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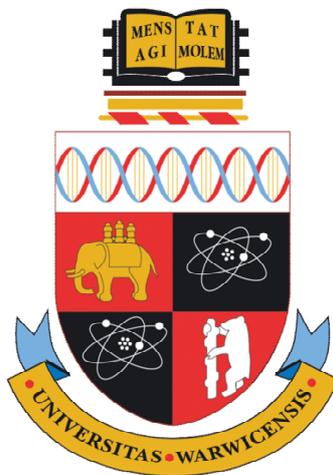
The Terroristization of Xinjiang: Violence, Discourse and Politics in  
China's Uyghur Region (1978-2018)

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy in Politics and International Relations



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## **Declaration and Inclusion of Material**

This thesis is entirely the original work and therefore copyright of Pablo Adriano Rodríguez-Merino. It follows the guidelines provided in the Guide to Examinations for Higher Degrees by Research of the University of Warwick. The dissertation has not been submitted for a degree at another university and any errors within are entirely my own. Some material in the thesis was earlier published in 2019 in my article 'Old 'counter-revolution', new 'terrorism': historicizing the framing of violence in Xinjiang by the Chinese state', in *Central Asian Survey*, 38:1, pp. 27-45 and in an article co-authored with Dr. Alexandra Homolar, 'Making sense of terrorism: a narrative approach to the study of violent events', in *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 12:4, pp. 561-581.

## Abstract

This thesis investigates how and with what consequences violent conflict in Xinjiang, as well as the Uyghur identity, religion, and the region more broadly, have become constituted as a terrorism problem for the Chinese state. To this aim, the thesis develops the concept of terroristization as an original analytical framework for the study of discursive construction of terrorism in non-Western historical contexts. Specifically, this approach integrates dominant scholarly definitions of terrorism as a materiality-informed discursive structure of knowledge that provides a background to, and influences, this process. The study explores the historical phenomenology of Xinjiang-related violence (1978-2018), the discursive patterns of the Chinese state representation of the conflict during this period, and the state security practices implemented in response to the tensions. The thesis shows how the Chinese state framing of violent conflict in Xinjiang gradually changed between the early years of the ‘reform and opening up’ era and the post-9/11 period, when narratives evolved from representing conflict in the region as the inevitable result of structural factors to portraying Xinjiang and the Uyghurs as a security threat and a terrorism problem. This narrative shift was accompanied by a government policy change from a moderate approach to a far-reaching anti-terrorism campaign in Xinjiang, which has recently led to a large number of extrajudicial detentions of members of the ethnic Uyghur minority in re-education camps. Through its in-depth historical-analytical empirical investigation, the study reveals that the discursive change towards the systematic use of the terrorist jargon after 9/11 to represent violence in Xinjiang by the Chinese state is linked less to the materiality of violent events and more to broader socio-political developments, thereby calling into question the rationale behind China’s ‘war on terror’. Overall, the research increases our understanding of how security narratives are intertwined with, but not determined by, the phenomenology of violent events, and it illustrates how pre-existing structures of signification can foster terroristization processes. I argue, in summary, that if political agents employ a terrorism repertoire to represent violent events, this is a sign of agency and choice that holds meaning and matter together through terrorism discourse rather than being dictated by the material features of violence.

## List of Abbreviations and Acronyms

AI	Amnesty International
CASS	Chinese Academy of Social Sciences
CPC	Communist Party of China
CECC	U.S. Congressional-Executive Commission on China
CS	Copenhagen School
CS's	Copenhagen School's
CTS	Critical Terrorism Studies
ETIM	East Turkestan Islamic Movement
ETIP	East Turkistan Islamic Party
ETUE	Eastern Turkestan Union in Europe
EU	European Union
GWoT	Global War on Terror
HRIC	Human Rights in China
HRW	Human Rights Watch
IFJ	International Federation of Journalists
IAC	Islamic Association of China
IRBC	Immigration and Refugee Board, Canada
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
NPC	National People's Congress
PAP	People's Armed Police
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PRC	People's Republic of China
PSB	Public Security Bureau
RWB	Reporters Without Borders
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organization
SCIO	State Council Information Office
TS	Terrorism Studies
TIP	Turkistan Islamic Party
UAA	Uyghur American Association
UHRP	Uyghur Human Rights Project
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations

UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNSC	UN Security Council
UNRF	United National Revolutionary Front
US	United States
WHO	World Health Organization
WUC	World Uyghur Congress
XASS	Xinjiang Academy of Social Sciences
XPCC	Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps
XUAR	Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region

*Media*

AP	Associated Press
AFP	Agence France Presse
ANSA	Agenzia Nazionale Stampa Associata
AFR	Australian Financial Review
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
BBCME	BBC Monitoring Europe
BBCMCA	BBC Monitoring Central Asia
BBCMF	BBC Monitoring Newsfile
BBCMFSU	BBC Monitoring Former Soviet Union/USSR
BBCMSA	BBC Monitoring South Asia
BBCMSAP	BBC Monitoring Service Asia-Pacific
CCTV	China Central Television
CDT	China Digital Times
CRI	China Radio International
IPRSID	IPR Strategic Information Database
IPS	Inter Press Service
NPR	National Public Radio
PBS	Public Broadcasting Service
PTI	Press Trust of India
RFA	Radio Free Asia
TDN	Turkish Daily News

SCMP	South China Morning Post
UPI	United Press International
VOA	Voice of America

## **Note on Transliteration**

This thesis uses the Hanyu-Pinyin Romanization system for the transliteration of the names of Chinese officials (i.e. Wang Enmao) and geographical locations (i.e. Beijing, Xinjiang). For some official documents (i.e. ‘Document No. 7’), existing English translations by the Chinese state media or other academic sources are used. With respect to the names of geographical locations within the Xinjiang region (prefectures, counties, cities, townships, and villages), these are referred to with their long-established Uyghur names using the Uyghur transliteration system except for specific cases (i.e. Kashgar) in which I have maintained the Western spelling because it is widely accepted across English-language scholarship on the region. Alternative spellings have also been used when in quotations.

## INTRODUCTION

In the early morning of 4 August 2008, four days before the inauguration ceremony of the Beijing Olympic Games, two young adults from the Uyghur ethnic minority attacked a group of 70 Chinese civil border policemen in Kashgar in China's northwestern region of Xinjiang (BBCMSAP, 2008a). One of the attackers drove a truck against the policemen during their regular morning jog. Then both hacked the victims with machetes and hurled explosives at the Keshen police barracks before being arrested (*ibid*). According to the official account, the perpetrators, Kurbanjan Hemit and Abdurahman Azat, killed 16 Chinese officers and injured another 16 in the attack. In one of the first dispatches reporting the event, the Chinese state news agency Xinhua informed that the police considered the incident 'a terrorist attack' (Xinhua, 2008d).

The assault in Kashgar seemed like a self-fulfilling prophecy, which aligned the Chinese government's narrative on the terrorist threat that had begun to emerge in the aftermath of the tragic events of 11 September 2001 (9/11) in the United States with the material 'reality' of violence. The very same Chinese officials that days before 9/11 had declared the situation in Xinjiang as 'better than ever in history' (BBCMSAP, 2001c), now characterized the region as the locus of a terrorist threat by Uyghur Muslim separatists, a discourse that gained significant traction in the run-up to the Olympics. In January 2007, Beijing informed of a raid against a 'terrorist' training camp of Uyghur militants it accused of having links with Al Qaeda and Bin Laden (Reuters 2007a, BBC 2007). Later, the Chinese authorities announced they had foiled an 'organized and premeditated' flight hijacking 'terrorist attack' (Xinhua, 2008b). And in the months before the inauguration of the Olympics, the Chinese security forces trained explicitly on the basis of apocalyptic terrorist threat scenarios like the explosion of a radiological 'dirty bomb' nearby an Olympic venue (Reuters, 2007b, 2008a).

Yet one important element had been absent in the Chinese security focus on an imminent 'terror' threat in Xinjiang prior to the events of August 2008: no violent attacks were reported in the region for years. Western media, academic, and government circles, thus disputed the existence of a militant Uyghur terrorist organization and challenged the official accounts about 'terrorist' camps or 'terrorist' plots (see Poch, 2007; Elegant 2008; Joshi 2008; Harmsen 2008). Although the violence neither took place in the burgeoning Chinese capital, nor did it involve weapons of mass destruction, militant training or membership to Al Qaeda, as

much of the official accounts had suggested since 9/11, Hemit and Azat's violent attack on Chinese officers on the morning of 4 August 2008 allowed the government to fill the narrative of Xinjiang as terrorist hot spot with concrete names and actions – and therefore to supply evidence that they had not merely been 'crying wolf'. How is it possible that a rudimentary plan organized by a taxi driver and a vegetable peddler in a distant city-oasis from the Ancient Silk Road provided the necessary 'proof' to support long-standing claims about a violent Uyghur minority threatening Chinese national security and to pave the way for the repressive state actions that we see today? This question lies at the heart of this thesis.

The events in Kashgar found me in China, 4,400 kilometres away, in the newsroom of the Spanish international news agency EFE in Beijing. After spending three years in the Chinese capital, I had become familiar with the many stereotypes that surrounded the Turkic Muslim ethnic minority hailing from Xinjiang. To many of the Han Chinese I knew, the Uyghurs were a picturesque ethnic group known for an exotic lineage, excellent gastronomy, and a vibrant artistic repertoire that included folk dance, music, and acrobatics. Alongside these amiable descriptors, there were other less friendly ones. Uyghurs were perceived with social distrust amongst some Chinese, who saw them as thieves, pickpockets, and treacherous knife-carrying peoples. Uyghur intellectual Ilham Tohti thus likened the social status of the Uyghur community with that of gypsies in Europe (see Zambrana, 2010). What happened in Kashgar and its aftermath sparked a keen interest in the research focus of this thesis: exploring the process of how the Chinese state had arrived at defining dissidence in Xinjiang as a terrorist threat, which would eventually pave the way for the internment of hundreds of thousands of members of the Uyghur minority under the headlines of counter-terrorist 'reeducation' and 'de-extremification'.

### **Situating the Discursive Construction of Terrorism**

For the Chinese state, the characterization of the Uyghurs had long been heavily politicized. For centuries, violent frictions with a dissident dimension had been an intermittent element in China's rule over the ethnic minorities in the so-called 'New Frontier' following the annexation of the region by the Qing Empire (1750s) (see Millward, 2007; Perdue, 2005). Since the Communist Party of China (CPC) gained power in 1949, these anxieties came with a set of labelling practices that evolved with the international historical and political context. As Uyghur activist Erkin Alptekin recalled, Uyghur dissidents were represented as 'agents of the American paper tigers' in the 1950s, as 'agents of Soviet hegemonists' in the 1960s, as

religious ‘fundamentalists’ after the Iranian revolution in 1979, and as ‘splittists’ in the 1980s (quoted in *The Wall Street Journal*, 2005). And in the aftermath of 9/11, so Alptekin said, members of the Uyghur ethnic minority became ‘terrorists’ for the Chinese state (ibid). Against the assumption that the socio-linguistic construction of security threats is necessarily culturally bound and specific (Van Rythoven, 2015, p. 466), this suggests that a discursive link exists between the framing of the sudden violence in Kashgar as terrorism to the way in which a diverse range of issues had become subsumed under the headline of Islamic terrorism in the wider international arena.

Indeed, the discursive connection between the four coordinated attacks by al-Qaeda against the US on 11 September 2001 and dissident violence in a remote Chinese region is a prime example for the far-reaching reverberations of 9/11 in the international arena, at the level of language and politics. The construction of a ‘war on terrorism’ as the adequate response to the attacks on the US not only enabled the military campaign that followed 9/11 (Jackson 2005). It also led to the adoption of the ‘war on terrorism’ discourse in places other than the original scenarios of the conflict. As Buzan and Wæver (2009, p. 253) point out, the same way local conflicts in Latin America that had nothing to do with communism were re-phrased as part of the Cold War, many governments have adopted the ‘alibi of fighting terror’ to re-frame their localized conflicts against domestic dissidents in places from Chechnya to Sri Lanka and the Philippines. Well into the twenty-first century, terrorism has remained at the top of countries’ security and defence agendas (see Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2014; UK, 2015; US, 2017; US Department of Defense, 2018; Government of Pakistan, 2015; Republic of Turkey, 2019; French Republic Presidency, 2017), often subsuming complex socio-political violent dynamics under the terrorism headline. The prevailing ‘Islamic terrorism’ paradigm (Jackson, 2007) attached to violent events and threat scenarios continues to influence how states perceive and react to dissidence (Homolar & Rodríguez-Merino, 2019).

The way in which the framing of the (inter)national security environment under the discursive umbrella of terrorism quickly spread across the globe after the events of 9/11 - without an obvious shift in the frequency and phenomenology of non-state violent events (see Smith & Zeigler, 2017) also had a profound effect on the academic analysis of (inter)national security dynamics and this includes the field of Terrorism Studies (TS), broadly conceived. The powerful rhetoric of ‘terror’ that accompanied the Global War on Terror (GWOt) (Jackson, 2005) combined with increasing concerns over scholarly quality,

data reliability, and normative weaknesses within the traditional study of terrorism (Dunne 2011, p. 972; Reid 1993, p. 23; also Boyle, 2012; Dixit & Stump, 2011; Gunning, 2007; Jarvis, 2009; Silke, 2001; Shivani, 2007) and the avalanche of mainstream ‘pseudo-academic’ literature that emerged in response to the events of 11 September 2001 (Ransport, 2009) accelerated this transition, epitomized by the advent of a critical terrorism studies (CTS) branch (see Smyth, Gunning, Jackson, Kassimeris, & Robinson, 2008).

What is central to this study is that the critical turn in terrorism studies gave way to a greater emphasis on a constructivist ontology that understands terrorism as an intersubjective process of meaning-making rather than either as simply given (Ben-Yehuda, 1993; Turk, 2004) or as ‘fully formed, extra-discursive object of knowledge’ (Jarvis, 2009, p. 14). Indeed, CTS scholarship rejects the TS claim of the possibility of researching terrorism as a problem to be solved in a universal, value-free, and objective fashion, pointing instead to its boundedness in terms of time, space, and ideology (Pape, 2009: p. 644; see also Rapoport, 1984; Schmid, 2011).

Although acknowledging the productive power of the language of terrorism is not merely a post-9/11 phenomenon (see Chomsky 1987; George, 1991; Zulaika and Douglass 1996), much of the CTS research agenda is explicitly aimed at understanding how and under what conditions the problem of terrorism is discursively constructed – and with what consequences. This translates into unveiling the historical, social, political, and discursive conditions through which terrorism has emerged as an identity, problem, or threat within policymaking communities as well as for academic and popular audiences (Jarvis, 2009, p. 18; see also Smyth, 2007; Gunning, 2007) and freeing up the space for discussing experiences, practices, and form of knowledge that are neglected in ‘dominant accounts of security and terrorism’ (McDonald, 2007, p. 253) and for employing qualitative and discourse-centric research methods (Dixit & Stump, 2013).

Much of the ‘backlash’ against the traditional field is ‘old vinegar poured into new bottles’ (Weinberg & Eubank 2011, p. 131). Yet while traditional TS may since have recovered (Silke 2009, p. 47-8; also Pape, 2009, p. 646), CTS has firmly established itself as an alternative way of studying terrorism in the context of this widely articulated ‘rhetoric of failure’ (Stampnitzky, 2011). Just as in other areas of the security studies field the critical turn away from the study of ‘objective’ material realities towards processes of social construction has

persisted (see Spencer, 2012; Baker-Beall, 2014), and this exploration into the terroristization of Xinjiang is a case in point. Specifically, I shed light on the discursive processes that have, over time and linked to the framing of security threats in the international arena, given sense to violent unrest in the region as terrorist, creating particular issues, individuals, ethnicities, and religions as terrorist (Dixit & Stump, 2013, p. 23; Hülse & Spencer, 2008, p. 575).

## **Research Design**

How is it possible that the Chinese official narrative about the Xinjiang region and the Uyghurs, in particular, became fixated upon terrorist threats at a time when no violent events had been reported for several years before the Kashgar incident in 2008? And how do violent events become understood as terrorist attacks even if, materially, they do not differ from violence that is characterized as the socio-political grievance of the perpetrators? These questions lie at the heart of this thesis. To answer them, the thesis provides a detailed exploration into the cogs and wheels of Chinese state representations of violence in Xinjiang over the last four decades and puts the materiality of violent events in direct conversation with discursive construction of terrorism.

The study is structured around the central research question of how violent events in Xinjiang, as well as the Uyghur identity, Islam, and the region more broadly, have become constituted as a terrorism problem for the Chinese state, and with what effect. It adopts a multi-level approach to understanding this process of terroristization that focuses on three core dimensions, each of which has its own set of sub-questions. The first dimension that I investigate is the historical phenomenology of violence in Xinjiang, with a primary focus on the violent incidents that have been reported in the region since the early stages of the Chinese 'reform and opening up' era (1980s). This focus on the materiality of violence may seem counterintuitive for a study that adopts a largely post-positivist understanding of terrorism as a social construction. However, integrating a 'minimal foundationalist' position (Toros & Gunning, 2009; Jackson, 2011) allows both acknowledging that the materiality of violence plays a role in the interpretation and representation of terrorism and drawing a conceptual connection to dominant scholarly definitions of the concept. The central questions that guide the investigation in this phenomenology-centric analytical level are: What features characterize violent events in Xinjiang? To what extent do they overlap with the core definitional markers of terrorism?

The second dimension I explore is the Chinese state discourse on violence in Xinjiang. At this level, the central research question I ponder is: How has the Chinese state socially constructed violent conflict in Xinjiang? In answering this, I consider a sub-set of more detailed questions that aim to illustrate the core discursive patterns that the Chinese state have produced in this construction. These questions include: How has the Chinese state interpreted and represented specific violent events? How has the Chinese state labelled and characterized the perpetrators of the violence? How has the Chinese state interpreted and described their motivations? To what extent do these representations tap on the dominant academic understandings of terrorism? Finally, I also pose the question: What political possibilities does this discourse prescribe or discard?

The third and final dimension that I examine in this study comprises the political implications of the Chinese state discourse constructing violence in Xinjiang. The core research question I consider at this level is: What are the political consequences of the way/s the Chinese state has interpreted and represented violence in Xinjiang? To answer this question, I explore the policies that the Chinese government has implemented in response to the tensions in the region and how the state security practices have affected the Uyghur and other ethnic minorities from Xinjiang, both at the domestic and international levels.

Across these three analytical levels, the thesis draws extensively from primary sources such as official Chinese national and regional documents, Chinese state media reports, and other government and non-governmental sources. Conceptually, it adapts the Copenhagen School's (CS's) concept of securitization to the study of the discursive construction of terrorism in both non-Western and historical contexts. Methodologically, the study is based on the collection from these sources of Chinese official narratives, including instances of speech acts by government officials, and information about violent events reported in Xinjiang and elsewhere in China. Relevant data have been gathered from sources in Chinese language – either directly obtained from Chinese state media like Xinhua or government sources such as the State Council Information Office (SCIO) or indirectly through the reports of Western news agencies or the BBC Monitoring Service – and in English-language, such as those obtained from English-language state newspapers like China Daily or non-governmental sources like Radio Free Asia (RFA). While field research in Xinjiang could have supported the qualitative empirical analysis of violent unrest in the region, the current situation in China – one of censorship and persecution of non-official sources of information

– prevented the gathering of extra data through observation and interaction with the people there, notably members of the Uyghur ethnic minority, because of ethical concerns, including the safety of the researcher and potential interviewees. As I illustrate later in the thesis, the Chinese authorities have arrested Uyghurs and other ethnic minorities in Xinjiang for facilitating information or speaking to journalists and academics reporting in the region. While the perspective of local producers and audiences of the discourse on violence in Xinjiang could therefore not be analysed on the basis of original empirical data collected in the field, the broad range of publicly available sources nevertheless allowed for a rigorous exploration of the patterns and features of violent events in the region as well as their discursive representation without putting anyone at risk.

The investigation of the historical phenomenology of violence, the first analytical level of the study, is based on a database of violent incidents that occurred between 1978 and 2018, which I constructed from publicly available data. An abbreviated version of this original database is included in the appendix of the thesis. To analyse this database, I developed a scale for the interpretation of the phenomenology and framing of violence in Xinjiang from dominant scholarly definitional understandings of terrorism. How such definitions can be understood as a mapping device for violent events is discussed in Chapter One. For the analytical level, that of the Chinese state framing of violence in Xinjiang, this study intertextually explores the discursive practices of government officials across many temporal moments and events (Hansen, 2006, pp. 73-82; Doty, 1993, pp. 306-309). Here I identify and code core thematic arguments in the Chinese official narratives contained in publicly available materials through which the Chinese authorities have represented Uyghur-related unrest in Xinjiang over four decades, paying specific attention to language used to characterize violence, perpetrators, and causes.

To connect the first and second analytical levels with the third dimension of the thesis, the exploration of the policies implemented by the Chinese authorities in response to this unrest, I use soft process tracing that relies upon careful and historically rich description rather than causal process observations (e.g. Mahoney, 2010, pp. 125–131) This is focused on tracking the links between the changing Chinese security narratives, including the gradual inclusion of the language of terrorism in the official discourse, with the intensification of the security practices in Xinjiang. The key aim of this final analytical level is to demonstrate, through description and interpretation of violence in Xinjiang, how the changing discourse, in

particular the representation of violence as terrorism, has widened the limits of political possibility to enable the Chinese state implementation of increasingly harsh security practices in the region. This means that I do not seek to establish direct correlations to make causal inferences about the relationship between Chinese government's security discourse and its security practices, as a standard process tracing would attempt to do (see Beach and Pedersen, 2013).

Building on existing debates and interventions on the Copenhagen School's (CS's) concept of securitization for the study of the discursive construction of terrorism in both non-Western and historical contexts, the thesis develops an empirically rich historical-analytical narrative of (1) what type of violent events have taken place in the region since the 1980s; (2) how their discursive representation by the Chinese state gradually became part of a broader terrorism narrative; and (3) how this enabled a crackdown on religion and the emergence of a surveillance police state in the region.

### **Central Contributions**

Research that lies at the intersection between security discourses and security practices generally assumes that language is productive in the sense that it produces, fixes, and transforms meanings, identities, and discursive, and environments (Barnett & Duvall, 2005, p. 55; Miskimmon et al., 2013, p. 2), and that it sets the boundaries of political possibility (Holland, 2013) and of what is thinkable (Epstein, 2008). At the same time (inter)national security scholarship has remained vague about what precisely language is productive of when it comes to its effects beyond linguistics processes of sensemaking and sensegiving, and the study of terrorist events is no exception.

Works conceptually related to the securitization theory developed by the Copenhagen School (CS) over two decades ago have provided a conceptual entry point for understanding how issues move from the realm of normal politics into the realm of security and emergency politics through 'speaking' security. The concept of terroristization developed in this study is inspired by securitization theory scholarship. I build on the securitization literature to make set of three key contributions to the disciplinary fields of international security and terrorism studies. First, intertwining insights from the definitional consensus in TS about the materiality of events with their discursive representation, I offer a novel explanation towards why terrorism narratives 'stick' (Ahmed, 2014). Second, I provide an original conceptual

pathway to exploring terrorism discourses as historical processes, which also allows the integration of pre-2001 historical contexts that have been subjugated in much of the post-9/11 literature on terrorism (Smyth 2007, p. 261; Gunning, 2007. p. 370). Finally, I account for the construction of terrorism narratives by illiberal regimes, thereby transcending the Western liberal perspective that remains dominant in traditional TS.

The second set of contributions of this thesis is related to its empirical investigation of the Chinese state terroristization of Xinjiang. On the one hand, this study provides the first summary overview of over forty years of violent events in the Xinjiang region (see appendix). On the other, it offers a detailed account of violent dissidence in the region over four decades, and of how Chinese government narratives and policies in Xinjiang have evolved over time. The study helps, first, to better understand both the historical processes by which actions, behaviours, individuals, regions, religions or ethnicities are constituted as terrorist or terrorism (Jarvis, 2009; Dixit & Stump, 2013, p. 23) and the spillover effects of the GWoT discourse in localized conflicts (see Bhatia, 2005; Bartolucci, 2010; Nadarajah & Sriskandarajah, 2005; Russell, 2005; Tan, 2003; Santos, 2010). Second, it adds to the wealth of area studies scholarship (see Dillon, 1995, 2004; Bovingdon, 2002, 2004; Starr (ed.) 2004; Smith Finley 2007, 2011, 2013; Becquelin 2000, 2004; Millward 2004, 2007; Leibold, 2016; Hopper & Webber, 2009; Ma, 2003; Mackerras, 2001; Gladney, 2004; Sautman, 2000; Schluessel, 2007) and works by human rights organizations (i.e., HRW, 1998, 2005; AI, 1992, 1999; UHRP, 2007, 2012a, 2016) that have examined aspects related to conflict in Xinjiang. However, it is important to clarify here that the aim of this thesis is not to determine what type of violence has affected Xinjiang (cf. Rodríguez-Merino, 2009), to explain what the causes of that violence are, or to denounce the Chinese state security practices in response to such violence. Rather, it is to put the spotlight on processes of terroristization in China and at a general conceptual level.

Overall, then, this thesis demonstrates that when used as an analytical tool rather than as an explanatory theory and in conjunction with rich empirical analysis, the CS's securitization framework has utility for understanding processes of threat construction across time and space. What is more, by integrating a 'minimal foundationalist' dimension into a discourse-centric conceptual framework of terroristization processes, I acknowledge that the act of violence and its victims matters, including for political constructions of terrorism (cf. Schmid 2011, p. 470). I also underscore that there is room for bridging the traditional-critical divide

and establishing a conversation between different scholarly communities working under the conceptual umbrella of ‘terrorism’ (see Gunning, 2007; Horgan & Boyle, 2008).

### **Plan of the Thesis**

This thesis is divided into four chapters. Chapter One develops the concept of terroristization as a conceptual framework for the study of the discursive construction of violence as terrorism, and it consists of two main sections. The first section explores the key tenets of the CS’s securitization theory in a conceptually productive fashion that demonstrates how the concept of securitization can be used to understand the discursive construction of violence as terrorism by states and the politics this enables. I examine existing debates and interventions on securitization theory to adjust the original securitization framework to account for historical processes of terroristization in non-democratic countries. The section also examines the politically productive power of narratives and investigates the relationship between materiality and discourse to make the case for a ‘minimal foundationalist’ approach to the study of terrorism. The second section of the chapter brings into focus the traditional scholarly debate about the definition of terrorism as the discursive context in which processes of terroristization take place. I analyse the interpretative possibilities of key terrorism markers and develop a matrix of the degree to which the phenomenology of violent events and their discursive representation correspond with dominant scholarly understandings of terrorism properties as a mapping device for the empirical investigation. I conclude by reiterating the three-level terroristization framework that guides this thesis.

The remaining chapters form the empirical heart of this thesis, analyzing in detail the process of terroristization of Xinjiang. The chapters follow a chronological outline that corresponds to the phases of pre-terroristization (1978-1990), proto-terroristization (1991-2001), and terroristization (2001-2018) of violent conflict in Xinjiang. Following the three dimensions set out above – historical phenomenology, discursive patterns, and the political implications – each chapter provides an in-depth analysis of the phenomenology of violence reported in Xinjiang or related to the tensions with the Uyghurs, a critical examination of the Chinese state discourse representing violent conflict, and an investigation into the subsequent politics implemented in the region.

Chapter Two explores the pre-terroristization phase, which I describe as the years of ‘counterrevolution’. Here, I demonstrate how the spectrum of violence in Xinjiang during the 1980s appears to have been dominated by events that were primarily situated on the socio-ethnic spectrum of intrastate violence, resulting from a combination of demands for greater regional and religious autonomy, clashes between the police and Uyghur protesters, and ethnic tensions between Han Chinese and the Uyghur minority. I show how high-profile violent events were rare, and when they occurred, they mapped only partially onto the core definitional markers of terrorism. I then provide an analysis of how the Chinese narratives about the tensions in Xinjiang went from a moderate discourse that framed violence as a social problem rooted in historic inter-ethnic frictions and economic disparities to a more aggressive tone that represented the tensions as part of a long-term fight against ‘splittism’ and an incipient security threat, one which culminated in 1990 with the construction of the Baren unrest as a ‘counterrevolutionary rebellion’. This is followed by an investigation into the Chinese policies in the region between 1978 and 1990, which I show evolved in parallel to the changing official discourse, shifting from a ‘gradualist’ approach based on economic development and cultural and religious liberalization and a moderate response to the violent events registered in the years 1980-81, to a securitization approach characterized by the militarization of the region and a crackdown on dissent and religion.

Chapter Three investigates the proto-terroristization phase. Here, I examine how, following a combination of factors ranging from the intensified state repression that came after the Baren turmoil, the increasing Han-Uyghur economic inequalities, or the emergence of a violent dissident agency amongst some Uyghurs, violent incidents increased in Xinjiang during the 1990s, peaking between 1996 and 1999 and appearing in more varied manifestations than in the 1980s, with some events getting closer to dominant understandings of terrorism. Next, the chapter explores how the language of ‘terrorism’ entered the Chinese state discourse during the second half of the 1990s to underpin the representation of separatism and religious extremism as the core threats to the stability of Xinjiang and to frame the tensions with the Uyghurs as part of the life-or-death struggle against a foreign-instigated threat. It also pays attention to how the Chinese authorities exported their domestic discourse on Xinjiang to the international arena, articulating - together with Russia and some Central Asian states- the ‘three evils’ of separatism, religious extremism, and terrorism as a regional threat. The chapter also demonstrates how the Chinese securitization narrative, which prescribed a fight against a dehumanized enemy as

the way forward for Xinjiang, facilitated the intensification of the crackdown policies in the region, which involved an increasing repression of Islam, the launching of ‘strike hard’ campaigns resulting in thousands of arrests, and a series of efforts aimed at stifling Uyghur political dissent in Central Asia and other countries like Turkey.

Chapter Four examines the terroristization phase of the Xinjiang conflict. Here, I first examine how Chinese leaders seized the post-9/11 *momentum* to frame Xinjiang as China’s front in the GWoT. I pay particular attention to how terrorism became the dominant language in Chinese security narratives about Xinjiang, and how the official discourse linked the historical tensions in the region to the events on US soil, representing Uyghur dissidence as the ‘East Turkistan terrorist forces’. The chapter then shifts its attention to the resurfacing of violent phenomena in the region after years of relative calmness. As I demonstrate, the wave of violence that rocked Xinjiang, and other parts of China, between 2008 and 2016 includes events of a varied nature that tap in almost every possible interpretation, from ethnic riots to attacks that reflect dominant understandings of terrorism. Next, I analyze the core patterns of the Chinese state discourse during this period. I demonstrate how Chinese officials and state media sustained the government’s claim warning of terrorism through the systematic representation of all types of violent events as either terrorist attacks or terror-related incidents, no matter the fact that much of the violence in Xinjiang is far from general scholarly understandings of terrorism. I also show how the Chinese state established a link between Islam and violence to prescribe a ‘people’s war’ on terrorism and religious ‘extremism’ as the only possible and logical response to violence in the region. The chapter goes on to trace the effects of this discourse. I examine how Xinjiang has remained in a permanent state of emergency since 2001, with the rise of a counter-terrorism apparatus that has tightened the grip over the Uyghur and other Turkic Muslim ethnic minorities in the region and abroad. Also, I explore the most recent steps of China’s war on terrorism, which includes the advent of a surveillance state in Xinjiang, and the mass internment of Uyghurs for ‘re-education’ and ‘de-extremification’.

The conclusion of this thesis reviews the central argument and findings of the study. It reflects on how, why, and with what consequences the Chinese state has constructed violent tensions as terrorism in Xinjiang. Here, I discuss the broader implications of the study for future research on terrorism and violent conflict. I outline that a terroristization framework emphasizes the importance of recognizing the limits and complexities that the constructed

nature of terrorism entails. I also suggest further avenues of research on terroristization, including examining the 'discursive past' of localized conflicts dominantly constructed as terrorism, processes of 'deterroristization' in which violence ceases to be constructed as such, and alternatives narratives of contest and destabilization of dominant discourses of terrorism.

## CHAPTER ONE

### **‘Terroristization’: A Conceptual Framework for the Discursive Construction of Terrorism**

In this chapter, I lay out the theoretical and analytical foundations of this thesis. I do so by developing the idea of terroristization (see Dixit and Stump, 2013, pp. 23-24; Dixit, 2016) as a conceptual framework for the study of the discursive construction of terrorism. In the first section, I build on securitization studies to propose a conceptual avenue for the study of terrorism in China. Here, I examine the core tenets of the securitization theory framework developed by the Copenhagen School (CS) and introduce the conceptual avenue of terroristization. Following existing debates and interventions on securitization theory, I adjust the framework first, to study terroristization as a historical process that combines general security narratives with the construction of specific violent events as terrorism; second, to study non-democratic countries by stressing the utility of terroristization for such regimes based on functions such as deterrence, moral support, legitimization, agenda-setting, and retrospective recasting. Finally, the section engages with recent Critical Terrorism Studies (CTS) scholarship to reflect on the productive power of ‘talking’ violent events into being ‘terrorism’, while integrating a ‘minimal foundationalist’ lens to capture how the materiality of violence is intertwined with terrorism discourses, and vice versa. In the second section of the chapter, I examine dominant scholarly definitions of terrorism as the discursive setting in which processes of terroristization take place. Highlighting the relevance of the core definitional terrorism markers as discursive anchors that foster mapping a new instance of violence as an act of terrorism, the section also considers the range of their interpretative possibilities. Based on this analysis, I develop a terrorism ‘mapping device’ that allows making inferences about the degree to which both the phenomenology of a violent event and its discursive representation correspond with dominant scholarly understandings of terrorism. To conclude, the chapter reiterates the three-level terroristization framework that guides the empirical analysis of the thesis.

## 1.1 Adjusting Securitization Theory for the Study of Terrorism in China

Following the end of the Cold War, much of the Security Studies discipline, broadly conceived, broadened and deepened towards considering a greater range of issues and referent objects to within its remit. Security scholarship increasingly moved away from primarily strategy-centred approaches limited to the ‘study of the threat, use, and control of military force’ (Walt, 1991, p. 212) and began to transpose the linguistic turn of Western philosophy to the study of security following the end of the Cold War (see Buzan & Hansen, 2009; Mutlu & Salter, 2013). With the concept of securitization, a group of scholars often referred to as the ‘Copenhagen School’ (CS) (McSweeney, 1996; Neumann, 1996; Huysmans 1998), has here provided ‘one of the most innovative, productive, and yet controversial’ frameworks (Williams, 2003) that understands security as a product of discourse (Williams, 2003; see also Wæver, 1995; Buzan, Wæver, & De Wilde, 1998; Buzan & Wæver, 2003). Frequently described as a ‘theory’ (Stritzel, 2007; Vuori, 2008; Ciută, 2009; Balzacq, 2011), the CS’s idea of securitization is the answer to the question of ‘what quality makes something a security issue’ (Buzan et al., 1998, p. 21) and provides a ‘theoretical tool to facilitate practical security analysis’ (Taureck, 2006, p. 55). While securitization theory has significant limitations, some of its core tenets can be adjusted and expanded in a conceptually productive fashion to study terrorism as discourse, including in non-democracies.

### *Key Tenets of Securitization Theory*

The concept of securitization rests on a post-positivist ontology that sees security not as an objective condition, but as a discursive construct. Contrary to concerns about the designation of ‘objective’ or ‘real’ security problems based on material factors, and following language theory and poststructuralist thought, securitization theory defines security as a ‘speech act’ and a ‘self-referential practice’ (Buzan et al., 1998, p. 24). This means that something ‘becomes a security issue not necessarily because a real existential threat exists but because the issue is presented as such a threat’ (ibid). Security is talked into being by discursively representing an issue as ‘posing an existential threat to a designated referent object’ – generally by narrating ‘a plot that includes existential threat, point of no return, and a possible way out’ – that calls for the use of ‘extraordinary measures’ which lie ‘outside the normal bounds of political procedure’ (Buzan et al., 1998, pp. 21, 24, 33). The ‘grammar of security’, as the CS conceptualizes it, thereby has a decidedly Schmittian connotation (Williams, 2003, p. 522; Aradau, 2004, p. 392). At the same time, because of its emphasis on the necessity of

justifying and legitimizing the use of extraordinary measures to gain domestic institutional approval, its application is implicitly limited to liberal-democratic regimes (Browning & McDonald, 2011, p. 248; Balzacq, 2011, p. 9; cf. Buzan, Wæver and De Wilde, 1998, pp. 21-23).

The Copenhagen School's research agenda is mainly concerned with the study of state-centric processes of securitization (Buzan et al., 1998, p. 35). This is because in securitization theory, the 'social capital' and 'position of authority' of the securitizing actor – the speaker of security - increase the resonance of the securitizing discourse (Buzan et al., 1998, p. 33). The state emerges as the most powerful securitizing actor, one that has been 'historically endowed with security tasks and most adequately structured for the purpose' (Buzan et al., 1998, pp. 31-37). While securitization theory moves the study and definition of security significantly beyond mainstream positivist approaches in the Security Studies field, it thus retains both a 'static element' (Stritzel, 2007, p. 366) and a connection to the traditional realist meaning of national security as a matter of state survival from external military threats. As Ciută (2009, pp. 306-307) emphasizes, securitization theory freezes the meaning and conceptual logic of security as a matter of survival.

Securitization theory also reserves a role for materiality more broadly, acknowledging that extra-discursive contextual factors may affect the resonance of a security discourse. These are conceptualized broadly as 'facilitating conditions... under which the speech act works, in contrast to cases in which the act misfires or is abused' (Buzan et al., 1998, p. 32). One of these conditions is the extent to which the non-discursive features of a securitized issue are 'generally held to be threatening' (Buzan et al., 1998, p. 33). For example, a government is likely to gain support from a legislative body or a constituency for extraordinary policy measures and powers, if the securitized issue is generally assumed to be actually threatening. Material factors thus act to increase or decrease the credibility of a threat, which, in turn, impacts upon the securitizing actor's ability to complete the securitization move.

Securitization theory holds significant potential for the study of terrorism as discourse along with three main analytical principles. To begin with, it provides the conceptual starting point that a violent event which is discursively represented as a terrorist incident should be understood not as consisting of objective material features that 'make' terrorism, but as a matter of choice by political agents to do so. Terrorism is 'talked' into being, that is, an event

or issues is *terroristized* through discourse. Second, it provides a convincing rationale for assigning significant agency in terroristization processes to a country's political leadership, with the state featuring as the most salient 'speaker' of terrorism (Jackson, 2005; Bhatia, 2005). As is the case in much of securitization research, the centrality of government speech acts in terroristization processes is derived from its formal authority and social capital in defining security threats, stimulating related public debates, and shaping security policy agendas (see Schmid, 2004, p. 384; 1992). Finally, reflecting the (thin) Schmittian logic within the securitization framework, if the 'grammar of security' enables the securitization of an issue by articulating an emergency scenario in which the survival of a referent object is at stake, framed as demanding an exceptional response, the language of terrorism can then be regarded as an instant securitizer. Terrorism is a potent label of enmity and threat, which carries a 'powerfully negative emotional baggage' that provokes retribution (K. J. Long, 1990, p. 203). In Dixit's words (2016, p. 33), the use of the term 'automatically authorizes states to use forms of violence that they would otherwise be penalized for'. As Jackson (2005, 2007) noted, when violence is constructed as terrorism, this enables exceptional coercive and punitive counter-terrorist strategies, as opposed alternatives in the realm of normal politics, such as dialogue, compromise, and socio-economic reforms.

While providing a useful entry point for the study of terrorism discourses, the original outline of securitization theory also has significant weaknesses. In particular, international security scholarship has pointed not only to conceptual tensions within the securitization framework but also its broader analytical limits, its overly linguistic approach to discourse, and the normative challenges it poses (Aradau, 2004; Stritzel, 2007; McDonald, 2008; Balzacq, 2005, 2011; Williams, 2003; Wilkinson, 2007; Ciută, 2009), all of which point to its 'narrowness' (Balzacq, 2011, p. 8; Wilkinson 2007, p. 12). This suggests that securitization theory should not simply be taken as 'shorthand' for the study of the social construction of terrorism (McDonald, 2008). Indeed, the development of a terroristization framework based even loosely on the concept of securitization requires adapting the latter in a way that integrates history, context, and functionality into the study of the dynamics and implications of terrorism discourses and widens its application beyond Western liberal democratic countries.

#### *From Securitization to Terroristization*

The Copenhagen School's concept of securitization has a narrow temporal scope, with the 'speech act' considered only as a specific moment in time during which the construction of

security takes place. Here, the very act of discursively presenting an issue as a ‘security threat’ is conceptualized as the defining instance in the social construction of security (Buzan et al., 1998, p. 24). Yet, as McDonald (2008, pp. 575-6) pointed out, issues become security threats not only at particular occasions, but also over an extended period of time, and within historical contexts (see Ciută, 2009, p. 317; Salter, 2010, p. 118). To address this issue, Balzacq (2011, p. 13) proposed that the study of securitization should be adjusted to clearly account for it as a process that is sensitive to particular ‘historical conjunctures’ rather than a singular linguistic event.

The idea of terroristization takes up these suggestions to account for context and focuses explicitly on broader historical processes that can be divided into three distinct stages: (1) a *pre-terroristization* period during which a discursive representation of an issue – in this study violence and dissidence in China’s Uyghur region – as terrorism is largely absent; (2) a *proto-terroristization* phase during which the language of terrorism emerges in official security narratives about the issue, and (3) the stage of *terroristization*, which is characterized by a hegemonic narrative construction of an issue as terrorism in government discourse and significant, even extraordinary political measures (cf. Jarvis, 2009, p. 14).

The understanding of terroristization as a historical process does, however, not preclude the analytical relevance of specific instances where terrorism is constructed. Rather, whether and how terroristization moves from one stage to the next is intertwined with the accumulation of speech-acts in which the language of terrorism is used. These discursive representations of terrorism can refer to a variety of referents such as states, individuals, and groups, describe conditions or identity markers such as ethnicities and religions, and also narrate specific events as acts of terror or terrorism attacks (Dixit & Stump, 2013; Jarvis, 2009). What is more, despite the significant variation of instances in which the language of terrorism can be applied, a process-oriented understanding of terroristization that puts history and context centre-stage allows capturing how narrative maturing is linked to, rather than removed from, the materiality of violent events. Integrating ‘catalytic events’ past and present, into terrorism speech acts allows terroristizing political agents to narrate an otherwise abstract threat as ‘real’, attaching the veneer of legitimacy to security policy agendas (Homolar, 2011, pp. 706-8). In line with the Copenhagen School’s assumption that materiality acts as a kind of intervening variable in securitization moves, the concept of terroristization thus underscores that there is a fundamentally different quality and pulling power of terrorism discourses that

can move beyond representing unspecific conditions, phenomena, or behavior as a source of insecurity and danger (Homolar, 2014, pp. 3-6) As I discuss in more detail below, an analytical focus on violent events within their historical context thus provides a window for capturing how materiality influences discourse and when it may facilitate the social construction of terrorism (or not).

It is important to note here that the focus on different terroristization stages and the impact of catalytic events on these is neither to imply that the gradual shifting of violence and dissidence into the realm of terrorism is an automated process nor that it is without a point of return once the terroristization journey has begun. As Williams (2003, pp. 522-523) suggests, the Copenhagen School treats securitization not as a decisive speech-act, but as a 'social process' which opens a 'framework of communicative action and legitimation' with the potential to expose and even frustrate abusive security discourses (see Buzan et al., 1998, pp. 34-35). As is the case for securitization, the study of terroristization processes that is integral of violent events may not only free up 'space for dialogue and deliberation' (McDonald, 2007, p. 253) but could indeed contribute to un-making practices of security (Aradau, 2004, p. 406) by exposing the constructed, contingent, and political nature of security episodes or fostering a 'reflexive understanding of political violence' that interrogates, for example, the use of specific tactics, from torture to surveillance, in the name of countering terrorism (Dixit, 2016, p. 46).

#### *Moving Terroristization Beyond Democracies*

In states like the People's Republic of China (PRC), decision-makers do not require a formal mandate or public approval to implement far-reaching security policies and counter-terrorist measures. In the case of Xinjiang, the Communist Party of China (CPC) is in complete control of the Chinese government, and the CPC leadership decides how to deal with the tensions in the region. Neither the political opposition, nor the media, nor academia can freely propose alternative issues for securitization or critique and hinder securitization moves initiated by the Chinese government, with academics, journalists, and political dissidents having been imprisoned for criticizing China's handling and control of the region. China presents a case where, as Wilkinson (2007, p. 12) emphasizes, significant sections of the population are not afforded the ability to express their security concerns, which in turn problematizes the 'inherently Eurocentric assumptions about the social and political context' on which the Copenhagen School's securitization theory assumptions are based.

Reflecting on this issue, Buzan, Wæver and De Wilde (1998, p. 24) had pointed out that securitization theory is of limited utility to understand security dynamics in non-democratic countries such as the PRC, where ‘secrecy of violation of rights is the rule and where security arguments are not needed to legitimize such acts’. Vuori (2008, p. 68) likewise argued that in non-democratic countries, ‘there is no need to move security issues away from the democratic process into ‘special politics’, as there are no democratic processes to begin with’. How, then, can a concept of terroristization that draws significantly upon the securitization framework be analytically useful for a non-democratic regime in which broad institutional and public support are not required to instigate a repressive counter-terrorism program? Paraphrasing Wilkinson (2007, p. 22), how can securitization, or in this case terroristization, be adapted to travel beyond the ‘presumptions of Western democracy’ so as to cope with local conditions such as those of the PRC? Or, to put it in the context of this study’s empirical focal point, why would the authoritarian Chinese government (Linz & Stepan, 1996; T. Shi, 2008) need to engage in processes of terroristizing violence and dissidence in Xinjiang? The answer to both questions can be found, at least partially, in shifting our conceptual attention away from formal decision-making processes towards the realms of moral support, agenda-setting, and retrospective recasting, including in the international arena.

