations provide at their own expense.

Indonesia: Muslim power and the overseas Chinese

In the aftermath of the 2009 Ürümqi riots, the most chilling threats against China came not from terrorists or religious fanatics but from a mainstream Muslim politician in Indonesia. Din Syamsuddin was the leader of Muhammadiya, Indonesia's second largest Islamic movement with over 30 million members throughout the archipelago. He accused Beijing of "ethnic cleansing" in Xinjiang and implied that such crimes could provoke attacks against Chinese citizens in Indonesia (Widhi, 2009).

Syamsuddin and other Muslim leaders deliberately avoided specifying whether they were referring merely to mainland citizens carrying PRC passports or to the nearly ten million overseas Chinese who were native-born Indonesians (*indonesiamatters.com,* 2009). The ambiguity quickly raised the specter of the anti-Chinese riots during the final months of Suharto's rule in 1998 and, more ominously, the mass bloodbath of 1965 in which thousands of Indonesians of Chinese descent were murdered because they were accused of conspiring with Communist insurgents.

A major row with Jakarta would have been even more threatening to Beijing's interests than the spats with Ankara and Islamabad. Turkey and Pakistan were China's overland gateways to Europe and the Middle East, but Indonesia stood squarely astride China's maritime lifeline – the crowded and narrow sea lanes connecting the Pacific and Indian Oceans (Sukma, 2009a, Laksmana, 2011). In addition, Indonesia was the decisive voice in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), which had emerged as the regional broker for Great Power competition throughout the Western Pacific (Hadi, 2010, Pattiradjawane, 2010). Indonesia would shape any proposal for settling the territorial disputes that were breaking out between China and its neighbors and for creating a wider Asian security community that might try to balance China against rival powers, including the US, Russia, Japan, and India (Sukma, 2009b).

When the Ürümqi riots erupted, Indonesia's Chinese community was enjoying a commercial and cultural renaissance after decades of isolation and discrimination under Suharto. Their family-run firms were more integrated than ever into the vast network of overseas Chinese businesses that ran Asia's financial hubs and linked them to mainland China (Suryadinata, 2006). Chinese festivals were celebrated openly for the first time in years and the once-banned Chinese language was

making a comeback in print and electronic media. Coming from one of Indonesia's most powerful Muslim politicians, Syamsuddin's remarks put all of this at risk, threatening to turn back the clock to Cold War days of conflating Chinese heritage with disloyalty (Suryadinata, 2008, Glionna, 2010).

Beijing wisely responded to Syamsuddin as though he was an opportunist rather than an old-fashioned racist and anti-Communist. Everyone knew that he was no friend of the US, notwithstanding his doctorate from the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). Indeed, he was famous for his long-running feud with the American government, which he regularly described as anti-Muslim because of its accusations that Indonesia was coddling Islamic terrorists (Martin, 2007).

Like other Muhammadiya leaders before him, Syamsuddin tried to represent the grievances of Muslim businesses that were battling what they viewed as unfair competition from foreign multinationals and from the well-connected Chinese firms they often preferred as partners in Indonesia. Muhammadiya had considerable success in lobbying Jakarta for preferential treatment to Muslim entrepreneurs, but they were frightened that the new ASEAN-China free trade agreement would decimate that vulnerable constituency (Amirrachman, 2007).

Bearing such political and commercial interests in mind, Beijing could pragmatically approach Muhammadiya and its followers not as enemies, but as rent-seekers or would-be tributaries. Accordingly, China set out to defuse tensions with Indonesia's Muslims through a combination of economic incentives and cultural diplomacy.

China is probably the only country in the world capable of tackling Indonesia's massive needs for rapid infrastructure development. Indonesian planners are eager to integrate the internal markets of the largest islands where overland transport and communications are often dilapidated or non-existent. Such integration requires a level of capital, technology, and commitment that Jakarta has never obtained from its long-time trading partners in Japan, the US, or Europe. China, in contrast, has offered to undertake many of the most costly projects because it regards Indonesia's resources, markets, and goodwill as indispensible to its own prosperity and security. Hence, there was little surprise when Beijing increased its already impressive loans and trade benefits after the incidents in Xinjiang (Baskoro and Bisara, 2010, Bisara and Agustiyanti, 2012).

Responding directly to the fears of weaker Muslim businesses, China also carved out several exemptions for Indonesian producers in the regional free trade agreement that was due to take effect in 2010 (*Jakarta*

Globe, 2010, Safrina 2010, Fung 2011). Smaller firms were temporarily protected from tariff reductions. Most of them qualified for adjustment loans during the early years of the treaty. And several received long-term supply contracts with Chinese state enterprises, including special procurement deals with the PLA for uniforms and non-combat equipment (Blake, 2010, Ekawati, 2010).

Beijing also launched several initiatives to identify China's history and culture with Indonesian Islam. The Chinese embassy sponsored a grand exhibit in Jakarta showcasing Islamic arts from China, including a wide assortment of manuscripts, calligraphy, and hajj memorabilia. (Hew, 2009, *Purwoko,* 2010) Chinese scholars and media celebrated the role of Zheng He, the Muslim admiral who commanded the 15th-century armadas of the Ming emperor that sailed from the Pacific to the Persian Gulf and on to East Africa (Marsahid, 2013, Karsono, 2010).

