



NATO, XUAR, XI, VW

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NATO stands for North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Leaders of member states gathered in London on 3rd and 4th December 2019 “to celebrate seventy years of the strongest and most successful Alliance in history, and mark the thirtieth anniversary of the fall of the Iron Curtain.”ⁱ As expected, the concluding London Declaration emphasized the need for members to increase “defence investment”. Future historians might find it curious that leaders nominally dedicated to North Atlantic security felt obliged to reaffirm “our commitment to long-term security and stability in Afghanistan.” The only state singled out for criticism in the London Declaration is Russia, whose “aggressive actions constitute a threat to Euro-Atlantic security.”

XUAR stands for Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. Ildikó Bellér-Hann and I have worked here on and off since 1986. Field research has never been entirely straightforward but we were fortunate in 1995-6 and again in 2006-7 to be able to live among Uyghurs in several different locations of this vast region. This would not have been possible without the help of numerous academic partners and local officials. Since our last visit, a brief one of just a few weeks in 2013, these Uyghur colleagues have been imprisoned or sent to reeducation camps, along with over a million co-ethnics. We are nowadays afraid to attempt contact with family members for fear that any links to foreigners, even foreigners with a deep sympathy for China, could aggravate the precarious situation of these Uyghurs who have lost their liberty, despite careers in which they have been loyal to their state as well as to their ethnic community.

Xi Jinping is the Han Chinese leader ultimately responsible for these draconian measures. He has reversed decades of relatively tolerant cultural and religious policies, including provision for Uyghur language education and elements of affirmative action in both education and economic management that were originally devised in the early Maoist era.ⁱⁱ Xi’s rationale is that assimilation and repression in every domain is the only way to tackle Uyghur secessionist aspirations. Since 9/11 western countries have been meekly complicit in this logic, though numerous scholars have insisted that these policies are more likely to have the opposite consequences. A population of some 11 million with a long history of high culture cannot be so easily dispossessed.

VW is a German car company that has done excellent business in China ever since market-oriented reforms were launched in 1979. Since 2013 Volkswagen has been making cars in Urumchi, capital of the XUAR. This investment symbolizes how the entire region, formerly a string of oases along the Silk Road, has been drawn into the global economy. It is widely assumed that building this factory in a remote province was part of a deal with the authorities in Beijing to enable the company to continue its successful operations in the populous east. VW managers disclaim any interest in issues of politics or human rights. They insist that their enterprise in Urumchi is profitable, that their presence is dictated solely by economic criteria, and that it benefits the local population, including ethnic minorities. This has been questioned by journalists, who have documented close cooperation between the VW joint venture and the security forces responsible for the mass internments.ⁱⁱⁱ

With the unfolding of the post-Mao reforms, the indigenous population has found itself increasingly disadvantaged in urban labour markets. Inability to communicate effectively in the language of the state is undoubtedly a significant factor for many rural Uyghurs. But even those who have good qualifications and are entirely fluent in Mandarin complain about discrimination. These problems in the economic realm together with total domination by Han Chinese in the political realm and the suppression of cultural freedoms (including religious expression), have led a small minority of Uyghurs to engage in active resistance. President Xi seems to think that these problems can be resolved by intensifying political repression, securitization, and economic interventions that in effect coerce Uyghurs to work for minimal wages for Han companies, inside and outside their homeland.^{iv}

Analysis

Although academics have been drawing attention to the scale of the catastrophe in Xinjiang since early 2017, international responses have been feeble. Of course, VW cannot jeopardize its most important market. Scientific organizations such as the Max Planck Society continue to cultivate links with Chinese partners. Washington policy makers finally began to pay attention to the Uyghur cause late in 2019, but this was manifestly an artifact of diplomatic jousting between Donald Trump and Xi Jinping over global trade issues. Who will represent the Uyghurs in the longer term?^v It is significant that the London Declaration by NATO leaders included no criticism of China, just spineless recognition “that China’s growing influence and international policies present both opportunities and challenges.”

One could theorize these developments across Eurasia in terms of empires and nation-states. China under Xi is definitively abandoning the socio-cultural diversity characteristic of agrarian empires and high socialism in order to attain the homogeneous high culture of the industrial nation-state, as modelled by the late Ernest Gellner.^{vi} By contrast, the correct name of the state demonized as Russia in the London Declaration is the Russian Federation. Its Soviet processor

was also a federation, the republics of which were able to secede in a remarkably smooth process in the early 1990s. The rump Russian Federation is still a remarkably diverse polity, which shows no sign that it will adopt the strategy of Xi to deal with its many undeniable problems. In comparison with the military expenditure of NATO and Beijing, that of Moscow is modest. Perhaps some of the resources thereby saved are used to pay for the expensive inefficiencies of continuing to recognize minority languages, and applying policies of affirmative action across Eurasia.

The London Declaration was published in three languages: English, French, and Russian. No doubt this is possible because the headquarters of NATO and the British Foreign Office still possess reserves of Russia-expertise. The Cold War continues; but sooner or later it will be important to translate such communiqués into Chinese.

Notes

ⁱ All quotations are taken from the official communiqué released by NATO on 4th December 2019: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_171584.htm

ⁱⁱ See Mimi Lau: 'From Xinjiang to Ningxia, China's ethnic groups face end to affirmative action in education, taxes, policing'. *South China Morning Post*, 5th December 2019: <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/politics/article/3040577/chinas-ethnic-groups-face-end-affirmative-action-education>

ⁱⁱⁱ For an outline of the situation concerning this joint venture, which only attracted attention in Germany in November 2019, see 'Uiguren-Lager: VW verteidigt Werk in Xinjiang'. *Deutsche Welle*, 26th November 2019: <https://www.dw.com/de/uiguren-lager-vw-verteidigt-werk-in-xinjiang/a-51425104>

^{iv} See the recent special issue of *Central Asian Survey* edited by Joanne Smith Finley (Vol. 38, No. 1, 2019), in particular the editor's introduction (pp. 1-26): Securitization, insecurity and conflict in contemporary Xinjiang: has PRC counter-terrorism evolved into state terror? DOI: 10.1080/02634937.2019.1586348

^v In the short term, the Uyghur cause has been taken up by a sports celebrity in a way that indicates the connectivities of Eurasia from a different angle. Mesut Özil is a famous German footballer of Turkish extraction. He currently plays for Arsenal, London. When Özil, who is a Muslim, posted a message on social media expressing support for the Uyghurs, he was promptly accused of initiating a *jihad* against China. The Chinese authorities cancelled the televising of Arsenal's game against Manchester City in London on 15th December 2019. For Arsenal, to lose its fan base in China would entail serious costs, and so the club is currently doing all it can to distance itself from the sentiments expressed by its player. See:

<https://www.theguardian.com/football/2019/dec/16/arsenal-mesut-ozil-uighurs-china>

^{vi} See Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*. Oxford: Blackwell (1983).

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