The Copenhagen School conceptualized securitization moves as requiring not only that ‘security’ is uttered by ‘authoritative’ speakers to conjure the image of an existential threat to a referent object, in particular, the state, but also that their audience must accept this claim to the extent that emergency measures to counter the securitized threat are implemented (Buzan et al., 1998, p. 25). This suggests that the audience support necessary to complete a securitization move is understood essentially as limited to enabling the formal-institutional endorsement of security policy measures. Balzacq (2011, p. 9) argued, however, that a broader understanding of the role of audiences in securitization processes is key to capture other forms of domestic public support, because they may be crucial for maintaining the broader backing of constituencies. At the international level, security utterances that overlap with the interests, norms, and rules can likewise be a source of (in)formal support, but they may also prevent international diplomatic and economic sanctions on the regime. Vuori (2008, pp. 79-81) underscored here that even political agents that are in a position of ‘de facto control of subordinates’ attempt to avoid unwanted actions by ‘another state,

secessionist group, or protesters' by discursively discouraging it. For an authoritarian regime, discursive deterrence is an effective way of keeping dissidence at bay.

Although there is no formal (and conceptually causal) requirement for an 'empowering audience' to agree with the claims of the securitizing actor, a severing of social bonds can impact negatively on both their credibility and, in extension, their leadership staying in power both at the domestic and international level (Balzacq 2011, pp. 8-9). While seeking formal acquiescence may be less of a concern for non-democratic countries in mandating security policy measures, the authoritarian leadership of countries such as China may still want to 'cloak security arguments in the semantic repertoire' of a particular audience, such as the domestic constituency or the international community, to win moral support for the government and its security policy agenda (see Balzacq 2011, pp. 8-9). The terroristization of violence and dissidence can be an enticing discursive avenue for the Chinese government precisely because it allows leveling the playing field with its liberal democratic counterparts in the justification of emergency politics and obtaining moral support at home and abroad for repressive actions and extraordinary controls.

In an illiberal context such as the PRC, a securitization discourse can reach a variety of audiences with a set of purposes different from obtaining the formal-institutional endorsement of emergency politics. The empirical chapters in this thesis reveal first a sustained deterrent purpose in the Chinese state discourse aimed at domestic audiences, initially epitomized by an active discouraging of 'counterrevolution' during the 1980s and part of the 1990s, and then, following 9/11, by Beijing's outright condemnation and rhetorical defilement of those engaging in the 'three evils' of terrorism, separatism, and religious extremism. In this case deterrence by securitization and/or terrorism is not only aimed at the broader Chinese population, in particular the Turkic Muslim ethnic minorities and within them, political or religious dissidents, but also at government officials and Party members, as the signaling of 'two-faced' cadres for persecution demonstrates (see RFA, 2017l; Gan, 2017a; C. Liu, 2017). In contrast, the official use of terrorism narratives aimed at international audiences to justify the crackdown emergency politics in Xinjiang, avoid widespread condemnation of repressive practices, and mobilize support amongst allies is only evident from the second half of the 1990s onwards. The search of moral and formal support at the international level is first manifested during the *proto-terroristization* stage through the internationalization of China's discourse on Xinjiang amongst friendly

international audiences in the regional community of shared interests that is the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).

Second, following 9/11 and during the *terroristization* period, through the attempt to legitimize the crackdown in Xinjiang in the eyes of the liberal democracies from the West by framing Xinjiang as China's front in a 'shared' Global War on Terror. This variety of audiences, and their different relevance depending on the period, is reflected in the sources the study uses for the empirical analysis. Chapter Two, which is concerned with the 1980s and the language of 'counterrevolution', relies mainly on the monitoring of Chinese state media in Chinese language, suggests an initial primordial preoccupation to with domestic audiences by the Chinese state. Meanwhile, Chapter Three, and to a greater extent Chapter Four, are based on Chinese state media reports in English-language, which indicates an opening-up and outward orientation of Beijing when it comes to 'talking' violence in Xinjiang. One of the findings of this thesis is, thus, how the Chinese state has evolved from a position of restraint and opacity when discussing Uyghur-related violent unrest in the region, epitomized by the scarcity of information on violent incidents during the 1980s and the 1990s, to one of post-9/11 openness, verbiage, and even sincere enthusiasm about sharing the 'terrorism' problem of violent conflict in Xinjiang with the world.

The utility of narrative persuasion in the implementation of extensive security policy measures should therefore not be discarded outright in a study of terrorism in non-democratic regimes that builds upon securitization theory. At this point, a terroristization framework may illustrate how authoritarian political agents tune their language to the experience of the audience in terroristization moves, curbing resistance against political leadership at the domestic level (cf. Balzacq 2011, pp. 8-9) and pre-empting criticism and even gathering support at the international level. No government can rely exclusively on the power of violence and coercion (Arendt, 1969).

#### *Discourse and Materiality: Terroristization's Minimal Foundationalism*

Following from the above is that by broadening the temporal and analytical scope of securitization theory, a terroristization analytical framework allows exploring the processes of how violence and dissidence emerge as terrorist threats in non-democratic countries. In line with the post-positivist underpinnings of both securitization theory and critical terrorism scholarship, I approach the issue of terrorism in Xinjiang as a process of discursive social

construction (Hülse & Spencer, 2008, p. 575) that gives sense to violent unrest in the region as terrorist and that creates particular issues, individuals, ethnicities, and religions as terrorist (Dixit & Stump, 2013, p. 23). Specifically, the terroristization framework that I propose here considers two major tenets firmly situated within a focus on studying the emergence, dynamics, and consequences of terrorism narratives.

The first is the creation of meaning of violent events through discourse. This presupposes that language and discourse play a mediating role between the material and the social worlds, and the assigning of a terrorist meaning to a violent event is no exception. It is only through discourse, predominantly linguistic, that we construct the meaning and qualities of things and social facts (Milliken 1999, p. 229; Guzzini, 2013, p. 201) and give sense to events as 'security problems'. Understood in this way, terrorism is a social practice productive of subjects and objects that includes the interpretation of events and their presumed causes that is far from value-neutral (Turk 2004, p. 271-2; Yee, 1996; Milliken, 1999; Doty, 1993). As Jackson (2005, p. 21) argues with respect to using the terrorism label, 'words are never neutral: they don't just describe the world, they actually help to make the world'. Terrorism and terrorists, then, are constructed not by virtue of the material features of violent phenomena, but through the very process of labelling them as such, an assumption which lies at the heart of the idea of terroristization.

The second tenet is the productive power of 'talking terrorism'. In creating meaning, language and discourse have political consequences, in as much, they set a 'social script to choose among various policy options' (Doty, 1993, p. 300). As Yee (1996, p. 95) explains, 'languages or vocabularies authorize or restrict, as well as prioritize and distribute, the ideas and beliefs that policymakers can think and in doing so partly delimit the policies they can pursue'. The productive power of terrorism narratives and labels lies in their capacity to determine political outcomes by framing the range of possible action, rendering some political avenues as reasonable, appropriate, plausible, or acceptable, while denoting others as unreasonable, inappropriate, implausible, or unacceptable (Yee, 1996; Jackson, 2005). Importantly, naming particular entities as terrorists has significant political, economic and military implications (Turk 2004, pp. 271-2). They may take the shape of 'delegitimizing domestic dissent and resistance' (Jarvis, 2009, p. 19), justifying state counter-terrorism policies (Gunning, 2007, p. 377; Jackson, 2009; Dixit & Stump, 2013, p. 162), and the broader 'dehumanizing and depoliticizing' of a specific group of people (Jarvis, 2009, p. 19; Dixit,

2016, pp. 40-43). The UN (2002) has already suggested, in the context of the GWoT, that the practice of ‘labelling opponents or adversaries as terrorists’ is a ‘time-tested technique to de-legitimize and demonize them’.

A fundamental question that arises from a focus on the productive power of language in the study of terrorism concerns the role played, if any, by the *actual* violence taking place – that is a violent event that exists at the phenomenological level. If, ontologically, terrorism is a social construct and, epistemologically, its discursive construction is the main focus of critical research, how shall we then understand, ontologically and epistemologically, the act of violence that has taken place? The aim of the terroristization framework that I propose in this thesis is to provide a conceptual entry point into bridging the material-discursive divide in the study of violent events.

This is particularly important as some CTS scholarship has explicitly prioritized a focus on terrorism as a discursive construct while removing it entirely from a material essence. Here, ‘completely constructivist’ (Stump, 2013, p. 219) approaches, for example, have denied the ‘objective existence’ of terrorism ‘as a thing in the world’ (Heath-Kelly, 2016, p. 67; see Jarvis, 2009; Zulaika & Douglass, 1996; Stump & Dixit, 2013). From this follows that rather than any actual violent event, the ‘primary source of terrorism research must be the discourse in which the social construction of terrorism takes place’ (Hülse & Spencer, 2008, p. 575). This is not to say that these scholars do not acknowledge that a material reality of violence exists. As Hülse and Spencer (2008, p. 575) emphasize, ‘there are real people who purport real actions’. Instead, they argue that terrorism can only be understood as a social fact detached from the materiality of violence, because ‘what these people and their deeds mean is a matter of interpretation’ (ibid).

This means that, from such a radical constructivist position, the politics of terrorism does not lie in the phenomenology of violence, but in how violence is interpreted and constructed regardless of how violence occurs and what material features it may have. In other words, there is nothing to ‘see’ in the act of violence itself, and thereby nothing worthy to analytically and empirically integrate outside the realm of discourse. As Zulaika and Douglass (1996, p. xi) put it, ‘terrorism’ only exists as an ‘empty signifier’ in a ‘postmodern world’. And while the question of what conditions enable the label of terrorism to ‘be successfully applied to particular acts – violent or otherwise’ (Stump, 2013, p. 220) is central to much radically

constructivist CTS research, any concession to the positivist position terrorism is a type of violence with specific (material) characteristics is seen as risking to reify and reproduce ‘terrorists’ and ‘terrorism’ and endorsing them as legitimate categories of state action (Stump & Dixit, 2011).

Yet not all critical approaches to the study of terrorism share what Porpora (2016, p. 81) has characterized as ‘extreme social constructivist ontological view and some scholars have even explicitly taken issue with completely discarding the materiality of violence from terrorism research (Toros & Gunning, 2009; Jackson, 2011; Toros, 2012; Porpora, 2016), and this thesis is firmly situated within this scholarly camp. The theoretical premise here is that discourse and materiality are ‘entwined’ (Hardy & Thomas, 2015) in the sense that the *actual* materiality of violence shapes the *constructed* discourse of ‘terrorism’, and vice versa. Building on Toros and Gunning (2009), Jackson describes this ‘minimal foundationalism’ approach as one in which:

“The ontological distinction between subject and object is preserved, and discourse and materiality are conceptualized as shaping each other in a dialectical, never-ceasing dynamic (rather than the one being solely constituted by the other), allows for research on both instances of ‘real world’ political violence like terrorism, as well as the discursive processes by which such violence is given meaning’ (Jackson, 2011, p. 118).

This suggests that a ‘minimal foundationalist’ lens enables the investigation of the dialectical relation between materiality (violence) and discourse (terrorism). At the same time, it serves as ‘a bridge between critical and traditional scholarship’ (Toros & Gunning, 2009, p. 92). A minimal foundationalist orientation does not mean, however, that terrorism, as a category of violence, has an immutable objective reality but that it should be understood as a social, historical, and culturally contingent discursive construction that is linked to material characteristics which make terrorism different from other violent phenomena (see Jackson, 2011, p. 118).

But how, then, are we able to assign features to a violent event that explains how and why its interpretation as terrorism is possible and more likely than alternative characterizations? Engaging with the quintessential traditional-positivist endeavour of defining terrorism,

Jackson (2011) has here suggested that the definitional exercise within the traditional terrorism field can serve as an analytical entry point. This is because it consists in finding a series of ‘observable regularities’ on which to build the discursive (definitional) construction of terrorism, and these can serve as ‘relatively secure’ knowledge ‘anchorages’ that allow linking materiality and discourse (ibid, p. 119). Definitional debates, rather than being sidelined as a positivist endeavour that has long lost its value for CTS scholarship, thereby moving into the centre of conceptualizing how particular material features may make the interpretation of a violent event as terrorism both possible and thinkable (Homolar & Rodríguez-Merino, 2019).

## **1.2 ‘Terrorism’ Definitions as Mapping Device**

Narratives do not emerge in a discursive vacuum, but in a context of pre-existing ‘structures of signification’ with a ‘background capacity’ (Milliken, 1999, p. 23). This also holds for discursive representations of issues, actors, and actions as terrorism that take place within a context of historical practices of labelling (Dixit, 2016, p. 32) and specific linguistic cultures (Salter, 2010, p. 118). The original securitization framework, however, does not feature a ‘comprehensive awareness’ of the broader social contexts ‘from which both the securitizing actor and the performative force of the articulated speech-act/text gain power’ (Stritzel 2007, p. 365). In this section, I address this shortcoming by conceptualizing definitional exercises as an integral part of the socio-linguistic setting in which processes of terroristization take place. The longstanding debates over how to define terrorism matter because they enduringly and regularly expose audiences to claims about constitutive characteristics.

### *Understanding Terrorism Definitions as Discursive Anchors*

Definitions are, in a very broad sense, the discursive outcome of a process of thinking and abstraction that is later translated into words (Schmid, 2004). In this process, the defining agent conceptualizes an object by attaching a set of essential properties to it, while at the same time restricting these properties to make the object ‘clear or definitive’ (Collins Dictionary, 2015). In the case of terrorism, definitional exercises have thus far not produced a universally accepted answer to what terrorism is and which necessary and sufficient

constituent parts it features, and instead only provided a negative definition of terrorism as violence that is not insurgency, guerrilla action, ethnic riots, or hate crimes, and that non-state actors should be considered as the primary culprits (Laqueur 1986). Indeed, while terrorism remains a fundamental taboo in world politics that is placed outside the boundary of legitimate political contestation (cf. Loadenthal 2013, 93), its exact meaning remains a matter of intense dispute among policymakers and scholars. Brannan et al. (2001) thus pointedly observed a ‘perverse situation’ where a phenomenon – terrorism – is extensively studied although its essence has not been pinned down.

That attempts to conceptually pin down the essence of terrorism have thus far failed to deliver a universally accepted definition need not, however, be resolved to understand their relevance as the discursive setting in which processes of terroristization take place. This is because the many debates within the academic and policy communities over what distinct features should serve to objectively categorize events as terrorism and a unique type of political violence (cf. Boyle, 2012, p. 529) function as discursive anchors that bias interpretations of what happens, to whom, and why in the direction of salient ‘terrorist’ reference points that we have previously been exposed to (Homolar & Rodríguez-Merino, 2019, p. 4). In their definitional effort, scholars attach a series of properties, or *definiens*, to the *definiendum* terrorism, and while critical terrorism scholarship may keep a significant distance to more traditional approaches, it has nevertheless echoed the key markers contained within their orthodox counterpart’s definitions in the latter’s rejection (e.g. Jackson, 2011, p. 123; Finn & Momani, 2017, pp. 838-4; Gunning, 2007, p. 38; Burke, 2008, p. 39; cf. Stump, 2013). This means that even though terrorism definitions are continuously marred by contradictions (cf. Stampnitzky, 2017), they nevertheless expose us to the very same discursive elements. If a frame is negated, it is still activated (Lakoff, 2004), and the repetition of a particular terrorism marker in definitional debates – in the affirmative or negative – only serves to amplify it. The reiteration of the core elements contained in the plethora of terrorism definitions – as well as their broader public resonance – serves as background setting to discursively map a new instance of violence as an act of terrorism.

Nearly three decades ago, Schmid (1992, p. 7) identified academia as among the most relevant definitional agents producing understandings of terrorism. Scholars across the critical-orthodox divide in this ‘intellectual forum’ on terrorism (Schmid, 1992, p. 7) have assigned a ‘logical priority’ (Baldwin, 1997, p. 8) to the premise of defining their object of research

(see for example Jenkins, 1983, p. 8; Gibbs, 1989; K. J. Long, 1990; Merari, 1993, pp. 214-7; Hoffman, 1998, p. 43; Bjørge, 2005, p. 2; Horgan, 2005, p. 2; Crenshaw, 2011, p. 3). While unsurprisingly offering a wide and multi-faceted range of definitions, 22 *definiens* of terrorism stand out (Schmid et al., 1988; Weinberg et al., 2004). These scholarly terrorism markers, which are summarized in Table 1.1, have emerged as central in a total of 182 definitions generated through both a definitional survey (Schmid et al., 1988) and articles published in three key academic journals focused on political violence (Weinberg et al., 2004). While the frequency of the definitional elements varies on each definition, put together they provide the essence of the academic understandings of terrorism.

**TABLE 1.1** Most frequently cited *definiens* in scholarly definitions of terrorism

(adapted from Weinberg et al., 2004)

- |   |
|---|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Violence, Force</li><li>2. Political</li><li>3. Fear, Terror emphasized</li><li>4. Threat</li><li>5. Psychological effects and (anticipated) reactions</li></ol> |
|---|

6. Victim-Target differentiation
7. Purposive, Planned, Systematic, Organized action
8. Method of combat, strategy, tactic
9. Extra-normality, in breach of accepted rules, without humanitarian constraints
10. Coercion, extortion, induction of compliance
11. Publicity aspect
12. Arbitrariness, impersonal, random character, indiscrimination
13. Civilians, non-combatants, neutrals, outsiders as victims
14. Intimidation
15. Innocence of victims emphasized
16. Group, movement, organization as perpetrator
17. Symbolic aspect, demonstration to others
18. Incalculability, unpredictability, unexpectedness of occurrence of violence
19. Clandestine, covert nature
20. Repetitiveness, serial or campaign character of violence
21. Criminal
22. Demands made on third parties

A closer look at these dominant terrorism markers reveals the existence of three core definitional clusters of constituent properties around which scholars have constructed the concept of terrorism. As I summarize in Table 1.2, the first of these markers indicates that terrorism is predominantly a type of physical violence with distinct characteristics regarding the level of organization, choice of targets, degree of predictability, and publicity. The second cluster envisions terrorism as a type of violence that has psychological effects and coerces audiences other than its immediate physical victims. Finally, a third ideational realm points to terrorism as violence with a political motivation. I explore the individual clusters and *definiens* further below.

**TABLE 1.2** Definitional clusters and *definiens*<sup>1</sup>

**1. Terrorism is *violence* (1) as it...**

<sup>1</sup> Author's clusterization of the core *definiens* of terrorism identified in Weinberg et al., 2004.

<p>is organized and planned (7)  is covert and clandestine (19)  attacks victims categorized as innocent/civilians/non-combatants/neutrals/outside (13,15) in an arbitrary/impersonal/indiscriminate/random way (12), considered extra-normal, without humanitarian constraints and in breach of the accepted rules (9)  occurs in an incalculable/unpredictable/unexpected fashion (18)  presents a symbolic/publicity aspect (11, 17), it is demonstrated to others (6)</p>
<p><b>2. Terrorism is <i>terror</i> (3) because its violence...</b></p>
<p>has psychological effects (5), like fear and/or terror (3), in third parties different to the immediate victim (6)  intimidates/coerces/extorts/threatens (4, 10, 14) third parties different to the immediate victim (6) so they react (5) in a way which benefits the objectives of the perpetrator, potentially by fulfilling/complying (10) with its demands (22)</p>
<p><b>3. Terrorism is <i>political</i> (2), because its violence has...</b></p>
<p>a <i>political</i> purpose (7) for which a group/movement/organization (16) uses it in a systematic way (7, 20) as a method of combat/tactic/strategy (8) in a wider conflict</p>

It is important to note here that while the individual properties contained within the three clusters may not always each be present in either terrorism definitions or the discursive representation of events as terrorist acts, the clusters themselves are interrelated and do not stand in isolation. For example, if an attempt to achieve political objectives is not accompanied by physical violence, it does not fit squarely in the scholarly box of terrorism. Similarly, an event that is seen as featuring ‘terroristic’ material properties such as indiscriminate violence against civilian targets without a motivation that is understood as political would not satisfy the minimal scholarly consensus of what terrorism is – and neither would a violent attack with a clear political motivation that does not contain any elements associated with ‘terror’.

Following from the above is that the essential ‘material’ ingredient for labelling an event as a terrorist act is physical violence described as arbitrary, indiscriminate, and extraordinary – violence that is constructed as illegal and morally unjustifiable and as targeting civilians and non-combatants for a (under-defined) political purpose. A terrorist attack is also associated with a high degree of premeditation, in terms of planning and coordination, and with the clandestine and serial character of violence that is aimed at addressing a secondary audience rather than the primary victims. Yet what at first glance may seem an intuitive, even common

sense, understanding of terrorism that emerges from the scholarly definitional markers is, however, full of interpretive pitfalls. Questions arise, for example, on what the nature of violence is, who falls under the category of ‘civilian’, what constitutes a ‘political’ motivation, or how fear and coercion actually work. Because of the role dominant terrorism markers play in terroristization processes as discursive ‘background noise’, it is necessary to highlight the range of interpretative possibilities and the politics their particular use entails.

*Terrorism is premeditated violence*

‘Terrorism’ is understood first and foremost as violence and/or force in scholarly definitions, where it ranks as the most frequently cited element (Weinberg et al., 2004, p. 781; see Table 1.1, marker 1). The meaning of violence, however, is not clear-cut. As Wolf-Dieter Narr (cited in Imbusch, 2003, p. 14) points out, the concept of violence presents itself a series of ‘chameleon-like colorations’, which, in turn, widens the interpretative possibilities of understanding violence as terrorism.

To begin with, mainstream definitions of violence have firmly wedded this to a physical dimension and frequently see it as interchangeable with the concept of force. Popitz (cited in Imbusch, 2003, p. 17), for example, conceptualized violence as an ‘act of power leading to intentionally physical injury of another, regardless of whether its purpose for the agent is actually in carrying it out ... or whether the action is intended to be translated into threats and lead to lasting subjugation’). The World Health Organization (WHO) likewise taps into the idea of violence as a deliberate act of physical force, defining it as:

‘the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment, or deprivation’ (WHO, 2002, p. 5-6).

Many official definitions of terrorism likewise represent violence as brute force, whereby it is evoked as an act involving ‘death and bodily harm with the use of violence’ (Government of Canada, 2015), one that ‘endangers a person’s life’ (UK, 2000, 2006), ‘acts dangerous to human life’ (US Code, 1990) or ‘attacks on people resulting in death’ (EU, 2002). This dominant understanding also underlies UN counter-terrorism conventions on bombings and ‘nuclear terrorism’ (UN General Assembly, 1997, 2005) or the manufacturing and trade of

weapons (IAEA, 1979; UN General Assembly, 1991), phenomena implying the material destruction of life.

Not all conceptualizations of violence see it as an exclusively physical phenomenon. Beyond its flagship definition, the WHO (2002, pp. 6-7), for instance, distinguishes four modalities of violence: physical, sexual, psychological, and deprivation or neglect. The last two categories do not imply the use of physical force. When the United Nations Development Programme formally introduced the concept of human security in 1994, it likewise pointed to many areas of insecurity that are not linked to direct physical violence and deliberate brute force, such as liberty, self-determination, development, healthcare, and economic wellbeing (Homolar, 2015). These broad understandings of what violence may entail are loosely linked to Galtung's (1969 p. 168) conceptualization of forms of indirect violence that prevent human beings from achieving the full potential of their 'somatic and mental realizations'. The idea that violence transcends physical interaction is also present in Fanon's (1963) analysis of the 'structural violence' imposed by the colonial state, Bondi's (1974) 'economic violence' of capitalism, and Bourdieu's (2000) 'symbolic violence'.

Some terrorism definitions have incorporated an extended meaning of violence and conceptualize terrorism as a phenomenon that may encompass both physical and psychological dimensions. The US Patriot Act of 2001 holds, for example, that 'threatening to commit acts of violence' already is a 'terrorist activity' (US Congress, 2001), equating emotional blackmail (the mere act of threatening) with actual physical harm. What is more, 'neoliberal' oppressive economic deprivation has also been imbued with the capacity to 'terrorise' populations by means other than direct and intentional physical force (Heath-Kelly, Baker-Beall, & Jarvis, 2015).

While indirect violence has begun to be subsumed under the headline of terrorist activities, physical intentional force has remained dominant in characterizations of 'acts of violence' by political agents, and this also holds for the minimal scholarly consensus on key terrorism markers presented above. This is, to a significant degree, owing to the centrality of the elements of premeditation and intention in definitions of terrorism. The properties of a significant degree of (clandestine) organization, planning, and premeditation in particular set terrorist incidents apart from violence that erupts only as a spontaneous and reactive response to an immediately previous development, whether an aggression, a provocation, or

the escalation of existing tensions (Krug, Dahlberg, Mercy, Zwi, & Lozano, 2002, pp. 5-6; Schmid, 2004, p. 408). For example, violent clashes between street protesters and state authorities lend themselves less well to being interpreted as terrorist incidents because they are usually preceded by a confrontational situation that escalates (e.g. Collins, 2008). When violence is not the result of an organized plot, it is more challenging to perceive it as falling within the minimal consensus understanding of terrorism.

The understanding of terrorist violence as an organized deliberate act is frequently linked to other phenomenological aspects such as the type of weaponry used. Incidents where the attackers use advanced weaponry and explosive devices more readily signal a premeditated violent aim. This, however, does not suggest that the use of more rudimentary devices including knives and vehicles prohibits assigning a significant degree of intentionality and, by extension, the interpretation of such violence as terrorism. Rather, it points to the idea that the use of automated weapons rather than boxing gloves to cause physical harm lends greater weight to representations of violence as a terrorist incidents and may fall more intuitively within the minimal scholarly consensus on terrorism markers.

#### *Terrorism is violence against civilians*

Terrorism is overwhelmingly constructed as premeditated physical violence that is directed against victims that are categorized as ‘civilians’ and ‘innocent’ (see Table 1.1, marker 13). The international legal framework prohibiting violence against civilians has been a cornerstone of the inter-state system for nearly seventy years (e.g. ICRC, 1949, pp. 169-170; CRC, 2016, Rule 3, 5, and 6; United Nations, 1998, p. 5) and the deliberate targeting of attacks against civilians lies at the core of the international community’s critique of terrorist events. The violence-against-civilians marker is the context in which violence is understood to occur, and the interpretation of whether an act of violence is considered to be part of a ‘proper’ armed conflict plays a crucial role in delineating who belongs to the ‘civilian’ category and who does not. Indeed, based on the terrorism markers above, a violent event cannot be easily classified as a terrorist act if the victims are not ‘civilians’.

The category of ‘civilian’ originates from the international law governing armed conflicts between states or civil wars, and which seeks to limit the use of military force and direct physical violence ‘to the amount necessary to achieve the aim of the conflict’ (Sassòli & Bouvier, 2006, pp. 81-2). The terminology of ‘civilian’ applies to ‘non-combatant’ persons

who are ‘not members of the armed forces’, are ‘no longer members of the armed forces’, or ‘who do not participate in hostilities’ (ICRC, 1949; 2019). Despite its centrality in international human rights law, however, the category of ‘civilian’ has some limitations and is not as straightforward as this definition suggests. To begin with, it does not apply in the context to domestic intra-state hostilities when these are not understood as part of an ‘armed conflict’ that fall within the remit of international law despite its domestic location (UN 1979, 661). If there is no armed conflict, the combatant status vanishes – but so does the category of the civilian as its binary opposite. In ‘peacetime’, both the perpetrators and victims of the use of force can be construed as civilians.

Because international law does not provide a ‘lower threshold at which violence amounts to an armed conflict’ in a domestic context (Sassòli, 2006, p. 963), what counts as armed conflict remains highly contested, and states are biased against declaring internal turmoil as either armed conflict or civil war’ This is because in doing so, states would concede their opponents a legal status of combatants in a ‘non-international armed conflict that falls under the remit of international law, which entails immunity for such agents of violence from prosecution under domestic law for taking up arms against the state (ICRC, 2019). States thus have an incentive to limit the reach of international law regarding conflicts within their boundaries (Scharf, 2001), and this is reflected in how they represent violent domestic turmoil even if non-government fighters use uniforms, infantry-light weapons, and commando-style tactics (Merari, 1993). Consider, for example, the ongoing hostilities in Syria, for which President Bassar Al Assad has systematically rejected the label of “civil war” between two domestic contenders (Mroue 2012) and instead drawn a parallel to the terrorist attacks in Paris in November 2015 that took place in the absence of intra-state conflict (Bacchi 2015). At the same time, there is a ‘substantial consensus’ among state actors about ‘terrorism’ in peacetime that has no grounding in international law (Cassese, 2006, pp. 936-7), and which expands the category of ‘civilian’ victims to encompass every person, including state officials, members of state enforcement agencies, and the security forces (see UK, 2000; EU, 2002; US Congress, 2001).

On the other hand, those waging violence against the state seek legitimacy and reject the terrorism label by representing their fight as part of an armed conflict that falls under the remit of international legal frameworks. This is illustrated in the names adopted by dissident groups, from the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) to the Irish Republican

Army (IRA), or in their depiction of their struggle as part of a war or an armed conflict. ‘When you kill in war, it is an act that is allowed’, pointed Yigal Amir after killing Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in 1995 (CNN, 1995). The Basque separatist group ETA (Homeland and Liberty) describe its militants as commandos engaged in ‘armed conflict’ (Veres, 2006). In the case of Xinjiang, dissident organizations like the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) claim to be engaged in a ‘holy’ war against China (RFA, 2012h).

The lack of precise provisions around the categories of ‘civilian’ or ‘combatant’, of legitimate targets, and of agents of violence outside of internationally recognized armed conflicts opens space for narrative contests over the status of the victims and perpetrators of violent events, despite appearing as unambiguous properties in the minimal consensus over what constitutes an act of terrorism. Perpetrators here seek to discursively represent their victims either as combatants or part of an oppressive state apparatus, and thereby as legitimate targets, whereas governments tend to emphasize the civilian status of victims in the same event to represent violence as outside the boundary of legitimate conduct (see Homolar & Rodríguez-Merino, 2019, pp. 8-9). The latter frequently paves the way for legitimizing repressive and extraordinary measures against perpetrators on the basis of denying them combatant status (see Jackson, 2011).

#### *Terrorism is indiscriminate and unexpected violence*

Delineating terrorism through the character of an act of violence is not limited to the question of whether premeditated violence claims ‘innocent’ civilian lives. Conceptually entwined with violence against civilians as a core constituent property of terrorism are the degree of target selectivity and forewarning involved. A key definitional marker holds that a terrorist violent event is generally an act of indiscriminate violence, also described as ‘arbitrary’, ‘impersonal’ or ‘random’ violence, which also occurs in a way that is ‘unexpected’, ‘incalculable’ or ‘unpredictable’ (see Table 1.1, markers 12 and 18). Collins (2008, p. 400) notes here that terrorist attacks are characterized as such precisely because the attackers launch violence avoiding any previous confrontation or detection.

As was the case with the civilian definitional marker, this element again links to long-standing international (legal) norms over the use of force that, in this case, hold for intrastate conflict (Crawford & Pert, 2015, p. 198; ICC, 1998, p. 5). International Human Rights Law prohibits ‘indiscriminate attacks’, which are defined as those instances of the use of direct physical

force that are ‘not directed at a specific military objective’, and ‘which employ a method or means of combat the effects of which cannot be limited as required by international humanitarian law’ and which ‘are of a nature to strike military objectives and civilians or civilian objects without distinction’ (see ICRC, 2019). International law also offers some guidance on how to delineate suddenness and unpredictability of terrorism, which, in addition to an explicit warning, includes the concealing of weapons and civilian clothing rather than uniforms (Merari, 1993; Pfanner, 2004). The key here is that the unexpected and random disruption of everyday life challenges the international normative consensus on the use of force by violating conditions of pre-emption and self-defence.

To analytically establish whether the use of force is intentionally indiscriminate and surprising is often, even if implicitly, derived from two material factors of violent events: the technology used to carry out violent attacks and the types of spaces targeted. For example, some advanced technologies associated with the use of force are primarily indiscriminate by design, such as explosive devices and weapons of mass destruction, while other more rudimentary devices including guns and knives as well as objects not intended for the use of physical force, only gain the indiscriminate status through the way in which they are deployed. Likewise, the locations of violent events can more or less readily foster interpretations of indiscriminate physical harm against civilians. In contrast to spaces associated with the state security apparatus such as military barracks or police stations, public venues including transport hubs, busy squares, and markets are widely associated with the presence of a predominantly civilian population that does not anticipate an act of violence. Acts like ‘detonating a bomb in a public place clearly do involve random targeting’ and foster the interpretation of the act as terrorist event (Jackson, 2011, p. 120), whereas it is more ‘difficult to conceive how an act could be labelled as terrorist if ... the author identifies himself as an attacker while he is visible to the combatants he attacks during and prior to the launching of the attack’ (Sassoli 2006, p. 9). Within the context of ‘highly patterned’ events that are part of ethnic conflicts, for example, violence is neither random nor unpredictable and surprising (Horowitz, 2001, p. 1).

Yet again the mere materiality of either technology and space or clandestine elements such as civilian clothing that are central to establishing an act of violence as indiscriminate do not automatically invite the interpretation of violent events as terrorism. A case in point is China’s selective application of the terrorism label for events that could all be understood as

indiscriminate acts of violence. In July 2013, the Chinese authorities did not characterize the detonation of a homemade explosive device, without causing fatalities, at the Beijing airport, by a man who protested his ill-treatment by the police (X. Chen, 2013; Zheng & An, 2013). Neither did they frame as terrorism the explosion of nine bombs by ex-convict and local resident Feng Zhijun, outside the headquarters of the CPC in Taiyuan (Shanxi province) in November 2013, which killed one person and left eight others injured (Meng, 2014a). In contrast, when events concerned Xinjiang, the Chinese police presented ‘boxing gloves’ as ‘evidence of a terror plan’, and framed as a ‘terrorist’ attack an episode in a remote mountainous area in which the alleged terrorists were accompanied by children (see RFA, 2012e, 2011i). Just as for the civilian property of terrorism, the definitional category of indiscrimination is satisfied less through the materiality of a violent event but is instead dependent on how political agents chose to frame the incidents.

*Terrorism is symbolic violence that communicates fear to coerce*

Scholarly conceptualizations of terrorism properties prominently feature a communicative dimension. This is linked to definitional markers that imbue terrorist violence with a ‘symbolic’ character that pursues ‘publicity’ through violence with the intent to instil ‘fear’ or ‘terror’ in victims other than the immediate physical target of an attack (see Table 1.1, markers 3 and 17). The presumed aim of such fear-inducing symbolic violence is the coercion, intimidation, extortion, or threatening of third parties into acting in a way that satisfies the perpetrators’ agenda (cf. GTD, 2014, 8; ICRC, 2019).

The construction of terrorism as a communication device is based on the underlying assumption that in contrast to ‘legitimate’ uses of deliberate physical force, terrorist attacks are not conducted with the intention or capacity to achieve direct territorial or military gains but rather to generate a broader psychological reaction that follows the direct physical act. The idea that ‘fear and trembling’ (Rapoport, 1984) is a potent military and political strategy that can be traced back to the classic Chinese strategist Sun Tzu’s maxim ‘kill one, frighten ten thousand’ (see Prunckun, 2014). Rapoport (1984, p. 669) recalls here the effects that Zealot violence had on the Romans, for whom ‘the panic created was more alarming than the calamity itself; everyone, as on the battlefield, hourly expected death’.

Based on the psychological reach of violence, terrorism has been constructed as a rhetorical device with the capacity to intimidate and coerce third parties into complying with the

political objectives of the perpetrator, that is, ‘propaganda by the deed’ (Fleming, 1980). The uniqueness of terrorism lies, according to Schreiber (1978), in the existence of a speaker, an audience, and a language. The terrorist is the speaker, the audience — which may be the public, the media, or the government — is the part to be coerced and extorted, and violence is the language. The media, from television to newspapers to the Internet, emerge as the conduit of this communicational process, the guarantor that the terror-to-coerce mechanism will unleash (see Jenkins, 1974, p. 4; Decker & Rainey, 1980, pp. 4-5; Hoskins & O’Loughlin, 2009; Weimann, 2008).

In contrast to the terrorism properties discussed in the previous subsections, the communicative dimension is challenging to link to specific material features. As Schmid (2004, p. 395) emphasizes, differentiating terrorism from other types of political violence on the basis of its ‘coercive and communicative tactics’ is a difficult task. At least in theory, every violent attack has the potential to terrify and intimidate audiences beyond the immediate victims. Terrorism does not have the monopoly of these effects, as the use of rape as an instrument of war demonstrates (Clifford, 2008). The US Patriot Act’s definition of terrorism echoes the challenge of determining the intentionality of spreading terror, noting that for an act to be considered as terrorism, it merely needs to ‘*appear to be intended*’ (US Congress, 2001, p. 275; my emphasis).

To some extent, the symbolic element of terrorism can be deduced from the choice of target. By selecting a locus for a violent attack that is likely to be considered broadly as traumatizing or by implementing violence in a shocking way, perpetrators may obtain more greater publicity, which, in turn, may hold the potential to facilitate the spreading of terror and anxiety, and, in extension, increase the likelihood of achieving the coercive effects intended. Scholars have attributed this ‘spectacular’ element to aircraft hijacking tactics (Rapoport, 2002), the September 11 attacks in the US in 2001 (Kellner, 2004), and the diffusion of gruesome executions through the Internet and the social media (Friis, 2015).

#### *Terrorism is political (violence)*

A final but fundamental definitional marker assigns a ‘political’ property to violence for it to become interpreted as terrorism. Indeed, this element stands alongside violence and terror as one of the three core clusters underpinning the concept (Weinberg et al., 2004, p. 781; see Table 1.2). It is, however, equally vague and open to interpretation as the previous terrorism

properties, perhaps even more so if we understand the political arena as comprising ‘the entire sphere of the social’ (Hay, 2002, p. 3), and with the boundaries of what is political as opposed to private, personal, or peculiar generally seen as difficult to establish (Stampnitzky, 2017). To narrow the breadth of phenomena that fall within the ‘political’ dimension of terrorism markers, terrorism scholarship has generally zoomed in on the motivation of the perpetrators. This, however, evokes questions on what precisely is political about a motivation for violence and how we can identify it as the perpetrator’s overarching rationale for violence.

Analytically, a first difficulty is here that violence is always political in as much as it is always subject to legal scrutiny in the public realm. Unlike other social phenomena, from making friends to doing sports, violent interactions are regulated by the state. Broadly speaking, violent phenomena are either part of the state’s monopoly of legitimate physical violence within a particular territory (Weber, 1919/1965) or fall they into the private sphere, where they are regulated according to country-specific systems of law and legal prosecution (Krug et al., 2002, p. 5). What is more, there seems to be no agreement in the international arena on what the specific political motivation of terrorism is. For the WHO, terrorism has a ‘social’ motive, as differentiated from a ‘political’ one (Krug et al., 2002, p. 8). International Law, broadly conceived, interprets terrorism as having a political or ideological motivation of public scope, as opposed to private ends such as a personal economic profit (Cassese, 2006), but some scholars find ‘narco-terrorism’ to be a political phenomenon (Björnehed, 2004) or see a political dimension in ‘the pursuit of economic goals for criminal organisations’ (Toros & Mavelli, 2013, p. 73).

It is similarly difficult, if not impossible, to establish whether a set of ideas are political, ideological, or religious. Interestingly, while there are no clear boundaries between these realms, they have all been traditionally associated with motivations for terrorism. For example, Rapoport’s mapping of ‘modern terrorism’ into four anarchist, anti-colonial, new left, and religious waves shows how ideological and religious energies are intertwined with political ones. In the contemporary era, the idea of ‘Islamic terrorism’ has gained particular prominence among policymakers and scholars alike (Jackson, 2007, pp. 398-400). Overall, as Wieviorka (2007, p. 96) suggests, ‘the political dimensions of terrorism are permanently fueled (sic) or invaded by other logics where meaning is lost or overloaded by new elements’, leading violence to be ‘either infrapolitical (and then dominated by economic or purely

criminal goals)', or 'metapolitical (and then dominated by religious goals, including life after death)'.

An alternative way to analytically grasp the political definitional marker, and one which finds ideological or religious motivations as compatible with a political agenda rather than in opposition to it, is to start from a definition of politics as the 'strive for a share of power or to influence the distribution of power' (Weber 1919/1965, p.78). Based on an understanding of politics as intimately connected to (contests over) power scholars have studied terrorism as both a dissident tactic and a state strategy, despite the differences between both phenomena (Laqueur, 1986, p. 89).

Violence by non-state actors has been the core focus of terrorism scholarship. The insurgent groups cited by Rapoport (2002) saw their ultimate purpose in the subversion of the established order, whether this was a monarchy, in the case of anarchism, colonial states or Western liberal democracies. Theorists and strategists associated with such movements often explicitly emphasized the crucial role of violence in achieving their politically subversive aims. George Sorel (1908/1999), for example, praised the proletariat's violence as a core means to counter the state's orchestrated terror and repression, whereas Carlos Marighella (1969/2002, p. 3) suggested that 'to be an assailant or a terrorist is a quality that ennoble any honourable man because it is an act worthy of a revolutionary engaged in armed struggle against the shameful military dictatorship and its monstrosities'. Frantz Fanon (1963, p. 61), in turn, proposed 'greater violence' as the means of defeating a 'colonialism' that he labelled as 'violence in its natural state'. Such terrorist violence against what is perceived as oppressive regimes is here understood as political because it disputes their legitimacy in a competition over power.

While a bias exists toward assigning terrorist agency to non-state actors (Jackson, 2009, p. 179), scholars have also considered the political dimension of terrorism in the context of repressive state practices, in particular as means to hold on to power and suppress dissidence. The idea of terror by the state is rooted in the violence that the revolutionary French regime adopted during the period known as *La Terreur*, and amongst others, Lenin reserved a crucial role for 'organized terror' as a means for state coercion once in power (cited in Leggett, 1987). Arendt (1969) pointedly referred to 'terror' as 'the form of government that comes into being when violence, having destroyed all power, does not abdicate but, on the contrary,

remains in full control'. Today, the notion of 'state terrorism' generally refers to 'violent repression for control of state power' (Marsden & Schmid, 2011, p. 161), and while the idea of state terrorism has been mainly associated with totalitarian regimes, it has also been used to describe violent campaigns implemented or sponsored by liberal democracies of the 'global North' (see Jarvis & Lister, 2014). Such terrorist violence can, therefore, be understood as political in as much it aims to hold and wield power over a regime's subjects.

Finally, a reference to a political dimension is also contained in the definitional property that characterizes terrorism as violence that is carried out by a group, movement, or organization (see Table 1.1, 16), which includes both a political affiliation and a desire to further political ends for a wider community on the part of the attackers. Violent acts that are committed by individuals without any organizational connection and for reasons such as personal revenge or private grievances do thus not routinely fall under this dominant understanding of terrorism. If violent attacks that are carried out by isolated individuals are represented as acts of terrorism, the perpetrators are commonly portrayed as 'lone wolfs' (Baker & De Graaf, 2011) who have a strong ideological affiliation and cause (see Pantucci, 2011).

As with the previously discussed terrorism properties, invoking a political dimension to interpret violence as an act of terrorism is a sign of agency. It is not imbued unambiguously by the phenomenology of either the event or motivation of the perpetrators. This is exemplified by the recent labelling 'leniency' toward right-wing extremist positions and violence as 'hate crime' that otherwise display key markers of terrorism if compared with a straightforward association between Islam, violence, and 'terrorism' (Jackson, 2007). This underscores that although the phenomenology of violence matters in identifying violence as terrorism, its discursive construction thus plays the lead role in giving sense to violent events as terrorist acts.

#### *A matrix for interpreting violent events as terrorism*

Following from the above is that the 'things' used to identify a terrorist event are not simply 'empty receptacles of discourses nor do they have 'essential' characteristics... but emerge in relation with material-discursive practices' (Aradau, 2010, p. 494). Yet while they are neither immutable nor passive or fixed (Barad, 2007, p. 151), the core markers of terrorism can nevertheless serve as core ingredients of an analytical mapping device that allows making

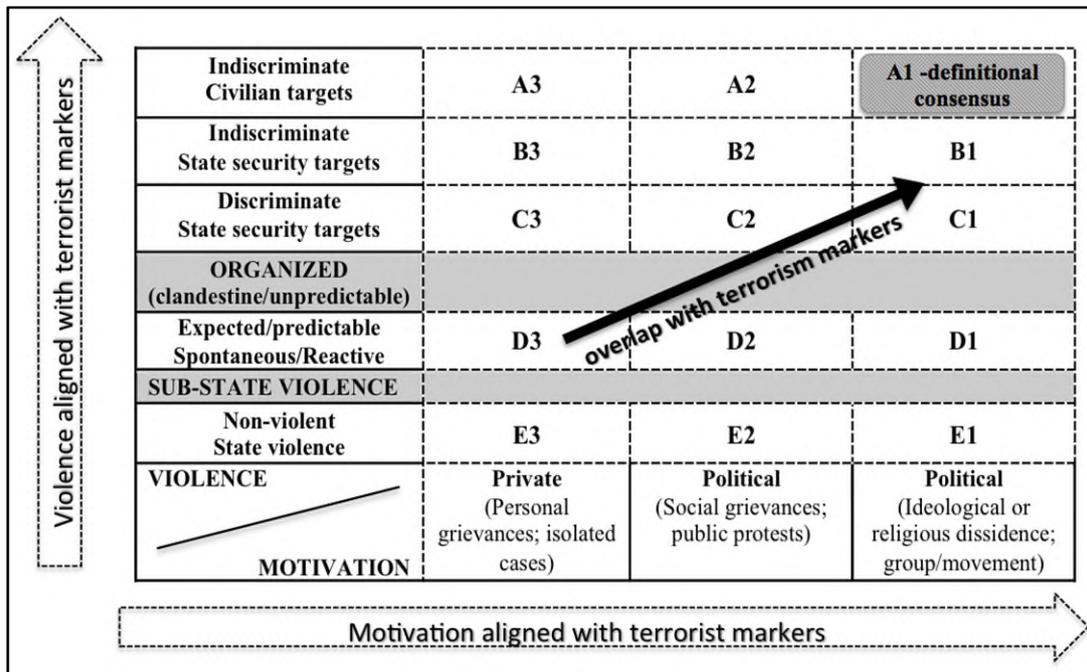
inferences about the degree to which both the phenomenology of a violent event and its discursive representation correspond with dominant scholarly understandings of terrorism.