Zheng He and his Chinese crews were described as some of the earliest bearers of Islam in Indonesia. Their descendants were traced to well-known communities of Chinese Muslims who had lived for centuries in Surabaya and other coastal cities (Lombard and Salmon, 1994, Kong, 2008). Historians in China and Indonesia increasingly portrayed the Islamization of Southeast Asia as a complex blending of Chinese, Arabian, and Indian influences. Zheng He has become a multivalent icon of China's solidarity with Afro-Asian peoples and the Islamic world, but he enjoys a special role as a patriarch of all Chinese Indonesians – Muslim and non-Muslim alike. In this narrative, Islam will help to unite Chinese and Indonesians in the future as Communism once divided them in the past (Muazkki, 2010, Zhuang, 2011).

China has benefitted greatly from its sensitivity to Indonesia's growing influence in regional and global affairs (Darusman, 2010, Padden, 2010, Raslan, 2010). Indonesian diplomats have repeatedly foiled Washington's efforts to participate in negotiations on maritime disputes between China and ASEAN member states. Indonesia continues to balance Great Power ambitions in the Pacific, avoiding formal alliances while steadily leading ASEAN's economic integration with mainland China (Laksmana, 2010, Brown, 2011). This sort of diplomatic hedging suits China's interests admirably because it encourages a fluid, multipolar international order instead of an American-dominated Pacific or a return to the treaty blocks of the Cold War. Hence, China can credibly claim to uphold the Western Pacific status quo in principle while gradually expanding its influence in practice (Goh, 2008, Laksmana, 2009).

Common techniques of damage control – and their diminishing returns

In dealing with the fallout of the Xinjiang protests, Chinese leaders used three interrelated approaches that helped to steady and improve their relations with Turkey, Pakistan, and Indonesia. In each case, they recognized grievances and offered compromises to ameliorate them. They also tried explicitly to identify China with the Islamic world, either as a sister civilization or as an integral member. In addition, they shrewdly distinguished or combined the issues of race and religion, depending on the apparent demands of the circumstances.

Chinese diplomats seldom discussed Xinjiang in a vacuum. Even when they blamed others for contributing to the violence, they offered attractive incentives for isolating Uyghur nationalists. In Turkey, they even agreed to discuss China's domestic problems with foreigners as long as the conversations were private and limited to Xinjiang. Whenever possible, Beijing found important economic grievances that it could address as trade-offs for sympathizing with its predicament in Xinjiang. China also stressed the wider geopolitical perspective, treating each country as a key member of an emerging global order that would improve its status and well-being.

China's negotiators made concrete efforts to identify with Islam as a civilization and to disavow accusations that Beijing was hostile to any world religion. Every package of incentives included symbolic religious measures that were calculated to produce lasting emotional effects – deference to the hajj, respect for religious scholars, shared artistic traditions, even kinship with the earliest Muslim missionaries. The more China portrayed itself as a Muslim-friendly country, the more it could cast the Uyghur protestors as separatists and extremists who were pressing ethnic and nationalist demands instead of as pious victims defending their religion and traditions.

The Chinese emphasized racial identities when they thought doing so would strengthen their case. In Turkey, they portrayed the Uyghurs as only remotely connected to the people of Anatolia, especially compared with Muslims in the Balkans. In Indonesia, the Chinese highlighted common Muslim ancestors and touted China as a source of Southeast Asian Islam. In Pakistan, however, China focused on common religious concerns, arguing that Pakistani scholars could help to elevate Islamic learning and practice in China itself (Ali, 2009).

All of these damage-control efforts are being rapidly overtaken by mounting eruptions of carnage in Xinjiang and their reverberations in

all corners of China. No amount of nimble and shrewd diplomacy can end the bloodshed that shocks China's citizens at home and disgraces them around the world. The spillover from Xinjiang threatens to aggravate many other festering ethnic divisions – not only in Tibet and Inner Mongolia, but also among the Chinese-speaking Hui Muslims that Beijing depicts as the loyal face of a domesticated and nationalist Islam (Iredale, Bilik and Guo, 2003, Jia and Mi, 2007). Nor can the party-state count on support from the over-stressed Han majority (Wei, 2010, Blanchard, 2011). Increasingly divided by social inequality and disillusioned by corruption, why would they stand by a fractured police state that cannot even protect their families in schools and clinics or in markets and train stations?

The party, police, and army cannot agree on effective remedies for Xinjiang's troubles – just as they can't agree on the root causes. The muscular approach continues the centuries of conquest, rebellion, and re-conquest, viewing the province as a perpetual war zone that China's rulers must subdue and repopulate lest their enemies turn it against them (Forbes, 1986, Millward, 1998). The developmental approach imagines Xinjiang as a global crossroads that makes China more than the sum of its parts while linking it to continents far beyond (Tian, 2008, Fisher, 2009, *The Economist,* 2011).