The interpretative matrix that I use in this study as a mapping device of violent events features two perpendicular lines, or axes, which show the phenomenological distance of an event to each of the key terrorism properties discussed in the previous sections as well as to the minimal scholarly consensus: (x) the degree to which a political motivation on the part of the perpetrator can be assigned to a violent act; and (y) a scale of how much a violent incident overlaps with the material definiens of terrorism. As illustrated in Figure 1.1, the higher an event is situated on both axes, the higher the degree of correspondence of a violent event with scholarly understandings of terrorism.

In the empirical investigation that follows, the phenomenological quality of an event is assessed by placing it at the intersection of both axes, which can be divided further into 15 quadrants according to their proximity or distance to the minimal scholarly terrorism definition. It is important to note here that while this mapping device is designed to provide a pathway to approximate the spectrum of violence in Xinjiang vis-à-vis academic definitions of terrorism, the individual categories are far from either unequivocally or clear-cut. As the dashed lines demarcating the different quadrants acknowledge, the definitional markers of terrorism are fluid and open to negotiation, contestation, and manipulation by political agents.

Box A1 contains events that fit squarely into the consensus because they correspond with all core terrorism properties: they are premeditated, unpredictable, and indiscriminate violent attacks against ‘civilians’, and they are carried out by organized groups with a political dissident agenda. In turn, events that fall onto quadrants A2 (social grievances) or A3 (personal grievances), while presenting similar material features lack a distinct political dimension because they are not accompanied by a dissident agenda or cannot be traced to an insurgent organization.

**FIGURE 1.1 Interpretative scale of terrorism according to violence and motivation**



Box B1 corresponds to actions with the same material and motivational features of A1 and denotes events in which victims are seen as ‘combatants’ rather than as civilian. Attacks against ‘combatants’ motivated by personal reasons (B3) or by public grievances but with no insurgent aim (B2) are one and two degrees respectively further removed from overlapping with the definitional consensus. C-boxes follow a similar pattern to those in the B quadrants, with the exception that violence here is not indiscriminate but deployed against selectively targeted victims. When these victims are perceived as ‘combatants’, or members of a ‘repressive apparatus’, and their targeting implies an insurgent aim, targeted assassinations display a stronger ‘terroristic’ character (C1) compared to events in which the perpetrator is motivated by personal grievances directly linked to the targeted victim (C3).

Events in D-boxes are those that, while potentially exhibiting some of the features present in A1, such as involving indiscriminate violence against ‘innocent’ victims, do not involve a significant degree of prior organization or premeditation. Instances of spontaneous or reactive violence that follow an immediately previous confrontational context, even if displaying some dissident motivational dimension (D1), generally fall in the D2 box when wider socio-political tensions linger in the background, or the D3 box when they stem from personally aggrieved individuals. Ethnic riots are a case in point for events within the D-quadrants. They combine different violent patterns, from indiscriminate attacks launched by mobs of ‘civilians’ against other ‘civilians’, to the repression by the state security forces

(‘combatants’) of peaceful ‘civilian’ protesters, but lack the elements of organization and premeditation. While riots are often predictable considering that they result from the escalation of immediately previous tensions, they may still involve dissident individuals who may act as opportunistic instigators. Finally, E-boxes reflect either non-violent events or state violence, both of which lay outside the definitional consensus on what constitutes terrorism.

Overall, then, the matrix developed here serves to make claims about the material anatomy of an event to assess whether its phenomenology should facilitate a terrorist interpretation. Yet, as the above discussion of the key terrorism properties featuring in this study suggests, whether and how violent events are discursively mapped onto prevalent definitional markers of terrorism requires agency. There is a *palette* of interpretative possibilities associated with each marker, some of which may steer violent phenomena away from dominant understandings of terrorism, and while others may indeed facilitate a ‘terroristic’ meaning. If political agents employ salient ‘terrorist’ reference points in the message text to represent a violent event, this interpretative route invokes discursive anchors that prompt memories of terrorist violence, fostering unreflective knowledge toward interpreting a violent event as an act of terrorism because they fit onto pre-existing discursive maps. References to terrorism markers are a discursive choice, and, if present, are indicative of terroristization processes.

#### **1.4 Conclusion**

This chapter has developed the core elements of terroristization as an analytical framework for the study of the social construction of terrorism. Building on securitization theory and adopting a ‘minimal foundationalist’ approach, I have conceptualized terroristization as a framework that enables the study of discursive constructions of terrorism in authoritarian regimes, such as the PRC.

With its emphasis on the discursive construction of threats and the emergency politics this enables, securitization theory and the interventions adjusting and expanding the Copenhagen School’s proposal provide a template from which to investigate the processes by which terrorism discourse makes counter-terrorism practice a political possibility (see Jackson,

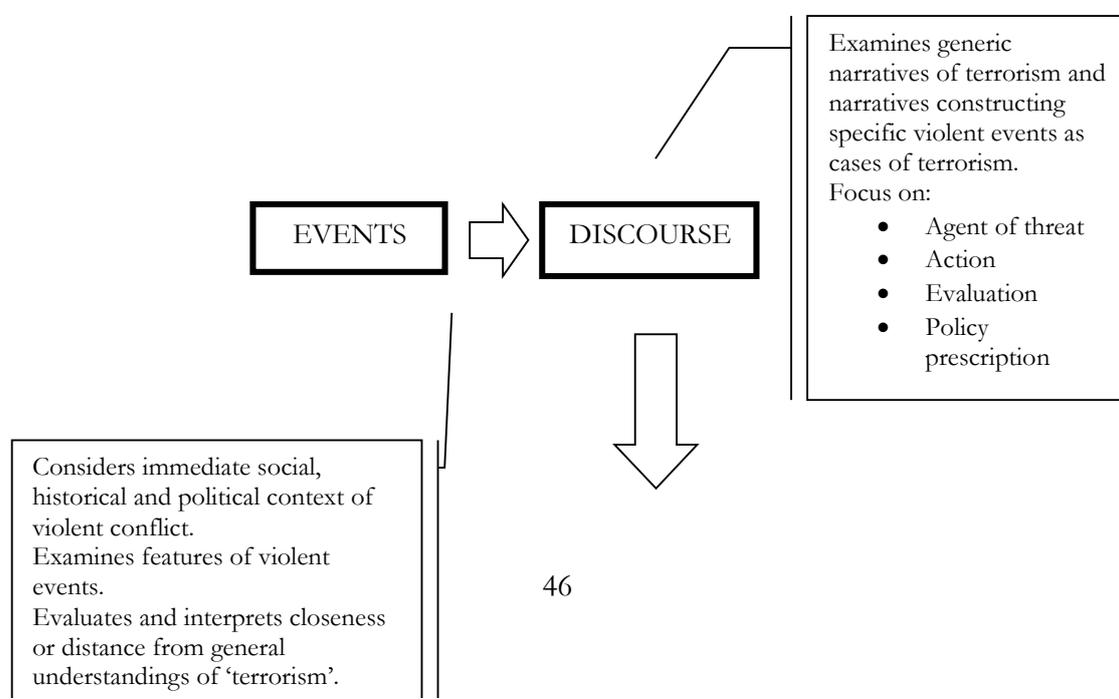
2005; Holland, 2013). Other critical approaches to the study of security have proved useful to investigate the emergency politics in Xinjiang, notably the emergence of a surveillance state or the internment of hundred of thousands of ethnic minorities in so-called ‘re-education camps’ (see Chapter Four). Drawing on Foucault (1997), Roberts (2018) has analysed the gradual exclusion of Uyghurs as a manifestation of *biopolitics*, where the Chinese state approaches the ethnic minority group as a biological threat to society that must be quarantined through surveillance, punishment, and detention practices. Meanwhile, Walsch (2020, p.) has recognized Agamben’s ‘state of exception’ (2005) in the police state of Xinjiang, one ‘where the rule of law is lifted and replaced with x-rays, iris scans, GPS tracking systems in all vehicles, collection of DNA from medical checkups, banning of all communication software, and sporadic arrests’. Also building on the ideas of Foucault and Agamben, Yi (2016, p. 38-39) has reflected on China’s ‘Panoptical surveillance’ over the Uyghur ethnic minority, examining how Uyghur culture, language, and habitus have been constrained or rendered useless by the Chinese state in the name of a safe development of the society. As these and other critical perspectives (see Zhang and McGhee, 2014) emphasize, the biopolitics, surveillance, and state of exception present in Xinjiang, conceptualized in this thesis as indicators of a *sine die* state of terroristization, are the result of the predication of a terrorism threat and the labelling of Uyghurs as terrorists (see Roberts, 2018, p. 234; Walsch, 2020). Securitization theory, with its capacity to link security discourse and change in practice (see Salter, 2010, p. 122), hence provides the entry point to investigate the discursive patterns, historical context, and political implications of these labelling and predication. And it does so in combination with the dominant scholarly definitions of terrorism, which this chapter has introduced as both the materiality-informed discursive structure of knowledge that provides a background to, and influences the terroristization process and as the basis to develop a mapping device for violent events.

The terroristization framework that I have introduced here thus enables the empirical investigation of the discursive construction of terrorism across three levels, which are summarized in Figure 1.2. The first draws on the scholarly dominant definitions of terrorism to examine the extent to which violent events echo general understandings of terrorism. The second level examines the linguistic patterns deployed by political actors to characterize violent conflict and to construct specific violent incidents. The third level looks at the wider political implications of the way violence is interpreted and represented discursively. The next three chapters analyze these three core dimensions (violence, discourse, and politics) of

the terroristization process at three different contemporary stages within the historically chronological order they occurred.

As we shall see, neither discursive practices nor material phenomena should be understood as ontologically or epistemologically prior (Barad, 2003, p. 822), as Hardy and Thomas (2014, p. 686) point out, ‘material objects and discourses are intertwined, with the former acquiring its identity through the discourses in which it is situated’. This means that the material basis of violence does not automatically anchor an event as a terrorist attack in processes of sensemaking – even if it significantly overlaps with the predominant terrorism markers contained within the surplus of definitions. Rather, in terroristization process, it is the invocation of a terrorism repertoire in narratives about violent events that function as the key device to hold meaning and matter together.

**FIGURE 1.2 Three-levels of the terroristization framework**



POLITICAL  
IMPLICATIONS

Examines counter-terrorist practices enabled by the terroristization of the conflict.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Securitizing Xinjiang: The years of ‘counterrevolution’ (1978-1990)

Until the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, terrorism in China’s northwest Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) did not exist. This is not to suggest that there were no episodes of violence in the region; on the contrary. Rather, the term ‘terrorism’ was essentially absent from the Chinese state discourse about conflict and dissidence in Xinjiang. During the 1980s, in the absence of a terrorism repertoire, the Chinese authorities instead used the label of ‘counterrevolution’ to diagnose a security threat in the region. As I argue, this period nevertheless played an important part in setting the scene for the securitization of ethnic tensions in the region and should be therefore be understood as a stage of pre-terroristization.

This chapter explores the Chinese government’s move away from gradualism and discursive restraint to suppression and ‘counterrevolution’. Access to information on –and narratives of – violence at the time is possible because, in contrast to the hermetic character of the Maoist rule (1949-1976), Deng Xiaoping’s early leadership of the Communist Party of China (CPC), which coincides with the period under investigation here, tolerated media openness to the extent that the 1980s have been described as a ‘golden age’ in foreign reporting on China (Gittings, 2006). Nevertheless, in particular, the exploration into the phenomenology of violence comes with the caveat that incidents other than those presented here can - and will - have occurred in Xinjiang during the ‘reform an opening up’ (*gaige kaifang*) period even if their details remain unavailable (cf. Abel, 1985).

The chapter shows that the emergence of the discourse of ‘splittism’ and the construction of a ‘counterrevolutionary’ threat was a gradual process that replaced the government’s earlier restraint in acknowledging and responding to violence in Xinjiang, which had characterized the beginning of the ‘reform an opening up’ era in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The securitization of the region was complete when authorities represented a violent outburst in the Baren township (Aqto county of Kizilsu Kirghiz Autonomous Prefecture) as a ‘counterrevolutionary rebellion’ and a ‘holy war’ and abandoned its approach of moderation and gradualism (see Connor, 1984) in favour of a militarized response to the tensions with the Turkic Muslim minorities of Xinjiang. The period of ‘counterrevolution’ thus sets the

scene for the stages of proto-terroristization (chapter 3) and terroristization (chapter 4) and plays a vital role in understanding the contemporary Chinese discourse on terrorism.

The chapter proceeds as follows. The first section explores the phenomenology of violence in Xinjiang during the 1980s, analysing official and alternative narratives in response to a series of violent incidents. The focus lies here on mapping their material features and evaluating the degree of their correspondence to dominant scholarly understandings of terrorism. The second section centres on the Chinese state discourse on Xinjiang. It traces how the statements of Chinese officials and the state media began to increasingly represent violence and dissent in the region as a separatist ‘counterrevolutionary’ threat to the stability and unity of China. This discourse, I argue, enabled the securitization of the Uyghur ethnic minority and the Xinjiang conflict. In the final section, I turn my attention to the political responses that were enabled through this discursive shift, demonstrating how the Chinese authorities abandoned conciliatory policies towards the ethnic minorities in favour of a crackdown campaign that has remained in place until today.

## **2.1 Mapping Violence in Xinjiang in the early ‘reform and opening up’ period**

Violence has been a feature for much of Xinjiang’s modern history (Forbes, 1986; Gladney, 1990; Benson, 1990; Perdue, 2005; Millward, 2007). Inter-ethnic tensions, in particular, have long fuelled secessionist attempts such as the emirate of Kashgaria (1864-1877), the First Turkish Islamic Republic of East Turkestan (1931-1933), and the Second Eastern Turkestan Republic (1944-1949) (see Kim, 2004; Forbes, 1986; D. Wang, 1999), or the resistance to the CPC’s ‘peaceful liberation’ of Xinjiang after 1949 (Y. Zhang, 1994; Dillon, 2004). Following the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), and despite the moderate policies that the Chinese government adopted to please ethnic minorities and defuse political dissent, violence continued erupting in the region. The ‘reform and opening up’ period is no exception.

What features characterized violent events in Xinjiang during the early years of the ‘reform and opening up’ era? To what extent do their characteristics overlap with academic definitions of ‘terrorism’? Guided by these questions, this section explores the spectrum of violent activities reported in Xinjiang between 1978 and 1990. It focuses in particular on four violent events known to have taken place in Payzawat (1981), Kashgar (1981), Ürümchi

(1989), and Baren (1990). Besides, the analysis integrates the student protests taking place in Ürümchi, Beijing and Shanghai in 1985. While not violent they provide insights into how the Chinese state discourse and policies vis-à-vis dissent evolved over the decade. Drawing on the insights gained in Chapter One, the section examines the extent of their political motivation, their level of organization and premeditation, and whether violence was deployed indiscriminately to target civilians to assess how well these incidents map onto the terrorism grid.

#### *Payzawat 1981*

One of the first violent events that occurred in Xinjiang after the end of the Cultural Revolution is a failed armed uprising occurring in the spring of 1981 in the county of Payzawat, in Kashgar prefecture. According to available accounts (Dillon, 2004: pp. 59-60; Rong, 2003; X. Chen, 2014), a group of nine students led by Ismail Hasan had founded the Eastern Turkestan Prairie Party that year. Within two months of existence, the organization recruited 148 members, the majority of them students aged between 15 and 20. In their founding meeting, the party had committed to rising in arms against China to build an East Turkestan Islamic Republic.

On the evening of May 26<sup>th</sup>, 1981, party members, divided into three groups, kidnapped the guard of the county armoury on the outskirts of Payzawat and seized 152 firearms, including ammunition and grenades. Before they could move forward, the Chinese authorities, alerted by the guard's wife, had mobilized the army and the police. The 'rebels' gathered in a forest three kilometres outside the town, where they claimed they would fight as 'mujahideen ranks'. Surrounded by troops from the People's Liberation Army (PLA), they accepted to negotiate with a representative of the local Public Security Bureau (PSB), and eventually surrendered. Accounts differ on the fate of the insurgents. Some Chinese sources emphasise that the uprising was put down without 'a single shot' and 'without shedding a drop of blood' (X. Chen, 2014). Others point out that 13 received prison sentences (Rong, 2003), while Dillon (2014, pp. 59-60) suggests that authorities adopted a differential response in which some armed insurgents were dealt with 'severely' while secondary members were merely reprimanded. Local witnesses suggested years later that the PLA stopped the uprising violently, leaving many dead (Reuters, 1988b).

Based on the materiality of the violent episode, the events in Payzawat overlap significantly with dominant constructions of terrorism. To begin with, if a political purpose is understood as a dissident revolutionary, secessionist or insurgent agenda, the armed uprising in Payzawat fits neatly into the politically motivated violence box that forms a cornerstone of many academic markers of a terrorist act. This is because the group had (reportedly) explicitly stated that the purpose of their resort to violence was to achieve secession of the region from the PRC. The Eastern Turkestan Prairie Party also sought to act upon its foundational principle of rising in arms against the Chinese rule. To do so, they had seized a weapons cache and were on their way to launch an attack when the authorities halted the operation. This suggests a significant degree of covertness, organization, and premeditation, all core features within the dominant construction of terrorism.

#### *Kashgar 1981*

A second relevant episode was the Kashgar riot on October 30<sup>th</sup>, 1981. This was triggered by a street scuffle in which an ethnic Han Chinese killed an Uyghur peasant. The victim, Abdulla Kader, had complained to the perpetrator, Ye Xin, objecting to the construction of a drainage ditch through Uyghur property (Wren, 1983; Dillon, 2004, pp. 59-60). The discussion escalated into a fight in which Ye accidentally shot dead Abdulla, afterwards turning himself into the police. According to a local Uyghur official, what at this point should have ended as a criminal case quickly turned into an ethnic riot of considerable dimensions: hundreds of Uyghurs took the streets parading the body of the victim, shouting slogans against the Han Chinese and calling for the establishment of an independent 'Uyghuristan' (Oziewicz, 1983). Armed with knives and clubs, they went on a rampage beating Han Chinese, looting shops, smashing cars, and attacking municipal buildings and other public facilities. Two people were killed, 59 were significantly injured, and 570 sustained minor injuries. Some Chinese accounts emphasize that the riots were instigated by an organization named the Central Asian Uyghuristan Youth Spark Party, created only a month before by young Uyghurs (Rong, 2003). According to this version, the organization took over the protests, distributing leaflets, seizing weapons, and calling to jihad and martyrdom. Twelve of the group's leaders were executed after the riot (Y. Liu, 2014), and the Chinese state compensated the original victim's family and executed the perpetrator along with an accomplice (L. H. Sun, 1985).

While official accounts of the unrest in Kashgar emphasized the participation of an organized group with a separatist agenda, the way in which the events unfolded suggests that this organization merely capitalized on a riot already underway and that it had no role in premeditating or triggering the event. Instead, the protest in Kashgar originated from an interethnic quotidian scuffle that ended with murder. While not a unique or isolated case – violence was not an uncommon feature of the tense interethnic interactions of the time – the primary trigger of the riot was not a political agenda, but a reaction to a private violent incident, even if the latter had an ethnic dimension. The core motivation of those who took to the streets, which included the victim’s family and friends, was to protest the crime and possibly to demand justice from the Chinese authorities. The course of the events changed because protesters eventually channeled their fury through ethnic rioting. Even if members of an organized group provoked protesters into violence and attached separatist slogans to the riot, this does little to qualify the violent episode as ‘revolutionary’ action. The broader context remains a public demonstration resulting from a crime partly rooted in ethnic mistrust, rather than an armed uprising with a straightforward political motivation that takes centre stage in the dominant construction of terrorism.

#### *Student Protests 1985*

Another key episode of unrest in Xinjiang is the student protests of December 1985. While not violent, hundreds of ethnic minority students illegally demonstrated in the streets of Ürümchi, Beijing, and Shanghai. The protests started on December 12<sup>th</sup> in the region’s capital Ürümchi when approximately 2,000 ethnic minority students from several universities demonstrated in front of the local government offices against the nuclear tests undertaken in the region. The students also demanded an easing of the family planning policies, the fulfillment of the constitutional provisions for ethnic autonomy, the improvement of education for minorities, and the reinstatement of Ismail Amat as regional governor following his replacement days earlier by Tomur Dawamat, whom they considered unqualified for the post (Burns, 1985). They shouted slogans such as ‘Han out of Xinjiang’ or ‘Independence, Freedom and Sovereignty for Xinjiang’ (Dillon, 2004, p. 61). A Chinese official interviewed by a Western news agency explained that the march ‘dispersed after patient persuasions by the (Communist) Party and government leading comrades who explained to the students that nuclear tests in Xinjiang didn’t have any harmful effects on the people’ (AP, 1986). Another Chinese official pointed that, in front of the students’

‘reasonable opinions on various government policies’, his colleagues ‘used verbal persuasion and education to have the students return to a normal academic situation’ (Reuters, 1986).

At the end of the month, the protest was repeated in Beijing, where around 300 ethnic minority students from the National Minorities Institute demonstrated in Tiananmen Square and marched to the entrance of Zhongnanhai, the Chinese government headquarters (AP, 1985). The students renewed the demands of their peers in Ürümchi, and additionally called for democratic elections in which local officials from the ethnic minorities could participate and for the end of the policy of sending criminals to Xinjiang. Chinese officials, amongst them a minister and four vice-ministers, met with 30 student representatives, to whom they explained that nuclear tests were necessary and that China’s policies toward minorities were generous (AFP, 1985). Only days later, a hundred students paraded in Shanghai waving banners reading ‘Stop nuclear testing’ and ‘Don’t turn Xinjiang into a concentration camp’. One of the protesters, commenting on what response the demonstration would have from the authorities, pointed out that he expected the government would be ‘reasonable’ (UPI, 1985). This comment greatly reflected the moderated approach to dissent that the Chinese government showcased at the time of the events.

The student protests in 1985 displayed clear-cut political orientation, but a separatist motive is difficult to establish. Rather, the demands centered on achieving the implementation of the Chinese constitution provisions for autonomy and the election of governors, as well as on improving education and the halting of the nuclear tests in Xinjiang. Far from dissident, these demands were made of the Chinese government suggesting an implicit acceptance of its authority. Chinese officials responded with moderation, meeting with some of the students, considering their demands and reassuring them concerning the nuclear tests. In late 1988, a protest that followed a similar pattern occurred. Uyghur students demonstrated in Beijing against Chinese films that they said distorted Uyghur history and culture. They carried banners reading ‘minorities demand human rights’ and ‘we want national unity based on equality’ (Roche, 1988e). Officials of the State Nationalities Commission met the marchers and promised to investigate their grievances, despite the demonstration was illegal under local rules that required protesters to apply for advance permission (*ibid*). These protests were political, but not dissident in their nature.

*Ürümchi 1989*

A third major violent episode is the string of riots that broke out in Ürümchi in 1989. In other Chinese Muslim-populated provinces like Ningxia, Gansu or Qinghai protests had already erupted against the publication of the book 'Sexual Customs' (1987), as it was perceived as condescending Islam. Following these, on May 12<sup>th</sup> 1989 around 2,500 Muslim demonstrators marched in Beijing in a procession that, unlike the well-known demonstrations in Tiananmen Square later that year, was authorized by the PSB. Furthermore, the municipal government supported the suppression of the contentious book because it attacked 'the unity of China's minorities' (Pomfret, 1989). The protest march ended in Tiananmen Square, with Muslim religious leaders delivering a letter to the National People's Congress (NPC) that called for the imprisonment of the book editors (Pomfret, 1989; Roche, 1989).

In Ürümchi, however, a similar - although unauthorized - demonstration ended in violence. On May 18<sup>th</sup>, 1989, a procession organized by senior religious figures and community leaders from mosques and Islamic schools marched the streets of the regional capital with slogans defending Islam against discrimination, demanding the destruction of the book 'Sexual Customs', and calling for the punishment of the authors and publishers (Mudin, 2012). The march congregated up to 5,000 individuals in front of the regional headquarters of the CPC, where the organizers unsuccessfully insisted to meet with senior government figures. The protest dissolved peacefully but some of the organizers were later arrested and others prevented from repeating the procession. The next day, thousands of people congregated again in the streets, this time rudderless, in a tense environment and under heavy police and military presence. At some point, two fire engines directed their water cannons onto demonstrators to disperse the protest, after which riots erupted (see Mudin, 2012). What followed, according to the official version, was a 'counterrevolutionary' riot in which hundreds of 'hooligans' stormed the government compound, beating and injuring 150 policemen and government officials (BBCMSAP, 1989a). A Chinese court later sentenced 10 rioters to prison terms ranging from a year to life, accusing them of robbery, sabotage, and defacing property (BBCMSAP, 1989b).

Subsuming the case of Ürümchi under the category of terrorism is difficult, in particular, because a clear-cut political motivation and premeditation to instigate violence are absent. The origin of the event was a procession organized by local clerics who demanded government action, implicitly recognising the Chinese state authority. Violence only erupted

when the regional authorities decided to disband those demonstrating in the streets of Ürümchi. While some individuals may have shouted separatist slogans during the riots that ensued and actively engaged in the acts of ‘smashing, looting and beating’ denounced by the authorities, it is misguided to understand the event as a dissident revolutionary action per se that can satisfy any of the core terrorism markers.

#### *Baren 1990*

The most publicized episode of violence reported at the time in Xinjiang is the so-called Baren revolt in 1990. On April 6th, 1990, hundreds of Chinese security forces ended unrest that had begun the day before in the township of Baren, 50 km. from Kashgar, killing 15 ‘rebels’ and eventually suppressing the turmoil. This violent incident is widely considered by scholars as a turning point in the Chinese approach toward dissidents in the region (Dillon, 2004, p. 62; Becquelin, 2000, p. 69; Millward, 2007, p. 325). There are, however, widely differing accounts on the nature and course of the events.

Religious protests were frequent at the time, in particular after recently announced official plans to limit the number of mosques and Islamic schools, which the government feared could be harboring dissident political activities (The Straits Times, 1990b, 1990c; Schmetzer, 1990). The Chinese official version of the incident in Baren, echoed by the state media (see BBCMSAP, 1990a; Dinmore, 1990a), however, described the protests as a premeditated armed rebellion organized by an anti-government ‘jihadist’ organization, the East Turkistan Islamic Party (ETIP). According to this account, the group had spent months extorting people to obtain funds, as well as training and equipping dozens of youngsters ‘to serve as their hired thugs during the rebellion’ (The Independent, 1990). During the month of Ramadan, on April 5<sup>th</sup> 1990, the group led a religious protest in the streets of Baren as they had been forced to act because the authorities had gotten wind of their activities, so the official story goes. Those marching were said to have threatened merchants who opened their businesses or sold tobacco and to have chanted separatist slogans in favor of ‘a republic of East Turkestan’, claiming that Islam would ‘triumph over Marxism and Leninism’, and announcing the formation of suicide squads. According to the official Chinese account, one of the leaders shouted:

‘we should not merely pray five times a day. We must fight. Our purpose is to eliminate the heathens. We must attack them... Even Moslem [*sic*] women must kill the enemy’ (BBCMSAP, 1990a).

In the official story, when the demonstration arrived at the town hall, Chinese officials sought to reassure the protesters, but this was met with violence. The protesters, ‘frenziedly stopped and attacked the public security personnel who went to perform their duty, robbed them of their weapons and killed six armed police officers, injured 13 others and destroyed four police vehicles’ (BBCMSAP, 1990a). Some reports painted a picture of rampaging Muslims attacking ethnic Han Chinese on the streets (S. Long, 1990b). The Chinese official account put significant blame on the ETIP, pointing to their raising of funds and training individuals for an armed uprising, which overlapped with statements by local witnesses mentioned in non-official accounts (Paula, 1994). Some Western media reproduced and amplified this version of events by reporting Afghan guerillas had provided weapons to the local insurgents from across the border (Kynge, 1990b; S. Long, 1990c). However, this was later contradicted by official recounts of the almost inexistent rebel weaponry (Millward, 2007, p. 327). A Chinese book published in 1994 summed up the event as ‘a well-planned, well-organized and premeditated violent act’ that sought to ‘occupy the Baren town by armed revolt and establish the ‘Eastern Turkistan Republic’ (Y. Zhang, 1994).

Alongside the official version, local testimonies describe the episode as a demonstration against government restrictions placed on religious activities that escalated into a riot that was forcefully repressed by Chinese forces (see Kyodo, 1990; Kynge, 1990a; AI, 1992). According to these alternative accounts, on April 4<sup>th</sup> 1990, only a day before violence erupted, groups of 60 to 200 Uyghur demonstrators had assembled in village mosques to request more religious freedom (AI, 1992). The Chinese authorities initially tried to persuade the protesters to disperse, but resorted to the use of force on April 5<sup>th</sup>, right after what was here described as ‘the end of a peaceful public prayer meeting held by about 200 protesters near government offices’ (AI, 1992). Some of these testimonies also suggested that violence erupted when two Chinese officials ‘were killed after talks hit a deadlock’ (Kynge, 1990a).

The stories of both the ‘armed rebellion’ and the ‘repressed demonstration’ overlap in their account of the course of the events: both emphasize the sequence of a religious protest, some sort of negotiation or discussion between Chinese officials and protesters, and a final

escalation of the demonstration into violence. However, they significantly differ on the immediate trigger of the violence: in one account it was the lynching of two officials by the protesters, in the other, the Chinese authorities' resorting to force in their attempt to disperse protesters. As the previous examples and detailed historical accounts of the region suggest (Haider, 2005; Acharya, Gunaratna, & Wang, 2010, pp. 52-4), it is not unlikely that a Muslim fundamentalist-leaning group organized the demonstration and also instigated a violent outcome. However, significant doubts arise on the extent to which the uprising was armed. According to official accounts, all the weapons used by the rioters, except for one gun, were snatched from the Chinese police in the course of the events (Millward, 2007, p. 327). This element would make it difficult to describe the unrest as an armed revolt. Uyghur dissident groups in exile praised at the time and afterwards the riot as an 'armed uprising' by 'freedom fighters' against 'the unjust Chinese rule' (ETUE, 1991, 1992; WUC, 2015b), implicitly supporting key elements of the Chinese official version of the events.

In 2002, the government presented the Baren incident as the first contemporary attack of the so-called "'East Turkistan" Terrorist Forces' (SCIO, 2002). Nevertheless, this violent episode does not map well onto dominant understandings of an insurgent uprising that overlaps with core terrorism markers. Official narratives acknowledge that there was a demonstration in which hundreds of protesters congregated in front of the township hall that escalated into violence. In this sense, while members of a subversive group may have planned the protest or contributed to the escalation of a negotiation deadlock into a violent confrontation, this incident is comparable to Ürümchi a year earlier: a large-scale demonstration motivated by religious grievances, in particular over the control of religious practices by the Chinese authorities, rather than a separatist agenda, should be seen as the primary stimulus. As it occurred with the Kashgar riot, violent subversive activities only took place under the cover of a wider event that was not violent in origin.

#### *The Spectrum of Violence During the 'reform and opening up' era*

The above suggests that high-profile violent events were rare during the 'reform and opening up' era in Xinjiang. When they occurred, they were primarily situated on the socio-ethnic spectrum of intrastate violence and their material features mapped only partially onto the core definitional markers of terrorism. This is illustrated in Table 2.1 below. Certainly, the episodes of violence of the 1980s were all political in the sense that they had a social dimension (Hay, 2002; Wiewiorka, 2009). They stemmed from social grievances, had a

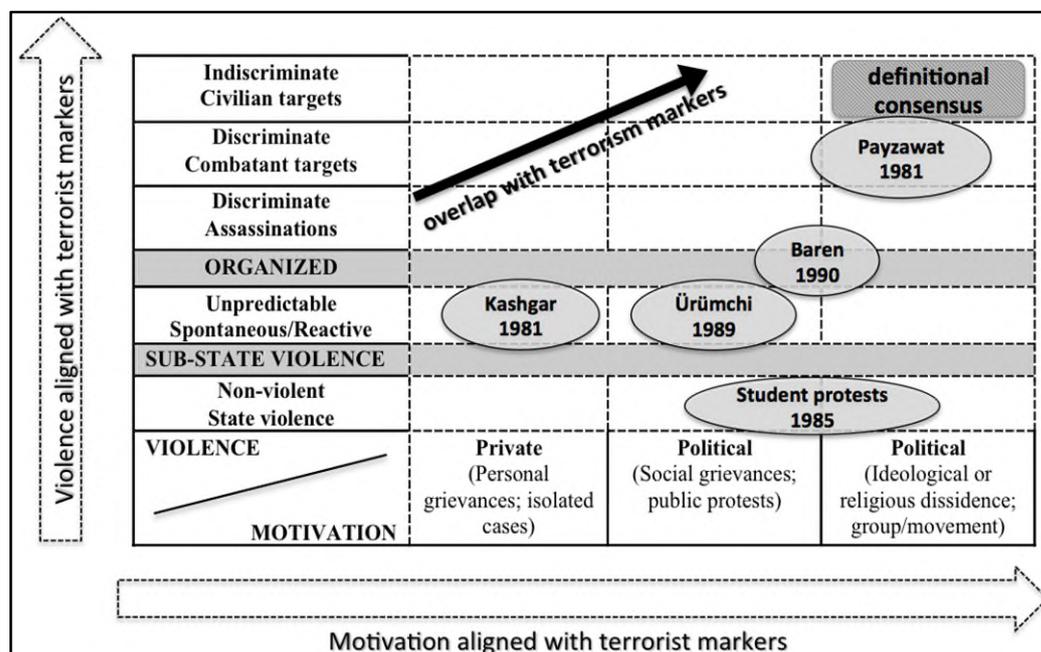
profound impact in the public sphere, or involved the intervention of the Chinese authorities. The incidents in Ürümchi and Baren should be understood primarily as broader public protests of a minority group that were eventually high-jacked by dissident elements. Only the Payzawat 1981 events, however, can be seen as politically motivated in the sense of the separatist ‘counterrevolution’ conveyed in the Chinese official discourse at the end of the decade.

**TABLE 2.1 Key features of ‘reform and opening up’ era events**

	<b>Motivation</b>	<b>Unpredictable violence</b>	<b>Premeditated violence</b>	<b>Indiscriminate violence</b>	<b>Civilian victims</b>
<b>Payzawat (1981)</b>	Political/insurgent	Yes	Yes	Yes	Unknown
<b>Kashgar (1981)</b>	Private/dissident	No	No	Yes	Yes
<b>Student protests (1985)</b>	Political/activist	No	No	No	No
<b>Ürümchi (1989)</b>	Social/religious	No	No	No	Yes
<b>Baren (1990)</b>	Social/dissident	No	Partially	Yes	Yes

While the violent episodes in Kashgar, Ürümchi and Baren were not political in the sense of revolutionary or separatist, as the Chinese government would increasingly assign to these, they nevertheless share a core feature commonly associated with terrorism. This pertains to the type of victims cases as they frequently fell under the category of civilian or ‘innocent’ victims: rioters attacked Han Chinese citizens in the streets of Kashgar, the mobs attacked government civil servants in Ürümchi, and during the Baren incident, unconfirmed reports pointed that the unrest spread to Kashgar, where groups of rampaging Muslims attacked Han Chinese civilian bystanders (S. Long, 1990b). However, except for the Payzawat failed uprising, which was carried out clandestinely and showed a significant degree of prior organization, planning, and pre-meditation, the violent incidents in Kashgar, Ürümchi, and Baren lack the element of surprise or unpredictability suggested by academic constructions of terrorism. In these cases, violence erupted neither suddenly nor unilaterally. Rather, it broke after the situation became increasingly tense and escalated, sometimes days after an initial trigger. While the precise moment when protest would turn into violence was unpredictable, the resort to violence was a likely feature, considering a context where streets were filled with outraged protestors, and security forces were deployed for an eventual crackdown. It is thus problematic to assign the terrorism marker of surprise to these events.

FIGURE 2.1 The spectrum of violence during the ‘reform and opening up’ era



Generally, the incidents discussed here featured a broad range of material characteristics and motivations. As the positioning of the events on the terrorism grid suggests (Figure 2.1), none of them aligns well with the dominant construction of terrorism as reflected in the definitional consensus established in Chapter One. While Payzawat holds the highest position on the terrorism grid, it is difficult to discern the course of events had the group indeed reached the town, but their foundational commitment to an armed uprising with the aim of secession makes a confrontation with the security forces, rather than an indiscriminate attack on civilians, a more likely scenario. The student protests of 1985, while not being promoted by a known organization, were politically significant and showed a public outreach in their demands. However, they fell short of counting as a violent dissident event. When it comes to the Kashgar, Ürümchi, and Baren protests, they differed regarding their level of premeditation and insurgent political purpose. Accounts of the Kashgar incident suggest a spontaneous non-premeditated riot immediately triggered by an isolated murder. The violence in Ürümchi originated from an organized demonstration against religious grievances, a protest with public outreach in a Muslim society. In the case of Baren, while the official narrative blamed a fundamentalist secessionist organization for the violence, the way the events unfolded casts doubts on whether it was actually a rebel armed uprising, or if violence, as it occurred in Ürümchi, precipitated from a confrontation between protesters

and the security forces. The event was political in the sense that it stemmed from a social religious grievance, and that it created a public security incident that demanded the intervention of the police. It was not, however, initially violent, and in a way comparable to the protests in 1985 or 1989. While a militant organized group had allegedly plotted an armed uprising for months, they had to settle for instigating violence in the context of a protest against religious policies (BBCMSAP, 1990a; Paula, 1994). The reported fact that the Chinese authorities only sent a few rioters to prison, releasing others without charges, suggests that the event was not interpreted, even from the state's perspective, as a secessionist rebellion.

Overall, the spectrum of violence in Xinjiang during the 1980s appears to have been dominated by events that were a combination of demands for greater political and religious autonomy, clashes between the police and Uyghur protesters, and ethnic tensions between Han Chinese and the Uyghur minority. How, then, is it possible that the violent events during the early years of the 'reform and opening up' period era played a central role in the discursive shift of the Chinese state toward securitizing violence in Xinjiang through the terminology of counterrevolution? What enabled their retrospective recasting as evidence for long-standing terrorist activities in the region at the turn of the millennium? The following section suggests that the answer to the key questions of how violence became terroristized lies in the way in which the official discourse shifted in response to domestic and international challenges to the CPC authoritarian rule.

## **2.2 Talking 'counterrevolution': from restraint to securitization**

The Chinese authorities maintained a moderate discourse in relation to the context of Xinjiang during much of the 1980s decade. Violence in the region was not initially conceptualized as a national security threat, but as a problem that resulted from historic inter-ethnic frictions and economic disparities. This position changed towards the end of the decade, amidst riots in the neighbouring region of Tibet, the incipient dissolution of the Soviet Union and the collapse of Communism, and increasing calls for political reforms at the domestic level, posing threats to China's territorial integrity and authoritarian rule. From 1988 onwards, official statements on Xinjiang acquired a more aggressive tone, with the ideas of an existing long-term fight against 'splittism' and an incipient threat of 'counterrevolution' increasingly dominating the Chinese state discourse. The framing of the tensions in Xinjiang

as a security threat culminated in 1990 when violence in Baren was represented as the materialization of the threat of ‘counterrevolution’. As we shall see, this paved the way for a crackdown approach to unrest in the region and set the scene for the ‘strike, hard’ (*yanda*) campaigns that led the Chinese government’s response to violence in the 1990s decade.

*Neither Serious nor Surprising’: The riots discourse during the early 1980s*

In the first years of the 1980s, the Chinese state discourse on Xinjiang reflected a moderate approach in which violence, far from being constructed as an emergency security threat, was understood as the inevitable result of long-standing frictions and mistrust between the local ethnic groups - mainly between Uyghurs and the Han Chinese population. This exercising of restraint towards tensions in the region during the early years of the ‘reform and opening up’ era is reflected in the way in which Chinese officials discursively constructed violent events. The episodes were mentioned only in passing, and when Chinese officials did chose to weigh in on the circumstances, their statements signal a disinterest of the government to play up the tensions in Xinjiang.

To begin with, the official state media mentioned the Payzawat uprising and the Kashgar riot in 1981 barely and belatedly (Thomson, 1987). This is significant because the atmosphere during these years, the type of environment in which the Kashgar riot inflamed was tense. As Xia Ri, an economic research official in the region, commented, even ‘if a Uyghur was hit by a car, it became a major incident’ (Elliot, 1985). Rather than simply ignoring the Kashgar incident, Eisa Shakir, an Uyghur communist official, actually downplayed the riot and emphasized that it was neither surprising nor serious:

[the Kashgar riot] started from a quarrel between two men. The Han took a hunting gun and shot the Uyghur and killed him. It was about four hours before the public security bureau got on to the case. By that time, some bad elements started instigating trouble by suggesting that the Han bully the Uyghurs. They did this to sow dissension’ (Oziewicz, 1983).

A prominent exception to these otherwise moderate narratives was that of region chairman Ismail Amat. In the aftermath of the tumultuous 1980-81 period, he vowed to ‘deal blows at all violations of law, crimes and counterrevolutionary sabotage carried out under the cloak

of religion' (Wren, 1983). This more confrontational tone would nonetheless become the dominant mode of discourse at the end of the decade.

The tensions and mistrust between indigenous minorities and the Han Chinese (many of whom had settled in Xinjiang during the communist era) were, however, perceived as an obstacle to economic development, which was the main objective envisaged for the region in the 'reform and opening up' period. Bahar Rayim, director of the Department of National Minorities in Ürümqi, explained in 1983 that China could not realize the CPC's campaign to strengthen the country through four modernizations - agriculture, industry, national defence, and science and technology - 'without unity and stability' (Oziewicz, 1983). Ürümqi's Mayor Ismail Mahsut emphasized the same year that a recently launched campaign to promote inter-ethnic unity was not in response to ethnic tensions but rather an effort to foster 'unity among the minorities', (Wren, 1983). The emphasis on multicultural coexistence under the umbrella of the Chinese state was also conveyed by then CPC national chief Hu Yaobang who, during a visit to Xinjiang, praised the fact that members of forty different nationalities lived within the community and urged everyone in the region to work towards 'conciliation' (Wren, 1983). In 1985, Wang Enmao, then acting CPC chief in Xinjiang, described the state of inter-ethnic relations as 'very good', but nevertheless admitted there had been 'serious problems' at the beginning of the decade (L. H. Sun, 1985). He also pointed to ongoing 'disparities between the Han and the minorities' because of economical inequality, adding that 'where there are disparities in income, there will be friction' (ibid).

In short, the official discourse was characterized by moderation, pragmatism, and restraint. Violence was primarily framed as a social problem rooted in a long-standing history of ethnic mistrust and as a problem of a growing economic gap between the different groups. Meanwhile, the repertoire of an insurgent dissident threat was generally absent in official language about violence in Xinjiang. The situation in the region was nevertheless an integral element of the political priorities of Deng Xiaoping's CPC chairmanship. Deng was intensely aware that the scale of autonomy of ethnic minorities was a pressing issue in post-Maoist China (Bovingdon, 2004, p. 41). Following the Payzawat and Kashgar riots, the Chinese leader described the situation in Xinjiang as 'unsteady' (L. H. Sun, 1985). In 1981, he, therefore, promoted the afore-mentioned Wang Enmao - a moderate figure with a good reputation among the ethnic minorities - as CPC secretary in Xinjiang, that is, as the *de facto*

regional leader. Despite a significant degree of unrest in the region, Xinjiang remained unsecuritized in the Chinese state discourse. This, however, would soon begin to change.

*'Counterrevolution' and 'Splittism': The discursive shift on riots in the late 1980s*

Narratives emphasising ethnic conflicts and economic disparities as the primary causes of violent outbursts in Xinjiang gradually faded into the background. In their place, towards the end of the 1980s, a discourse emerged among Chinese leaders and officials that characterized the regional tensions as a threat to the stability and unity of the Chinese nation, a seed already laid through their characterization as detrimental to the reform programs. Interethnic violence – and dissent more broadly – became the threats of 'counterrevolution' and 'splittism', and the arguments they entailed started to dominate Chinese official assessments of Xinjiang. At the end of the 1980s, Chinese leaders and officials began to describe the tensions in the region as a threat to the stability and unity of the Chinese nation. Xinjiang went from being just another region requiring a push in the expectation of wider profits from the 'reform and opening up' policies to becoming the scenario of a 'fight' against an enemy that threatened the very core of the Chinese communist regime.

This discursive shift, characterized by an increasingly alarmist and bellicose tone, was underpinned by three main lines of argumentation. The first is that 'hostile forces' operated within Xinjiang under the cloak of religious grievances to undermine Chinese national unity and the core principles of the communist regime. Groups presumed to conspire against the regime from outside China alongside a few elements within the region were of particular concern. The forces understood to infiltrate Xinjiang were seen as 'opposed to socialism' and promoting 'bourgeois-liberalisation' (Wo-Lap Lam, 1990b) and acted 'under the banner of freedom for ethnic minorities and religion' (Ismail Amat quoted in Wo-Lap Lam, 1989).

Chinese leaders had already accused 'agents of some anti-Chinese foreign forces', in reference to international organizations supporting the Dalai Lama and the dissident exiled Tibetan community, for instigating violent riots in the Tibet Autonomous Region (Thomson, 1988). The same argument was then applied to the Uyghur exile, which, unlike the Tibetan diaspora, had a much less visible position in the international arena. In 1988, a CPC document quoted by the *Xinjiang Daily* alerted of 'separatist infiltration' from abroad (Roche, 1988b). Wang Enmao warned that 'very few individuals', whom he described as 'scum and traitors', were 'hiding in dark corners engaging in conspirational activities' and planning to

‘overthrow the CPC and restore the old reactionary system’ (ibid). Another Party document claimed that outsiders and insiders worked to ‘split the motherland and destroy ethnic unity’ (Roche, 1988c). In 1989, the Chinese Minister of Public Security, Wang Fang, maintained that these ‘unstable elements in Xinjiang, mostly separatist forces – their source being from the United States and other countries – have not given up their splittist and subversive secret plots’ (quoted in Reuters, 1989b).

The second line of argumentation is that religion played a major part in stirring up counterrevolutionary sentiments and was generally in contrast to both the core principles of the communist regime, and the development and prosperity of its people. Huang Zhaobang, regional deputy governor, related the presumed separatist foreign forces to the person of Isa Alptekin, an 88-year old Uyghur political leader who fled to Turkey when the CPC rose to power (Benson, 1991). According to Huang, Alptekin, a long-term advocate of regional full-autonomy for the ethnic minorities in Xinjiang, had ‘always wanted to split China’, and his ‘spies’ had been recently arrested in the region (The Straits Times, 1990c). While Alptekin was popular among young Uyghurs in Xinjiang, he denied having any ‘agents’ inside China, advocating instead for a ‘passive resistance’ to the Chinese government (Pope, 1988). Despite the mostly secular nature of the Turkic Uyghur dissident movement in Istanbul, Huang insisted upon connecting Alptekin with the threat of ‘religious infiltration’ rather than looking at the religious fundamentalism introduced in Xinjiang by preachers from Pakistan and Saudi Arabia (Dreyer, 1993, p. 292; Haider, 2005; Acharya et al., 2010, p. 52-4). The official media accused ‘a small number of national separatists’ of ‘using the pretext of revitalizing Islam to spread religious mania’, emphasizing that these individuals, in ‘trying to win over youngsters from us’, had set up ‘illegal schools to teach religious scriptures and instill [sic] separatism in students’ (L. H. Sun, 1990).

It is important to note that the language of ‘counterrevolution’ was not novel in the 1980s in relation to religious grievances and dissidence. At the end of the 1950s, in the midst of a government campaign against religion, a high-ranked regional official claimed, for example, that ‘individual counterrevolutionary elements’ had ‘infiltrated into Islam’, and put on ‘the cloak of religion’ in order to carry out ‘counterrevolutionary activities’ (McMillen, 1979, p. 115). By the end of the 1980s, however, the Chinese government’s position had shifted toward diagnosing an incompatibility between religion and good Communist citizenship. This was reflected in an editorial at *People’s Daily*, which claimed that ‘people of minority

ethnic groups must choose between Marx and Allah' and emphasized 'the absolute supremacy of the party over religion' (Goodspeed, 1990).

The final line of argumentation is that calls for independence, in particular on the basis of ethnicity, were essentially threatening China's survival as a state. At the international level, China had long been wary of separatist developments at the other side of the historically sensitive 2,250 km-long Soviet-Xinjiang frontier (see Shichor, 2005). Over the course of the 1980s, however, the anxiety of the Chinese government grew with the ethno-nationalist riots registered in the neighboring Central Asian Soviet republics (Kuzio, 1988; Keller, 1989; Ljunggren, 1990). Xinjiang was seen as a strategically important 'area with different nationalities' that 'shared boundaries with quite a few countries', like Qiao Shi, head of the Chinese security forces, pointed out during a visit to the region after the Baren incident (Wo-Lap Lam, 1990f). In February 1990, amidst riots in Tajikistan, and only weeks before the unrest in Baren, Ismail Amat, then chairman of the State Ethnic Affairs Commission, underscored the Chinese government's uneasiness with the 'recent developments of ethnic conflicts in the Soviet Union' as well as 'radical changes in the East European countries, and the awarding of the 1989 Nobel Peace Prize to the Dalai Lama' – events which he presented as a threat to ethnic unity and national stability (quoted in Sampson, 1990). One month later, the region's Communist Party chief, Song Hanliang, requested 'the people's armed police border squads' to 'continue serious alertness strategies' so as 'to protect the border' with the then tumultuous Soviet republics of Tajikistan and Kirghizia (quoted in *The Straits Times*, 1990a).

At the domestic level, dissatisfaction with the CPC authoritarian rule and social and economic injustices had by now come the fore as unintended consequences of the 'reform and opening up' policies. The students' national demonstrations of 1986, culminating in the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989, are a case in point (Kwong, 1988; Zhao, 2001). In the case of the autonomous ethnic regions, Xinjiang and Tibet, these broader socio-economic grievances were combined with ethnic, religious, and other indigenous concerns, as the slogans characterizing the students' demonstrations in 1985 show. Importantly, dissent in Tibet had acquired a violent dimension, with pro-independence demonstrations resulting in deadly clashes with the security forces (Fu, 1987; Uhlig, 1988; Kristof, 1989). The government began to replicate the counterrevolutionary framing applied to characterize the situation in Tibet in the discourse about Xinjiang, with a particular emphasis on using the

label of ‘splittism’. A literal translation from the Chinese word *fenliezhuyi*, the term emerged as the ‘worst epithet’ levered against those expressions criticizing the Chinese ‘occupation’ of Xinjiang and Tibet, or the reunification of Taiwan and the mainland (Callahan, 2004, p. 209). The political crime of ‘splittism’ was now ranked high as a core threat to the regime (K. C. Wong, 2010, pp. 66-7).

The official discourse also articulated the measures to adopt in order to counter the splittist threat in Xinjiang, for which Chinese leaders surmised a response based on crackdown policies and militarization. Wang Enmao urged local CPC cadres in 1988 to ‘resolutely struggle’ against ‘splittism’ (quoted in Roche, 1988b). To counter dissident acts, Wang drafted in the help of the army and police regional contingent, made up of 460,000 members, and the two million people workforce, mostly Han Chinese, of the paramilitary Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (XPCC) (Kyodo, 1988). Following the suppression of the Tiananmen demonstrations in June 1989, Ismail Amat warned that the response to unrest in Xinjiang would be ‘simple and brutal’ (quoted in S. Long, 1990a). In turn, Premier Li Peng vowed to ‘wipe out all separatist activities’ while these were ‘in the embryonic stage’ (quoted in Kristof, 1990), and Xinjiang regional chairman Tomur Dawamat promised to ‘smash saboteurs who are the scum of the nation’ (quoted in Kynge, 1990a).

By 1990, then, the Chinese authorities had rhetorically identified ‘a small number of separatists’ as ‘the greatest threat to Xinjiang’s stability’ (AP, 1990). According to Li Peng, ‘splittism’ threatened communism, ‘the unification of China’, the ‘socialist system’, and the ‘development and prosperity of minority areas’ (Kristof, 1990; SCMP, 1990a). In 1988, Amudun Niyaz, then deputy secretary of the CPC committee in the XUAR, had already referred to dissident activities in Xinjiang as a threat to ‘the unity of the motherland’ and ‘national solidarity and stability’ (quoted in BBCMSAP 1988a). Just two years later, as Huang Zhaobang reiterated, ‘calling for independence’ had become a ‘counterrevolutionary crime’ (quoted in The Straits Times, 1990c). At the same time, new regulations adopted at the end of the decade were conceptualized as measures to tackle those who disrupted ‘socialist modernization [sic], damaged ‘ethnic unity’, and opposed China’s four cardinal principles (*si xiang jiben yuanze*), established by Deng’s government in 1979: the ‘socialist road’, the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’, the ‘leadership of the Communist party’, and ‘Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong thought’ (Roche, 1988d; CPC, 2007). This signals the victory of

confrontational jargon over more pragmatic, conciliatory approaches in Chinese state discourse.

While prominent, these three lines of argumentation were not the only narratives evaluating the unrest in Xinjiang. Moderate positions outlining economic disparities and ethnic frictions as the root causes of violence continued to exist. For example, a CPC document criticizing separatism likewise blamed the Han Chinese community in Xinjiang for prejudice against the ethnic minorities (Roche, 1988c). Weeks before the 1990 Baren incident, Ismail Amat underscored that the ‘economic problems faced by areas inhabited by minorities and the mistakes incurred by various levels of government’ were factors contributing to ethnic strife (SCMP, 1990a). Amat also recommended treating the ‘contradiction among the people’, a Marxist conceptualization of the ethnic frictions, with ‘flexibility’ (Wo-Lap Lam, 1990a). By the end of the 1980s decade, however, these calls were eclipsed by the dominant confrontational discourse.

#### *The Baren ‘counterrevolutionary rebellion’*

The Chinese government began to persistently and vigorously warn of an immediate rebel threat thriving in Xinjiang as the 1980s took their course. However, until the end of the decade violence in the region had essentially been absent for many years (or at least unreported), since 1982. While the official discourse had moved towards characterizing dissent in Xinjiang as ‘splittism’ and counterrevolution, there was hence little evidence of violent resistance that would ground this shift in actual events of resistance and rebellion. Only students had repeatedly grated on the nerves of the Chinese authorities with relation to Xinjiang during their demonstrations in 1985 and 1988, which were met with a reprimand and ‘patriotic education’ (Dinmore, 1988).

The riot in Ürümchi in 1989, which followed demonstrations against the book ‘Sexual Customs’, ended this comparably peaceful spell. To condemn the turmoil, regional officials echoed the broader government discourse that represented religious grievances as a mere cloak for counterrevolution. The riots, they argued, were ‘created by the scum of Islam’ who incited ‘the masses unaware of the truth to storm regional party organs, engage in beating, smashing and looting’, all ‘under the pretext of protesting against the book’ (BBCMSAP, 1989a). Chinese authorities did not however interpret it as a separatist revolt or as an outright challenge to the Chinese rule in Xinjiang. Some officials even described the riot as another

‘mistake’ to blame on Zhao Ziyang, the General Secretary of the CPC purged for opposing the use of force to end the protests in Beijing’s Tiananmen Square in 1989, and they linked the events in Ürümchi to the wider tensions with China’s pro-democracy movement. In a meeting of the standing committee of the NPC, a legislator from Xinjiang said the book triggering the riot was the product of ‘Zhao Ziyang promoting bourgeois liberalisation in the central government’, which had facilitated that the ‘indecent book was available on the market’ (quoted in Reuters, 1989a). Within the main official discourse, the Ürümchi riots were therefore understood as part of the (ideological) strife of the CPC against those pushing for a liberal democratic regime in China.

It seems that Wang Enmao’s warning of a ‘counterrevolutionary rebellion’ in the region (MacDougall, 1990) would become a discursive self-fulfilling prophecy when violence erupted in Baren only six months later. The official interpretation of the Baren township riot in 1990 produced by the state media and the statements of some political leaders, reiterated the mainstream argument of characterizing dissent within the increasingly hostile Chinese state security discourse of counterrevolution and splittism. The violent events in Baren were explicitly blamed on dissident groups within Xinjiang, hostile external agents, and religious infiltrators who threatened the core principles of the communist regime and national unity, hiding behind religious grievances. Niyaz accused ‘enemies’ within China and unnamed ‘hostile foreign forces’ of orchestrating the violence (Reuters, 1990d). Kuerban Rouzi, president of the Regional Higher People's Court, accused ‘a small number of nationalist splittist extremists acting in the name of religion’ (The Straits Times, 1990e). The regional state media blamed ‘splittist forces within and outside the country’ for causing the violence, and described those participating as a ‘counterrevolutionary organization’ (BBCMSAP, 1990a). The Xinjiang television explained that the gang presumably responsible for the revolt had acted ‘under the banner of religion, incited a religious craze, and wildly proclaimed the launching of a sacred war to eliminate the heathens’ (Dinmore, 1990a). It also announced that ‘they concocted reactionary slogans, saying that they would establish a republic of East Turkestan, that Islam will triumph over Marxism and Leninism, that they would form dare-to-die squads of Moslems [*sic*]’ (ibid). Meihemaiti Simayi, an Uyghur high-level regional official, insisted on the idea that ‘a handful of reactionaries, under the cloak of religion’ had coordinated ‘at distance with separatists abroad’ to prepare the incident (Tyson, 1990). Meanwhile, a commentary on the *People’s Daily* outlined the necessity of preventing ‘ethnic

separatists' from linking up with 'forces advocating bourgeois liberalism', and stopping 'infiltration, subversion and separatist activities of hostile forces' (Reuters, 1990f).

The event was also conceptualized more broadly as an existential threat to the stability of China, which endangered the cultural unity of the nation and the core principles of the communist regime in particular because of its 'splittist' dimension. For Wang Enmao, the events in Baren showed that it was 'an objective fact' that 'separatism' was 'the major danger facing Xinjiang', and one should 'never treat it lightly' (Reuters, 1990i). The *Xinjiang Daily* presented violence as a 'premeditated activity' that undermined 'the motherland's unification and unity among nationalities' and opposed 'the communist party and people's regime' (BBCMSAP, 1990a). The regional state television alerted its audience that 'the primary danger' in the region came from 'the splittist forces inside and outside the country' that had 'never stopped their scheme of attempting in vain to separate Xinjiang from our great motherland' (Reuters, 1990c). A government report produced weeks after the incident described 'national splittism' as the gravest danger faced by the region (S. Long, 1990d) and officials claimed that the situation demanded to safeguard 'stability and unity' (Reuters, 1990a). In his visit to the region on July 1990, Qiao Shi declared that the CPC was 'very concerned about stability in Xinjiang', which was necessary to achieve the economic construction of the region, for which he vowed to 'strengthen the unity of the nationalities' (Xinhua, 1990b; Wo-Lap Lam, 1990f). Similarly, while touring the area months after the incident, Jiang Zemin, then General Secretary of the CPC, emphasized that unity was crucial to achieving the 'common objective' of turning Xinjiang into a 'production base for cotton, grain, sugar and animal husbandry' (Wo-Lap Lam, 1990g).

In addition to reiterating the notions of a counterrevolutionary and splittist threat that had begun to increasingly underpin the security rhetoric of the final years of the 1980s, the government's reaction to the Baren incident also introduced the idea that violence in Xinjiang was part of a lasting conflict. Official statements on the Baren incident depicted the situation in Xinjiang as a problem that rather than being solved was instead intensifying, projecting a long-term campaign to confront this threat. A militaristic-leaning statement from the *Liberation Army Daily*, newspaper of the PLA, warned of the possibility of 'local war and military conflicts in the border areas' of China, in reference to Xinjiang and Tibet (Wo-Lap Lam, 1990d). Other state media outlets outlined that 'the struggle against splittism' would be 'protracted, complicated and arduous' (BBCMSAP, 1990a). The *Xinjiang Daily* commented

that ‘feudal, backward religious forces’ were ‘continually expanding their battlefields’, and alerted that ‘the construction of civilization in the spirit of socialism’ would meet ‘serious obstacles’ (Reuters, 1990i). Reports from the regional state television broadcasted images of hundreds of riot police carrying shields and truncheons in Xinjiang, warned that ‘a very small number of hostile elements in our society may stir up new trouble’, and revealed that the security forces were ‘emphasizing training to deal with all eventualities’ (Reuters, 1990g). In the aftermath of the violence, Ba Dai, member of the regional CPC standing committee, affirmed that ‘hostile forces at home and abroad’ were ‘stepping up their infiltration’ and that ‘national separatists’ were ‘intensifying their sabotage’ (quoted in Tyson, 1990). Six months after the incident, the Xinjiang television reported that the public security forces were in the midst of a ‘people’s war’ on ‘counterrevolutionary crimes’, which Jiang Zemin described as a ‘struggle in blood and fire’ (Benjamin, 1990). More than a quarter of a century later, the mantra of a ‘people’s war’ would be applied again in Xinjiang, this time to represent a ‘people’s anti-terrorism war’ (Xinhua, 2015a).

The Chinese state discourse had by now moved significantly away from proposing a pragmatic, moderate response to unrest in Xinjiang and beyond. An early indicator that Beijing planned to forcefully deal with dissent was the government’s decision to have Qiao Shi, who had applied the use of force earlier in Tibet and was an advocate of strong-armed tactics against ethnic upheaval, tour the Xinjiang region only weeks after the Baren riot, where he stressed that ‘the theme of countering secessionism’ should ‘absolutely not be relaxed’ (quoted in Wo-Lap Lam, 1990f). Jiang Zemin further emphasized the determination of the CPC to use the military and the police to crack down on ‘splittist’ activists by Uyghur nationalists (Wo-Lap Lam, 1990g). The Xinjiang state television called for ‘governments at all levels’ to ‘heighten their vigilance’ (Reuters, 1990g). Indeed, the official line replicated in the state news media was that the threat to the public order remained ‘very grave’ in Xinjiang well after the Baren incident, and that restoring stability required ‘another upsurge in the crackdown’ (Reuters, 1990j).

In the weeks and months immediately following Baren, there were also calls for increasing the pressure on the religious spaces and practices. Tomur Dawamat, for example, vowed to foster ‘the construction of socialist spiritual civilisation’ in order to counter ‘splittist and sabotage activities’, in particular by intensifying the surveillance of religious activities and venues and preventing any ‘outside forces’ to intervene in religious issues in Xinjiang

(Reuters, 1990b, 1990e). Ethnic minority CPC officials went a step further and called for 'harsh penalties' for anyone operating private religious schools and for close supervision of religious publications (The Straits Times, 1990d). The official discourse also stressed the importance of reinforcing the communist values and CPC rule in the region, as the way to overcome the threat. Qiao Shi called to unite those 'religious leaders and worshippers who are patriotic and who support national unity' to increase support for 'the modernization and construction of socialism' (Wo-Lap Lam, 1990d). Another official called to 'strengthen the socialist legal system and bring into further play the dictatorial function of the state' (Reuters, 1990a). Only under the rule of the communist party, so the official story went, could 'China's reform and opening policy proceed along the socialist road' in Xinjiang (Jiang Zemin quoted in Snyder, 1990).

In contrast to earlier incidents, the Chinese official discourse reacting to the Baren incident proactively marginalized alternative interpretations of violence as a phenomenon rooted in ethnic grievances or a reaction to controversial social policies such as those related to family planning restrictions or the control of religious practices. Some of the official statements on the events had suggested such alternative understandings of the Baren incident. For instance, using the Marxist jargon, Ba Dai had identified 'hot spots of social contradictions' as one of the factors causing it (Tyson, 1990). However, arguments and explanations for dissent in Xinjiang that did not fall into line with the official discourse of the threat of splittism and counterrevolution were quickly dismissed. The regional television emphasized that unrest 'was not caused by either nationality or religious problems' (BBCMSAP, 1990a). Dawamat related those who opposed family planning with the threat of 'national splittism' (Reuters, 1990h). In turn, Umar Kara Aji, a patriotic religious figure and the imam of a Kashgar mosque, argued that violence was 'not a minority problem nor (...) a religious problem', but had occurred 'because of social scum who are using religion with the intention of opposing communism' (quoted in L. H. Sun, 1990). As we shall see in the next section, by fixating an understanding of the Baren unrest as a 'counterrevolutionary rebellion', to the detriment of alternative interpretations of the causes and nature of the event, the Chinese state discourse legitimized and enabled the then ongoing shift in the policies applied in Xinjiang.

### **2.3 The politics of 'counterrevolution' in Xinjiang**

Chinese policies in Xinjiang between 1978 and 1990 evolved in parallel to the shifting official discourse. For the most part of the decade, in line with the moderate response to the violent events registered in the years 1980-81, Beijing deployed a set of policies that have been described as ‘generally gradualistic and moderate’ (McMillen, 1984, p. 569), as allowing an era of ‘cultural and religious freedom’ (Rudelson, 1997, p. 129) and a ‘significant liberalization of autonomous cultural expression’ (Dwyer, 2005, pp. 11-12) for the ethnic minorities in Xinjiang. These years of gradualist policies are nowadays conceived as a golden age that Uyghurs recall with ‘nostalgia’ (Kehoe, 2016). From 1987, under the domestic and international factors that contextualized the discursive construction of a ‘splittist’ and ‘counterrevolutionary’ threat in Xinjiang, moderate policies were progressively abandoned, giving way to a security crackdown that became dominant after the Baren incident in 1990. Thus, between the first years of the ‘reform and opening up’ era and the end of the 1980s decade, Chinese policies in Xinjiang went from a combination of the ‘carrot’ of economic development and the ‘candy’ of cultural and religious liberalization to the introduction of a crackdown ‘stick’ that since then has dominated China’s rule in the region.

*Gradualism: a moderate response to violence*

The violence registered in Xinjiang during the 1980-81 period and the moderate political response that the Chinese authorities adopted in the face of events like the Payzawat uprising or the ethnic riots in Kashgar can be better understood when the immediate historical context, heavily influenced by the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), is considered. The national turmoil was particularly cruel for ethnic minorities. In Xinjiang, Islam was widely persecuted. Hundreds of mosques were destroyed, ethnic minority cadres and elites were purged because of their religious background, and minority cultural customs were attacked and subjected to total Chinese assimilation (Bovingdon, 2004, pp. 29-33; J. Lin, 1997, p. 194). These practices, along with the massive arrival of Han migrants, which saw the Han population grow from roughly a 5% of Xinjiang’s total population in 1949 to over 40% in 1978 (Bovingdon, 2004, p. 24), greatly eroded the legitimacy of the CPC regime vis-à-vis the ethnic minorities. This exacerbated inter-ethnic mistrust and violence, and further destabilized a socio-economic environment already damaged by economic deprivation in southern Xinjiang (McMillen, 1984).

The Chinese government’s reaction to this critical conjuncture and the violent outbursts of 1980 and 1981 was a return to the moderate policies that had characterized the first years of

CPC rule in the region, between 1949 and 1957, before the Maoist radical turn that culminated in the Cultural Revolution. As McMillen (1979, pp. 113-115) explains, these early policies ‘sought to overcome anti-Communist and anti-Han sentiments’, an aim which implied avoiding coercive measures and respecting religion and other local idiosyncrasies in the exercise of government. This approach pleased many Uyghurs and members of other Turkic Muslim ethnic minorities. It brought a degree of governmental autonomy for the region, regulation of the economy in a manner that benefited all residents in Xinjiang, freedom to practice their religion, and relaxed control over cultural and linguistic matters (Bovingdon, 2004, pp. 5-6).

Two Chinese political figures epitomize the logic re-enacting the gradualist response to the tense environment in which violence had erupted in 1980-81. The first was Hu Yaobang, the national reformist whose death motivated the Tiananmen protests in 1989, and who had devised in 1980 a program for Xinjiang that included genuine autonomy, a cultural and educational revival, locally sensitive economic policies, and the gradual transfer of Han officials out of the region (Dillon, 2004, pp. 35-36). The second, Wang Enmao, historical leader of the CPC in Xinjiang whose trajectory represents like no other the evolution of Beijing’s political approach to Xinjiang. In the 1950s, Wang had implemented the moderate policies consolidating the CPC’s control of the region without creating discomfort amongst the ethnic minorities. When these measures were abandoned, the CPC entered a spiral of radical policies and ‘anti-local nationalist’ campaigns, and ethnic unrest broke out in some cities (McMillen, 1979, pp. 118-9; 1984, p. 569). Wang was later purged during the Cultural Revolution but Deng Xiaoping chose him in 1980 as the leader in charge of implementing the return to gradualism and ensuring Xinjiang’s integration with the rest of China (McMillen, 1984, p. 569). The logic of the approach devised by Hu and implemented by Wang rested on the assumption that Xinjiang posed a low separatist threat that would be further deactivated, along with anti-government protests, through economic development and moderate policies enabling a cultural and religious revival among the ethnic minorities (McMillen, 1984, p. 576; Rudelson, 1997, p. 129; Dillon, 2004, p. 36).

Consequently, and as opposed to opting for a widespread crackdown, the gradualist approach of the early ‘reform and opening up’ period sought to defuse dissent by encouraging the rehabilitation of the aggrieved ethnic minorities in several realms, from religion to economy. Islam, a core element of the Uyghur identity was a significant front for

liberalization. Chinese officials publicly criticized the Marxist rejection of religion and saw Islam in a positive light. Zhou Fusan, Deputy Secretary of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), acknowledged that experience showed it was 'necessary and possible to unite the religious believers of every nationality to jointly build socialism' (Reuters, 1985). Vested in supporting a patriotic understanding of Islam, the government reinstated the Xinjiang Islamic Association in June 1980 as a vehicle to support the practice and study of religion, improve inter-ethnic relations, and open the region to other Muslim countries in line with the Chinese foreign policy at the time (McMillen, 1984, p. 577; Christoffersen, 1993). The Chinese authorities also facilitated the reopening of mosques and Islamic schools, the reprinting and distribution of the Quran and other Islamic books, or the celebration of weddings officiated by imams or the pilgrimage to Mecca, measures all embraced with enthusiasm by Uyghurs and other Muslim ethnic groups (see L. H. Sun, 1985; McMillen, 1984, p. 577; Butterfield, 1980; Wren, 1983; Oziewicz, 1983; Bovingdon, 2004, p. 33).

The religious relaxation was accompanied by a set of policies facilitating a revival of the culture, language and education of the minorities. The state-approved preferential policies for ethnic minority students. These included favourable quotas to enter the university, programs taught in their native languages, the reintroduction of an Arabic-based script for the Uyghur language, and the enactment of laws and policies explicitly supporting the use of minority languages (Xinhua, 1989b; A. S. L. Lam, 2005; Butterfield, 1980). The revitalization of language spearheaded the official efforts to preserve the historical and cultural heritage of the ethnic minorities (Dwyer, 2005, pp. 11-12). Uyghur literature blossomed, with some writers exploring the Uyghur historiography and reinforcing in the way a collective political identity, sometimes with separatist tones (Rudelson, 1997; Bovingdon, 2004). Student associations were formed to promote the culture and rights of the Uyghurs (Castets, 2003). In this context, Uyghurs could practice again the *meshrep*, an art form integrating song, dance and entertainment considered 'the most important cultural carrier of Uyghur traditions' (UNESCO, 2010) and which would be banned in the 1990s (Becquelin, 2000) following the abandonment of the gradualist approach.

The moderate approach also entailed the rehabilitation and training of cadres from the minority nationalities envisaged by Hu Yaobang. In this sense, the CPC declared a fight against 'Great Han chauvinism' and ethnic discrimination by increasing the number of

communist officials from the ethnic minorities (McMillen, 1984, p. 577). By 1989, ethnic minority officials made up 46,4% of the total regional force (Xinhua, 1989c).

Along with the benefits derived from the religious, cultural, and social rehabilitation of the ethnic minorities, the Chinese government worked on the economic development of the region. The regional economic strategy included surveying the energy and commodity resources of Xinjiang to supply the Chinese coastal regions -main geographical focus of the national economic transition-, developing logistical infrastructures to facilitate this domestic supply, improving the regional agriculture and industrial output through the decollectivization of the rural economy, and rectifying the urgent needs of the less developed southern areas (McMillen, 1984, p. 578; BBCMSAP, 1984; Burns, 1985; L. H. Sun, 1985). As Clarke (2007, p. 62) notes, the secondary role attached to Xinjiang at this initial stage of the nationwide reform, as a region placed at the service of the prioritized coastal regions, resulted in many local businessmen resorting to foreign trade as a way to prosper. This would promote regional exchanges with the USSR, Pakistan and other so-called 'Islamic circles' (Christoffersen, 1993; Clarke, 2007; BBCMSAP, 1985a; BBCMSAP, 1985b). The economic development pushed by Deng Xiaoping's reforms brought unprecedented but insufficient prosperity to Xinjiang. While many traders from the ethnic minorities profited from the commercial opening with the rest of China and the world, the regional gap increased between the more developed north of the region, the Beijiang, where the majority of the Han population lives, and the rural agricultural south, the Nanjiang, where violent tensions have been historically concentrated (Becquelin, 2000, p. 68). The government acknowledged this gap. The state media often reported on the poverty-stricken areas of the south, and Chinese officials blamed the preferential policies prioritizing the development of the Chinese coastal regions for the existing disparities (BBCMSAP, 1986; Reuters, 1988a). The economic gap was, according to the Gansu province governor Jia Zhijie, a factor destabilizing the 'unity of the nationalities' (O'Neill, 1988).

A crucial consequence of the religious and economic reforms pushed by the gradualist policies was the opening of Xinjiang to the world. Areas like the Kashgar or Aqsu prefectures, which had remained closed to the exterior for decades, were opened to foreign visitors in 1986 (BBCMSAP, 1987). In this sense, the commercial opening of the Karakorum Highway and the authorization of the Hajj pilgrimage made Pakistan and Saudi Arabia referents of Islam in the region. Uyghur imams and mullahs from Kashgar or Hotan studied

in Pakistani madrassas (Roberts, 2004). Trade ventures between Uyghurs and Pakistani businessmen were common, and Pakistani merchants and tourists frequently visited the southern oasis of the region, leaving a cultural mark in the region (Haider, 2005, p. 525). Having the possibility to travel to countries like Pakistan, Kazakhstan, Saudi Arabia or Turkey facilitated the development of the Uyghur identity as part of the Muslim world, but also as a specific Chinese Muslim group (Gladney, 1990, p. 18). An unwanted effect of this opening would be the expanding influence of religious fundamentalism in the region, mainly through the earlier mentioned funding of religious schools and mosques, or by sending preachers and religious materials (Y. Zhang, 1994; Dreyer, 1993, p. 292).

Overall, the gradualist approach to Xinjiang at the beginning of the ‘reform and opening up’ era was significant not only for the soft conciliatory policies it adopted but also for the policies it did *not* embrace. The politics of gradualism avoided the repression of the ethnic minorities that had characterized the Cultural Revolution or the security crackdown that would dominate the proto-terroristization (1991-2001) and terroristization periods (2001-2018). This does not mean that the Chinese government was naïve in front of separatism at the time, but that its response to the issue was moderate to the extent that this period is nowadays remembered amongst ethnic minorities as a ‘relaxed’ (*qingsong*)’ era (Kehoe, 2016). Nevertheless, moderation had its limits. As McMillen (1984, p. 579) suggests, toleration was ‘selected’ and liberalization was ‘guarded’. At the same time, as Bovingdon (2004, p. 29) remarks, power remained during this period on the regional secretary of the CPC, a position always occupied in Xinjiang by an ethnic Han official. Besides, and to intercept the potential role Islam could play as a vehicle for dissent and separatism, Deng’s autonomy concessions were given an aura of patriotism (Dillon, 2004, p. 4; McMillen, 1984, p. 577; Haider, 2005, p. 525). While relevant, the threat of ‘splittism’ remained at a second level during most of the 1980s and while the student protests between 1985 and 1988 included calls for independence or anti-Chinese slogans, the Chinese authorities understood them for the most part as a natural outcome of disparities resulting from the economic reform or the historical ethnic mistrust, grievances boosted by Han migration into the region.

The pragmatism and moderation that dominated the early years of ‘reform and opening up era’ could be particularly felt in the Chinese government’s political response to the students’ protests, with Chinese officials meeting the protesters in 1985 and reassuring them about their grievances. This conciliatory approach continued until 1988, when amidst reports of

pro-independence leaflets and posters circulating in the region in a campaign allegedly instigated from abroad, the regional authorities refrained from launching a crackdown and instead opted to organize a program of classes in the official theory of nationalities and the nationality policy among Uyghurs (Kyodo, 1988; Dinmore, 1988). The Chinese state abandoned this approach at the end of the 1980s decade, first through a change of perceptions on the situation in the region and then by adopting series of measures that seemed to revert the gradualist path and justify a crackdown approach, further spurred with the construction of the Baren riot as a ‘counterrevolutionary rebellion’ in 1990.

*Abandoning gradualism, singling out Xinjiang for a crackdown*

The same way Hu Yaobang and Wang Enmao embodied the return of the moderate policies to Xinjiang, the demise of the former and replacement of the later marked the abandonment of gradualism in the region. When Song Hanliang replaced Wang Enmao as Party Secretary in the region on October 1985, the regional economy and the inter-ethnic relations seemed to have stabilized, and Song was set for a continuation of Wang’s policies (Clarke, 2011, p. 83). However, following the nationwide student protests in 1986 (Kwong, 1988), Hu Yaobang was purged in 1987, and the former Xinjiang Military Commander Wang Zhen, who had been contrary to Hu’s conciliatory approach vis-à-vis the ethnic minorities, promoted the abandonment of the accommodating policies in the region (Bovingdon, 2004, p. 21). The fact that dissent, anti-Chinese and anti-Han feelings, or separatism were alive in Xinjiang despite the moderate policies was a backbone argument for those rejecting the gradualist approach. A Han official who supported a hard-line policy to stabilize the region pointed out, in reference to the ethnic minorities: ‘you give them autonomy and they will only turn round and create an East Turkestan’ (quoted in Dillon, 1997, p. 82). With a similar idea, the official *Xinjiang Daily* criticized those who, despite the ‘tremendous assistance’ of the Chinese state to the development of the region, were denouncing that the ‘exploitation of Xinjiang’s resources’ had not benefited the ethnic minorities (BBCMSAP, 1988b).

The abandonment of gradualism was initially epitomized by two sets of policies which, when implemented, contributed to the protests leading to the Baren incident: the extension of mandatory birth controls to the ethnic minorities, and the control on religious practices, specifically the limitation of the number of mosques. In the first case, minority couples were limited from July 1988 to a maximum of two children, three for the rural areas (AP, 1988). This policy was perceived amongst Uyghur families as interfering with a choice, that of

reproduction, they felt should be left to the realm of their religious and cultural convictions (L. H. Sun, 1990). Conscious of the controversy that family planning policies would create in Xinjiang, regional chairman Tomur Dawamat, an ethnic Uyghur himself, outlined the progressive character of these policies and the fact that they were being practised in other Islamic countries, leading a regional campaign to avoid religious interference during their implementation (Roche, 1988a).

The religious liberalization also came to a halt at the end of the decade. The Chinese authorities had grown increasingly wary of the ‘obsession with Mosque building, praying and Haj’ among Uyghurs, and the potential of mosques and religious schools as strongholds for ‘counterrevolutionary activities’ (Y. Zhang, 1994). In this sense, an unexpected outcome of the economic opening of the region was indeed the presence of foreign religious organizations in Xinjiang. Fundamentalist groups have been reported to fund mosques and schools at the time while spreading religious opposition to the atheist values of communism (Y. Zhang, 1994; Haider, 2005; Castets, 2003). Consequently, the Chinese authorities increased their monitoring and administration of religious venues from 1988 (Xinhua, 1990a) and began to scrutinize the practice of religion at the private sphere, a trend that would increase in the years to come (Waite, 2006). In March 1989, the *Xinjiang Daily* announced a six-point action plan against religious proselytizing which included the limitation of the number of mosques. According to the report, the existing temples -which had experimented a remarkable growth during the 1980s decade (Y. Zhang, 1994; Bovingdon, 2004)- were ‘sufficiently numerous’ to care for the believers’ needs, and prior authorization would be required for the construction of new mosques (The Straits Times, 1990b). Along with family planning and religious controls, there was a change of perception on the Chinese authorities regarding the role of ethnic minority languages, increasingly seen as an obstacle to the development of the region (Xinhua, 1989a; Xinhua, 1990a). This belief paved the way for the future backlash against what was perceived by the CPC as an excess of cultural autonomy (Dwyer, 2005, pp. 11-12).

The response to the Baren incident in 1990 consolidated the shift from ‘gradualism’ to securitization. Unlike the ‘political resolving, public persuasion, [and] propaganda education’ which followed the Kashgar riot, or the ‘persuasion, social work and intensive ideological and political education policy’ with which the Chinese government had handled the student protests, the Baren incident was met with ‘prompt military suppression and political

dissolution' in order to 'quickly destroy it' (see Y. Zhang, 1994). This military hard-line approach predated the incident. Weeks before violence erupted in Baren, Chinese President Yang Shangkun had asked the PLA to consider the 'deployment of forces' in Xinjiang, to intensify the surveillance of 'splittist' activities, and to be prepared 'to forestall sudden incidents', a call followed by the transfer of tens of thousands of troops to the region (Wo-Lap Lam, 1990c). The same way the discursive construction of Baren as a 'counterrevolutionary rebellion' was to a certain extent a self-fulfilment of the premonitory words of Wang Enmao, the Chinese military was expecting a violent outburst only days before the events. It should then come at no surprise that 1,000 members of the security forces, including the army and police units with heavy weapons and air support, were mobilized to put down the unrest, killing 15 rioters in the process (AI, 1992, p. 4). Unofficial sources, however, suggest that more extrajudicial killings may have occurred, as well as cases of torture and ill-treatment of the hundreds of suspected protesters allegedly arrested for participating the incident (AI, 1992, pp. 4-5).

In the weeks and months following the episode in Baren, the Chinese government ratified the end of an era of moderation and gradualism. It further promoted the militarization of the region by positioning a hard-line ideologue, Major General Cao Pengsheng, as Political Commissar of the Lanzhou military region, which covered Xinjiang, and sending Lieutenant General Fu Quanyou to inspect the regional border with Tajikistan, very close to Baren, where he asked guards to oppose separatism and contribute to Xinjiang's stability (Wo-Lap Lam, 1990e). In addition, the authorities deployed paramilitary units in Kashgar to prevent unrest before a Muslim festivity in July (Jae-Bok, 1990).

Together with the deployment of security forces in the region, the Chinese government launched a two-month crackdown in which 500 'counterrevolutionary gangs' were smashed, several thousand 'counterrevolutionary activists' were arrested, and more than 3,000 cases of 'counterrevolution' were dealt with (Reuters, 1990j). Meanwhile, the control of religious practices and spaces greatly intensified. Months after the unrest, the *Xinjiang Daily* announced that 'drawing a lesson from the counterrevolutionary riot of Baren', the Chinese authorities had ordered the closure of 50 'superfluous' mosques, halting the construction or restoration of 153 others in the district (The Straits Times, 1990f). Tighter controls resulted in a purge of the clergy, a clampdown on illegal religious education and publications, and a ban on foreign preachers (S. Long, 1990d). A container carrying copies of the Quran sent by Saudi

Arabia, a shipment authorized before the Baren incident, was relabelled 'counterrevolutionary material', confiscated and burnt by the police, leading to a Sino-Saudi diplomatic row (Dinmore, 1990b). The crackdown also reached the ranks of the CPC. Dozens of party members who lost 'revolutionary zeal' or participated in the unrest were expelled and several party organizations, accused of 'weakness', were subjected to a process of 'rectification' (BBCMSAP, 1990b).

Alongside the domestic crackdown, Beijing took some diplomatic steps aimed at obtaining the favour of other countries to hinder the Uyghur dissidents abroad. These moves marked the beginning of a strategy to export the crackdown in Xinjiang abroad, notably to the then Soviet Central Asian republics, and to countries like Turkey or Pakistan, home to the Uyghur diaspora and safe havens for Uyghur cultural and political organizations. As chairman of the XUAR, Tomur Dawamat accompanied premier Li Peng in an official visit to Moscow shortly after the Baren incident. The threat of separatism featured highly in the bilateral agenda and was described as a common source of anxiety for both states (D. Chen, 1990). In Istanbul, the home of Uyghur exile leader Isa Alptekin, the Chinese Foreign Minister Qian Qichen asked for Turkish collaboration in containing the activities of the separatist Uyghur organizations based there (Wo-Lap Lam, 1990g; L. H. Sun, 1990). China also started efforts to normalize diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia, a task entrusted to a charismatic Uyghur CPC cadre, Saifuddin Azizi. Full diplomatic Sino-Saudi ties would be eventually achieved, projecting an image of communist tolerance with Islam reinforced by the cordial relations of the PRC with other Islamic countries, from Indonesia to Pakistan (SCMP, 1990b). In neighboring Central Asia, the XUAR government continued a bilateral rapprochement vis-à-vis the Kazakh, Uzbek and Kirghiz Soviet Socialist Republics, nations on the verge of becoming independent states in 1991 (BBCMSFU, 1990; Xinhua, 1990c), and which hosted politically active Uyghur communities that included groups openly separatist (Rashid, 1990a, 1990b). While visits by Xinjiang official delegations were at the moment focused on economic, trade and technical cooperation, there was a clear incentive for China to co-opt them into the crackdown on Uyghur separatism. This objective would be further advanced and consolidated during the 1990s through the creation of the Shanghai Five, later renamed the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).

## **2.4 Conclusion**

In the early years of the ‘reform and opening era’, there was no ‘terrorism’ in Xinjiang. There were episodes of violence, some of them serious enough to be interpreted as a rebellion by the Chinese authorities, but nowhere during these years the government in Beijing considered conflict in Xinjiang a ‘terrorist’ issue. The 1980s decade, however, witnessed a U-turn in the way the CPC responded to ethnic minority unrest in the region. As this chapter has shown, the Chinese political elites evolved between the early years of the decade and 1990 from a prudent and pragmatic interpretation of violent events as the product of historical ethnic frictions and economic disparities to the construction of violence in the region as a foreign-instigated separatist threat to the stability and unity of China.

This chapter demonstrated how this discursive evolution was paralleled by a change in the way the Chinese authorities dealt with Xinjiang. Under the initial gradualist approach, Beijing opted for moderated policies that assisted in rehabilitating the aggrieved Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslim groups, even in spite of the violent events reported at the beginning of the 1980s, some with a clear dissident dimension. When Uyghur students marched in the mid-1980s demanding equality, autonomy, or protection, CPC officials tried to reassure them of the government’s policies in the region, refraining from cracking down on the demonstrations. From 1988, and in line with the evolving domestic and international context, the CPC changed its approach to Xinjiang and the Uyghurs, replacing the moderate approach for stricter controls on areas such as the practice of religion or the adoption of family planning measures. This signalled the transition towards the securitization of the tensions in the region, which culminated in 1990 with the construction of the Baren riot as a ‘counterrevolutionary rebellion’ and the ensuing beginning of a long-term crackdown in Xinjiang. The way was paved for the ‘strike, hard’ (*yanda*) approach that will characterize Xinjiang in the 1990s decade, a proto-terroristization stage in which the language of terrorism entered the Chinese official jargon for the first time, as the next chapter reveals.

## CHAPTER THREE

### **The Proto-Terroristization of Xinjiang:**

#### **‘Striking Hard’ against the ‘Three Forces’ (1991-2001)**

Terrorism made its first official appearance in Xinjiang during the 1990s – at least from the perspective of the official Chinese narrative framing violence in the region as well as through the lens of the definitional consensus on the materiality of this violence. On the one hand, amid increasing social tensions between Chinese authorities and ethnic minorities, several bombings took place in public spaces during these years, which can be understood as overlapping with core scholarly markers of terrorism. On the other hand, the language of ‘terrorism’ emerged in the Chinese state discourse, while the terminology of ‘counterrevolution’ that was prominent during the 1980s faded away. In what follows, I, therefore, conceptualize the developments in Xinjiang in the 1990s as forming a proto-terroristization stage.

Specifically, this chapter explores the time-period following the Baren ‘counterrevolutionary rebellion’ in 1991 until the weeks preceding the attacks in the United States on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001. The first section examines the phenomenology of violence during these years, primarily in Xinjiang but extending to other parts of China and abroad where they matter for the development of the official security discourse on the region. It reflects on the materiality of events and their position vis-à-vis scholarly understandings of terrorism, and it pays specific attention to how violence intensified between 1996 and 1999. The second section analyses the Chinese state discourse about Xinjiang during the 1990s. It identifies the core arguments enunciated sustaining the official narratives, notably the framing of separatism and religious extremism as the main threats to the stability of Xinjiang and the recommendation of a ‘merciless’ crackdown to counter them. In the final section, I trace the political consequences of this discursive process. These include the erection of a legal-executive security apparatus, the implementation of security practices aimed at controlling religion, a propaganda campaign, and the militarization of Xinjiang. Here, I also show how the incidence of the ‘strike, hard’ crackdown campaigns interlinks with the broader the Chinese strategy to neutralize Uyghur political activities abroad.

### 3.1 Mapping violence during the proto-terroristization phase

Violence increased in Xinjiang during the 1990s. A statistical analysis of violent events in the region during this period shows a comparatively calm first half of the decade, a significant increase in the number of violent incidents between 1996 and 1999, and then a declining in violence towards the end of the decade (Rodríguez-Merino, 2009). It is important to note here that, as Millward (2004, p. 2) suggested, some of this rise in violence might be less reflective of the actual increase in violent events and more a consequence of their broader resonance and reporting in the international media. Yet, as the following overview of the material features of the violent events reported in Xinjiang during the 1990s shows, violence became more varied than in the previous decade.

#### *Key episodes of violence in Xinjiang and beyond*

The number of reported cases of violence significantly increased between 1991 and 2001. In contrast to the previous chapter, which presented incidents along a historical timeline, the violent events reported during the proto-terroristization stage will be introduced and analysed thematically. Specifically, they are grouped into five main categories: attacks in public spaces, assassinations, attacks against security forces, escalation of non-violent conflict, and state security operations.

#### a) Attacks in public spaces

The most remarkable aspect of the phenomenology of violence in Xinjiang during the 1990s is the arrival of events that can more readily be classified as ‘terrorism’ in the light of dominant scholarly understandings of the concept. In particular, in comparison with violent events in the region during the 1980s, a significant number of incidents with elements of premeditation and organization took place in public spaces throughout this period. The first such ‘typical’ case of terrorist violence reported in Xinjiang occurred in February 1991, when a device exploded at a video theatre in the county of Kuchar (Aqsu prefecture), killing one person and injuring 13 others (see SCIO, 2002; S. Wang, 2004). This was followed by similar incidents during the next couple of years, with the explosion of two bombs in public city buses in Ürümchi in 1992 (Reuters, 1992; AP, 1992; Grace, 1992; BBCMSAP, 1995e) and in other public venues in Kashgar and Hotan in 1993 (SCIO, 2002), as key examples. A high-profile event, in public spaces during the ‘peak’ phase of violence in the mid-1990s, took place in 1997. In February that year, five explosive devices destroyed two buses in Ürümchi

killing nine and wounding a further 68 people (BBCMSAP, 1997r; Kyodo, 1997b). While certainly salient, bomb attacks were not the only mean used against civilians. For example, Uyghur radicals attacked Han Chinese dwellers in Xinjiang in 1997, hanging their heads and bodies on a bridge (BBCMSAP, 1997n; AFP, 1997e).

b) Assassinations

The premeditated targeted murder of individuals with a public profile - the type of action that Ben-Yehuda (1990) conceptualized as a 'political assassination' - was not a new phenomenon in Xinjiang when a significant number of such cases were reported in the region during the 1990s. However, except for a *People's Daily* report informing on attacks on Chinese cadres in Kashgar in 1983 (Abel, 1985), such incidents had essentially remained unreported in the Chinese state media during the 1980s. Nevertheless, their number multiplied during the 1990s. These attacks targeted individuals perceived as collaborators of the Chinese government or 'traitors', that is, agents of the 'presumed oppressive apparatus' (Walzer, 1977, p. 202). The victims were predominantly police officers, government officials, Party cadres, and pro-government religious figures. Members of the Uyghur ethnic minority associated with Uyghur Party cadres were also among those targeted – as 'traitors' to 'the aspirations of Uyghur nationalism' (H. Yee, 2003, p. 449).