The fatal flaw of the developmental strategy is that it remains just another form of colonization. Uyghurs and other Muslim inhabitants might survive as diminished minorities in their homelands, but they cannot share in the vision of a modern and multi-cultural society that Beijing advertises (Cao, 2010, Gladney, 2009, Zang, 2012). The marginalized non-Han residents of Xinjiang see a future of apartheid disguised as ethnic pluralism – and for the most desperate among them, that is a reason to expand the zone of battle to all of China.

Festering Sino-Turkish tensions and the Arab spring

Repeated flare-ups of violence in Xinjiang and their repercussions throughout China have put greater strains on Sino-Turkish relations. More than any other country, Turkey retains the most abiding involvement in Uyghur affairs and suffers from the greatest contradiction between popular and official attitudes toward China. For a few years, the Arab Spring and challenges to the blockade of Gaza gave Turkey and China an unexpected cooling off period in which Middle Eastern conflicts overshadowed Central Asian geopolitics. Erdoğan garnered enormous popularity by engaging in constant quarrels with Israel and

by identifying with Arab aspirations for democracy (Al- Marzuqi, 2010, Shadid, 2011, Samir, 2012).

From Ankara's perspective, these Middle Eastern arenas appeared far more promising and less costly than earlier run-ins with China and Central Asian governments who had accused Turkey of pursuing pan-Turkist and pan-Islamic agendas (Tuğal, 2012, Pantucci, 2015). In Turkey, pro-Uyghur causes were eclipsed by the AK Party's electoral victories in 2011 and Erdoğan's successful campaign to assume the Presidency in 2014. Annual commemorations of the "East Turkestan Ürümqi massacres" – anti-China hackers pasting Turkish flags on Chinese websites, and nationalist politicians' complaints during public visits to the Chinese embassy – all these continued, but with less and less fanfare (HaberVakti, 2010, Haberx, 2010).

However, Erdoğan's triumphs were short-lived. As president, he quickly found himself fighting off challenges on several fronts at the same time: from the fallout of long civil wars in Syria and Iraq, from more defiant Kurdish groups in the southeastern provinces, and from new waves of secularist and leftist protests in the major cities (Grunstein, 2011, Manthorpe, 2012, Shafak, 2013). Before long, Xinjiang returned to the crisis list as well.

In 2014, police in Thailand announced that they had rescued hundreds of Chinese Uyghur refugees who had fallen into the hands of human traffickers after fleeing the deepening violence in Xinjiang. Turkey and China traded accusations and insults over their plight, with Ankara claiming they were victims of racial and religious persecution who should be given asylum in Turkey and Beijing insisting they were fugitives who should be extradited to China for interrogation and trial (Martina, 2014). Bangkok rejected both countries' demands and kept most of the Uyghurs in Thai custody. Nonetheless, several refugee families managed to enter Turkey and resettle in Kayseri. Before long, the Uyghur detainees in Thailand began a hunger strike to attract international attention to their cause (HaberVakti, 2015, Gerin, 2015).

These quarrels opened the door for Rebiya Kadeer to return to center stage, aggravating old ulcers in Ankara and Beijing alike. Kadeer is the head of the World Uyghur Congress that China accused of organizing the 2009 Ürümqi protests and many other incidents. She claimed that Turkish diplomats were dragging their feet in the refugee matter, pretending to stand up for the Uyghurs while intentionally doing nothing that might antagonize the Chinese. Kadeer charged that for years Turkish leaders had made many promises to China about expelling

Uyghur activists, restraining pro-Uyghur demonstrations, and barring her from her "second homeland" in Turkey (Elveren, 2014).

Now, she asked, why was Turkey's government stalling over a few hundred Xinjiang refugees while accepting tens of thousands from other countries such as Syria, Iraq, Palestine, Libya, and Somalia? "If Turkey is taking in so many Syrians because they are Muslims," she said, "then Turkey should lend a helping hand to the Uyghurs, who nobody looks after, because they are both Turks and Muslims." (Elveren 2014) Kadeer's accusations resonated widely in Turkey, particularly in Central Anatolia where Erdoğan's party is most vulnerable to rival right-wing parties with a long history of pan-Turkist and anti-China activities (Milli Gazete, 2010). Just as Ankara and Beijing were looking forward to a decade of cooperation in building a "New Silk Road" traversing Eurasia and linking London with Shanghai, both countries were again locked in prolonged and bitter exchanges over Xinjiang's Uyghurs (Ermintan, 2014).

The current stand-off over the Xinjiang refugees illustrates the inherent weakness of the tacit Sino-Turkish strategy of indefinite damage control. Diplomats on both sides want to improvise formal exchanges that will allow their leaders to fend off criticism from ultranationalists at home while conducting business as usual on every other issue. Xinjiang's eruptions are growing in frequency and magnitude. But Ankara and Beijing are just beginning to realize that the Uyghurs' predicament jeopardizes their own destinies, particularly their grand vision of Eurasian integration.

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