There are many examples of these actions during the proto-terroristization period in Xinjiang. In the case of attacks on police officers, for example, Chinese authorities confirmed in 1996 the 'premeditated and organized murders' of two policemen (Dickie, 1996). Between 1997 and 1998, alternative sources reported at least 18 further cases of assassination of police officers (BBCMSAP, 1998n; Reuters 1998b; AFP 1997r). In 1997, a Chinese official denounced a wave of attacks on 'police officers and their families' (AFP, 1997q). The state media reported many more attacks on policemen at their homes later in the decade (BBCMSAP, 2000b).

When it comes to attacks on government officials and Communist Party of China (CPC) cadres, a Chinese official confirmed in 1996 that several incidents had occurred in which 'rural cadres' were killed by what he labelled 'terrorists' (Earnshaw, 1996b). In 1997, Uyghur exile sources reported that 'radicals' had killed four Chinese officials in Aqsu (BBCMSAP, 1997z). Another example is the murder in 1998 of the Alik village CPC secretary Aliqiong Bozli, who managed the local family planning and state religious affairs, by a group of

attackers led by a former imam (AFP, 1999d). The Chinese government continued to reveal attacks on ethnic Uyghur officials and their relatives between 1997 and 2001 (Hutzler, 2001; SCIO, 2002).

There is also a broad range of examples where Muslim ‘patriotic’ clerics loyal to the Chinese government were assassination targets. In 1993, for instance, there was a murder attempt against the imam of a mosque in Qaghiliq, in the Kashgar prefecture (SCIO, 2002). In 1996, the Chinese government confirmed the killings of several ‘progressive religious leaders’ (Earnshaw, 1996b). The same year, in the streets of Toqsu County (Aqsu prefecture) two masked men shot dead imam Akenmu Sidike who was widely known for his support to the government (Dickie, 1996), whereas attackers seriously wounded 73- year-old Aronghan Aji, one of the highest religious officials in Xinjiang, when he walked the streets of Kashgar (Dow Jones, 1996). According to the Chinese authorities, the attackers were inspired by militants from ‘foreign terrorist organizations’ they had met on pilgrimage to Mecca (Dow Jones, 1996; BBCMSAP 1996o). More ‘patriotic’ clerics were assassinated in 1997 and 1998 (see SCIO 2002).

c) Attacks against security forces

Another main category of violent events reported in Xinjiang in the 1990s are ‘hit-and-run’ attacks launched against the Chinese security forces and official buildings, often suggesting a significant degree of prior organization. These were generally incidents characterized by both the use of basic firearms and the focus on compounds, detachments, and patrols from Chinese security forces, rather than targeting either specific public figures or public spaces. One example is an attack launched in August 1996 by six men in ‘combat fatigues’ against a government office in Qaghiliq county, in which two local government officials, one police officer, and three security guards were killed (SCIO, 2002). That same year, unconfirmed accounts also reported an attack by Uyghur ‘nationalists’ who opened fire with a machinegun against a group of Chinese policemen, killing 16 officers. (The Economist, 1997; Meyer, 1997). Similar episodes included an attack with ‘guns, machetes, incendiary bottles and grenades’ against a police station in Poskam county (Kashgar prefecture) in 1999 (BBCMSAP, 1999l); the blowing up of a military vehicle in front of a military training facility in Ürümchi in 1996 (Kang Lim, 1997c); and the explosion of two bombs in a traffic police watchtower in Hotan in 1998 (AFP, 1998d).

d) Escalation of non-violent conflict

Violent incidents closely patterned as the riots of the 1980s transpired again in the 1990s. In these events, violence was not premeditated, but the result of the escalation of other phenomena such as protests for religious and/or social grievances, or tensions derived from arrests.

The first riot confirmed by the Chinese government during this period took place in Hotan on July 7<sup>th</sup>, 1995, and it resembles in many aspects the Ürümchi riot of 1989. Hundreds of Muslims protested against the arrest of Abdul Kayum, imam of the Baytulla mosque, popular for his interpretation of the Quran in a socio-political light. Crowds marched from the mosque to an official compound asking for Kayum's release (AI, 1999, p. 14). When they got no satisfactory response, they occupied the CPC headquarters, triggering a clash with 50 police officers (ibid). Further riot police squads dispersed the clash with tear gas, beating up the protesters and arresting dozens, of which 20 were sentenced from three to 16 years of prison (AI, 1999, p. 15). The Chinese authorities described the rioters as 'an extremely small number of counter-revolutionary criminals' who 'had used religion as the pretext to deceive and incite a small number of ill-informed believers to carry out attacks on the party, government and police headquarters' (ibid).

Yet the most significant riot, and probably the Xinjiang-related violent incident with the largest international impact at this period, happened in Ghulja, in the Ili Kazakh autonomous prefecture, between February 4<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup>, 1997. As Millward (2007, p. 331) emphasizes, accounts on the Ghulja incident are 'starkly different' depending on the source. Still, as it is the case with the Baren riot, a close look at the official and alternative versions of the incident suggests that both accounts are not necessarily incompatible.

The official version of the events, put forward by Chinese officials and the state media, represented the riots as an abrupt wave of vandalism and violence in which innocent bystanders were attacked. Chinese officials pointed out that the unrest started with a protest by 200 members of an 'illegal religious organization' who, acting in the name of Allah, burnt their identity cards and stripped off their 'Han' clothes as an affirmation of their 'true Muslim' identity (quoted in Hutzler, 1997b; see also Sina News, 2001). Regional CPC secretary Wang Lequan and regional government spokesman Liu Yisheng initially described the incident as a case of 'beating, looting, and robbery' (quoted in Hutzler 1997a; BBCMSAP 1997k). The

state media underscored that ‘local people’s lives and property were jeopardized and normal public order was disrupted’ during the tumult (BBCMSAP 1997o). Three Uyghurs were condemned to death for ‘malicious arson, hooliganism, and beating, smashing and looting’ (ibid). The Chinese state account emphasized that both Uyghur and Han Chinese died in the incident, confirming, willingly or not, that the riots had somehow followed a peaceful protest (see Hills 1997; Leicester, 1997). In 2002, the Chinese authorities revealed further details about the attacks on innocent civilians that took place amidst the riots (SCIO, 2002).

Alternative accounts of the Ghulja incident are based on the testimony of local residents or sources related to them and cast light on the immediate context and causes of the riots, missed in the official narrative. Citing these accounts, Western media and human right groups emphasized three aspects of the riots. First, they contextualized the incident within the tensions that had been mounting up during months in Ghulja after the traditional Uyghur *meshrep* gatherings had been banned in July 1995 (see Dautcher, 2004, pp. 286-7; AI, 1999; WUC, 2013). The prohibition of the *meshrep* had triggered protests in July 1995 and in August 1996 (Dautcher, 2004, pp. 286-7; BBCMSAP, 1997f). These protests were the prelude of the 1997 incident, as illustrated by the fact that one of the leading activists in the 1995 and 1996 disturbances, Abudu Helili, had been arrested and released after receiving ‘ideological education’, only to be condemned again as a leader of the February 1997 riot (Reuters, 1997c).

Second, the alternative version emphasized that the riots were not a premeditated violent attack organized by a dissident group, but the result of the escalation of a tense protest which erupted on February 5<sup>th</sup> after the police had arrested hundreds of Muslims the night before, amongst them youths and women, while they were praying at home (Leicester, 1997; WUC, 2013). Following this incident, thousands of Uyghurs occupied the streets to demand the release of those arrested (WUC, 2013; SCMP, 1997a). They shouted slogans against the CPC and the official decision to appoint mullahs through administrative channels (Grabot, 1997; Reuters 1997c). At this point, some reports outline that Chinese security forces ‘brutally suppressed’ the demonstration and clashes erupted (WUC 2013; Kyodo 1997b). Some reports cite the public execution on February 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> of around 30 arrested protesters as a factor that further exacerbated the tensions (Reuters 1997b; AFP 1997c; Grabot 1997; Kyodo 1997a).

While emphasizing the suppression of the protests and the killing or execution of protesters as the main violent actions taking place during the riots, non-official accounts also confirm that Uyghurs engaged in rioting and attacked the police as well as Han Chinese passers-by. A Russian residing in Ghulja, explained that dozens of young Uyghur men ‘attacked shops and ethnic Chinese with whatever they could get their hands on while they shouted independence slogans’ (quoted in AFP 1997a). Other residents confirmed these attacks on civilians (Reuters 1997a; BBCMSAP 1997e).

The official and alternative accounts of the violence in Ghulja are compatible. Together, they reflect the eclecticism of the ethnic riot as a category of violent phenomena. Patterns of violence in Ghulja included state actions as immediate triggers, tense protests, an escalation towards violence possibly fuelled by the brutality of the Chinese security forces, and widespread chaos during which mobs of Uyghurs attacked Han Chinese. As with the Baren ‘rebellion’, it remains unclear who started the violence, the Uyghur protesters or the Chinese security forces. If anything, official and alternative narratives differ on their toll of casualties. At the time of the events, Chinese officials estimated that 10 people were killed and 132 ‘innocent people’ were injured (AFP, 1997a, 1997c). Alternative accounts, however, raised the death toll to between 80 and 100 victims, both Han Chinese and Uyghur (Grabot, 1997; AFP, 1997a). Some witnesses estimated 125 people were killed when Chinese soldiers opened fire on protesters (Kyodo, 1997a; WUC, 2013).

#### e) State security operations

Clashes between Uyghurs and Chinese security forces also erupted during the course of police operations against separatist suspects. In these cases, violence cannot be considered premeditated or organized because it results from the agency of the Chinese security forces. An example of this type of event occurred in May 1996, during an operation against several suspects of killing ‘seven patriotic figures’, when the Chinese police killed nine suspected ‘Islamic separatists’ in a gun battle (AP, 1997c; AFP, 1997c; Macartney, 1996a). Another case took place on June 1997, when members of the Chinese military police exchanged fire with a group of Uyghurs during a house search. One policeman and the owner of the house were killed, and three Uyghurs were arrested (BBCMSAP, 1997v). The same year, two Uyghur suspects and a Chinese police officer were killed in the course of a police operation against a ‘separatist group’ that had allegedly planned an attack during the Hong-Kong takeover by China (Fong, 1997; Kang Lim, 1997d). Similar incidents were reported in Ghulja in April

and June 1998, leaving dozens of victims on both sides (Kyodo, 1998; Reuters, 1998c; BBCMSAP, 1998j).

*The broad spectrum of violence during the 1990s*

As demonstrated above, the spectrum of violence in the 1990s increased in quantitative and qualitative terms. Taking the definitional markers of terrorism as a reference, Table 3.1 summarizes the core attributes of the most paradigmatic events reported during this period. Meanwhile, Figure 3.1 illustrates how the spectrum of violence got closer to dominant understandings of terrorism. It did so in two ways. First, incidents exhibited tactical attributes associated with scholarly constructions of terrorism to a greater extent. Second, the nature of the motivation guiding these acts reflected a more politically driven agency.

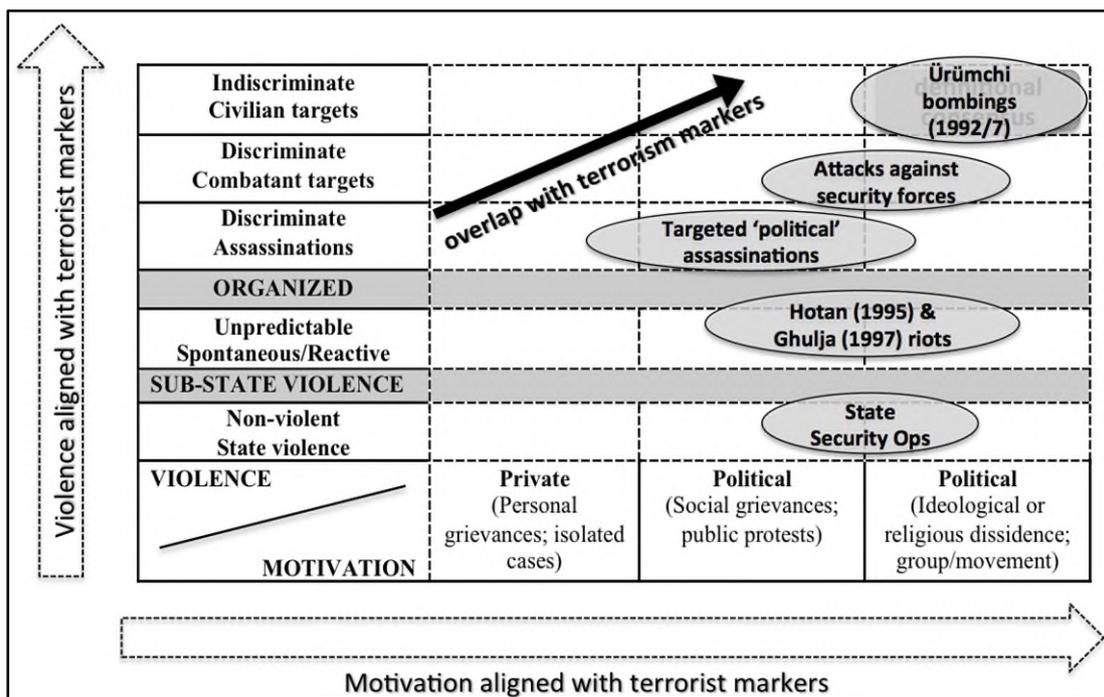
**TABLE 3.1 Key features of violence in Xinjiang during the 1990s**

	Motivation	Unpredictable violence	Premeditated violence	Indiscriminate violence	Civilian victims
<b>Ürümchi bombings (1992/1997)</b>	Political/insurgent	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
<b>Assassinations</b>	Political/insurgent	Yes	Yes	No	No
<b>Attacks against security forces</b>	Political/insurgent	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
<b>Hotan riot (1995)</b>	Social/religious	No	No	Yes	Yes
<b>Ghulja riot (1997)</b>	Social/dissident	No	No	Yes	Yes
<b>State security operations</b>	State security	-	-	-	-

Examining Figure 3.1, the Ürümchi bombings (1992, 1997) exemplify the highest level of proximity to interpretations of terrorism. These were organized attacks intentionally aimed at indiscriminately killing civilians, carried out with a presumably dissident or separatist motivation. The attacks against the Chinese security forces present similar characteristics to the Ürümchi bombings, but they fall short of a core marker of terrorism, as they did not target civilians. Meanwhile, the assassinations share some similarities with the indiscriminate attacks against the security forces, but they differ in their discriminate nature and means since

they targeted specific individuals. At the same time, in terms of motivation, they stand at the intersection of violence caused by private or personal grievances, and violence motivated by a political or ideological dissident agency. A step further away from constructions of terrorism, the Hotan (1995) and Ghulja (1997) riots reflect a lack of premeditation considering how the violence unfolded. Examining the nature of the protests from which they originated, they were caused by a mixture of social grievances and a certain dissident element, therefore standing in between both categories in the scale. It is also unclear whether a sub-state actor or the state security forces initiated the violence. Finally, security operations, while part of the phenomenology of political violence, fall out of the sub-state violence category, in as much the Chinese security forces initiated these events.

**FIGURE 3.1. The spectrum of violence in Xinjiang during the proto-terroristization stage (1991-2001)**



While the above categorization suggests a clear-cut typology of the phenomenology of violence, these categories are, far from solid and non-negotiable, fluid and open to interpretation. In particular, the element of motivation and purpose of the sub-state violent agent emerges as a site for potential interpretive contestation.

In this sense, not all attacks against public or civilian targets reported at the time necessarily involved a political motivation. Intentional explosions in public areas were not uncommon throughout China during these years (see AFP, 1999a, 1999f; *The Economist*, 1999; *The Washington Post*, 2001; BBCMSAP, 1998a; Fackler, 2001a; SCMP, 1999a). Hundreds of bombings rocked China during the 1990s. Some targeted trains or busy streets, or symbolic spots such as Tiananmen Square or the Forbidden City in Beijing, suggesting a clear aim to inflict civilian casualties; while others detonated in official buildings such as the Beijing Railways Ministry, suggesting an intention to attack the Chinese government (*ibid*).

In many of these cases, the attacker's motivation was far from a dissident separatist drive against the Chinese state. For example, disgruntled workers were blamed for some bombings, urging the Chinese government to worry about the growing social instability caused by unemployment or corruption (*China Focus*, 1998). This is relevant because, in the vacuum of responsibility that followed some intentional blasts reported in China at the time, Uyghur militants emerged as usual culprits in incidents for which they were eventually cleared. This was the case in Beijing (1997) and Wuhan (1998), when explosions against public buses left dozens dead and wounded, or in Ürümchi (2000), when a vehicle carrying explosives detonated, killing six and leaving more than 300 injured (AFP, 1997h, 2000e; Reuters, 1997f; BBCMSAP, 1998a, 1998c). Despite speculation to the contrary in the Chinese state and international media, these events were ultimately blamed on disgruntled workers, peasants with alleged marital problems, or poor road conditions (AFP, 1997g, 1997n, 1999a; BBCMSAP, 1997i). Similarly, the explosion of a device in the facilities of a state company in Kashgar in 1993, officially represented as 'terrorism' a decade later (SCIO, 2002), was considered at the time as motivated by peasant's dissatisfaction with the government's tax policy (Kyodo, 1993).

The construction of the assassinations of police officers, government officials, or CPC cadres as acts with a political dimension is also open to contestation. Other logics of a private and not necessarily anti-state dissident nature might have triggered these actions. A high political profile is certainly latent in the status of these victims, representative figures of the Chinese repressive apparatus. Chinese officials emphasized that, in the eyes of their attackers, CPC cadres held a clear political relevance (BBCMSAP, 1996x; Earnshaw, 1996b). They underscored that attackers saw victims as 'spies' of the CPC (Dickie, 1996), or as 'prominent' Uyghur supporters of the state (BBCMSAP, 1997ab). The status of the victim, however, does

not necessarily imply a political, dissident or ideological agency. In some occasions, the attacks were driven by personal revenge (BBCMSAP, 2000b). Personal grievances also stemmed from the application of controversial policies. For example, Chinese officials were attacked by Uyghurs acting in revenge against the implementation of family planning policies (BBCMSAP, 1998j; AFP, 2001b; Reuters, 1991c). Other attacks involved economic grievances against government officials (The Straits Times, 1994). As I explore later in this chapter, the boundaries between political and economic motivations were distorted in the official discourse and practices, notably in what refers to the ‘strike, hard’ anti-criminal campaigns. This suggests that part of the violence in Xinjiang has been interpreted as having a political motivation only by virtue of the attackers’ ethnicity, since not the tactics, neither the targets necessarily implied an ideological dissident driver.

Finally, the characterization of violence in Xinjiang as a sort of ‘guerrilla’ or insurgency (see G. Collins, 2015; The Guardian, 2011; Brown, 2014) is equally fluid and open to contestation. In this regard, at no time between 1980 and nowadays, the Chinese government has faced an insurgency in Xinjiang that reflected academic understandings of this type of political violence such as the control of territory or the use of military weapons (see Merari, 1993). Despite this, reports inflating the quantity, quality and scope of violent events in Xinjiang were frequent during the 1990s. Uyghur groups outside China, like the United National Revolutionary Front (UNRF), the flamboyant name for an organization actually consisting of two men – father and son – based in a flat in Almaty, described an underground insurgency allegedly thriving in ‘the mountains and forests’ of Xinjiang (AFP 1996o, 1996q). The UNRF reported attacks on Chinese military columns in the Taklamakan desert (see AFP 1996b; Grabot 1996), or clashes leaving hundreds of casualties in the Chinese security forces (AFP 1996k; see also AFP 1996i, 1996m). Similar accounts depicting a state of quasi civil war in the region were produced by journals in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Russia or Turkey (AFP, 1995a; Inside China Mainland, 1998; BBCMSAP, 1999d; BBCMNF, 1999; Artykova, 1993; Working, 2001). These reports offered inconsistent accounts of violent incidents and exaggerated the capabilities of the Uyghurs engaging in dissident violence.

### **3.2 New language, old arguments: the emergence of ‘terrorism’ in the framing of violence in Xinjiang**

During the 1990s, the ‘terrorism’ lexicon appeared for the first time in the Chinese state discourse on violence in Xinjiang. It gradually replaced the language of ‘counterrevolution’, so vivid in the 1980s. This shift, which took place in the second half of the decade, did not imply major changes in the key lines of reasoning proposed in the government’s discourse. Ideas of ‘hostile’ foreign forces or the perpetuation of a life-or-death struggle against the enemy still dominated the narratives. If anything, Chinese officials intensified their representation of religion as a negative force and denigration of the ‘separatist’ enemy, calling for a brutal response to dissidents. The new language of ‘terrorism’ came to underpin these constructions and the security practices that followed. The label did not merely replace ‘counterrevolution’ as the referent sobriquet in the Chinese state discourse at the domestic level. It also gained relevance in the international realm, where China, alongside Russia and some Central Asian countries, established the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which articulated a fight against terrorism and other ‘evils’, notably separatism and religious extremism, as its main security *leitmotif*.

In this section, I explore the core dimensions of the Chinese state discourse on Xinjiang during the 1990s. First, I examine the articulation of separatism and religious extremism as core threats to the stability of Xinjiang. Second, I investigate the prescription of a long and ‘merciless’ fight to counter them. Third, I trace the fading of the ‘counterrevolution’ jargon and the emergence of the new language of ‘terrorism’ as the referent vernacular used to describe violent tensions. Then, I proceed to analyse how the Chinese authorities *terroritized* the Ghulja riots to materialize the otherwise abstract threats constructed in the official discourse. Finally, I turn my attention to the internationalization of the Chinese discourse on Xinjiang.

### *Constructing the threat*

The Chinese government’s discourse on the tensions in Xinjiang reproduced and expanded core arguments used in the past during the 1990s. A key idea emphasized during the 1980s and further elaborated was that external forces were destabilizing Xinjiang. Throughout the 1990s, high-ranked Chinese officials kept warning of the infiltration of ‘reactionary’ and ‘hostile’ forces in the region (AFP, 1992a, 1997b; BBCMSAP, 1996r). The external enemy presented different faces. In the early 1990s, Chinese officials identified Western influences

as the negative external force. Former CPC regional leader, Wang Enmao, and his successor until 1994, Song Hanliang, associated external threats with ‘capitalism’, ‘imperialism’ or ‘bourgeois liberalism’ (quoted in AFP, 1991b; Reuters, 1991a). Ismail Amat, minister in charge of the State Nationalities Affairs Commission, later blamed the ‘imperialists’ for creating the geographical notion of ‘Eastern Turkestan’ to spread separatism (quoted in BBCMSAP, 1994g), while the government accused external forces of trying to ‘westernize’ and ‘split’ China (BBCMSAP, 1997j).

Chinese officials also represented religious extremism as the main threat to the stability of Xinjiang. They tied the religious threat to ‘secret societies from outside our borders’ (AFP, 1991d) or ‘foreign religious inimical forces’ (AP, 1991a). This discourse constructed Islam in binary opposition. On the one hand, religious practices were accepted as long as they were in line with socialist values and the law (Reuters, 1993a). State-endorsed clerics were described as ‘patriotic’ figures who ‘loved their country’ (Reuters, 1997k; AP, 1997c; 1997d). From this friendlier perspective, Chinese President Jiang Zemin vowed in 1998 to ‘trust the religious mass’ and to incorporate ‘religious activities in a way that they be harmonious with the legal system and the socialist society’ (quoted in SCMP, 1998). While this ‘patriotic’ Islam was to be tolerated, the Chinese authorities did not hide their disdain for religion. Nur Bekri, then mayor of Ürümchi, conveyed this contempt in 2000 when he claimed that it was better to spend time ‘studying science and technology’ than ‘going to the mosque and praying’ (quoted in AFP, 2000c).

On the other hand, the Chinese government framed religion as a separatist force and a threat to China’s national security. In this fashion, Wang Lequan warned in 1995 of ‘a handful of people’ who had entered Xinjiang ‘to advocate fundamentalism’, which he defined as ‘the concept of combining religion with politics’ (quoted in BBCMSAP, 1995b). The government accused ‘backward’ religion doctrines of being ‘incompatible with the current Chinese laws and statutes’ (BBCMSAP, 1997x) and the clergy for ‘coercing’ people in issues such as justice, education or family planning (BBCMSAP, 1996c, 1996k), promoting a separatist ‘crusade’ (SCMP, 1991c), declaring a ‘religious war’ (AFP, 1995b), or persecuting clerics with ‘terrorist means’ (BBCMSAP, 1997x). Meanwhile, the Chinese state media warned of a pan-Islamist movement seeding ‘anti-imperialist sentiment’ to consolidate ‘the power of landlords and mullahs’ (Reuters, 1996d; AFP, 1997i).

The Chinese authorities linked these threats to external scenarios. Throughout the decade, Chinese officials identified Afghanistan, Turkey, the United States, Switzerland, or the Central Asian nations as epicentres of Uyghur separatist activism (SCMP, 1991a; Landers 1995; BBCMSAP 1995c, 2000a). In 1999, Wang Lequan warned of forces ‘hidden in countries near Xinjiang’, in a veiled reference to Central Asia and Pakistan (quoted in BBCMSAP, 1999i). The authorities also presented Uyghur exiled activists such as Isa Alptekin or Wu’er Kaixi as the faces of the enemy abroad (SCMP 1991a; BBCMSAP 1995c). In 2001, using the new ‘terror’ jargon to frame the external enemy, regional chairman Abulahat Abdurixit accused ‘international terrorists’ abroad of assisting separatists in Xinjiang (quoted in AFP, 2001a).

The construction of a multi-faceted external enemy underpinned the slogan that ‘national separatism’ and ‘illegal religious activities’, instigated by external forces, posed the ‘greatest danger’ to the stability of Xinjiang. This slogan featured prominently in CPC statements (BBCMSAP, 1996d), institutions like the People’s Armed Police (PAP) or the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (XPCC) (AFP, 1996e; BBCMSAP, 1996i), and high-ranked regional officials such as Wang Lequan, Song Hanliang, or the regional chairman between 1994 and 2003, Abulahat Abdurixit (AFP, 1991b; BBCMSAP, 1996w).

The stability of Xinjiang thus emerged during the 1990s as the core referent object to protect from the threats of separatism and religious extremism. Stability was, as Ismail Amat put it in 1993, the ‘central task that overrides everything else’ (quoted in BBCMSAP, 1993c). When Chinese President Jiang Zemin visited the region in 1998, he aimed for ‘a stable political situation’ (quoted in SCMP, 1998). Chinese officials and state media linked the region’s stability to other referent objects. Stability and economic development often featured together in the official discourse. Ismail Amat declared stability ‘a prerequisite for improving the economy (quoted in BBCMSAP, 1993c), while Wang Lequan described it as ‘the prevalent factor for Xinjiang’s economic development’ (quoted in BBCMSAP, 1995d). Chinese officials also related the stability and the economic development of Xinjiang to national unity. Early in the decade, Jiang Zemin connected the dots when he declared the ‘strengthening’ of ‘minority unity’ and the ‘economic and cultural development of the ethnic minorities’ as requirements for ‘protecting social stability and the state’s long-term security’ and achieving China’s ‘target of modernization’ (quoted in AFP, 1991e). At the turn of the century, Prime Minister Zhu Rongji emphasized the necessity to ‘strengthen unity among

nationalities' and 'maintain social stability' as a 'basic prerequisite and guarantee' for the development of Xinjiang (quoted in BBCMSAP, 2000h).

At the same time, the concept of security acquired a greater dimension in the Chinese state discourse during the 1990s. Notably, it was invoked in 1993, when China approved its first State Security Law, which explicitly stated the purpose of 'safeguarding State security, protecting the State power of the people's democratic dictatorship and the socialist system, and ensuring the smooth progress of reform, opening-up, and the socialist modernization drive' (PRC, 1993). Meanwhile, the category of 'crimes of counter-revolution' was replaced with that of 'crimes of endangering state security' in the Criminal Law in 1997 (AFP, 1997f). By the turn of the century, security became a core referent object in the Chinese government's discourse, and on July 2001, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) declared Xinjiang as China's 'most important security problem in the next 20 years' (Marquand, 2001).

#### *The fight for stability*

Another core argument in the Chinese state narratives of the 1990s was that a 'long' and 'merciless' fight against separatism was needed for the stability of Xinjiang, an idea that would become instrumental to the Chinese security policies. Over the years, Chinese officials described this fight in different ways. In 1994, Abulahat Abdurixit called to 'fight resolutely' against separatism to reach stability (quoted in Zhongguo Tongxun She, 1994). In 1996, Wang Lequan advocated a 'people's war' against separatists to achieve 'a social environment of unity and stability' (quoted in BBCMSAP, 1996a). Earlier, Song Hanliang had vowed for 'a firm struggle against the destructive acts of a small handful of national separatists to ensure the smooth progress of reform, opening up and economic construction' (quoted in BBCMSAP, 1993b). Linking the fight against separatism with regional stability and even food security, the Chinese state media would present the 'bumper harvests' of 1999 as the result of the 'stable environment' created by 'combating illegal religious activities, and stopping violence and terrorism' (BBCMSAP, 1999f).

As they had done in 1990 following the Baren incident, Chinese officials represented the fight for the stability of Xinjiang as the continuation of past struggles that they also projected into the future. In 1991, Public Security Minister Tao Siju announced an upcoming decade of 'struggle against nationalist splittists and criminals who carry out sabotage in the name of

religion' (quoted in AFP, 1991c). Commenting on the State Security Law of 1993, Amudun Niyaz, then chairman of the Standing Committee of the XUAR People's Congress, described this 'struggle' as having been 'acute and complicated' since the founding of the PRC in 1949 (quoted in BBCMSAP, 1994c). In numerous editorials, the Chinese state media underscored the 'ceaseless' and 'protracted' nature of the conflict (see Reuters, 1996d; BBCMSAP, 1995h, 1996g, 1996w, 1997q). Attaching an inevitable character to it, Jiang Zemin affirmed in 1998 that 'the tree may prefer calm, but the wind will not subside' (quoted in AFP, 1998a).

In articulating a 'fight', 'war', or 'struggle' as the logical response to tensions in Xinjiang, Chinese authorities instilled a sense of emergency and exceptionalism in their narratives. In their opinion, the fight could not be relaxed under any circumstances. The *Xinjiang Daily* described the regional situation in 1996 as 'serious', one that vowed for 'deepening' the fight and not 'letting down our guard' (AFP, 1996l). Chi Haotian, Minister of National Defence, pointed out in 1997 that Xinjiang's geographic conditions demanded 'a high state of alert' (quoted in Reuters, 1997l). In 1999, Wang Lequan vowed not to 'relax our vigilance' (quoted in Kwan, 1999). For the Chinese officials, the fight against separatism and religious extremism had to be maintained even in times of peace or receding violence. These were Jiang Zemin's instructions in 1998, when he called to 'be prepared for danger and prevent turmoil in times of peace' (quoted in BBCMSAP, 1998l). In 2000, even though the violence had considerably decreased in the region, Ismail Tiliwaldi, member of the Standing Committee of Xinjiang Regional CPC, called to persist in the crackdown (BBCMSAP, 2000k) while Wang Lequan warned of 'increasingly serious threats' (quoted in BBCMSAP, 2000i).

The construction of a long exceptional fight as a requirement for stability facilitated the continued endorsing of a crackdown in Xinjiang. As the state media claimed early in the decade, the government's viewpoint was that 'only the methods of dictatorship' could work in the region (AFP, 1992b). Chinese officials advanced this argument in different ways.

First, they singled out the Chinese state security forces, and notably the army, to fight separatism alongside the peoples of Xinjiang. Senior figures often called the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to lead the struggle and the XPCC to 'beef up militia reservists' and become a 'backbone force' in the region (BBCMSAP, 1995i, 1999k, 1996i, 1994b). A Xinhua editorial called in 1997 for building 'a great wall of steel of army-people unity and ethnic unity' (BBCMSAP, 1997g).

Second, the official narratives deployed epic and bellicose verbiage, akin to that of a military conflict, when weighing up on Xinjiang. This included references to a ‘people’s war’ (BBCMSAP 1996a, 1996b; Reuters, 1997m), a ‘you die, I live’ struggle (BBCMSAP, 1996i, 1997j), or a conflict ‘between the enemies and us’ (BBCMSAP, 1997c). Those who died in the crackdown were described as ‘martyrs’ and ‘heroes’ who had ‘sacrificed’ their lives for the unity of China (Reuters 1998c; BBCMSAP 1998m).

Next, to legitimize this brutal response, the Chinese state discourse represented dissidents in a dehumanizing way to the point of justifying their elimination. Chinese officials and state media compared separatists with ‘rats in the street, followed and cornered by passers by’ (AFP, 1997s), or ‘rats’ at the sight of which ‘everybody cries ‘kill them’’ (BBCMSAP, 2000m). Amudun Niyaz described violent separatists as ‘poisonous grass’ and ‘killer bugs’ to be ‘wiped out’ for the sake of ‘stability and prosperity’ (quoted in AP, 1997b). The dehumanization of the enemy justified a ‘harsh retaliation’ or a struggle ‘without mercy’ (AFP, 1996l, 1997o; BBCMSAP, 1999m). Also, Chinese officials explicitly rejected alternative approaches to the tensions based on ‘leniency’, ‘benevolence’, or ‘tolerance’ (BBCMSAP, 1997c). ‘How can we be lenient towards these ferocious thugs?’, Wang Lequan asked in 1997, before stating that ‘killers should be killed in kind’ (quoted in SCMP, 1997b).

In short, the Chinese state proposed during the 1990s a long fight against separatism and religious extremism until their extermination. It should, therefore, come as no surprise that the crackdown operations of this period were named ‘strike hard’ campaigns, and aimed at ‘striking mercilessly and hard’ (BBCMSAP, 2000h), dealing ‘annihilating blows’ (Page, 2001), or using ‘all available measures to unearth enemy activities’ (Reuters, 1996a). In 1999, commenting on the crackdown, a police officer in Kashgar revealed that Chinese security forces were striking hard ‘every day, each season, all year, leaving ethnic separatists and terrorists no room to breathe’ (quoted in Reuters, 1999).

#### *Change of language: From counterrevolution to terrorism*

An important development in the Chinese state discourse on Xinjiang during the 1990s is the appearance of the ‘terrorism’ lexicon. The new vernacular gradually replaced the language of ‘counterrevolution’ that had characterized the official narratives during the 1980s.

During the first half of the decade, Chinese officials and the state media still constructed their arguments about Xinjiang with mentions to counterrevolution. Rebels were described as ‘counter-revolutionaries’ (AFP, 1992b) or ‘counter-revolutionary murderers’ (BBCMSAP, 1996x), their actions being framed as ‘counter-revolutionary incitement’ (BBCMSAP, 1994a), or ‘counter-revolutionary and serious criminal activities’ (BBCMSAP, 1994d). In 1994, a study on ‘Pan-Islamism and Pan-Turkism’ of the Xinjiang Academy of Social Sciences (XASS) explored the incidence of ‘ethnic rebellion’, ‘counter-revolutionary separatist thinking’, and ‘counter-revolutionary’ individuals and organizations (AI, 1999, p. 13; see Zhang, 1994).

In the mid-1990s, however, the utterance of the counterrevolution jargon began to fade, giving way to the gradual emergence of the language of ‘terrorism’. The XASS study had mentioned that ‘terrorist acts’ had occurred in Kashgar in 1993 (Reuters, 1994). In 1995, a regional security official cited ‘terrorism’ as a form of ‘sabotage activity’ (Reuters, 1995). Yet, a major turning point in this direction was the modernization of the 1979 Criminal Law in 1997. Explaining the change of wording, Wang Hanbin, vice chairman of the National People’s Congress (NPC), pointed out that ‘new situations and problems’ had arisen that demanded the revision of ‘crimes of counter-revolution’ as ‘crimes of endangering state security’ (quoted in AFP, 1997f). Among these new realities, Wang cited ‘offences in the nature of terrorist activities’ (ibid).

During the second half of the decade, the category of ‘violent terrorist activities’ entered the discourse as a distinct one, propelling the use of terror jargon in the official discourse. Before 1995, and in the absence of the label, Chinese officials had used a wide range of descriptors to conceptualize violent events with a political dimension. These included ‘revenge killings’ (AFP, 1994a), ‘counterrevolutionary and serious criminal activities’ (BBCMSAP, 1994d), ‘subversion, sabotage and infiltration’ (AFP, 1991b), ‘destructive acts’ (BBCMSAP, 1993b), or ‘explosion incidents’ (BBCMSAP, 1995c). From 1995, the terror lexicon entered the official jargon. Chinese officials and the state media used it to describe ‘cases of explosions and assassination’ or ‘acts of violence’ (AFP, 1996e; BBCMSAP, 1997m), as well as individuals or groups, training camps, means or ideas (AFP, 1997p, 1999b; BBCMSAP, 1997o, 1996w). The label was used alongside other expressions such as ‘sabotage activities’ (BBCMSAP, 1997h), ‘separatist activities’ (BBCMSAP, 1996w), or ‘illegal religious activities’ (AFP, 1996l), which suggested a conceptualization of terrorism as a distinct category of

violence. The Chinese authorities also used the ‘terror’ jargon in a discriminate way to describe a specific category of violence, in ways that were reminiscent of scholarly constructions of terrorism. As such, the authorities referred to organizations that aimed ‘to terrorise the people and spread chaos in Xinjiang’ by exploding bombs (AFP, 1997i), or criminals who used ‘ruthless’ methods to ‘fan ethnic hatred and create an atmosphere of terror’ (Reuters, 1998a).

Overall, the early use of terror jargon was somehow erratic during the 1990s. While it appeared for the first time in the Chinese state official vocabulary, it was never dominant. Other labels, such as separatism or splittism, were more popular in the state security narratives on Xinjiang. By the end of the decade, terrorism, as such, was a marginal issue in the state security narratives. The government’s white paper on defence published in 1998 did not mention terrorism at all, and the 2000 version only did so in passing (Scobell, 2005, p. 306). This situation would change immediately after 9/11.

#### *The terroristization of the Ghulja riot*

The Chinese government maintained a low profile when it came to reacting to fresh violent incidents during most of the 1990s. Chinese officials did not admit or comment on many of the episodes reported during this period, some of which were revealed only years later (see SCIO, 2002). During the early 1990s, accounts of violent events were mostly reported by Uyghur diaspora groups or foreign media organizations (Preston 1992; AP, 1992; Artykova, 1993). The Ürümchi bombings in 1992 almost went unnoticed at the time. Only in May 1995, when a Chinese court sentenced the attackers to death, the Chinese state media elaborated on the attack, blaming a ‘counter-revolutionary’ group for it (BBCMSAP, 1995e). Despite the unambiguous ‘terroristic’ features of this event, there was no mention of terrorism in the official reports (ibid).

This situation changed from 1996 onwards when the Chinese state media began to inform about the increasing violence in Xinjiang. In 1996, the *Xinjiang Daily* warned of ‘gangs of assassins and bombers’ in the region (Reuters, 1996b), and the regional government revealed the existence of ‘cases of explosions, assassinations and other violent terrorist activities of a political colouring involving party members and cadres’ (Reuters 1996c, BBCMSAP 1996n). As violence continued to surface, the Chinese authorities also went public to dismiss far-

fetched accounts of violence as ‘pure lies’ (AFP, 1996f) or ‘completely groundless’ stories (AFP, 1996p).

The government’s low profile on the incidence of violence in Xinjiang abruptly came to an end with the Ghulja riots in February 1997. Only 72 hours after the violence erupted, Turkish media outlets were reporting on the incident, prompting hundreds of Uyghur exiles to protest in front of the Chinese consulate in Istanbul (SCMP, 1997a). Very soon, Western media agencies were informing of a major incident in Xinjiang (Hills, 1997; AFP, 1997b; Leicester, 1997). As it occurred in 1990 following the Baren incident, the Chinese authorities had to come to the fore and provide their version of the events unfolding in Ghulja to the public. These narratives provide an empirical window into how the Chinese government constructed violent events in the 1990s.

At first glance, a very significant aspect of the official narratives about the Ghulja incident is that Chinese officials did not mention ‘terrorism’ –or any related term– when initially weighing upon the events. Liu Yisheng, spokesman of the regional government, and one of the first Chinese officials to comment on the riot described it as ‘a serious case of beating, looting and destruction’ (quoted in AFP, 1997c). Liu also attached a premeditated and political dimension to the episode, for which he blamed ‘a small number of hostile elements’ that ‘plotted to overthrow the people’s political power and to split the unity of the motherland’ (ibid). Contrary to Liu’s take on the incident, Zhang Yuliang, director of the regional CPC propaganda department, seemed to downplay the events in Ghulja. He emphasized that ‘the vast majority of those arrested were members of the public who had been hoodwinked into taking part and they have been released’ (quoted in Reuters, 1997d). In the aftermath of the incident, Zhang also announced ‘a session of education for the masses to teach them about ethnic unity’ (ibid). Despite commenting on the events, neither Liu nor Zhang mentioned ‘terror’ or ‘terrorism’ in their statements.

The absence of a terrorism lexicon in early statements of Chinese officials is in contrast with the use of the label to describe the Ürümchi bombings a few weeks later. An official statement published in the front page of *Xinjiang Daily* described the bombings as a ‘premeditated act of violence carried out by a terrorist organisation’ (AFP, 1997d). CPC leaders in the region referred to the attack as ‘terrorist bomb explosions’ (quoted in AFP, 1997m). Wang Lequan described the incident as ‘typical terrorist activity’, and denied any

connection with the events in Ghulja, which he differentiated as ‘a practice of beating, smashing, and looting’ to ‘pursue national separatism’ (quoted in Kang Lim, 1997a; BBCMSAP, 1997k). The different treatment given by Chinese officials to the Ghulja riot and the Ürümchi bombing thus suggests an early discriminate use of the terror lexicon by Chinese officials depending on the nature of the event. This differentiation, that represented terrorism as a specific violent category different from other violent phenomena such as the Ghulja rioting, was however about to be abandoned.

The terroristization of the events in Ghulja started when the Chinese courts issued the first sentences for the unrest weeks after the incident. Crucially, between the riot and these first sentences, the Chinese government revised the ‘crimes of counter-revolution’ as ‘crimes of endangering state security’ (AFP, 1997f). In April 1997, using this new legal jargon, local courts described the Ghulja riot as a crime that ‘seriously endangered state security’ (BBCMSAP, 1997o). Meanwhile, Chinese officials clarified that the ‘beating, smashing, and looting acts’ had been carried out ‘by violent and terrorist means’ and described the rioters as ‘a group of violent terrorists and criminals’ (quoted in BBCMSAP, 1997o, 1997w). A month later, the courts characterized the Ürümchi bombing as a ‘terrorist’ crime ‘by extremely cruel and criminal means’ (Reuters, 1997j). This effectively meant that the Chinese state positioned the Ghulja riot and the Ürümchi bombings, two incidents of a very different nature, at the same conceptual level, that of terrorism.

Hereafter, the terrorism lexicon would accompany in one way or another most of the official references to the Ghulja incident. In 1999, new judicial statements portrayed the riots as ‘violent terrorist activities’ and the rioters as ‘religious terrorists’ (AFP, 1999c, 1999e; BBCMSAP, 1999c). The process of terroristization of this event culminated in 2002 when the riot was retrospectively re-casted as a ‘terrorist incident’ in the document ‘East Turkistan Forces Cannot Get Away with Impunity’ (SCIO, 2002).

Beyond signifying the irruption of the language of terrorism to describe violence in Xinjiang, the state’s narratives about Ghulja also demonstrate how Chinese officials used the incident to reproduce core arguments of the official discourse and legitimize the crackdown. A case in point is the speech delivered by Amudun Niyaz in front of the cadres of the Yili prefecture on July 1997. In his intervention, Niyaz attached a political and premeditated nature to the incident. The riot, he said, was ‘by no means an accidental or isolated incident’, but ‘a

separatist and sabotage activity' carried out 'in a planned and organized way' (quoted in BBCMSAP, 1997ab). Niyaz also presented all types of violent phenomena, no matter their nature, as well as some non-violent dissident activities, as proof and part of a similar threat. He related the riot to 'terrorist acts and assassinations' before and after 1997 (ibid) and to other 'law-breaking criminal activities' such as the spread of dissident propaganda, or 'illegal religious activities' (ibid). The events in Ghulja, he continued, proved that separatism was 'the main danger harming Xinjiang's stability' and demanded a 'life-and-death', 'acute and fierce', and 'long-term and complex' fight (ibid). Niyaz concluded his speech using the incident to legitimize the crackdown in the region. Cracking down in Xinjiang, he claimed, was 'a just action' based on the 'sacred duty of protecting the people and striking at the enemy' (ibid). Alternative interpretations of China's response to the Ghulja riots, he added, were just 'rumours to mislead people' (ibid). For this 'life-and-death' struggle, Niyaz encouraged his fellow cadres to 'crack down, according to law, on law-breaking criminals who endanger state security and public order' (ibid). In a single speech produced with the occasion of a violent event, Niyaz conveyed the pivotal themes of China's security discourse on Xinjiang during the proto-terroristization stage.

#### *Internationalising the threat*

During the 1990s, the Chinese authorities internationalized their discourse on Xinjiang. They did so in two different directions. First, and following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Chinese officials exported the arguments about a terrorist threat in the region to their exchanges with the post-Soviet republics in Central Asia. Second, during this period, the Chinese state discourse conceptualized terrorism as a global phenomenon with domestic ramifications in Xinjiang, conveying the idea that China was a victim of a problem shared with the international community.

The international element was present in the Chinese official discourse about Xinjiang since the beginning of the 1990s. The region featured prominently in discussions about the developments in neighbouring USSR. Chinese officials framed the dissolution of the Soviet Union as an event that could galvanize separatism in Xinjiang. Following the failed coup against the government of Mikhail Gorbachev in August 1991, Chinese Vice President Wang Zhen warned of 'murky and changeable times' and predicted a 'treacherous' road ahead (quoted in Goodspeed, 1991). Meanwhile, the Chinese government framed the collapse of the USSR as a move that had emboldened 'separatists' in Xinjiang (SCMP, 1991c;

BBCMSAP, 1996y). Throughout the decade, leading cadres such as Song Hanliang or Nur Bekri continued to emphasize that China should not and would not repeat in Xinjiang the same ‘mistakes’ of Moscow in dealing with the ethnic minorities (quoted in Yeung, 1991; SCMP, 1999b).

The uncertainty of the ‘murky’ and ‘treacherous’ times proclaimed by Chinese leaders after the fall of the Soviet Union gave way to optimistic forecasts about Xinjiang based on a changing international environment. This feeling increased as Beijing’s diplomatic efforts in Central Asia started to bear fruit in the mid-1990s. From 1994, when the Prime Minister Li Peng toured the Central Asian nations, and particularly after the signing in April 26<sup>th</sup> 1996 of the first Shanghai Five treaty, Chinese high-ranked diplomats and the Chinese President Jiang Zemin started to celebrate with their Central Asian counterparts, a ‘commitment’ to oppose ‘splittism’ in Xinjiang and disallow Uyghur separatist activities on foreign soil (AFP, 1994b, 1996a, 1996h, 1997j; BBCMSAP, 1995a, 1996u). Following the inaugural treaty of the Shanghai Five, Xinjiang official media described the ‘international and regional’ context as ‘peaceful’ and ‘friendly’ (AFP, 1996g, BBCMSAP, 1996t).

In this new environment, Chinese officials replicated the core arguments of the national security discourse about Xinjiang in their international exchanges. Visiting Kazakhstan in 1996, the Chinese Minister for Economic Reforms Li Tieying, denounced the ‘instigation of foreign forces’ in Xinjiang (quoted in AFP, 1996n). In 1997, Chinese Foreign Minister Qian Qichen welcome the commitment of the Kazakh and Kyrgyz presidents to fight ‘splittism’ and ‘preserve regional peace and stability’ (quoted Reuters, 1997h). Echoing the calls for a ‘merciless’ struggle against ‘ethnic separatism’, Chinese General Chi Haotian told fellow ministers of Defence from Central Asian nations to ‘not be soft-hearted’ in this fight (quoted in AP, 2000b). The language of terrorism also entered the Shanghai Five summits at the end of the 1990s (see Y. Chan, 1998; Piskorskaya, 2000). In 1999, Chinese President Jiang Zemin and his Uzbek counterpart Islam Karimov vowed to ‘prevent, combat and investigate terrorist activities’ that threatened ‘regional or worldwide peace and security’ (quoted in AFP, 1999g). In 2000, Chinese Vice-President Hu Jintao and Kazakh Prime Minister Kasymzhomart Tokayev pointed that they were ‘ready to oppose jointly the forces of international terrorism and extremism so as to protect security and stability in this region’ (quoted in Reuters, 2000b).

Exchanges at the SCO level culminated with the construction of a discursive label that blended all perceived threats in the region: the ‘three forces’. In March 2001, regional government chairman Abulhat Abdurixit had vowed to ‘crack down on three forces: splittists, religious extremists and terrorist groups’ in Xinjiang (quoted in BBCMSAP, 2001b). Months later, and only weeks before September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks in New York, the newly branded SCO signed a convention to ‘combat terrorism, separatism and extremism’, a threat later conceptualized as the ‘evil’ triad (SCO, 2001).

Beyond exporting the threat in Xinjiang to the Central Asian stage, Chinese officials also related violence in the region to other conflicts around the world. In 1998, commenting on violent attacks in Northern Ireland and Africa, regional vice chairman Zhang Zhou affirmed that Xinjiang was ‘no more dangerous than any other part of the world’ (quoted in Y. Chan, 1998). Chinese officials also compared the Xinjiang front with conflicts in Russia or Kosovo (Kwang, 2000). ‘They say that what happened in Kosovo today will happen in Xinjiang tomorrow’, Wang Lequan emphasized (quoted in Kwan, 1999). The Chinese official discourse thus represented the world stage as a realm where ‘the perils of separatism and ethnic conflict’ had plunged peoples ‘into the abyss of misery and death’ (BBCMSAP, 1997q). Xinjiang was no exception to these threats. In Wang’s opinion, ‘neither criminal cases nor terrorist incidents’, and these included those in Xinjiang, could be ‘eliminated in any country, including developed ones’ (BBCMSAP, 1997k).

The idea of a global threat with ramifications in Xinjiang also served to legitimize the Chinese policies in the region. Chinese officials insisted in representing the crackdown in Xinjiang as a logical reaction that could be found elsewhere. ‘Like any country in the world’, a regional official said, China was ‘opposed to terrorism’, which meant that separatist activities would be ‘punished with the full might of the law’ (quoted in AFP, 1996j). Commenting on the attacks on pro-government imams, regional vice-chairman Yusufu Aisha reminded that this ‘brutal behaviour would be condemned and cracked down upon in any country’ (quoted in BBCMSAP, 1997x). In his speech following the Ghulja riots, Amudun Niyaz defended the handling of the event by the Chinese security forces on the basis that ‘no country in the world would permit it’ (BBCMSAP, 1997ab).

From this perspective, violent events in Xinjiang were depicted in the state media as incidents that sowed terror worldwide. The *Xinjiang Daily* stressed that the Ürümchi bombings and the

Ghulja riots had ‘caused a fairly great impact both at home and abroad’ (BBCMSAP, 1998f). In this line, Xinhua described the Ghulja incident as ‘terrorist actions that shocked China and the world’ (AFP, 2000b). Confirming the incorporation of the language of terrorism into the Chinese state discourse during the 1990s, the Ghulja riots thus went from being represented as a local isolated riot, to becoming the proof that China was just another victim of a global phenomenon.

### **3.3 The politics of ‘striking hard’**

The Chinese state discourse on Xinjiang during the 1990s was instrumental to the policies that the government implemented in the region. The framing of the frictions in Xinjiang as caused by a separatist, terrorist or religious extremist threat inspired or directed from abroad and aimed at destabilizing the country, enabled the adoption of an ever-intensifying crackdown as the logical response to the threat. This section explores these policies, which I describe as the politics of ‘striking hard’, following the slogan of the crackdown campaigns that swept Xinjiang during this period. First, I pay attention to the establishment of a legal-executive security apparatus to fighting separatism in Xinjiang. A key development I investigate here is the issuing in 1996 of the directive *Document No. 7.*, which effectively set a new security agenda for Xinjiang. Second, I look at the domestic crackdown, with a special focus on the persecution of religion, the government’s propaganda efforts, and the militarization of the region. Next, I examine the landmark security device of the time, the ‘strike hard’ crackdown campaigns, and their effects on the ethnic minorities. Finally, I turn my attention to the international dimension of the crackdown, tracing Beijing’s diplomatic strategy aimed at stifling Uyghur political dissent in Central Asia and reducing its influence in other countries such as Turkey, a strategy that reached its zenith with the establishment of the SCO in 2001.

#### *A legal-executive security apparatus to fight separatism*

Throughout the 1990s, the Chinese government equipped itself with the legal and executive tools required to crack down on the threats it had articulated in its discourse. This process involved the creation and updating of laws that further constructed and reacted to these threats and the issuing of executive directives that set the agenda to neutralize Uyghur dissidents in Xinjiang and abroad.

At the beginning of the decade, Chinese authorities issued a series of directives aimed at tightening their grip on religion. An early example was ‘Vigilance Against Infiltration by Religious Forces From Abroad’, published in 1990 (HRW, 1992, p. 67) and described by human rights activists as a ‘green light for severe repression, if not persecution, of unofficial religious groups’ (Duckworth, 1991). In February 1991, the CPC Central Committee issued the ‘Circular on Further Tackling Certain Problems of Religious Work’, known as *Document No. 6*, which urged public security agencies to ‘resolutely attack those counterrevolutionaries and other criminal elements who make use of religion to carry out destructive activities’ (Pomfret, 1991). *Document No. 6* called for controlling the activities of ‘monasteries, Taoist temples, and churches’, and ‘bible colleges, convents, and theological seminaries’ (CPC, 1991, p. 57). It also prohibited the interference of foreign religious organizations and individuals in domestic religious affairs (CPC, 1991, p. 59) and called for the strict control of religious publications, audio and videotapes, and other propaganda materials from abroad (CPC, 1991, p. 60).

*Document No. 6* was followed by a nationwide crackdown on religion. By November 1991, signs of religious persecution were reported across China (AP, 1991b). The crackdown focused on underground Christian churches in the provinces of Zhejiang, Anhui, Jiangsu and Henan, or the cities of Shanghai, Guangzhou and Shenzhen (SCMP, 1991b). As the circular emphasized, temples, churches, seminaries and religious institutes were the ground of competition between religion and the Chinese government for the hearts and minds of young people (CPC, 1991, p. 57; Pomfret, 1991).

Another key legal development for Xinjiang was the adoption, in February 1993, of the State Security Law, the first of its kind in China. The law was aimed at opposing ‘espionage bodies and various hostile forces outside China’s territory’ (BBCMSAP, 1994c) and called for the prosecution of ‘any act endangering the state security’ (PRC, 1993). This category included activities such as ‘plotting to subvert the government, dismember the State or overthrow the socialist system’, ‘joining an espionage organization or accepting a mission assigned by an espionage organization or by its agent’, or ‘stealing, secretly gathering, buying, or unlawfully providing State secrets’ (PRC, 1993). A year after its promulgation, and commenting on its implementation in the region, the *Xinjiang Daily* praised the law as a ‘legal weapon’ to ‘safeguard state security’ (BBCMSAP, 1995f). In this safeguarding, the vagueness of the law’s

provisions proved crucial for the unrestrained crackdown on dissidents. As an illustration, Uyghur activist Rebiya Kadeer was charged with ‘the crime of illegally providing national intelligence people abroad’ for mailing copies of local newspapers abroad (AP, 2000a; BBCMSAP, 2000c).

To a certain extent, the efforts in the first half of the 1990s were aimed at countering the influence of political or religious dissidents nationwide. Particularly, *Document No. 6* targeted Western influences on Catholic and Protestant Christian churches in China. During the second half of the decade, however, new legal developments targeting religion shifted their focus towards Islam in Xinjiang.

In this sense, the ‘Chinese Communist Party Central Committee Document No. 7’ directive is fundamental to understand the evolution of Xinjiang in the second half of the 1990s, for it set the Chinese security agenda in the region for the years to come. Distributed in March 1996 among the CPC regional ranks, it reproduced the core arguments underpinning the Chinese state discourse throughout the 1990s. *Document No. 7* placed ‘national separatism and illegal religious activity’ as ‘the main threats to the stability’ of the region, painting a grim picture with ‘some real and potentially dangerous elements facing Xinjiang’ (CPC, 1996, pp. 10-18). Furthermore, it asked for increased ‘vigilance’ and suggested a series of policies that would inform the politics of ‘striking hard’. Considering that violence in Xinjiang actually intensified from 1996 and paraphrasing *Document No. 7*, which described a situation of security emergency requiring to ‘dam the river before the floods come’ (CPC, 1996, p. 10), it could be argued that the actual *floods* of violence only unleashed *after* the Chinese authorities built the *dam* in the first place with this directive.

*Document No. 7* outlined four lines of action that guided the Chinese state security practices in Xinjiang (and abroad) for the time to come. First, and foremost, the directive called for a restriction of ‘all illegal religious activities’ in Xinjiang (CPC, 1996, p. 11). It ordered the ‘severe’ control of mosques, the closure of ‘underground religious schools’ and Quran studies meetings, higher control of Muslim students and clerics, and the exclusive management of religion by ‘patriotic religious leaders’ (ibid). To enforce these measures, *Document No. 7* recommended establishing a covert ‘sensitive information network’ in south Xinjiang to monitor suspected individuals (CPC, 1996, p. 12).

Second, the directive called for an intervention on the cultural and educational fronts. It discouraged the incorporation of foreign teachers and prohibited cultural exchanges of local students with foreign schools (CPC, 1996, p. 12). It also ordered the removal of contents inspiring ‘ethnic separatism’ or publicizing ‘religious ideas’ from textbooks and the confiscation of all published and audio-visual works involving a ‘twist’ in history (ibid), that is, challenging the CPC’s official historiography.

Next, *Document No. 7* emphasized the potential of the PLA to form a ‘stronghold against ethnic separatism’, and tasked the XPCC with the defence and development of Xinjiang (CPC, 1996, p. 13), conferring a status to the paramilitary organization similar to that of the regional government (see Seymour & Anderson, 1998; Seymour, 2000). The XPCC would become the main destination of Han migrants in the region, answering the call of *Document No. 7* to relocate Han cadres in Xinjiang and ‘import talented people’ (CPC, 1996, p. 11), mostly Han settlers, into the region.

Finally, the circular asked for a diplomatic campaign aimed at putting pressure on countries such as Turkey, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan to ‘limit and weaken the activities of separatist forces inside their borders’ (CPC, 1996, p. 13). To accomplish this task, the document pointed out that China was to impose its ‘political superiority’ over these nations. Alongside diplomatic and economic means, the directive ordered the espionage of the Uyghur diaspora communities and the division of the ‘outside separatist forces’ (ibid).

*Document No. 7* was not the last instrument at the service of the crackdown. With the ‘strike hard’ campaigns in full development, and in order to facilitate the actions of the security forces, the CPC issued an order to ‘kill on the spot with the authority of the law’ all criminals in a series of categories that included ‘ringleaders and backbone elements of gangs creating violence and terrorist activities’ (BBCMSAP, 1996s). Meanwhile, in March 1997, the government amended the 1979 Criminal Law of the People’s Republic of China (PRC). It reconceptualized as ‘crimes of endangering national security’ those offences previously known as ‘counterrevolutionary’ crimes and included provisions against ‘terrorist activities’ (PRC, 1997). The amended law also included provisions against ‘acts to split the country or undermine national unification’ (ibid, article 103), ‘armed riots’ (ibid, article 104), or crimes of ‘murder, explosion, or kidnapping’ carried out by members of a ‘terrorist organization’ (ibid, article 120), as well as against ‘those provoking ethnic hatred or discrimination’ (ibid,

article 249). These orders and categories would be frequently invoked to legitimize crackdown operations in Xinjiang.

#### *Implementing Document No. 7*

Most of the policies adopted by the Chinese government in Xinjiang during the 1990s involved the implementation, in the name of fighting separatism and illegal religious activities, of the legislation and directives examined above, notably *Document No. 7*. The resultant practices can be grouped into four broad lines of action. First, the restriction and control of those religious activities deemed illegal by the Chinese authorities. Second, a propaganda campaign complemented with a stronger control of cultural and religious publications. Third, surveillance measures aimed at monitoring and infiltrating the Uyghur community. And finally, the deployment of more Chinese security forces in Xinjiang.

Starting with the repression of religion, the words of Chinese President Jiang Zemin in 1999 encapsulate the Chinese state approach to religion in the 1990s. On the surface, they projected an image of China as a haven for religion in an otherwise secular country. As Jiang put it, China guaranteed the ‘freedom to be or not to be a religious follower’ or to ‘believe in one or another religion’, the state protection of ‘normal religious activities’, and the view that ‘religion must be separated from government’ (quoted in BBCMSAP, 1999h). However, at the same time, Jiang also emphasized that China should administer religion ‘on its own’, avoiding ‘intervention by any international religious force’, and forbidding religious ‘intervention’ in ‘state administrative and judicial functions’ (ibid). On these grounds, the practice of Islam became securitized in Xinjiang, subjected to how Chinese officials interpreted which individuals, groups, practices or places were harmless and which were ‘illegal’.

The crackdown on religion had, as a preliminary task, to neutralize the venues where, according to the Chinese government, Uyghur separatists were organizing and encouraging ‘illegal religious activities’. To this effect, the authorities banned religious preaching outside venues authorized by the government (Macartney, 1996b). A campaign followed to shut down illegal mosques, eradicate underground religious classes, and send those administering classes to re-education (ibid). From 1996, religious ‘rectification’ campaigns swept the region, and hundreds of mosques and study groups were closed down (BBCMSAP, 1996x, 1997u, 1996q, 1997ac, 1999f).

The Chinese authorities also intensified the control of the religious clergy and the practice of Islam. From 1995 and throughout the second half of the decade, the regional government compiled lists of authorized clerics and places of worship, and required imams, mullahs, and other religious figures to undergo an examination to obtain a certification to operate legally (AFP, 1995b; BBCMSAP 1997u). Those who criticized the CPC were rebuked (Grabot, 1996). Other measures were intended to govern the customs of Muslims in areas such as prayer or dress codes or to exclude religion from public life. In 1998, during the celebration of the holy festival of Kurban Ayt (also known as Eid al-Adha or Feast of the Sacrifice), the regional authorities restricted traditional prayers on the streets and the use of loudspeakers in mosques to ‘preserve stability’ (BBCMSAP, 1998g). Another rectification campaign, launched in 1997, tried to eradicate the use of veils amongst women in rural areas, encouraging them to ‘voluntarily’ abandon the clothing and live a ‘productive labour and social life’ (BBCMSAP, 1997t). In 1999, the Ürümchi City Public Security Bureau launched a crackdown campaign to ensure stability and public order with the occasion of Ramadan (BBCMSAP, 1999a). The enforcement of these amongst other measures, aimed at shaping religious and cultural customs deeply rooted in Uyghur communities, heightened the tensions and triggered outbreaks of violence, such as the killing of a family planning official in Aqsu in 1998 (BBCMSAP, 1998j; AFP, 2001b).

The monitoring of religion was particularly intense on members of the CPC. Party cadres were banned from subscribing to religion or participating in religious activities (BBCMSAP, 1997d). Despite this prohibition, the participation of Uyghur party cadres in religious activities and their belief and practice of Islam were not rare. In 1997, the Turpan Prefectural CPC Committee reported that, since 1990, 25% of the party members in the prefecture had taken part in religious activities, with participation reaching 40% in some villages (BBCMSAP, 1997a). Facing this situation, the Chinese authorities went on to prosecute those officials they saw as ‘corrupted by religion ideologically’ or holding ‘illegal’ religious thoughts (BBCMSAP 1996j, 1997a). In areas with a high religious incidence, such as Turpan, the government organized campaigns of ‘atheist’ education and ‘face-to-face persuasion sessions’ amongst party members (BBCMSAP, 1997s). At the same time, the CPC did not accept positions of political tepidity in the struggle against separatism and punished officials who made comments that the authorities perceived as ‘detrimental to the stability of

Xinjiang’ (AFP, 1996d), or ‘who lacked the strength to oppose illegal religious activities’ (BBCMSAP, 1996p).

In line with the directives of *Document No. 7*, the Chinese government also launched several campaigns aimed at ‘purifying’ the cultural market for books and audio-visual products (BBCMSAP, 2000d). Censorship policies had been in place for years before the directive was issued. The government had banned radio stations that ‘endangered social security and stability’ (BBCMSAP, 1995g) and confiscated foreign magazines and pamphlets including content related to ‘Eastern Turkestan’ (K. Chen, 1994a). From 1996, the pressure increased on Islamic books, journals, and audio-visual materials. The Xinjiang People’s Publication House became the only official channel allowed to publish books about Islam (AFP, 1996a). The authorities banned the printing or import of materials published abroad (BBCMSAP, 1996e, 1996f) and equated themes like ‘religious fanaticism’ or ‘feudal superstitions’ to pornography as proscribed contents (BBCMSAP, 1996f, 1996c). To control the narrative on Xinjiang, the government tightened the grip on the historiography of the region. Already in 1991, the government had forbidden the works of the Uyghur historian Turghun Almas because they offered an alternative geographical and historical vision of the Uyghur (Dillon, 2004, p. 51). For the Chinese authorities, Almas’ books ‘brazenly advocated independence, agitated for splitting the country, harmed ethnic unity and damaged the unity of the motherland’ (Reuters, 1991b). In 1996, the Central Propaganda Department and the State Press and Publication Administration issued a warning against publications that re-evaluated historical figures and events (BBCMSAP, 1996v). The censorship reached authors whose publications criticized the CPC. Activist Abduwayiti Aihemaiti was accused in May 1996 of ‘writing and editing reactionary articles’ that, according to the Chinese authorities, sought to ‘divide the motherland and overthrow democratic dictatorship of the people’ (see AFP, 1996c; Kang Lim, 1996). To enforce these regulations, and as it happened with the scrutiny of religious practices and customs, the government organized house inspections, particularly in the south of the region. Being found in possession of ‘illegal’ publications or tapes resulted in prison sentences (BBCMSAP, 2000g).

The tightening grip on religion reached schools and universities. The Chinese government issued specific calls to ‘firmly occupy schools’ and prevent them from engaging in religious activities (BBCMSAP, 1996f). Materials seen as promoting ‘national division’ or publicizing ‘religious doctrines’ were removed from textbooks (BBCMSAP, 1996c, 1996f). In parallel,

regional vice-chairman Wang Huaiyu launched a campaign of ‘rectification’ in 1996 aiming at stopping the ‘infiltration of religions’ in university campuses of Xinjiang (quoted in Earnshaw, 1996b).

The campaign against religion was paralleled by a propaganda effort to ‘occupy the ideological and cultural position’ in Xinjiang (BBCMSAP, 1996f). As Wang Lequan put it, the media was a ‘battlefield’ where China waged ‘struggles against infiltration and secession’ (BBCMSAP, 2000i). The government fought this battle against cultural hegemony through a plethora of measures. It opened new radio and television networks, published official ‘ethnic books’, promoted party papers and journals, and organized actions to ‘enhance ideological and political work among young students’ (BBCMSAP, 1996f, 1998f). As an illustration, and with the occasion of Ghulja riots, local authorities in the Yili prefecture distributed materials explaining ‘the truth about the *5th February* incident’ (BBCMSAP, 1997u).

To further control the narrative on Xinjiang, the Chinese authorities made the region inaccessible to foreign media and organizations, acting against reporters in several instances. In 1991, the Chinese Foreign Ministry accused Gisela Mahlmann, a correspondent for a German television channel, of instigating separatism and unrest amongst minorities in Xinjiang through her reporting (AFP, 1991a). In 1997, the authorities expelled three BBC journalists from Xinjiang for ‘illegal coverage’, (AFP, 1997k). A Japanese correspondent and a German reporter were expelled in 1998, accused of obtaining secret documents (Xia, 2012). These actions were followed by the arrest of two British journalists in the late 1980s for travelling to Kashgar (Wilhelm, 1988). In a similar vein, the government issued a series of regulations aimed at monitoring the work of non-governmental organizations, considered to be ‘exploited’ by the ‘hostile forces’ to carry out sabotage activities (BBCMSAP, 1999g).

The 1990s also witnessed some precursors of the ‘surveillance state’ that the Chinese state has entrenched in Xinjiang during the 2010s (see Chapter Four). These include the recruitment of Uyghurs to praise the ‘wonders’ of the CPC policies amongst their fellow peoples (Bovingdon, 2004, p. 22) or the organization of meetings to lecture the population against separatism, during which residents would hand over the names of relatives implicated in criminal acts (AFP, 1997p). In 1997, Uyghur sources abroad claimed that the Chinese police had deployed informants during anti-separatist exhibits to report the reactions of the

audience and uncover and arrest potential dissidents (BBCMSAP, 1997y). According to the Chinese state media, only in 1998, there were more than 1,000 tip-offs to the authorities (BBCMSAP, 1998d). An answer to the call made by *Document No. 7* to scrutinize the movements of Uyghurs, these measures led to the worsening of their status across China. Already subject to negative stereotypes in the eyes of the Han population, the suspicions and mistrust of the Uyghur community increased nationwide after the government encouraged the profiling of individuals based on their ethnicity. (Ngai, 1997; BBCMSAP, 1998e, 1999j).

Finally, and following the leading role given in *Document No. 7* to the army and security forces as a safeguard for stability, Xinjiang underwent a deepened process of militarization during the 1990s. The government deployed extra troops and paramilitary forces in the region after critical moments such as the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 (SCMP, 1991c) or the Ghulja riots (Kang Lim, 1997b; AP, 1998; BBCMSAP, 1997n). The state media also reported, and encouraged, an increase of ‘militia reservists’ to maintain ‘social stability’ and ‘strengthening border defence’ (BBCMSAP, 1994b, 1994e). Military and armed police troops often carried out intensive training exercises and were inspected for their ‘combat readiness’ (BBCMSAP, 1993a, 1996l, 1998k). In 1996, the PAP called for more controls in border crossings to ‘abolish the terrorist activities at the very beginning’ (AFP, 1996e). The massive display of military might have had an enormous impact on ethnic minorities, with the region now transformed in the scenario of a ‘peoples’ war’. In August 2001, the PLA organized a large military exercise in a mountainous plateau not far from Kashgar (MacLeod, 2001). Thousands of soldiers took part and fighter jets, as well as helicopter gunships, flew the area during days, in a demonstration of the state’s military power in Xinjiang that was interpreted at the time as a ‘warning to Muslim separatists’ (ibid).

#### *The ‘Strike Hard’ campaigns: a terroristization device*

Underpinned by a discourse that called for ‘harsh retaliation’ (AFP, 1996l), ‘merciless’ action (BBCMSAP, 2000h), or ‘annihilating blows’ (Page, 2001), it should come as no surprise that the main security device of the Chinese state in Xinjiang these years was a series of anti-criminal campaigns described as ‘strike hard’ (*yanda*) (Trevaskes, 2008, p. 397). These operations had been launched nationwide from 1983 with a focus on many criminal categories, from rapists to drug dealers (see China Daily, 2010). In Xinjiang, Chinese authorities used them to target dissidents (Bovingdon, 2004, p. 22; HRW, 2005; Earnshaw, 1996a), making ‘strike hard’ the beacon of the securitization of the region.

'Strike hard' campaigns followed a principle of criminal justice that prioritized the 'serious and swift punishment' of criminal offenders (BBCMSAP, 1996t; Trevaskes, 2008, p. 397). Their logic has been described as one of 'quick approval, quick arrest, quick trial and quick results' (Reuters, 2001a). As Bovingdon (2004, p. 22) puts it, the 'strike hard' campaigns became 'massive dragnets' of suspected criminals. The pressure to yield results forced the police and judicial bodies to perform in a fast, steady, and brutal way where the potential for miscarriages of justice increased (Fackler, 2001b; Reuters, 2001a). This was exacerbated with the earlier mentioned CPC's order to 'kill on the spot' (BBCMSAP, 1996s), a sort of *license to kill* separatists in Xinjiang. These elements, alongside the widespread use of the death penalty in China (Trevaskes, 2008, p. 397), led Amnesty International (AI) to depict the 'strike hard' operations as 'an execution frenzy' and 'a huge waste of human life' (Reuters, 2001a).

While anti-criminal campaigns had targeted separatists in the past (BBCMSAP, 1994f), the focus on political and ideological dissidents intensified following the issuing of *Document No. 7* and the signing of the Shanghai Five initial agreement (Rudelson & Jankowiak, 2004, p. 317; Clarke, 2011, p. 129). Following these developments, a large campaign against 'splittism and illegal religious activities' kicked off on April 1996 in Xinjiang (BBCMSAP, 1996s). The operation was hailed for 'scoring significant victories in cracking down on violent crimes, terrorism and national separatism' (BBCMSAP, 1996m). Another major campaign was launched in 2001, with the aim 'to suppress and deter Xinjiang independence elements' (BBCMSAP, 2001a). These significant campaigns were complemented with shorter ones that targeted specific crimes or were circumscribed to specific areas (Kwan, 1997; BBCMSAP, 1997l, 1997p, 1999e, 1997b, 1999f).

Despite the difficulty in obtaining accurate figures on the number of arrests, imprisonments and executions, the official accounts provided by Chinese state media, while incomplete, illustrate the massive outreach of the security crackdown these years. Nationwide, during the first phase of the 'strike hard' campaign starting in 1996 -from April 15<sup>th</sup> to July 15<sup>th</sup>-, the Chinese police arrested more than 297,150 'serious criminal suspects', of which approximately a 40% were sentenced, with 692 'resisting serious felons' shot dead only a month into the campaign (Svartzman, 1996). State figures confirmed that 3,212 people had been sentenced to death by the beginning of May (BBCMSAP, 1996s). According to AI, more than 4,400 criminals were executed during the whole campaign (Fackler, 2001b). In

Xinjiang, the campaign resulted in the arrest of 2,773 criminals between April and June (Earnshaw, 1996b). Only during the last week of April, the security forces arrested 1,700 ‘criminals and criminal suspects’ in the region (BBCMSAP, 1996h). A further 2,000 people were arrested during the three months following the phase launched in 1997 (AP, 1997a). Between April and July 2001, right before the 9/11 attacks gave new impetus to the terroristization of Xinjiang, the Chinese authorities reportedly executed 1,781 criminals in a fresh national ‘strike hard’ operation (Reuters, 2001a).

#### *Exporting the proto-terroristization of Xinjiang*

Alongside the crackdown at the domestic level, *Document No. 7* encompassed a call by the Chinese government to monitor Uyghur communities outside China and suppress their dissident activities (CPC, 1996, p. 13). The move was aimed at countries like Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, or Turkey. At the beginning of the 1990s, the Uyghurs living there enjoyed considerable levels of freedom of cultural and political association, a context that dramatically changed throughout the decade.

During the first half of the 1990s, Almaty, Bishkek and Istanbul were safe havens for the Uyghur diaspora. These capitals hosted Uyghur associations with a hectic political activity such as the Kyrgyzstan Uyghur Unity (Ittipak) Association, the Kazakh Inter-Republic Uyghur Association, or the Eastern Turkistan Refugee Committee in Turkey (Shichor, 2009; Kynge, 1994). They published printed bulletins and audio-visual materials, often with a nationalist tone (Kynge, 1994; ETUE, 1991; Shichor, 2009, p. 18; BBCMSAP, 1997v), and organized protests worldwide, from the Central Asian capitals or Istanbul to the UN headquarters in New York (Hunt, 1992), for issues ranging from the nuclear tests in the Lop Nor area of Xinjiang (AFP, 1994c) to the violation of human rights in the region (AFP, 1998b, 1998d). Uyghur activists abroad also sought to promote their causes amongst heads of state, international organizations, and the broader international community (Reuters, 1993c; BBCMCA, 1999; IPS, 1992; BBCMSAP, 1997aa). Also at this stage, Uyghur diaspora activism started to transcend the domestic level with international meetings, such as those held in Turkey (Central News Agency, 1998; IRBC, 1999) or Munich (BBCMSFU, 1999), precursors of the World Uyghur Congress (WUC), that would consolidate the Uyghur dissident movement from 2004.

The states hosting the Uyghur communities and political activism maintained, at the very least, an ambiguous position vis-à-vis Uyghur dissidents, when not subtly supporting them. Several cases illustrate this relaxed environment. While Uyghur separatism was not welcome by the Kazakh government, officials admitted in public that, unlike China, Kazakhstan was a democratic state where exile groups could not be silenced (Kynge, 1994). At the same time, Uyghur activists had a program in Uyghur language on the Kazakh state television, during which they reported on the repression in Xinjiang (ibid). In Kyrgyzstan, Nurmammed Kenjiev, president of Ittipak, Uyghur organization that espoused independence, was a member of the parliament (ETUE, 1993). Meanwhile, Turkey -a country with strong ethnic, historical, and cultural ties to the Uyghur- tolerated Uyghur activism and was the first choice for Uyghur exiles in search of political asylum. The Turkish leaders' relationship with Isa Yusuf Alptekin, leading Uyghur political figure in exile, epitomized the tolerance and even support for the Uyghur cause in Turkey. President Turgut Özal or Prime Minister Süleyman Demirel met with Alptekin and, in 1995, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, then mayor of Istanbul, named a section of the Sultan Ahmed Mosque Park after Alptekin, where the local authorities erected a memorial dedicated to the 'martyrs' of the fight for the independence of East Turkestan (see Shichor, 2009, pp. 2, 25-6).

Following *Document 7.*, the Chinese government started to use its 'political superiority' (CPC, 1996, p. 13) to intercept the fragmented albeit incipiently transnational Uyghur dissident movement in exile. This initially translated into using China's economic and trade promise to obtain support for Beijing's security agenda. This give-and-take had already characterized economic exchanges with former Soviet republics early in the decade (L. H. Sun, 1991; Reuters, 1993b). A further step in this direction was Chinese Prime Minister Li Peng's Central Asian tour in 1994. During 12 days, he visited Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Mongolia, in what was the first occasion in which Chinese business representatives accompanied a political leader in a formal state visit (Artykova, 1994; Burles, 1999, p. 16). During this maiden trip, Li offered economic assistance and access to the Chinese market in exchange for support against Uyghur separatism (Artykova, 1994). Presidents Askar Akayev (Kyrgyzstan), Islam Karimov (Uzbekistan), Saparmurad Niyazov (Turkmenistan), and Nursultan Nazarbayev (Kazakhstan) all issued statements reassuring China on their opposition to Uyghur separatism (ibid). Illustrating the logic of the exchange, Karimov later urged Turkic-speaking states against showing support to Uyghur claims for self-determination and invited them to focus on improving the economic relations with

China (BBCMSFU, 1998b). This tacit pact of economic benefits in exchange for political support would characterize later bilateral arrangements. Extradition treaties were signed alongside financial agreements, and gradual moves towards a common security agenda accompanied China's efforts to secure energy resources in Central Asia (AFP, 1996h; Reuters, 2000b).

Yet the landmark (in)security move against Uyghur political dissent in Central Asia was the Shanghai Five forum, held on April 1996, only weeks after the issuance of *Document No. 7. Meeting in the Chinese metropolis*, the leaders of China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan signed the 'Agreement on Confidence-Building in the Military Field Along the Border Areas' (UN General Assembly, 1996). A year later, the same parties signed a second treaty focusing on troop reductions and the former Soviet-Chinese border (People's Daily, 2000). This second agreement also stated the 'determination to fight jointly against national separatism, international terrorism, religious extremism' (People's Daily, 2000). In this way, China effectively demanded its Central Asian partners a compromise against Uyghur separatism, not only as a requirement for obtaining Chinese economic support but also as the basis for cooperation on security issues. Further summits deepened this scheme, underscoring the importance of 'effectively combating international terrorism' and pushing against using human rights as 'a pretext for interference in the internal affairs of states' (UN General Assembly, 1999). In 2001, the Shanghai Five became the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and incorporated Uzbekistan as a new member. In its opening statement, titled 'Shanghai Convention on Combating Terrorism, Separatism and Extremism' (HRIC, 2011), the SCO placed the crackdown on the Uyghur dissidence at the forefront of its agenda.

The internationalization of the crackdown had immediate effects on the social, cultural, and political lives of the Uyghur diaspora. In Central Asia, Uyghur organizations with a nationalist or separatist agenda were banned in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, forced to either abandon their political aspirations or go underground (Thoenes, 1996; Busvine, 1996; BBCMSFU, 1995). Some Central Asian nations banned any protest against China (Forney, 1997; Reuters, 1997i; BBCMSFU, 1997). At the same time, the first cases of deportations of Uyghurs took place following the signing of the extradition agreements within the SCO framework and on a bilateral level (Hutzler, 2000; AFP, 1996h). In 1997, three Uyghur exiles wanted by Beijing were arrested in Kazakhstan and deported back to China (Reuters, 1997g). In 1999, AI reported that four Uyghur adults, two of them religious teachers, and four children, were

sent back to China after fleeing to Kazakhstan (AP, 1999). Some countries tightened their control of religion at home. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan put the focus on fundamentalist religious groups, which they accused of interfering in their internal affairs by promoting Uyghur separatism (AFP, 1998c; BBCMSFU, 1998a). In Bishkek, the Kyrgyz police arrested three prominent Uyghur political dissidents for their alleged ties to Islamic extremism (BBCMSAP, 1998h). Under a similar pretext, the Uzbek authorities arrested the Uyghur writer Emin Usman, who died in police custody in 2001 (Peuch, 2001).

Beyond the Central Asian scope, the CPC's international strategy reached other regions in the 1990s, notably Turkey and the South Asia region. During the second half of the decade, Chinese leaders compelled the Turkish government to control Uyghur activism (AFP, 2000a, 2000d). Following the pressures, Turkish Deputy Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit conceded in 1998, after meeting the Chinese President Jiang Zemin, that Turkey would have to account for China's interests and adopt a stronger stance against Uyghur dissidents (TDN, 1998). Following this, the Turkish government urged ministers and officials not to participate in activities held by Uyghur organizations in Turkey (BBCMSAP, 1999b). The authorities also downgraded the status of future Uyghur immigrants coming from Xinjiang, from granting them citizenship to only providing a residence permit (BBCMSAP, 1998i). In 2000, following Jiang Zemin's visit, both countries announced a cooperation agreement against international terrorism and a commitment to ban separatist or religious extremist activities in their respective territories (BBCMSAP, 2000e). The Chinese state media interpreted this communiqué as a major blow to the 'Xinjiang splittist forces in Turkey' (BBCMSAP, 2000f). During the 1990s, China also signed a series of security bilateral agreements with other Central Asian countries outside the SCO, such as Tajikistan and Turkmenistan (Rashid, 1993; Gittings, 1998). More discreetly, and pondering the positive bilateral ties, Beijing also pressured Pakistan to prevent interference in Xinjiang by Pakistani religious organizations and preachers (Reuters, 1997e; PTI, 2000). Following this, Pakistan deported 12 young Uyghurs who had crossed the border illegally fleeing repression in China (AFP, 1997l) and expelled dozens of Muslim students and pilgrims from Xinjiang for their alleged links to terrorism (BBCMSAP, 2000j, 2000l). Finally, in their effort to control the activities and influence of Uyghur dissidents beyond Chinese borders, Chinese diplomats travelled to Afghanistan to be reassured by the Taliban regime that Uyghur Islamist groups would not be supported there (Rashid, 1999; AFP, 2000f; Reuters, 2000a).

While certainly effective, the Chinese government's strategy to intercept Uyghur nationalism in Central Asia and other countries was not definitive. Uyghur organizations continued to operate abroad, and political demonstrations did not disappear altogether (Forney, 1997; IPRSID, 1999). Still, by the turn of the century, the context had radically changed for Uyghur communities in places such as Almaty, Bishkek, or Istanbul. Once safe havens for the Uyghur diaspora, they were now spots under the strategic clout of Beijing.

### 3.4 Conclusion

In the mid-1990s, Uyghur businesswoman Rebiya Kadeer featured in the international media as an example of the entrepreneurial spirit of a Muslim woman who had gone from poverty to become a millionaire (K. Chen, 1994b; Kang Lim, 1995). Her tenacity and philanthropic character, invested as she was in helping fellow Uyghurs to prosper, did not go unnoticed by the Chinese government. Kadeer was appointed to the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, China's national advisory group, and represented China in the United World Conference on Women in 1995 (BBC, 2009). From 1997, Kadeer's life changed, as she turned into an unwelcome figure for Beijing. Her husband, Sidik Rouzi, a former political prisoner, had earlier fled to the United States for his defence of the Uyghur human rights or the cause of self-determination. In 1999, Kadeer was arrested on her way to meet a visiting delegation from the United States Congressional Research Service to complain about political prisoners in Xinjiang (ibid). Ürümqi courts sentenced her to prison for posting copies of local newspapers to her husband (BBCMSAP, 2000c). In the new environment of the 1990s, such an action constituted a crime against China's national security.

The rise and fall of Rebiya Kadeer in the eyes of the Chinese government embodies the core findings of this chapter: the intensification of the securitization of Xinjiang during the decade of the 1990s and the appearance of the 'terror' jargon in the state discourse, albeit in a non-dominant way. At the domestic level, Beijing increased the pressure over Uyghurs in the region, notably after the issuing in 1996 of *Document No. 7*, after which Islam became either 'patriotic' or 'illegal'. Thousands of people were imprisoned or executed during periodic 'strike hard' anti-crime campaigns. At the international level, China externalized the Xinjiang conflict in the Central Asian regional arena. The threat of terrorism gained a salient status in

the discourse that China shared with its Central Asian partners and Russia in the Shanghai Five forum and the SCO. Building on this network, China expanded its reach over the Uyghur communities in the exile that, from Almaty to Istanbul, felt the tremors of the crackdown in Xinjiang. In this context, violence became ‘the only vehicle of showing frustration’ in Xinjiang (Castets 2003, p. 13). In this sense, Dautcher (2000, p. 277) emphasizes that, despite the economic disparities, unrest in Xinjiang during the 1990s resulted mainly from ‘three much less tangible social goods: freedom of association, of religious faith, and of cultural expression’ (Dautcher, 2000, p. 277; see also Dautcher 2004, p. 285-8). These social goods had all been targeted in the first place by *Document No. 7*, suggesting that violence only increased in the 1990s when it became clear that the Chinese state had replaced the moderate policies of gradualism for a full-blown crackdown.

With violence almost absent in the region at the end of the 1990s and the objective of ‘stability’ virtually achieved, an unexpected event encouraged the Chinese state to make another shift in its discourse, push the crackdown further, and eventually provoke a new wave of violence. This incident took place on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, and would spur the full-blown terroristization of Xinjiang.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### **The Terroristization of Xinjiang (2001-2018): Waging a People's War on Terror**

On 11 September 2001 (9/11), a series of terrorist attacks were carried out on American soil, shocking the United States and the international community. The tragic events represented a 'critical juncture' (see Pierson, 2004, p. 35) that put many countries on a firm path to fight international terrorism at home and abroad. The post-cold War interregnum, in which Francis Fukuyama (1992) saw the beginning of the end of history, came to a sudden end. At the same time, 9/11 spurred an escalation in the Chinese official use of the terrorism jargon to characterize violence in Xinjiang.

As this chapter will show, Chinese leaders seized the post-9/11 *momentum* to frame Xinjiang as China's front in the Global War on Terror (GWO'T) and the language of terrorism became dominant in Chinese state narratives about the region, with significant implications. The terroristization of violent phenomena in Xinjiang enabled a deepening of the crackdown already underway under the pretext of countering separatism. After years of increasing repression, this was answered with the resurfacing of violent dissidence in 2008, exacerbated with the Ürümchi riots in July 2009, which killed close to two hundred people, mostly Han Chinese. The terroristization of Xinjiang from 2001 onwards led to a cycle of repression and violence, and the Chinese government's declaration of a 'people's war' against terrorism.

In this chapter, I investigate the period of terroristization between 2001 and 2018 in three steps. The first section illustrates how Chinese authorities discursively built up the terrorist threat in Xinjiang in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks despite the absence of significant violent incidents in the region between 1999 and 2008. Section two maps the phenomenology of violence that erupted from 2008 onwards, mostly in Xinjiang. I pay specific attention to the material features of violent events and evaluate the extent to which they overlap with dominant understandings of terrorism. The third section explores how the Chinese authorities have systematically constructed Xinjiang-related violence as terrorism and how they have emphasized the link between Islam and violence to prescribe a crackdown on religion. The final section of the chapter focuses on the political implications of the terroristization of Xinjiang. Here, I investigate the establishment of a state counter-terrorism

apparatus and the increasingly harsh practices that are linked to its institutionalizations, in particular, the intensified and sustained repression of religion. I conclude the chapter with a discussion of the emergence of the latest development of China's war on terror: the 'surveillance state' of Xinjiang.

#### **4.1 Terroristization in the absence of violence**

On September 2<sup>th</sup> 2001, welcoming international businessmen to a trade fair in Ürümchi, the secretary of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR), Wang Lequan, told foreign reporters that the situation in Xinjiang was 'better than ever in history' (BBCMSAP, 2001c). Yes, there had been 'destructive activities' by 'national separatists' and 'religious extremists' in the past, he conceded, but the different nationalities were now working in peace, 'united as brothers' (ibid). A few weeks later, following the 9/11 attacks in the United States, Chinese Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan spoke at the 56<sup>th</sup> General Assembly of the UN, signalling a U-turn in how the government described the region. Specifically, he claimed that a dissident movement in Xinjiang, 'the Eastern Turkestan terrorist forces', were 'trained, equipped and financed by international terrorist organizations', posing a significant security threat to China (Bezlova, 2001). Despite the absence of violent outbursts in the region, separatist violence in Xinjiang was now elevated to a top national security threat, and China's leading diplomat embedded this shift within a globally emerging narrative of the 'international fight against terrorism' (ibid). The official discourse about the region continued to change its tone from a rather conciliatory approach to one of confrontation and terroristization in the aftermath of the 9/11 events in America, and below I trace in detail how the Chinese government seized the 9/11 momentum to capitalize on the attacks in its dealings with domestic Uyghur dissidents.

##### *The recasting of violence in Xinjiang as terrorism after 9/11*

In the weeks and months that followed the September 11 attacks in the US, the Chinese state discourse on terrorism picked up significant pace, replacing the restrictive use of the label primarily within the realm of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) statements at the turn of the century with becoming the dominant theme in the Chinese security narratives about Xinjiang. As the following suggests, in the aftermath of the attacks, Chinese leaders

and the state media swiftly moved to frame the region as a front in the GWoT and discursively linked the historical tensions in Xinjiang to the events on US soil.

The argument that violence in Xinjiang was part of a global menace is latent in Chinese officials' initial condemnations of the 9/11 attacks. In their statements, they voiced their opposition to 'all forms of terrorism', implying the existence of a common terrorism threat from New York to China with distinctive manifestations across different geographical settings. On September 14<sup>th</sup> 2001, Chinese President Jiang Zemin declared that the events were 'not only a disaster to the US people but also a challenge to the world' (MacAskill, Traynor, & Gittings). Jiang told his counterpart George W. Bush that China would stand with the US and the international community 'against *all manner* of terrorist violence' (ibid; my emphasis). In the following weeks, the Chinese leader reiterated the Chinese opposition to 'terrorism of *all forms*' (Kyodo, 2001; my emphasis), and described terrorism as 'a grave threat to international peace and security' and 'a rampant infringement of human rights' (AFP, 2001c). Tang Jiaxuan noted similarly that China condemned '*all forms* of terrorism' (my emphasis), presenting terrorism as a threat to 'international peace and security', and describing it as 'the common enemy of all mankind' (quoted in BBCMSAP, 2001f). Importantly, Chinese officials claimed that China was 'one of the earliest countries' that had 'fallen a victim to terrorism' (Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Zhang Qiyue, quoted in BBCMSAP, 2001g). What is more, the Chinese government constructed an image of China as a country on the verge of a terrorist invasion, closed the border with Pakistan based on the narrative that terrorists would otherwise 'come to China' (AP, 2001) this way, and began to train the security forces to intercept 'terrorists who were trying to sneak into China, set off bombs, attack a motorcade, use chemical weapons, hold hostages and hijack an aircraft' (Reuters, 2003).

Pushing for China's status as a rightful victim of the same type of violence that had rocked the US to its core in 2001, the Chinese authorities began to actively *terroristize* the historical frictions between the central Chinese powers and the ethnic minorities in Xinjiang. In this process, Chinese officials and state media reframed terrorism as a problem that could be traced as far back as the beginning of the twentieth century, long before the terror lexicon had entered the Chinese official discourse. To support this claim, media outlets began to publish pieces that reflected upon the long history of terrorism in Xinjiang. An article in *Ta Kung Pao*, a Chinese state-backed newspaper in Hong Kong, for example, traced the threat

of terrorism in Xinjiang to collaborators of ‘foreign colonialists’ before 1949 (BBCMSAP, 2001d). A state news agency described an Uyghur nationalist organization founded in 1944 as a group of ‘separatists terrorists’ (BBCMSAP, 2001i), and *China Daily* reported that the ‘East Turkestan forces’ had plotted violent incidents ‘since the 1930s’ (Xie & Wang, 2002). The rewriting of the history of Xinjiang through the lens of terrorism also included the re-evaluation of key historical Uyghur figures. A case in point is Seypidin Azizi, first chairman of the XUAR between 1955 and 1967. When Azizi died in 2003, the state news agency Xinhua focused their tribute on what they characterized as ‘great contribution to the fight against splittism, religious extremism and terrorism’ (Xinhua, 2003), despite the fact that the language of terrorism was virtually absent in Party narratives at the time of his spell as a CPC leader in the region.

A key step in the post-9/11 retrospective terroristization of violence in Xinjiang was the publication by the State Council Information Office (SCIO) of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) of the document ‘East Turkistan Terrorist Forces Cannot Get Away with Impunity’ (SCIO, 2002). Released on January 2002, the document reframed the phenomenology of violence in Xinjiang during the 1990s as a series of ‘terrorist incidents’ that ‘threatened the security and stability of related countries and regions’ (ibid). Notably, it recast the Baren incident, represented as a ‘counterrevolutionary rebellion’ in 1990, as an attack by ‘a group of terrorists’ who ‘created an atmosphere of terror’ (ibid). Similarly, the Ghulja incident, described in 1997 as a ‘serious case of beating, looting and destruction’, was recreated in the document as the work of ‘terrorists’ and ‘terrorist organizations’ (ibid). Furthermore, the report directly linked the ‘East Turkestan terrorist forces’ to the villain behind the 9/11 attacks, Osama Bin Laden, and his organization Al Qaeda, which were previously absent in the official Chinese discourse on Xinjiang. In October 2001, Tang Jiaxuan claimed that Muslim separatists within China had been ‘trained at the secret training camp established by Bin-Ladin [sic] in Afghanistan’ (BBCMSAP, 2001e), a link that he reiterated in front the UN General Assembly weeks later (AFP, 2001c). Xinjiang officials likewise underscored the connection between violence in the region and Al Qaeda. In March 2002, regional chairman Abulahat Abdurixit claimed that Uyghur ‘separatists’ had fought with the Taliban ‘in Afghanistan’ (EFE, 2002), while Wang Lequan argued that Al Qaeda had trained 1,000 Uyghur militants in Afghanistan and other regions (BBCMSAP, 2002c). From this point onwards, Chinese officials have continued to stress that ties exist between the ‘East Turkestan forces’ and other Uyghur ‘extremists’ in Xinjiang with groups

understood widely around the world as terrorist organizations, such as the Taliban or Al Qaeda first (S. Sun, 2005; AP, 2007a) and later the Islamic State (BBC, 2012c; Reuters, 2013b; Fox News, 2015).

Chinese officials lobbied internationally to recognize the fight against the ‘East Turkestan terrorist forces’ as part of the larger US-led GWoT. Foreign Ministry officials frequently put forward the idea that separatists in Xinjiang posed a global international threat beyond the Chinese context, often framing separatist activities in Xinjiang as a threat to the ‘security and stability of the whole region’ (Leicester, 2001; BBCMNF, 2002; AFP, 2002c). In the words of both Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Zhang Qiyue and Xinjiang party chief Wang Lequan, China’s fight against the ‘East Turkestan terrorist forces’ was an integral ‘part of the international anti-terrorism struggle’ (BBCMSAP, 2001g). Tang Jiakuan put it this way while addressing a meeting of the UN Security Council (UNSC): ‘the ‘East Turkestan’ is an out-and-out terrorist group and a part of international terrorism and must therefore be resolutely fought’ (BBCMSAP, 2001f). Although the construction of a terrorist threat in Xinjiang was internationally controversial, Chinese officials did not hesitate to claim that the ‘crack down on the East Turkestan terrorist forces’ now underway had an ‘important international legal basis’ following the UNSC listing of the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) – an obscure organization previously absent from the official Chinese discourse on Xinjiang – as a terrorist organization (BBCMSAP, 2001e). As Sun Weide, spokesman for the Beijing Olympics, put it in 2008 to justify the pre-Olympic anti-terrorism crackdown, the UN-listing of the ETIM as a terrorist organization made the terrorist threat in Xinjiang ‘a fact of life’ (AFP, 2008c).

The above suggests that China had jumped on the 9/11 bandwagon prior to the eruption of violence in Xinjiang more than half a decade after the terrorist attacks against the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. With the publication of the 2002 *White Paper on Defence* terrorism was officially – and for the first time in China’s history – placed at the top of threats to the country’s national security (see Scobell, 2005, p. 306; Channel News Asia, 2002). At the same time, it now featured as the biggest danger to the social stability of Xinjiang (BBCMSAP, 2003b) with Chinese officials, including President Hu Jintao, continuing to stress that the terrorism threat in Xinjiang was both ‘real’ (AFP, 2003c; Reuters, 2006; Xinhua, 2011c), and a top security threat for China (AFP, 2005b). By early 2007, China had elevated terrorism in Xinjiang to the category of ‘core’ domestic interest (PTI, 2007a), and

the authorities predicted that terrorism in Xinjiang would be a major threat at present and in the future (AFP, 2007a; People's Daily, 2010d), all in spite of the absence of violent outbursts in the region.

China's terrorism discourse was at a highpoint during the preparations for the Beijing 2008 Summer Olympics, which Chinese officials declared under the threat of terrorism (ANSA, 2005; SCMP, 2007; AP, 2007c) To be prepared, Chinese security forces trained to respond to apocalyptic threat scenarios such as the explosion of a radiological 'dirty bomb' nearby an Olympic venue or maritime attacks against the Olympic coastal venues (Reuters, 2007b, 2008a) The Ministry of Public Security warned about the hijacking of civil aviation planes (Reuters, 2007c), and airport police officials speculated with terrorists shooting down aircrafts flying over the Beijing airports (Reuters, 2008b). And indeed, after years of 'crying terrorism', violence finally rocked China on August 4<sup>th</sup> 2008, four days before the opening of the Olympics, but 3,000 kilometres away from the Olympic city, in Xinjiang's Kashgar. There were no aerial attacks, sea invasions, dirty bombs, or kidnappings of athletes as the official discourse suggested (BBC, 2008a; SCMP, 2008a), and the attackers were not international terrorists connected to Al Qaeda, but local residents, a taxi driver and a vegetable peddler.

## **4.2 The spectrum of violence in 21<sup>st</sup> century Xinjiang**

The relative calmness in Xinjiang that lasted almost a decade ended abruptly in summer 2008 with the attack in Kashgar. As we shall see, the period that followed was characterized by significant eruptions of violence in the region, reaching a peak of 34 incidents in 2014 alone. Given their large number this section will first provide a thematic overview of the range of violence during this phase, in a similar fashion to the previous Chapter Three, based on the material features of the events. I then turn my attention to laying out how well this phenomenology of violence aligns with a dominant understanding of terrorism.

### *Key episodes of violence in the terroristization phase*

The phenomenology of violent incidents during the second violent phase within the period of terroristization in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is characterized by a broad spectrum of violence. At the

same time, the availability of information about such events has significantly increased in comparison to the previous pre-terroristization and proto-terroristization phases discussed in Chapters Two and Three respectively. Below I, therefore, discuss violence in Xinjiang split into five thematic clusters, categorizing events according to their dominant features: attacks against the Chinese security forces, events escalating from non-violent conflict, attacks carried out in public spaces, assassinations, and state security operations.

a) Attacks against security forces

The key incident that ended the years of relative calmness in Xinjiang from the late 1990s onwards, and which also put violence in the region back onto the radar of the international community, was the violent attack against Chinese security forces in Kashgar. In August 2008, two members of the local Uyghur ethnic minority – a taxi driver and a vegetable peddler – unexpectedly drove a truck into a group of over seventy officers who had been jogging in the proximity of a police station. The action killed 16 policemen and injured another 16 members of the police force (Tarn & Choi, 2008; Xinhua, 2008e). Over the next few years, similar vehicle-ramming attacks against the security forces, such as police officers and paramilitary units, followed. For example in Aqsu city (capital of the Aqsu prefecture) in 2010, leaving 7 border patrol officers killed and 14 injured (Ifeng News, 2010; People's Daily, 2010c) and in Qaghiliq county in 2012, killing an undetermined number of people (RFA, 2012m).

On many other occasions, violence against the Chinese security agencies involved the use of bombs and homemade explosive devices against police stations (Macau Daily Times, 2008; Oriental Daily, 2013; Wan, 2013; Meng, 2014b; RFA, 2014j, 2014u) as well as Chinese police checkpoints and officers on patrol (BBC, 2008b; RFA, 2014l, 2014v, 2015g, 2015k; WUC, 2015a). In other cases, the assailants carried out the attack directly confronting the police with bladed or edged weapons (RFA, 2012n; Global Times, 2013; RFA, 2014a). Radicals also targeted Chinese security forces alongside other government and CPC buildings. In June 2013, for instance, Uyghurs used incendiary devices and knives in a combined assault on the Lükchün township, in Turpan's prefecture Pichan county (Buckley, 2013), targeting the township governmental building, a police station, a station of auxiliary police, and a construction site run by Han Chinese (Xuyang, 2013; Qiu & Yang, 2013). The incident left 27 people killed, amongst them nine police and security guards, and ten 'rioters' who were shot dead by the Chinese police (ibid).

b) Escalation of non-violent conflict

Once violence had restarted in Xinjiang in the summer of 2008, public expressions of dissidence and ethnic tensions quickly turned violent as well. In many of these cases, violence was a consequence of escalating non-violent conflicts. The most prominent case in this category is the Ürümqi ethnic riots, which took place on July 2009 and were widely reported around the world. On July 5, approximately a thousand Uyghurs attended a peaceful protest in the downtown of Xinjiang's capital city (China News, 2009). Demonstrators had gathered to protest against the Chinese government's handling of an incident days earlier in Shaoguan (Guangdong province) when at least two Uyghur migrant workers were killed by a mob of ethnic Han co-workers in a toy factory (Buckley, 2009). However, the protest in Ürümqi quickly turned violent, leaving at least 197 dead and hundreds of injured, most of them Han Chinese killed by Uyghur violent mobs (Xinhua, 2009f; Hu & Lei, 2009). Accounts differ significantly on how and why the non-violent demonstration escalated into one of the most deadly incidents in the region. According to the Chinese authorities, the violence was conceived and provoked by the main Uyghur political organization in the diaspora, the World Uyghur Congress (WUC) (Xinhua, 2009a; Wu, 2009). Alternative accounts blamed the violent repression of the protest by the Chinese security forces for the unrest (Marquand, 2009) while acknowledging that local Uyghur radicals played a role in instigating the violence (Sainsbury, 2010). In the aftermath, the Chinese authorities detained around 1,500 suspected rioters, at least 43 of whom, mostly teenagers, have been documented missing (Bristow, 2009).

Similar incidents shook the region after the Ürümqi riots. In Hotan in July 2011, more than a dozen Uyghur men broke into a police station and the adjacent government buildings, reportedly armed with knives and Molotov cocktails (Xinhua, 2011b; Shao, 2011). While the Chinese authorities described the attack as a premeditated act by a separatist group (ibid), alternative sources described the event overwhelmingly as a violent side effect of an escalating peaceful protest. According to this scenario, police officers violently dissolved a peaceful demonstration against a local clampdown on women wearing black veils and traditional outfits (WUC, 2011a; SCMP, 2011b). In the process, they arrested some of the protesters, which prompted a group of Uyghurs to storm the police station demanding the release of their family members (ibid). The incident resulted in nearly 20 people killed, including a policeman, a security guard, and 14 Uyghurs who were shot down by the Chinese

police (L. Liu, 2011). This event relates to wider government practices of enforcing a ban on the use of veils and headscarves by women (see Leibold & Grose, 2016), which has led to deadly clashes when Chinese officials forced Uyghur women to remove their coverings. A case in point is a violent incident reported in the town of Sēriqbuya (Maralbéshi county, Kashgar prefecture) in 2013 (Grammaticas, 2013; RFA, 2013g, 2012o; Cui, 2013a), which originated when a local community watch group was enforcing the banning of veils in the home of a religious family that had had long-standing issues with the local authorities. During the visit, the group ordered a woman to lift a veil covering her face, which she refused. When one of the community workers forcibly removed the veil, a clash ensued with Uyghur relatives attacking the community workers and the armed police gunning down the rioters (ibid).

Another deadly incident related to religious grievances happened on June 2013, when hundreds of Uyghurs took the streets of Hanerik township in Hotan prefecture to express their anger over the arrest of a young imam and the closure of a mosque. Violence broke out when the police blocked the demonstration, on its way to Hotan, and started to arrest the protesters, killing 15 and injuring 50 (Qiu, 2013; RFA, 2013j). Two months later, violent clashes erupted in Aqsu city's town of Ayköl after government officials prevented hundreds of Uyghur residents from attending prayers in the mosque on the eve of the Eid Muslim festivity (RFA, 2013m). The incident left three people dead and about a dozen injured when the police opened fire to disperse the crowd (ibid).

In July 2014, another unrest, this time in the Élishqu township of Kashgar's Yeken county, turned violent and led to dozens of deaths. Narratives about the course and materiality of events also differ. According to the Chinese official version, a gang armed with knives and axes attacked a police station and government offices, assaulting civilians and smashing vehicles as they passed (Xinhua, 2014h). Alternative sources described hundreds of Uyghurs, some carrying farm tools, marching on a road to protest for the killing of innocent villagers, including the shooting death of a family over a dispute about wearing traditional headscarves (Haas, 2015; RFA, 2014r). In this account, the march met a line of security personnel armed with assault rifles, who opened fire, killing dozens of protesters (ibid).

#### c) Attacks in public spaces

Beginning in 2011, several cases of indiscriminate violence carried out in public spaces against bystanders, for the most part, ethnic Han Chinese, were reported in Xinjiang or associated with Uyghur attackers when they occurred in other parts of China. These attacks were frequently carried out in public venues like transport hubs, shops or food markets (Qiu & Chang, 2014; RFA, 2014u, 2014w; Xinhua 2014j; People's Daily, 2011; Shao & Zhao, 2011). In one of the most publicized events of this type, in 2014, a suicide bomber immolated at Ürümqi's South Railway Station, leaving three dead and 79 wounded (Wan & Ng, 2014; SITE Intelligence Group, 2014). Uyghur militants were associated with violence against Han Chinese outside of China, including the Erawan Shrine bombings in Thailand's capital Bangkok in 2015, which killed 20 people and injured 125 (Reuters, 2016d). In other occasions, the attackers used knives and other bladed instruments against pedestrians (Global Times, 2012a; RFA, 2012c; Ng, 2017). The highest-profile attack of this type took place in 2014 when Uyghur assailants launched a stabbing rampage at Yunnan's capital Kunming railway station, leaving 35 dead, including four attackers, and 143 injured (Sina News, 2014; Xinhua, 2014k).

Alongside the use of explosives and knives, Uyghur perpetrators also launched vehicle-ramming attacks in public spaces. In October 2013, three members of an Uyghur family drove a sport utility vehicle (SUV) through a crowd in Beijing's Tiananmen Square, killing three pedestrians and injuring 39 (Cui, 2013c). In a similar sequence, assailants drove two SUVs against pedestrians in a busy street groceries market in Ürümqi in May 2014, killing 39 and leaving 94 dead, mostly Han-Chinese (People's Daily, 2014). These events are the closest to scholarly understandings of terrorism ever reported in Xinjiang, although they constitute only a small fraction of the violent phenomena the region has experienced.

#### d) Assassinations

Between 2008 and 2017, Xinjiang witnessed a series of assassinations that targeted CPC and government officials, members of the security forces, and other victims directly linked to the Chinese state apparatus, including pro-government religious figures. The victims in these violent acts were both Han and Uyghur CPC cadres and government officials, sometimes alongside members of their families (RFA, 2014h, 2014s, 2014b, 2015h). In some occasions, the attacks were linked to the implementation of specific policies. Maishalihan Aihemaiti, Uyghur cadre and party secretary in a village in Hotan, was killed after preventing the building of an unofficial mosque (Reuters, 2005). A prominent pro-government cleric killed in

Xinjiang was Juma Tayier, imam of the Id Kah Mosque in Kashgar (Cui, 2014a). Assaultants also targeted police officers and members of the People's Armed Police (PAP), the vanguard of the Chinese state security apparatus (RFA, 2014d, 2014p, 2015a).

Other assassinations targeted members of the ethnic Han community that were not directly affiliated with the government apparatus or the security forces, but linked to Chinese interests and presence in the region. Victims included Han Chinese farmers, businessmen, and immigrant workers (RFA 2014q, 2014t, 2010e, 2013k). One of the most high-profile attacks in this line was launched against a colliery in Aqsu prefecture's Bay county in September 2015, leaving at least 40 people dead or injured, including police officers, security guards, mine owners, and workers, as well as the attackers (RFA, 2015o; see also BBC, 2015c).

e) State security operations

Violence in Xinjiang during the terroristization phase is also linked to counter-terrorist operations carried out by Chinese security forces. A prominent case here is a police raid in a mountainous area of the Pamir plateau in Aqto county in January 2007, during which the Chinese security forces shot dead 18 suspected terrorists, and one policeman was killed. The official account placed the violence in the context of a security operation aimed at dismantling a terrorist training camp (CRI, 2007). Alternative sources, however, described the incident as a clash between Chinese police officers and members of the Uyghur community who protested against the acquisition of a local coal mine by an ethnic Han businessman (Poch, 2007). Deadly counter-terrorism operations generally had a significant share in violent events occurring in Xinjiang before the Kashgar incidents in August 2008 that eventually served to reignite violence in the region. For example, between February and July that year, seven Uyghur suspects were killed in two counter-terrorism operations carried out in Ürümchi against groups that were accused of planning to attack the Beijing Olympics (Xinhua, 2008a, 2008c). In August 2008, two security officers and six Uyghur suspects were killed during another police operation carried out in a cornfield of Payzawat county (Sina News, 2008b).

In line with increased violent tensions in Xinjiang more broadly, anti-terrorist raids greatly increased from 2013, after the Chinese authorities launched a large counter-terrorist campaign. The ensuing raids targeted houses, farms, or remote spots suspected of hosting

‘illegal’ gatherings, separatist activities, or terrorist training camps, and ended with dozens of Uyghurs shot down by police teams (RFA, 2012d, 2012f, 2013n, 2013o, 2013p, 2014i, 2014k, 2014m, 2015d, 2015j; Boehler, 2013; Xinhua, 2014g). But security operations that lead to death and injury were not limited to anti-terrorism raids. Frequently, they were centred on preventing members of the Uyghur ethnic minority to leave China. In December 2011, for instance, the Chinese police sought to prevent a group of Uyghur migrants from crossing over the border into Pakistan through the mountains of Guma county, in the Hotan prefecture (Yang, 2011). Seven members of the group and one police officer died in the clash, while several women and children were arrested (RFA, 2011i). Similar incidents were also reported outside of Xinjiang. In January 2014, Kyrgyz security forces in Pikertyk, an isolated mountain region in Kyrgyzstan 40 kilometres from the Chinese border, shot dead a group 11 Uyghurs trying to flee China (Trilling, 2014). In December that year, police in the southern Chinese province of Guangxi killed one person and detained 21 other members of several Uyghur families who sought to cross into neighbouring Vietnam (RFA, 2014x; Xinhua, 2015b). In 2015, Chinese police officers shot dead three Uyghur near Shenyang, in China’s northeastern Liaoning province, when they were in route to leave the country (A. Chen, 2015).

*Mapping the features of violence during the years of terroristization*

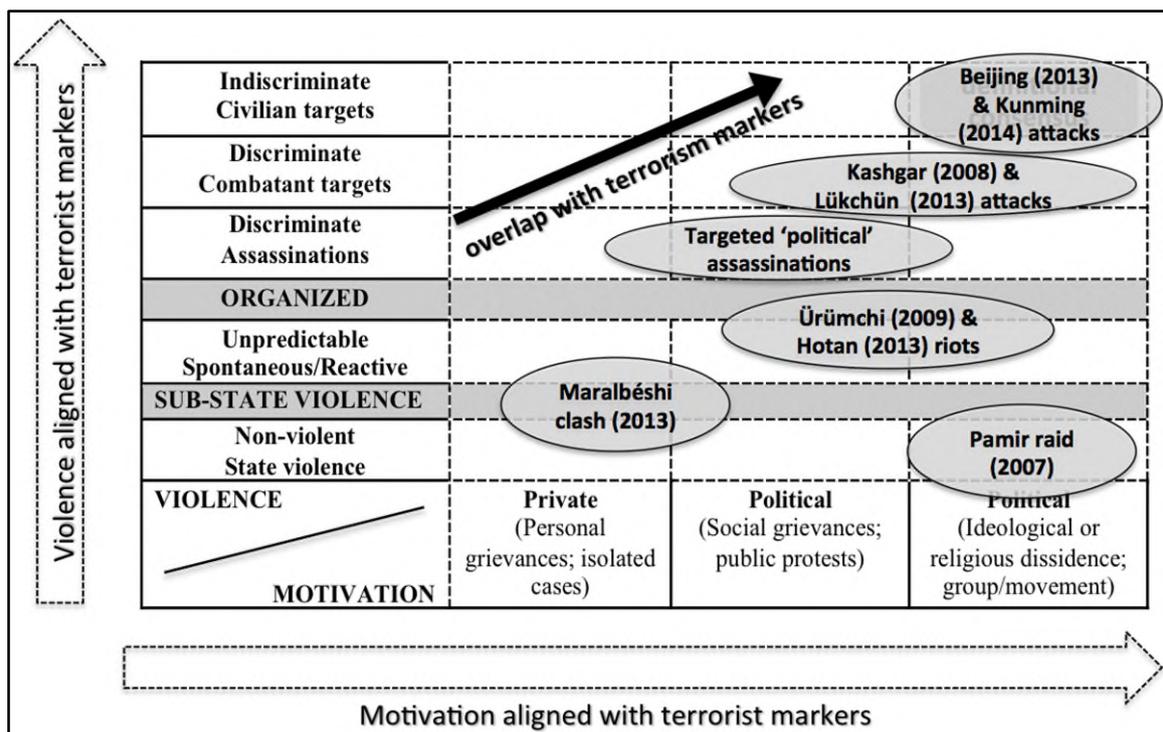
As in the 1990s, the wave of violent incidents reported in Xinjiang during the years of terroristization between 2008 and 2016, represents a broad spectrum of violence quantitatively and qualitatively. Table 4.1 summarizes the core features of selected incidents of this period. Meanwhile, Figure 4.1 illustrates how they map vis-à-vis dominant understanding of terrorism. The variety of incidents taps into almost every possible interpretation of violence.

**TABLE 4.1. Key features of violence in Xinjiang (2001-2018)**

	<b>Motivation</b>	<b>Unpredictable violence</b>	<b>Premeditated violence</b>	<b>Indiscriminate violence</b>	<b>Civilian victims</b>
<b>Beijing attack (2013)</b>	Political/insurgent Social/religious Social/dissident	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
<b>Pamir raid (2007)</b>	State security	-	-	-	-
<b>Kashgar</b>					

attack (2008)	Political/insurgent	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Ürümchi riots (2009)	Social/dissident	No	Unclear	Yes	Yes
Sëriqbuya clash (2013)	State security Social/religious	Yes	No	No	No
Kunming attack (2014)	Political/insurgent Social/religious Social/dissident	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Hotan riots (2013)	Social/dissident	No	No	Yes	No
Lükchün attack (2013)	Political/insurgent Social/dissident	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Assassinations	Political/insurgent	Yes	Yes	No	No

FIGURE 4.1. The spectrum of violence in Xinjiang during the phase of terroristization (2001-2018)



At first glance, and examining Figure 4.1, attacks such as those occurring in Beijing's Tiananmen in 2013 or the Kunming railway station in 2014 closely align with dominant understandings of terrorism. These are clear-cut examples of premeditated violence indiscriminately launched against civilians for political purposes. The attacks against a Chinese police border patrol in Kashgar in 2008, or the raid against the Lükchün police station in 2013 present similar characteristics, but they intentionally targeted the Chinese

state security forces and not bystanders from the public. Meanwhile, the attacks on individuals associated with the Chinese state apparatus present a selective individuated nature and wide range of motivations, from private grievances against the victim to a more dissident purpose. Moving away from the dominant understandings of terrorism, events like the ethnic riots in Ürümchi in 2009 or the Hotan riot in 2013 lack the levels of premeditation or the dissident dimension of previous examples. Despite presenting innocent civilian victims, they display the eclectic nature of the riot or mob violence, resulting from the escalation of non-violent situations, a role of the Chinese state security forces in the unleashing of the hostilities, and a heavier role of social grievances as motivators of the unrest, rather than a clear political dissident agenda. Finally, the clash in Marabelshi (2013) and the raid launched by the Chinese security forces in the Pamir Mountains (2007) are examples of incidents that can hardly be conceptualized as sub-state violence, the first representing a violent reaction towards the enforcement of specific security practices, and the second illustrating the Chinese state counter-terrorism crackdown.

Despite this seemingly clear-cut mapping of the spectrum of violence, violent events during the phase of terroristization present multiple points of interpretive containment. These are related to core definitional markers of terrorism, notably the motivation of the attackers or the level of premeditation and/or surprise of their actions, demonstrating again the fluidity of the categories used to make sense of violent events.

In this sense, the issue of motivation is a key area of contestation. As seen earlier, the region witnessed episodes that certainly recall the dominant archetype of terrorism. Attacks like those in Tiananmen Square (2013), the Kunming train station (2014), or the market in Ürümchi (2014) present evident 'terroristic' features, such as the premeditation of the attacks, their indiscriminate nature, or the targeting of victims who fall under the category of civilians. The technological and spatial dimensions of the attacks reinforce this perception. The arbitrariness is explicit in the vehicle-ramming tactics, the randomness of the stabbing spree, or the choice of locations like Beijing's Tiananmen Square, a crowded street groceries market in Ürümchi, or the busy Kunming's railway station, places which not only ensured a high rate of casualties, but also secured an impact beyond the immediate victims of the violence, with a capacity to reach the media and shock and shape the public opinion.

No matter these features, the political purpose of the attackers can be disputed in these incidents. A priori, a political agency can be inferred in all three scenarios. In Beijing, the perpetrators recorded a video announcing their radical deeds before carrying out the attack and carried a flag with a black standard commonly used by Islamist militant groups (Ng, 2013). In Kunming, the attackers carried a blue flag with the Muslim statement of faith (*shahada*) and the star and crescent (Ifeng News, 2014; Kaiman, 2014). Similarly, the attackers in Ürümchi had allegedly undergone a process of ideological radicalization (Xinhua, 2014e). However, despite these ideological markers, other logics might have invaded these strictly political motivations (see Wieviorka, 2009, p. 26). Specifically, and at least in two of these cases, personal grievances different from an active dissident agenda seem to lure behind the attacks. Usmen Hesen, the Uyghur who drove the vehicle that exploded in Tiananmen Square, had lost a relative in the Ürümchi riots (RFA, 2013q), and publicly vowed revenge after the Chinese police tore down the courtyard of his local mosque (RFA, 2013r). The fact that Hesen carried out the attack alongside his wife and his elderly mother adds weight to the argument that the resort to violence emerged from a personal grievance, and not from an established dissident political agency. It is also relevant that the terrorist group was created only a month before the attack (VOA, 2013). If anything, it was an *ad hoc* militant cell. Meanwhile, the violent agency of the Kunming attackers can be traced back to the repression following the earlier mentioned riots in Hanerik (RFA, 2014c, 2013i). Hundreds of Uyghurs left Xinjiang escaping from the crackdown that followed, amongst them the Kunming attackers (ibid). As such, alternative narratives zoomed in their ‘desperation’ as ‘asylum seekers’ that could not escape the country as the revengeful motivation behind the attack (RFA, 2014c).

In contrast to the cases of Beijing and Kunming, the instability in determining a political motivation for the attackers disappears when evaluating the attacks reported in Kashgar in July 2011. Then, Uyghur assailants used knives, explosives, and vehicle-ramming tactics in a twin attack in a pedestrian street and a restaurant that left 14 killed and 42 wounded over the course of a weekend (People’s Daily, 2011; Shao & Zhao, 2011). In this case, a month after the incident, the TIP released a video that showed one of the attackers, Memtieli Tiliwaldi, wrestling with other ‘fighters’ in a Pakistani training camp months before the attack (Wines, 2011; M. Lin, 2011). In this case, the documented links of Tiliwaldi with a established militant organization outside China –instead of a family or group created *ad hoc* for an isolated attack– would reinforce the official representation of the attackers as terrorists trained in Pakistan

(Xinhua, 2011a). As an analyst put it at the time, Tiliwaldi's background was 'the most concrete evidence ever introduced that links attacks in Xinjiang to the ETIM or militants in Pakistan' (Zenn, 2011).

The political motivation is also far from clear-cut in the targeted assassinations. Considering the profile of the targets, there is an obvious political dimension in attacking figures representing the Chinese state apparatus. Following the murder of an ethnic Han Chinese CPC official, the vice president of the Uyghur American Association (UAA), Ilshat Heseni, explained that 'township heads and party secretaries are the main power brokers under the county government, so to attack and kill a Han Chinese township head clearly indicates the level of resistance the Uyghur people feel towards China's repressive policies' (RFA, 2015h). This "power-brokering" role can be inferred in many of the victims of violence in Xinjiang, who are perceived by Uyghur as collaborators of the Chinese regime. However, personal grievances may have also triggered some of the assassinations. A case in point here is the killing of the PAP chief in Tagharchi township Fang Kezheng and his wife. The attackers came from Beshkent township, in Kashgar's Yeken county, where days earlier Fang and other police officers had shot dead a woman from the Uyghur ethnic minority (RFA, 2015a). Another example is that of Rejep Islam, party secretary in Hotan prefecture's Qaraqash county, who was targeted in revenge for the death of an Uyghur man shot dead by the police (RFA, 2014s). A similar logic can be traced to the attack in 2013 against the Lükchün police station and other government buildings. While the Chinese authorities represented it as a terrorist attack by a terrorist group (Reuters, 2013a), alternative narratives zoomed in the heightened tensions in the area due to the arrest and disappearance of Uyghur men, forced demolition programs, and a previous incident in which an ethnic Han man had killed an Uyghur boy as potential triggers of the attack (Uighurbiz, 2013; RFA, 2013f).

Claims of a political agency as the main driving force behind the violence are also far from clear-cut in the case of isolated selective attacks against ethnic Han residents associated to the Chinese interests and cultural influence the region, but without a direct role in the Chinese state apparatus. While Han migration in Xinjiang constitutes one of the more salient grievances for the Uyghur population, this does not necessarily entail a dissident political agenda. Other dynamics such as religious prejudice, ethnic hatred, and feelings of relative deprivation cast light on the violent agency of the attackers, as other instances demonstrate (see RFA, 2010e, 2010t, 2014f).

Alongside the political motivation marker, another feature prone to contestation and destabilization is that of the premeditation of the violent attack, closely linked to the element of surprise that is presupposed to terrorism. This is very relevant considering that, during the phase of terroristization, the Chinese state has constructed almost every violent incident in Xinjiang as a case of terrorism. In this sense, the framing of clashes resulting from the implementation of Chinese policies as terrorist attacks can be contested on the absence of the premeditation or plotting element. This is the case of the clash in Sëriqbuya (2013), where violence only erupted after a community worker lifted the veil of a woman (Grammaticas 2013; RFA 2013g) or the clash between the Chinese police and a group of Uyghur families who were trying to flee the country in 2011 (Yang, 2011), both constructed by the Chinese government as acts of terrorism. At the same time, the absence of premeditation and surprise destabilizes the construction of ethnic riots as acts of terrorism. Beyond the complexity of discerning whether violence started premeditatedly or spontaneously amongst the protesters, or as a reaction to the violent repression of the security forces, disturbances that result from the escalation of tensions can hardly be considered acts of terrorism. This is because, paraphrasing Sassòli (2006, p. 9), it is difficult to conceive how an act of violence in Xinjiang could be labelled as a terrorist attack if the alleged terrorists are visible and identified as potential attackers right before the actual attack. In this sense, the Chinese government portrayed the riots in Hotan (2011), Hanerik (2013), and Élishqu (2014) as terror attacks or terrorist incidents (L. Liu, 2011; Qiu, 2013; Xinhua, 2014h). Yet all three official narratives were contested on the basis that they were not terrorist attacks because violence only started after the repression of protests (WUC, 2011a; Haas, 2015; SCMP, 2011a).

#### **4.3 Terroristizing violence, prescribing a ‘people’s war’**

The process of terroristization of the Xinjiang conflict by the Chinese state in the post-9/11 period has culminated with two core discursive moves. First, the materialization of the terrorist threat through the systematic representation of all types of Xinjiang-related violent events as either terrorist attacks or incidents linked to a terrorist threat. In this way, the Chinese state has sustained its claim that the terrorist threat is ‘real’, even though many of these events do not map onto dominant scholarly understandings of terrorism. Second, the Chinese authorities have articulated a ‘people’s war’ as the only possible and logical response

to violence in Xinjiang. In doing so, they have emphasized a link between Islam and violence to legitimize a crackdown on religious ‘extremism’ as the core front in the counter-terrorism efforts.

*Materializing the threat: the terroristization of all violence in Xinjiang*

During the first years following 9/11, Chinese officials constructed a terrorism threat in Xinjiang amidst a void of violence. As the years passed, the state of imminent threat conveyed in the official discourse was not reflected in the events on the ground. The absence of violence, which contradicted the sense of emergency conveyed in the words of Chinese officials, came to an end in Kashgar in August 2008. Then, the Chinese government and the state media reported for the first time –and in real-time- a ‘terror attack’ in Xinjiang (AFP, 2008d). Since then, and throughout the most recent wave of violence, the Chinese government has constructed all Xinjiang-related violent incidents in the region and elsewhere in China as terror-related incidents, no matter if their features made these events close or far from dominant academic understandings of terrorism. To illustrate the terroristization of the entire spectrum of violent phenomena in the Chinese official discourse, I shall examine the official narratives produced with the occasion of five violent events that correspond to some of the core categories of violence explored in this chapter (see Table 4.2).

The official narratives about these incidents provide a window to explore firstly how violent events have been *terroristized*. That is, what discursive tactics have been used to frame specific episodes as terror-related events, when not straightforwardly as terrorist attacks. Secondly, these cases illustrate how the Chinese authorities have used violent events to redeploy the main arguments in their post-9/11 discourse of terrorism. In constructing violent incidents as terrorist attacks, Chinese narratives have materialized a threat that would have otherwise remained abstract.

**TABLE 4.2 Case studies of terroristization according to category of violence**

<b>PATTERN</b>	<b>CASE STUDY</b>
Attacks in public spaces	Tiananmen Square (Beijing) attack 2013
Attacks against security forces	Kashgar attack (2008)
Escalation of non-violent conflict	Ürümchi riots (2009)
Escalation of non-violent conflict (during implementation of religious restrictions)	Sëriqbuya clash (2013)
State security operations	Pamir Mountains raid (2007)

At this point, two discursive tactics facilitating the terroristization of violent events in Chinese state narratives deserve our attention: first, the use of a terror lexicon; second, the mobilization of the core definitional features of terrorism.

When it comes to the first discursive tactic, it must be emphasized that there is no more direct way of constructing a violent incident as a ‘terrorist’ attack than labelling it literally as such or describing the attackers as ‘terrorists’, among other usages of the terror jargon. This is evident in the five cases I examine. Chinese officials and state media described the Tiananmen event as a ‘terrorist attack’ (Xinhua, 2013b; 2013c) or a ‘violent terrorist incident’ (BBC, 2013b), and labelled the attackers as ‘terrorists’ (Xinhua, 2013d). They also identified the Kashgar attack as a ‘terrorist attack’ and the attackers as ‘violent terrorist forces’ (People’s Daily, 2008). In the case of the Ürümchi riots, regional chairman Nur Bekri blamed the incident on the ‘three forces of terrorism, separatism and extremism’ (CRI, 2009). Chinese officials also described the clash in Sëriqbuya as a ‘terrorist act’ (AP, 2013a) and a ‘terrorist criminal case’ (Xinhua, 2013a). Meanwhile, Xinjiang senior officials classified the raid in the mountains of the Pamir as an operation against a ‘terrorist training camp’ and linked it to ‘international terrorist forces’ (PTI, 2007b).

The second discursive tactic involves the use of the scholarly definitional markers of terrorism to construct events. The Chinese government is not unaware of scholarly debates on the definition of terrorism. In 2002, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs-affiliated Beijing Service Bureau for Diplomatic Personnel argued that the ‘East Turkistan forces’ were actually ‘terrorist elements’ after measuring their nature and actions against those ‘basic factors’ of the concept of terrorism that are ‘widely recognized by scholars around the world’ (Xie & Wang, 2002). Amongst these criteria, they named a ‘clear-cut political objective’, ‘extreme violent methods’, ‘organized and carefully planned’ activities, or ‘civilians’ as ‘major targets’ (ibid). Conscious of their rhetorical power, Chinese officials and the state media have mobilized these academic markers to attach a ‘terroristic’ dimension to violence in Xinjiang, as the five cases studied below demonstrate (see Table 4.3).

**TABLE 4.3 Mentions to definitional markers of terrorism in Chinese official narratives about violent events**

EVENT	CORE DEFINITIONAL MARKERS OF TERRORISM		
	Organization and/or	Victims’ status	Political motivation

	<b>Premeditation</b>		
<b>Tiananmen attack (2013)</b>	‘organized and premeditated’	‘innocent civilians’	ETIM and ‘international terror organizations’ ‘extremist religion’
<b>Kashgar attack (2008)</b>	‘meticulously plotted’	‘unarmed’ ‘young lives’ ‘sons of parents’	‘jihad’ ‘overseas terrorist groups’
<b>Ürümchi riots (2009)</b>	‘premeditated and organized’ ‘by no means incidental and spontaneous’.	‘innocent civilians’	‘profound’ political background ‘deceived by separatists’ ‘masterminded and remotely controlled by overseas separatist’ ‘instigated and directed from abroad’
<b>Sëriqbuya clash (2013)</b>	‘a premeditated attack’	‘law enforcement personnel, innocent residents, disregarding their gender or ethnic group’	‘split the motherland and undermine national unity’ ‘affected by extremism and hoped to commit themselves to Jihad’ overseas ‘East Turkestan terrorists’
<b>Pamir raid (2007)</b>	‘preparations for a series of terrorist acts’	‘martyr’ ‘upright and honest boy’ who ‘showed respect to his parents’	ETIM ‘international terrorist forces’

In this sense, the definitional marker of terrorism that refers to the organized and premeditated nature of the violence featured in the Chinese official narratives on all five cases. Meng Jianzhu, a member of the CPC 25-member Politburo responsible for domestic security, outlined that the Tiananmen attack was ‘organised and premeditated’ (BBC, 2013b). Commenting on the Kashgar attack, Shi Dagang, vice chairman of the regional government, noted that it was ‘meticulously plotted’ (BBCMSAP, 2008a), a circumstance also emphasized by Wang Lequan (BBCMSAP, 2008b). Chinese state narratives also underscored that the Ürümchi riots were ‘premeditated and organized’ (Xinhua, 2009b), and ‘by no means incidental and spontaneous’ (Xinhua, 2009d). Similarly, following the clash in Sëriqbuya, Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying described the event as ‘a premeditated attack’ (BBC, 2013a), despite violence was sparked by the lifting of a veil. Considering the Pamir raid, an operation initiated by the Chinese security forces, which hardly can be represented as an attack by a sub-state actor, Foreign Ministry spokesman Liu Jianchao, zoomed in the fact that those arrested were in ‘preparations for a series of terrorist acts’ (ITAR-TASS, 2007). It was not an attack, but they were still preparing one, the official narrative argued.

Another definitional marker of terrorism featuring in Chinese official narratives was that violence targeted civilian and innocent victims. In press briefings, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokespersons Hong Lei and Hua Chunying noted that the attack in Tiananmen had targeted ‘innocent civilians and tourists’ (Reuters, 2013c; Xinhua, 2013c). Meanwhile, the official *China Daily* underscored that the victims in the Kashgar attack ‘were unarmed when they were slain in the most brutal way’, and highlighted their condition of ‘young lives’ and ‘sons of parents’ (S. Liu, 2008). Following the Ürümchi riots, Nur Bekri stressed that ‘most of the victims were innocent civilians’ (Duncan, 2009) and the state media emphasized that rioters had targeted civilians with premeditation (Xinhua, 2009d). Speaking about the clash in Sëriqbuya, regional spokeswoman Hou Hanmin pointed out that the incident showed the obvious features of a terrorist attack because the attackers did not care whether the victims ‘were officials or members of the public’ (Yang, 2013). Meanwhile, Meng Hongwei outlined that ‘the terrorist suspects brutally killed law enforcement personnel, innocent residents, disregarding their gender or ethnic group’ (Xinhua, 2013a). When it comes to the Pamir raid, Nur Bekri focused on humanizing the figure of Huang Qiang, a policeman who died in the operation, describing him as a ‘martyr’ who ‘sacrificed his valuable life for the national security of China and for the tranquillity of the people in Xinjiang’ (BBCMSAP, 2007b). The Chinese state media also represented Huang as an ‘honest boy’ who ‘showed respect to his parents’ (ibid), underscoring his human dimension, and diverting the attention from his condition of member of the Chinese security forces actively involved in the raid.

Chinese official narratives also tapped on the political motivation of attackers and/or rioters. In this sense, three discursive patterns can be found in the Chinese state narratives that politicized these violent events to facilitate their terroristization: the construction of the incidents as dissident separatist acts, the representation of the attackers as extremist religious militants, and the identification of external forces as instigators of the violence. All these patterns can be found interspersed in all the five cases studied.

Evaluating the Tiananmen attack, Hua Chunying claimed that China was threatened by violent separatists with links with groups outside the country (Martina, 2013). Meanwhile, Chinese officials and the state media described the attackers as ‘under the strong influence of extremist religion’ (Hatton, 2013; Cui, 2013c). When it comes to the Kashgar attack, Shi Dagang claimed that religion led the attackers to ‘carry out jihad’ (SCMP, 2008d; Kyodo, 2008a). He also argued that local militants were taking orders from ‘overseas terrorist groups’

(Kyodo, 2008a). Considering the Ürümchi riot, the Chinese government underscored the 'profound' political background of the incident and noted that rioters were 'deceit by separatists' (Xinhua, 2009e). In this sense, Chinese officials and the state media represented the riot as 'masterminded and remotely controlled by overseas separatists' (CCTV, 2009b) or 'instigated and directed from abroad' (Xinhua, 2009c). Chinese narratives also conferred a separatist and religious extremist character to the clash in Sëriqbuya. Nur Bekri described it as an action meant to 'split the motherland and undermine national unity' (Xinhua, 2013a) and Hou Hanmin claimed the attackers 'were affected by extremism and hoped to commit themselves to Jihad' (CNN, 2013). Hou also pointed the finger abroad by revealing that the attackers had radicalized by watching videos 'from overseas' (ibid). On his part, Meng Hongwei warned of the constant influence of overseas 'East Turkestan terrorists' in Xinjiang (Xinhua, 2013a). Finally, considering the Pamir raid, Ba Yan, spokeswoman for the Xinjiang Public Security Department, said that the training camp was run by the ETIM organization (CRI, 2007) and Liu Jianchao reminded that 'East Turkestan groups' in Xinjiang were connecting with 'international terrorist forces' (Reuters, 2007a).

Beyond fixating a political motivation to the attackers, Chinese officials also emphatically dismissed alternative causes behind the violent agency, in particular, those frictions related to the ethnic and religious policies applied in the region. After the Tiananmen attack, Hua Chunying criticized alternative narratives representing the riot as a protest against the country's ethnic and religious policies (Xinhua, 2013c) and Hong Lei accused those presenting alternative interpretations of 'connivance with terrorists' (Reuters, 2013c). Evaluating the violence in Ürümchi, city mayor Jerla Isamudin outlined that the riot was no 'ethnic issue' (Hu, Lei, & Zhao, 2009). Following the clash in Sëriqbuya, Nur Bekri claimed that the incident was 'not about ethnic or religious issues, but a terrorist act' (Xinhua, 2013a) and Hou Hanmin refuted the argument that the riot had been caused by China's 'suppressive policy' in the region (BBCMSAP, 2013).

Other definitional markers of terrorism featured in the Chinese official narratives on these violent cases. For example, commenting on the Tiananmen attack, Chinese experts quoted in the state media stressed that the incident was aimed at causing a greater fear among people (Xinhua, 2013d; Cui, 2013c). Meanwhile, weighing on the Sëriqbuya clash, Hou Hanmin tapped on the element of surprise allegedly surrounding the event to dismiss alternative narratives claiming that violence was the result of oppression (BBCMSAP, 2013). Chinese

officials also underlined the extranormal, inhuman nature of the violence. Meng Hongwei said that the ‘tragedy’ of Sëriqbuya showed the ‘anti-human and anti-social nature’ of the attackers (Xinhua, 2013a). Meanwhile, speaking about the Ürümchi riot, Nur Bekri described the rioters as the ‘most inhuman, barbaric... extremely vicious, unscrupulous and brutal’ (Duncan, 2009).

Besides fixating a ‘terroristic’ meaning to the violent events, Chinese officials seized the chance to link the incidents to the core arguments conveyed in broader security narratives about Xinjiang.

A first core argument was the notion that violent events in Xinjiang were not isolated cases, but the manifestation of a greater, lineal, compact threat. Chinese officials and the state media conveyed this idea by relating the Tiananmen attack to previous episodes of violence (Xinhua, 2013d; Cui, 2013c), the Kashgar attack in 2008 to the Pamir raid in 2007 (Xinhua, 2008f), or the Ürümchi riot in 2009 to the Kashgar attack, an earlier plot to blow a passenger plane, and a series of counter-terrorism operations conducted in 2008 (Xinhua, 2009b). In this sense, the *China Daily* reinforced the idea of the Ürümchi riot as a continuation of past phenomena by presenting it as an episode in a timeline that reached as far back as the Baren ‘counterrevolutionary rebellion’ in 1990 or the Ghulja riot in 1997 (China Daily, 2009).

Another core argument deployed in the official narratives was that these events confirmed the terrorist threat in Xinjiang. Following the Tiananmen attack, Hua Chunying described the ETIM as a long-term challenge and the ‘most direct and real threat to our security’ (Xinhua, 2013d). Chinese experts cited in the state media presented the Kashgar attack as proof that China ‘also’ had a terrorism threat (SCMP, 2008c, 2008b). After the Ürümchi riot, Xinhua warned that the ‘three forces of terrorism, separatism and extremism’ were ‘at work again’ (Xinhua, 2009b). Following the clash in Sëriqbuya, Chinese officials reiterated that the fight against terrorism would be ‘prolonged and complicated’ (Xinhua, 2013a). In 2007, Chinese officials presented the Pamir raid as the beginning of an anti-terrorist campaign. Zhao Yongshen, an official with the Ministry of Public Security, announced that the ‘East Turkestan terrorist forces’ would remain ‘the main terrorist threat facing China’ both ‘in the current period and in the near future’ (AFP, 2007a).

Next, Chinese officials used these events to reproduce the call for a continued, pre-emptive, and harsh crackdown in Xinjiang. Following the Tiananmen attack, Chinese diplomat Qin Gang vowed to continue to ‘crack down’ on the ETIM (Krishnan, 2013), and Hua Chunying, called for ‘severely punishing terrorists according to the law’ (Xinhua, 2013c). After the Kashgar attack, Shi Dagang said China would ‘spare no efforts to fight violent crimes and terrorists’ (Xinhua, 2008g), and Wang Lequan called for ‘active attacks’, a ‘hard’ crackdown, and pre-emptive measures ‘against the enemy’ (BBCMSAP, 2008b). With the occasion of the Ürümchi riots, Meng Jianzhu called for punishing ‘key rioters with the utmost severity’ (CCTV, 2009b) and regional CPC leader Zhang Chunxian pledged to strike separatists with ‘iron fists’, leaving terrorists with ‘no place to hide’ (BBC, 2012b). Chinese officials renewed the calls for a crackdown after the unrest in Sëriqbuya. Meng Hongwei vowed to ‘punish terrorists with no mercy’ (Xinhua, 2013a), Nur Bekri called to ‘leave no room for compromises and concessions’ (ibid), and Shi Dagang called to ‘prevent the spreading and promotion of extreme thought in the name of religion’ (Cui, 2013b). After the Pamir raid, police spokesman Wu Heping pledged to take ‘strong measures’ and ‘strike against all criminal activities of terrorist groups’ (Reuters, 2007a), and Nur Bekri vowed to ‘deal heavy blows at any attempt to separate China’ (BBCMSAP, 2007b).

Finally, Chinese officials used violent incidents to legitimize the crackdown at the international level. In some occasions, they referred to the UN-listing of the ETIM as a terrorist organization as a source of legitimacy in China’s war on terror (VOA, 2013; CCTV, 2013; Sina News, 2008a). At the same time, Hua Chunying also expressed his hope that the Tiananmen attack would allow the ‘international society’ to ‘have a clear view’ about Xinjiang (CCTV, 2013). Chinese officials also legitimized the crackdown by underscoring the global character of the terrorist threat they were fighting in Xinjiang. Following the Tiananmen attack, official statements depicted terrorism as the ‘shared enemy of all humanity’ (Martina, 2013) and Chinese officials described the incident as one against ‘humanity, society and civilization’ (Xinhua, 2013c). Meanwhile, Hou Hanmin compared violence in Sëriqbuya with the Boston Marathon bombings, describing terrorists as ‘the common enemies of peace-loving people across the world’ (Yang, 2013) and Liu Jianchao, following the Pamir raid, affirmed that China’s counter-terrorism actions were ‘in the interests of China and the world’ (AFP, 2007b).

*Prescribing a ‘people’s war’ against terrorism and ‘religious extremism’*

The articulation of a pre-emptive war of extermination against terrorism and religious extremism, often conveyed with crude bellicose expressions, as the rational response to conflict in Xinjiang, has been instrumental for the intensification of the crackdown against Uyghurs, notably in what refers to the latest developments in the region.

The rhetoric of war has come to permeate much of the official narratives on Xinjiang. In the second anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, Wang Lequan announced a war on terror in which China could not ‘guarantee total victory’ (AP, 2003). In 2015, two high Chinese military officials described the ‘struggle against terror’ as ‘a real war with knives and guns, a life and death war’ (Reuters, 2015b). In a similar vein, Xinjiang deputy party secretary Zhu Hailun declared in 2017 to be ‘ready for [combat]’ and vowed to ‘definitely win’ the war in Xinjiang (Tianshan News, 2017). In his dramatic call, Zhu vowed to ‘load our guns, draw our swords from their sheaths, throw hard punches and relentlessly beat, and strike hard without flinching at terrorists who must be brought down a peg or two’ (ibid).

The *warmongering* discourse has conceptualized the conflict in Xinjiang as a ‘people’s war’, recalling the rhetoric against separatism of the mid-1990s. In 2014, the party secretary in Xinjiang, Zhang Chunxian, announced a ‘people’s war’ against terrorism in the region (Xinhua, 2014f). Zhang’s successor Chen Quanguo repeated this call in 2017, instructing the Chinese police ‘bury the corpses of terrorists and terror gangs in the vast sea of the people’s war’ (SCMP, 2017). The idea of a ‘people’s war’ complements the representation of a ‘long fight’ in Xinjiang, dominant in the 1980s and the 1990s. This figure has persisted in the post-9/11 context. Xinjiang governor Nur Bekri captured the idea of a ceaseless and historical fight in 2010 when he predicted that separatism ‘was there in the past, it is still here now and it will continue in the future’ (BBC, 2010b). In a similar vein, following the July 2009 riots, Ürümchi mayor Jerla Isamudinhe announced a ‘fight against separatism now and for years to come’ (People’s Daily, 2010b). The counter-terrorism campaign has thus been described by Chinese leaders as ‘chronic, complicated and severe’ (Cui & Gao, 2014), or ‘long-term, complex and sharp’ (AP, 2011).

Official narratives have also constructed the Xinjiang conflict as one that, far from receding, is intensifying. According to this argument, the security context in Xinjiang is ‘extremely grim’ or ‘not promising’ (BBCMSAP, 2003f; AFP, 2010). It is also a threat that grows, as pointed out by regional chairman Nur Bekri, who predicted for the year 2009 a ‘more severe’

and ‘more fierce’ security context (C. Zhang, 2009). Or by Zhang Chunxian, who in 2015 announced a ‘more complicated and more intensive’ phase in the fight against terrorism (Global Times, 2015a). This framing has persisted in the Chinese state discourse even in times of relative peace. In 2005, following a lustrum without violent incidents reported in the region, Chinese officials warned that ‘heinous terrorists’ were at large preparing for ‘new rounds of attacks’ (S. Sun, 2005) and issued calls to ‘be prepared for danger in times of safety’ (Shi, 2005).

Building on the representation of a threat that is either intensifying or dormant in peaceful times, Chinese officials have articulated a pre-emptive and proactive counter-terrorism approach as the logical response to terrorism. Since Wang Lequan vowed in 2002 to ‘take the initiative of attacking’ terrorists and separatists ‘when they emerge’ and to ‘keep up a high pressure crackdown on the three evils’ (quoted in China News Service, 2002), Chinese officials have repeated calls to ‘go on the offensive’ and ‘strike the first blow’ (BBCMSAP, 2004a), or to ‘maintain an aggressive posture of cracking down hard’ (BBCMSAP, 2005a, 2007a), and to act ‘beforehand’ against ‘sabotage activities’ (People’s Daily, 2010b). This is a pre-emptive approach that ‘should reach every single village and household’, as pointed out by Public Security Minister Guo Shengkun (Global Times, 2014b; Wan, 2014), and which ‘should leave terrorists no place to hide’, as suggested by Zhang Chunxian (BBC, 2012b).

A core theme running through the war on terrorism discourse is the dehumanization of the ‘terrorist’ in a way that condones his elimination. Chinese officials have continued to represent terrorists as ‘rats scurrying across a street, hated, and detested by everybody’ (AFP, 2004a), ‘weeds’ that must be cut at the root (Jacobs, 2014), or as a ‘savage and evil’ army (ibid), explicitly calling for their extermination. In 2004, Wang Lequan instructed the government to kill ‘terrorists with an iron hand whenever they appear’ (BBCMSAP, 2004b) and a Xinjiang CPC cadre vowed to ‘destroy them one by one’ (BBCMSAP, 2004a). The endorsement of a *license to kill* terrorists is conveyed in an article published by Xinhua in 2008 that described how the Chinese police, in their training, ‘shot targets of swaying eggs 15 metres away within 1.5 seconds to practise killing terrorists’ (Xinhua, 2008h). The terrorist, the saboteur, or the secessionist, have thus emerged in the Chinese state discourse as a species to be ‘hunted down and punished’ (Xinhua, 2014a) or ‘battered resolutely’ (AFP, 2008a). Dissidents are therefore equated to ‘evils’ against whom when fought, the Chinese security forces ‘must aim at extermination’ (Jacobs, 2014).

Crucial to the repression of religion in Xinjiang is the articulation in the Chinese state discourse of a link between terrorism, violence and religious extremism. When violence resurfaced in the region in 2008, Shi Dagang, then CPC secretary in Kashgar, pointed at religion as the force behind those engaging in the attacks. Referring to Uyghur militants, Shi said that ‘religion is more important to them than their own life, and so they set out to perform jihad’ (Dyer, 2008). In 2013, this time as deputy governor of Xinjiang, Shi blamed ‘people who are brainwashed by religious extremism’ for the increase in violent incidents (Cui, 2013b). In a similar vein, regional chairman Nur Bekri pointed out in 2014 that religious extremism had ‘misled people, particularly the young, into terrorist activities’ (Xinhua, 2014d). Meanwhile, regional vice-chairman Arkin Tuniyazi claimed the same year that it was religious extremism, and not China’s ethnic policies, what was behind the upsurge of terrorist attacks (B. Chen, 2014).

Having framed the religious realm as the main front in the fight against terrorism, much of the Chinese state discourse has consisted in further developing the binary that divides religion between a good or ‘patriotic’ practice, and its evil ‘extremist’ antithesis. The line that separates both sides of this binary also determines who and for what reason becomes a target of the anti-terrorist policies or not. In this sense, Chinese officials have constructed specific Islamic practices or customs as extremist behaviour. The study of Islam, for example, has been articulated as a vehicle of transmission of radical anti-China positions. Chinese officials have presented underground schools as environments where children are educated on separatist ‘reactionary ideas’ (BBCMSAP, 2003f) such as that ‘jihadist martyrs go to heaven’ or that ‘killing a pagan is worth over 10 years of piety’ (Xinhua, 2014d). They have also identified religious ceremonies, like weddings or funerals, and other social gatherings, as fronts to ‘engage in sabotage activities’ and transmit ‘religious extremism’ (AFP, 2001e, 2002a; Cui & An, 2013). In this discourse, some religious fundamentalist positions are described as inspired by ‘extremist forces’ or linked to terrorism. Amongst these, the refusal of state religious documents; the rejection of singing, dancing, and watching television activities; as well as the act of expressing joy at weddings or mourning during funerals (Xinhua, 2014d; B. Chen, 2014; Reuters, 2013f). In this sense, no other religious custom has garnered more negative attention in the Chinese state discourse than the use of the Islamic veils amongst women and the growing of beards among young men. In the post-9/11 environment, Chinese officials have continued to represent burkas or black veils as the ‘garment of

extremism' (R. Li, 2015a; Xinhua, 2014d; B. Chen, 2014) and beards and moustaches as symbols used to 'incite separatism' (RFA, 2009a).

On the other side of the binary, Chinese officials have defined the contours of acceptable religious practice, that is, one in accordance with the values of patriotism, socialism, Chinese culture, and modernity. In this vein, Chinese officials have praised religious leaders who 'are quite patriotic' and 'love the motherland' as opposed to 'terrorists' using 'the purity of religion to cheat people' (Schauble, 2002). In 2003, regional chairman Ismail Tiliwaldi urged patriotic religious people to fight terrorism and 'accommodate a socialist society' (BBCMSAP, 2003f). Meanwhile, in 2015, Zhang Chunxiang said that religions should be 'sinicised' and immersed in the 'Chinese culture' to become 'normal and healthy' (Yu, 2015). Other Chinese officials have called for Islam to conform to modernity and encouraged Muslims to 'move toward modern civilization' (Reuters, 2015b), and abandon the 'backwardness' of the burka (R. Li, 2015a), further widening this divide.

Beyond the religious realm, Chinese officials have discursively framed areas such as education, culture, or the Internet as core fronts in an ideological combat against terrorism. In the post-9/11 context, the Chinese regime sees the struggle for an ideological hegemony as a fight against 'spiritual terrorism' (Marquand, 2003). One core front in this ideological struggle is the education system, which Chinese officials have described as infiltrated by the 'three forces of terrorism, separatism and extremism' (Leng, 2017). To counter this influence, the Chinese government called in 2002 to 'clean up and reorganise the schools, their leaders, (and) the teaching body to turn schools into a stronghold against separatism' (AFP, 2002b). Alongside education, other cultural realms from poetry to archaeology have been represented as fronts in the war on terrorism and separatism (Marquand, 2003; Bai, 2017). In this sense, Chinese officials have put their focus on the media and cultural production industries, accusing 'ethnic splittist forces' of 'taking advantage of broadcasting, publications, audio and video products, art and literary works, the Internet and other media to infiltrate Xinjiang' (BBCMSAP, 2002c). Above all these platforms, the Internet has been recreated as a counter-terrorism front in the official discourse. In 2009, the CPC secretary in Kashgar, Zhang Jiang, announced that the war against terror had 'extended to the virtual world' as 'terrorists' were using the Internet as 'their tool to spread their radical ideas' (AP, 2009).

#### 4.4 China's War on Terror in Xinjiang (2001-2018): Sustained Crackdown and the Advent of the Surveillance State

In the name of fighting a war on terrorism, Xinjiang has remained in a permanent state of emergency since 2001. The region, now established as a core issue in the Chinese national security agenda, has become the centre of a wide range of security practices that following 9/11 have increasingly tightened the grip over Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslim ethnic minorities. In this crackdown, violent crimes, political dissent, and what the Chinese government perceives as religious extremism are persecuted as part of the terrorism threat. The Uyghur subject is constantly monitored, his movements restricted, and his freedoms and identity markers, in particular, religion, intervened and scrutinized. These practices are not limited to Xinjiang or the rest of China. The persecution of the 'East Turkestan terrorist forces' has also evolved into a fundamental aspect of the Chinese government's international strategy.

This final part of the chapter addresses the political consequences of the terrorist discourse in Xinjiang, that is, the 'actual' war on terrorism. Here, I first explore the erection of a counter-terrorist apparatus at the administrative-legislative and military levels. Second, I turn my attention to the counter-terrorism crackdown, mostly focused on the repression of religion. Next, I analyse China's war on terror from an international perspective, tracing how the Chinese government has extended its pressure over the Uyghur communities abroad. Finally, I introduce the most recent development in the region, the advent of a surveillance state, which I argue suggests the *sine die* terroristization of Xinjiang.

##### *Establishing and implementing a counter-terrorist apparatus*

Since the elevation of Xinjiang to the status of China's domestic front in the GWoT, the Chinese government has developed a counter-terrorist apparatus consisting of administrative, military-security and legislative frameworks aimed at building the capacities required for a sustained crackdown on the 'three evil forces'.

Following 9/11, the Chinese authorities moved swiftly to create an administrative counter-terrorism structure to fit into the new international context of the GWoT. Four months after the attacks, the Ministry of Public Security established a National Anti-terrorism Coordination Team to manage China's anti-terrorism campaign (The Straits Times, 2002; X.

Zhang, 2013). The new bureau gathered personnel from the military, national security departments, the police force, various political and legal committees, or the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, amongst other bodies (ibid). Authorities at the regional and provincial levels quickly followed suit and created their counter-terrorist units (The Straits Times, 2002). In 2003, the Ministry of Public Security integrated the National Anti-terrorism Coordination Team into a newly set up Counter-Terrorism Bureau, dedicated to the research and promotion of anti-terrorist policies (Feng, 2009). The bureau published the first list of 'East Turkistan terrorists' and organizations in December 2003 (People's Daily, 2003b). In 2013, China's legislature created the National Anti-Terrorism Leading Group to 'command' the national counter-terrorism strategy, effectively replacing the Anti-terrorism Coordination Team (China Daily, 2014). Led by the minister of Public Security, the new body includes officers from the Foreign Ministry, the ministries of Public Security and State Security, the PAP, and the PLA General Staff (X. Zhang, 2013). From this heightened profile, the group launched and directed from 2014 the major anti-terrorist campaign known in Xinjiang to date (Xinhua, 2014a).

While these mechanisms play a central role in China's counter-terrorism efforts, the Chinese security forces implement most of the operations on the ground. The PAP and the PLA are China's main counter-terrorism agencies. The PAP, considered the major Chinese regular counter-terrorism force (China Daily, 2014; Ifeng News, 2013), gained major relevance in the war on terrorism in 2005, when the Ministry of Public Security ordered the establishment of anti-terrorist Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) units across the country (Savadove, 2005). In 2008, the Central Military Commission raised the status of the PAP contingent in Xinjiang from the category of 'deputy corps command' to that of 'full corps command', conferring the paramilitary force a leading role in managing the region (Reuters, 2008d), and signifying the exceptional anti-terrorism character of the XUAR. Other counter-terrorist units active in Xinjiang such as the Snow Leopard Commando (Cui, 2011; Xinhua, 2019) or the Snow Eagle, first female special group unit in China (CRI, 2015), are ascribed to the PAP.

At the same time, combating terrorism has become a core task of the Chinese army and a fundamental part of its training curricula (BBCMSAP, 2003f). While the PLA, through its special military forces, is supposed to command anti-terrorist operations when these affect the national security, the military presence in Xinjiang is largely aimed at supporting and complementing the armed police and its special units (Ifeng News, 2013). In this sense, a

crucial role of the PLA is that of deterrence, achieved via frequent military drills, often in the more restive south of the XUAR, where tanks, armoured vehicles, drones, assault helicopters and thousands of soldiers are often displayed to off-put any resistance to the Chinese rule (SCMP, 2013; Reuters, 2016b; Deng 2017).

Alongside the PAP and the PLA, the paramilitary Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (XPCC) have acquired a significant role in China's war on terror. Instrumental in quelling the Baren 'rebellion' in 1990, the case of the XPCC illustrates how a pre-existing resource used to deal with violent riots in Xinjiang has been reshuffled with a counter-terrorist dimension. China also elevated the status of the XPCC to 'deputy corps command' in 2012 -equalling the rank of the PAP in most provincial areas, but Xinjiang- after its decisive role in settling the Ürümchi riots in 2009 (L. Liu, 2012).

The counter-terrorist apparatus is supported by an ever-increasing deployment of manpower in Xinjiang, imperative for the execution of crackdown and surveillance policing. The Chinese state has multiplied its presence in the region since 9/11. On the brink of the US invasion of Afghanistan, the PAP transferred several hundred troops from Ürümchi to Kashgar (August, 2001) and the PLA transferred four army divisions, a total of 40,000 troops, to the south of the XUAR (Kyodo, 2002). The presence of security forces in Xinjiang, mostly from the PAP, skyrocketed after the ethnic riots in Ürümchi in July 2009, a critical context during which stability was only achieved after the deployment of 14,000 armed police troops (Zenz & Leibold, 2016). Tracing the development of a security state in Xinjiang, Zenz and Leibold (2017a) have revealed a massive increase in police recruitment in the region. First, as a response to the Ürümchi riots, when security-related recruitment doubled in Xinjiang, rising from 6,876 positions in 2006–2008 to 15,841 in 2009–2011 (People's Daily, 2010a). Then, during the expansion of the policing and surveillance efforts in the rural south (2012-2013), when 11,559 police and other security-related positions were advertised (ibid). Finally, with the launching of the major counter-terrorism campaign in Xinjiang, under the 'people's war' banner, with almost 20,000 security-related positions advertised in the 2014-2015 period (ibid).

Alongside the massive deployment of manpower for hard security purposes, China has sent thousands of officials to Xinjiang with the mission of winning the hearts and minds of the locals in the 'people's war' on terror, in a sort of 'violent paternalism' (Byler, 2018). The

regional government has been sending officials to assist with the economic development of the poorest areas of Xinjiang since 1997, but these efforts have acquired a new dimension under the war on terror: gaining popular support for the counter-terrorism policies (M. Lin, 2014). In November 2001, the CPC assigned 1,750 cadres to south Xinjiang to ‘get to know’ the residents (AFP, 2001d). In 2014, the XUAR authorities announced the gradual deployment of 200,000 civil servants in the rural areas of Xinjiang, which joined a group of 40,000 public workers sent to the region in 2013 to ‘accumulate grassroots experience and help improve local livelihoods’ (Xinhua, 2014c). From 2016, the government started assigning Xinjiang officials as ‘relatives’ to Uyghur families and pairing them to local villagers to improve ethnic unity (H. Zhang, 2018).

The deployment of this multi-level counter-terrorist apparatus has been financially sustained by an increase in the regional security budgets. Public security expenditures by the XUAR government dramatically increased from 1.54 billion RMB in 2009 to 6.7 billion RMB in 2015. In between, there were two significant boosts. The budget increased an 87.9 per cent up to 2.89 billion RMB in the 2010 budget, the first after the ethnic riots in Ürümchi. Meanwhile, it boosted another 24 per cent to 6.1 billion RMB in 2014, coinciding with the launching of a ‘people’s war’ on terrorism (see Famularo, 2015).

In parallel to the boost in security spendings, the Chinese authorities have developed over the years a legal framework to underpin the crackdown on terrorism. Right after 9/11, the Chinese government amended the Criminal Law to punish the crimes of terrorism and those who formed, participated, or funded a terrorist organization (PRC, 2001). According to AI, many Uyghurs were charged under the revised Criminal Law following this amendment (Reuters, 2002). This was the first of many steps to establish a legislative counter-terrorism apparatus, which culminated in 2015 when, following years of discussions, reviews, and draft bill readings (see AFP, 2005b; Valli, 2014; Global Times, 2015b) the National People’s Congress (NPC) adopted the first Chinese counter-terrorism law (PRC 2015). The new law defines terrorism as ‘any proposition or activity that, by means of violence, sabotage or threat, generates social panic, undermines public security, infringes on personal and property rights, and menaces government organs and international organizations with the aim to realize certain political and ideological purposes’ (ibid). As Zhou (2016), notes, the definition, while close to those of international institutions such as the UN or the EU, is vague enough to allow for the punishment of speech or thoughts. With 97 articles distributed in 10

chapters, China's counter-terrorism law establishes the basic operative rules of the Chinese counter-terrorism strategy, as well as the guidelines for preventing violence, handling attacks, punishing terrorists, and developing international anti-terrorist cooperation efforts (PRC, 2015).

Several aspects stand out from this piece of legislation, for they capture the essence of the Chinese state security practices. First, and foremost, the law conceptualizes religious extremism as the main ideological source that causes terrorism. As the approved bill reads: '[China] opposes all extremism that seeks to instigate hatred, incite discrimination and advocate violence by distorting religious doctrines and other means, and acts to eradicate the ideological basis for terrorism' (PRC, 2015). Second, it calls for a severe control of the freedom of expression and the free flow of information, presenting the Internet and social media as spaces of dissemination of terrorist and extremist ideas (*ibid*). Next, the law conveys the idea of a 'people's war' on terrorism by calling for rewards for those Chinese individuals who make 'outstanding contributions' to the anti-terrorism work, mainly through reporting terrorist activities or terrorist suspects, or by assisting in the suppression of terrorist attacks (*ibid*).

Alongside China's first counter-terrorism law, other legal provisions are instrumental to the war on terrorism. Some specifically target religious extremism or separatism. This is the case of the Law on Education for Ethnic Unity in Xinjiang, adopted in 2010, which banned 'speech detrimental to ethnic unity' and activities such as 'gathering, providing, producing, and spreading information to that effect', while declaring 'an obligation for all citizens to work towards national unity and against secession' (RFA, 2010a). Another case in point is the revision in 2015 of the regional regulation on religious affairs to target 'religious extremism' (Cui, 2014b). The new regulation reframed extremism as 'activities or comments that twist the doctrines of a religion and promote thoughts of extremism, violence and hatred'. Containing 18 articles, it is based –and gives legal force– to previous government directives issued to crack down on religion. Amongst them, the prohibition of wearing 'extremist' clothes or logos and distributing or viewing videos about jihad, the strict control of the religious venues, and the elimination of religious practices from government offices, public schools, businesses or institutions (*ibid*). Other legal moves have criminalized forcing others to wear 'extremist garments' (R. Li, 2015b), or preventing students from receiving high school education in the name of religion (Reuters, 2016c). The most recent legislation

against religious extremism is the XUAR Regulation on De-extremification, and offers a compendium of ‘extremist’ types of comments or behaviour (PRC, 2017; see Table 4.4). These benchmarks coincide with many of the religious practices that the Chinese state persecutes in the name of fighting terrorism. The Xinjiang authorities circulated an updated list of guidelines to identify ‘extremist’ behaviours in the implementation of the crackdown later in 2017 (RFA, 2017).

**TABLE 4.4 Types of comments and behaviour considered religious extremism according to Article 9 of the XUAR Regulation on De-extremification (see PRC, 2017)**

1. Advocating and spreading extremist ideas;
2. Interfering with the freedom of religion of others, by forcing them to participate in religious activities, or to provide properties or work services to religious clerics or venues for religious activity;
3. Interfering with others’ activities such as weddings, funerals, or inheritance;
4. Interfering with others’ communicating with other ethnic groups or religious faiths to exchange information, cohabit, or push people of different ethnic group or faith to abandon their homes;
5. Interfering with cultural and leisure activities, avoiding or rejecting public goods and services such as radio and television;
6. Generalizing the concept of halal, extending it to other fields beyond that of food, and manipulating it to interfere with other people’s secular life;
7. Wearing face-covering veils or robes, or compelling others to wear extremist garments;
8. Spreading religious fanaticism by wearing abnormal beards or using abnormal names;
9. Failing to perform the legal procedures for religious marriage and divorce;
10. Preventing children from receiving public education, and obstructing the functioning of the national education system;
11. Intimidating and instigating others to resist the national policies, to intentionally destroying legal documents such as resident identity cards or household registration books, or to deface currency;
12. Intentionally damaging or destroying public or private property;

13. Publishing, printing, distributing, selling, making, downloading, storing, reproducing, opening, copying, or possessing articles, publications, audio and video with extremist contents;
14. Intentionally interfering with or undermining the implementation of the family planning policy;
15. Other extremist speech and acts.

Altogether, the military, administrative, financial, and legislative counter-terrorist framework provides the Chinese state with mechanisms to sustain and intensify the ‘strike, hard’ crackdown of the 1990s under the alibi of fighting terrorism. Instruments that were already in place before 2001, such as the deployment of security forces, have been re-adapted to the anti-terrorist campaign. Other resources, such as the anti-terrorism legislation or the National Anti-Terrorism Leading Group, are novel developments in the region that illustrate how the Chinese state has adapted to a changing global environment where terrorism dominates the security agenda.

*Sustained crackdown in the name of fighting terrorism*

In the GWO’T environment, the Chinese state has continued to implement a domestic crackdown against the ‘evil forces’ of terrorism, separatism, and religious extremism. This triune conceptualization, a core figure of speech in the official discourse, implies that the Chinese government persecutes not only those it holds responsible for organizing violent attacks against the state, but also a series of ethnoreligious practices that it considers the ideological foundation of terrorism, and any manifestation of political dissidence, which the authorities perceive as separatism. China’s counterterrorism efforts are, therefore, aimed at religion, ethnicity, and dissent.

China’s war on terrorism is first and foremost a war on religious extremism, that is, a crackdown on the practice of Islam amongst the Turkic Muslim ethnic minorities in Xinjiang. Under the alibi of combating the ideology that feeds terrorism, Muslims have become suspects of the ‘religious extremism’ that feeds into terrorism. China defines this category with specific benchmarks (see Cao, 2014) in ways that often frame local Islamic traditions and customs as potential signs of terrorist radicalization (see Harris & Aziz, 2019).

A first religious realm disciplined in the war on terror is the space. The authorities have established a spatial binary of legal and illegal venues for the practice of religion. Religious

activities undertaken in non-officially approved venues are considered illegal and targeted by the Chinese security forces for their potential for hosting processes of extremist radicalization or terror-related activities. Under this logic, religious activities traditionally held at home by Muslim families, such as holding prayers, reciting the Quran, or celebrating Mawlid (the birthday of the Islamic prophet Muhammad), have all been linked to religious extremism and hence prosecuted (AFP, 2001d; RFA, 2011h, 2013d, 2016c). A crucial outcome from this framing is the prohibition of imparting religious education in the private sphere. In a society where religious practices are not allowed in government offices, public schools, businesses, or institutions (Cui, 2014b), and where children under the age of 18 and women are not allowed to enter the mosques (RFA, 2006), the private space emerges as the only option for Muslim adults to educate their children in the Islamic faith, values, and rites. However, the use of personal space for religious exchanges clashes with the spatial binary established by the Chinese state. Through surveillance and house-to-house inspections, the Chinese authorities have persecuted hundreds of unregistered Islamic schools, many of them in private residences, accusing organizers of hosting ‘illegal religious activities’ (AFP, 2004c; BBCMSAP, 2005b; Olesen, 2009; RFA, 2012b). Religious teachers, imams, and adults involved in underground schools have been sentenced to prison terms of up to 16 years for spreading ‘extremist religious thought and inciting others to wage a holy war’ (UHRP, 2012b), endangering state security (RFA, 2015b), or inciting ethnic hatred and disrupting the social order (Xinhua, 2014i). Another consequence of the spatial controls is that Muslims cannot participate in religious activities, even authorized ones, when these are held in a different district. The practice of ‘cross-village worship’ is thus considered a crime (RFA, 2009c). The restriction of movements for religious purposes also affects prayers, gatherings, and ceremonies held in shrines and other remote religious sacred sites, which are now prohibited (A. Su, 2017).

On the other side of the binary, the authorized mosque emerges as the only ‘extremism-free’ space for worship within the boundaries of Chinese law. By restricting religious activities to officially sanctioned spaces, the state secures the control of how the Islamic faith is practised, reproduced, and shared. Registered mosques facilitate the supervision and surveillance of the faithful by the Chinese authorities, and the prevention of children from practising religion (RFA, 2013d; CECC, 2006). As an illustration, the Chinese government sent more than 350 officials to Hotan in 2016 for three years with the mission of monitoring mosques (RFA, 2016k). Legal mosques have also become platforms for the Chinese authorities to disseminate patriotic propaganda on the faithful. Chinese flags and pro-CPC red banners

hang in the temples, and patriotic ceremonies such as the singing of the national anthem are held alongside religious practices (see Hayoun, 2013; RFA, 2017j).

Alongside the restriction of religious practices to official venues, the Chinese authorities have determined who can preach and educate in religion, continuing to establish a cohort of clerics instructed in spreading patriotism and promoting the Chinese state policies. To this end, thousands of imams and other Muslim religious figures have continued to participate in official programs of political re-education and patriotic propaganda (V. P. Chan, 2001; BBCMSAP, 2003f; Jiang, 2016). Some of these activities have bordered on humiliation. Imams have been forced to dance in the streets and swear an oath that they would not teach religion to children while chanting slogans in support of the CPC (The Express Tribune, 2015). Propagandistic drives are nonetheless not restricted to religious figures or spaces. Authorities in Xinjiang have organized public lectures throughout the region aimed at explaining and rallying support for the country's religious policies (Reuters, 2012). Evening classes for farmers and herdsman, primarily aimed at poverty eradication, are now accompanied with instructions on how to counter religious extremism (RFA, 2016n).

The Chinese state also dictates who can and who cannot practice religion. In the post-9/11 context, the collectives prevented by the state from practising religion have steadily increased. As an example, in 2006, the local authorities in Kashgar banned a series of categories of people from entering the mosque and conducting religious activities. Amongst them, it listed CPC cadres and members of the Communist Youth League; state employees, workers and retiree; youth under the age of 18; prefecture employees; and women (RFA, 2006). While the prohibition of entering the mosque to state officials and children had been in place at least since 1996 (Rotar, 2003), gender-based restrictions are a post-2011 phenomenon.

The children and the CPC cadres or government officials are the two main targets of the Chinese state efforts to prevent the spreading of religion in Xinjiang. Children and teenagers are distanced from Islam not only by not being allowed to enter the mosque or to get religious instruction at their homes but also through the systematic exclusion of religion from educational centres, from kindergartens to high schools (Chang & Bai, 2015; Reuters, 2016c). For Uyghur students, holding a prayer in the school can lead to expulsion under the accusation of having engaged in 'illegal religious activities' (RFA 2011d). At the university level, controls have reached the point where college students cannot graduate unless their

political views are approved (Reuters, 2013e). Besides, and from 2016, Muslim parents are not allowed to ‘encourage’ their children into religion, and must instead protect them from being lured into extremism and terrorism (Reuters, 2016c). Meanwhile, the pressure on state officials has also intensified (RFA, 2017d). It affects not only government employers, active or retired, but also their families and relatives (RFA, 2011h). Under this paradigm, gestures of faith, connivance or sympathy towards religion may end up in a disciplinary fault. In 2017, a Xinjiang official was demoted for refraining from smoking in front of religious figures so as not to offend their beliefs, a gesture interpreted as timidity in the fight against terrorism (C. Liu, 2017). The same year, an Uyghur CPC cadre was fired for holding her wedding ceremony at home according to the Islamic tradition (RFA, 2017d).

The crackdown on religion affects core elements of Islam, including materials, rituals, festivities, and traditions. A case in point is here is the pressure that the Chinese authorities exert over the Muslim holy book, the Quran. Traditionally present in every Muslim household, the Quran has been securitized in the war on terror. Its study and discussion (Coonan, 2014), the dissemination of its passages (Tong, 2017), or its sale and distribution (AFR, 2008), are practices of risk that may lead to prosecution. Raids confiscating copies of the Quran are not unheard of (RFA, 2009c; RFA, 2017k), while the Chinese authorities are striving to impose a ‘patriotic’ interpretation and edition of the book (HRW, 2005: 53; RFA, 2009e). The scrutiny over the Quran is representative of a general crackdown on unapproved religious literature and audio or video materials (BBCMSAP, 2005b; RFA, 2012j, 2014g).

Another central element of Islam targeted by the Chinese government is the *hajj*, mandatory pilgrimage to Mecca that Muslims must carry out at least once in their lifetime. The Chinese authorities have restricted this activity for fears that local pilgrims may come into contact with subversive religious ideologies. In doing so, many Uyghurs have become deprived of fulfilling their religious duty. Pilgrimages that are not organized by official channels like the Islamic Association of China (IAC) are straightforwardly prosecuted (RFA, 2017h), and those that are authorized are expensive and inaccessible for the majority of the people (AP, 2007b; OnIslam, 2011b; Krishnan, 2011).

At the same time, the Chinese state has imposed strict controls on the observation of fasting during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. While pressures on students and state officials to avoid fasting during this period had already been reported earlier (BBC, 2002), controls

have become systematic since 2008 (RFA, 2008b; BBC, 2014; Al Jazeera, 2012; Reuters, 2015a; Payton, 2016). The Chinese government does not prohibit fasting to the wider Muslim population, but it tries to avoid the popularization of its observance amongst students or civil servants. The Chinese authorities in Xinjiang have thus established units monitoring that teachers and students do not fast during Ramadan, sometimes accompanying the students to the canteen to make sure they do not observe the tradition (RFA, 2008b; Patience, 2014; RFA, 2014o). Meanwhile, state employees have been offered free lunches to prevent them from fasting (RFA, 2008c; AFP, 2012). The Chinese authorities have also discouraged fasting amongst those Uyghur Muslims who are supposedly allowed to fast. To this aim, they have forced Muslim restaurants to stay open all day under the threat of economic or administrative penalties (RFA, 2008b; Al Jazeera, 2015). At the same time, the Chinese authorities have established surveillance controls at the mosques during Ramadan to intimidate the Muslim population, profile those who observe the fasting (RFA, 2012k), and arrest those who encourage observing it (OnIslam, 2011a; RFA, 2016h).

The fight against religious extremism greatly interferes with the private lives of Uyghurs by conditioning personal life choices such as their dress, their physical appearance, or the names they can give to their children. Demonized as ‘abnormal appearances’ (The Straits Times, 2015), the Chinese authorities have eradicated the use of veils in women and beards in men, perceived by the state as signs of radicalization. The practice of encouraging women with incentives to stop wearing veils, characteristic of the 1990s, has given way to the straightforward prohibition of these garments in the post-9/11 period. Initially, the ban on veils was only applied to government employees and students (Smith, 2001; York, 2004). Then, it entailed harassing users and extending the ban to all the female population (CECC, 2011; RFA, 2013d). The prohibition now affects a wide range of religious attires such as full headscarves, jilbabs, hijabs, burkas, as well as combinations of black veils and black robes (Savadove, 2008; RFA 2011h, 2013d; Reuters 2013d; Ho 2015). To encourage the abandonment of veils and other garments with religious connotations, the government has also organized campaigns under names such as ‘Project Beauty’ or slogans like ‘Let Beautiful Hair Flutter, Let Beautiful Faces Be Revealed’ (SCMP, 2011b; CECC, 2011; C. Huang, 2013). The beard plays for men the same role as a marker of religious extremism that the veil does for women. As such, Chinese authorities have prohibited state employees and men under the age of 50 from styling beards (RFA, 2009a, 2013d). ‘Crescent moon-shaped’ beards have become the symbol of religious radicalization (RFA, 2015i) and styling a beard has become

punishable with prison (CECC, 2011; AFP, 2015). Finally, the Chinese state has also criminalized the choice of ‘overly religious’ names for the children – including Islam, Quran, Mecca, Jihad, Imam, Saddam, Hajj, or Medina- threatening to bar children with forbidden names from accessing public health and education (RFA, 2015p, 2017e).

Altogether, and under the pretext of combating religious extremism, the Chinese government has ‘nationalized’ and ‘patriotized’ Islam in Xinjiang, extirpating the Muslim faith from the private spaces and lives of the Uyghurs, and turning it into a state-managed issue. The state-sanctioned religious structure -characterized by a large number of temples, schools, clergy, and religious associations- constitutes for the Chinese government a proof that there is religious freedom in Xinjiang, and that the state can ‘satisfy believers’ normal religious requirements’ (SCIO, 2016). However, despite this image of religious freedom, the fact remains that the counter-terrorism agenda is aimed at diluting the religious conscience and replacing it with a secular and patriotic idiosyncrasy. This is a parallel agenda of patriotic flag-raising and national anthem singing ceremonies (RFA, 2016m), of Uyghurs forced to eat pork or drink alcohol during Chinese cultural festivals (RFA, 2019), of shops forced to sell and encourage the consumption of cigarettes and alcohol (RFA, 2015f); of mass events where the Uyghur population is pushed to adopt traditional Chinese garbs (RFA, 2016i), or of pushing the marriage of Uyghur women to Han men for assimilation purposes (Xiao, 2019). On the whole, China has implemented in Xinjiang an agenda of sinicization of Islam under the clout of fostering the ‘Chinese nation’s valuable traditions’ and spreading a ‘patriotic education’ (see Gan, 2018).

Beyond fighting religious extremism, China’ war on terror also entails the persecution of political dissent under the excuse of opposing another ideological force that the Chinese state sees as conducive to terrorism, that of separatism. Uyghur political activists critical with the policies in Xinjiang have therefore been persecuted as agents of the ‘East Turkestan terrorist forces’. No better example illustrates this logic that conflates political opposition with terrorism than the case of Uyghur scholar Ilham Tohti, sentenced to life in prison in 2014 under charges for separatism. Tohti, an intellectual who worked as a teacher at the Minzu University in Beijing, has been one of the most outspoken Uyghur critical voices in China. During years, he aired, often in the international media or through his website Uyghur Online, many of the social grievances affecting Uyghurs in Xinjiang, including unemployment, poverty, inequality vis-à-vis the Han, or the absence of real political

autonomy for the ethnic minorities (RFA, 2009b, 2008a). Tohti was also very critical of the Chinese state crackdown approach to violence and dissent in Xinjiang (see Kwok, 2010; Ramzy, 2010; G. Wong, 2013; RFA, 2013s). He investigated the cases of Uyghurs disappeared in the state crackdown following the Ürümqi riots in 2009 (Tohti, 2013). Despite this critical stance, he publicly declared himself against the independence of Xinjiang, explicitly framing his activism as aimed at the fulfilment of ethnic minority rights and autonomy as enshrined in the Chinese law and constitution (RFA, 2008a; Tohti 2014, 2015). This character and the fact that he never espoused violent means earned him a reputation as a moderate figure crucial for the understanding between the Chinese government and the Uyghur ethnic minority (The Economist, 2014). No matter this moderation, and following years of pressure to stop him from criticizing the Chinese policies and talking to foreign media (RFA, 2012l, 2013b, 2013l, 2013c), the Chinese authorities sentenced him in 2014 to life in prison, accused of separatism (Bo, 2014).

The case of Ilham Tohti is a reflection of how the Chinese government deals with critical voices from Xinjiang under the war on terrorism: through an association of critique with dissent, dissent with separatism, and separatism with terrorism. For years, many Uyghurs who have criticized the Chinese government policies in Xinjiang have been persecuted accused of threatening China's 'national unity' and 'security' and connivance with 'terrorists'. Uyghur poet Tursunjan Emet was arrested in January 2002 for reciting a poem critical with the Chinese policies that the Chinese authorities described as a 'reactionary, anti-society, anti-government and agitation poem' (HRW, 2005; BBCMSAP, 2003c), or like 'terrorism in the spiritual form' (Marquand, 2003). Uygur writer Nurmuhent Yasin was sentenced in 2005 to 10 years in prison for writing 'Wild Pigeon', the story of a blue pigeon that commits suicide rather than living without freedom (HRW, 2005, p. 21). The work was described as a 'strong portrayal of a people deeply unhappy with life under Beijing's rule' (RFA, 2005b; WUC, 2011b). Uyghur journalist Mehbube Ablesh, who worked for the state Xinjiang People's Radio Station in Ürümqi, was arrested in 2008 after posting articles online that criticized the regional government policies in Xinjiang (UHRP, 2015). Another Uyghur journalist, Memetjan Abdulla, who had worked for a state radio station, was sentenced to life in prison in 2010 on charges that he spread subversive information at the time of the Ürümqi riots (E. Wong, 2010). In 2015, a court in Xinjiang sentenced Uyghur religious scholar Qamber Amber, who had a history of speeches critical with the state policies in Xinjiang, to nine years in prison for 'crimes related to state security' (RFA, 2015c). Although treated with greater

leniency, ethnic Han journalists have also been punished for criticizing the war on terrorism. Zhao Xinwei, editor-in-chief of the Ürümchi-based *Xinjiang Daily* newspaper, was sacked in 2015 and removed from the CPC because his ‘words and deeds’ opposed China’s counter-terrorist policies (China News, 2015).

Following official calls to extend the anti-dissent efforts to the ‘virtual world’ (AP, 2009), the Chinese government has turned the media realm, and most notably the Internet, into another a front in the war on terror. Claiming to fight the circulation of ‘extremist’ materials, the Chinese authorities have arrested hundreds of people between 2012 and 2017 during regular online security crackdowns (Y. Wen, 2013; RFA, 2013e; C. Wong, 2014; Global Times, 2017b). Punishable online activities include uploading e-books with Uyghur nationalist or separatism tones (Y. Wen, 2013), uploading or watching audio-visual files with ‘extremist’ content (ibid), discussing ‘extremist’ ideas in online chats, using cell phones and DVDs to spread religious materials (RFA, 2013e), or fabricating rumours and disrupting social order (RFA, 2013h). Those arrested have faced jail sentences ranging from 2 years to life in prison (RFA, 2013e; Reuters, 2014). Besides persecuting the circulation of extremist materials, the Chinese authorities have also clamped down on online comments critical with the government policies, characterized as rumours or ‘hostile attacks’ (Global Times, 2017a). As put by a Chinese terrorism expert, the online crackdown is aimed at ‘misleading messages such as accusing the government of oppression’ (C. Wong, 2014).

The online crackdown has involved the closure of many Uyghur-language websites, in what has been described as a ‘massive digital book-burning’ that effectively dismantled the Uyghur Internet (Szadziwski & Fay, 2014). A case in point here is Tohti’s popular website Uyghur Online, conceived as a vehicle to foster understanding between the Han Chinese and Uyghur communities, and closed in 2008 for alleged links to Uyghur ‘extremists’ abroad (RFA, 2008a). Following the Ürümchi riots in 2009, several Uyghur webmasters and bloggers were imprisoned, their websites closed, under accusations of publishing illegal news, propagating separatism, endangering national security, or leaking state secrets (BBC 2010a; RFA, 2010d, 2011a, 2011b, 2015n). Far from hosting any sort of political or religious activism, most of these websites dealt with literature, entertainment, on wider cultural contents (see Szadziwski & Fay, 2014; Reyhan, 2012), making the crackdown an attack on Uyghur popular culture.

In their efforts to control the flow of information and prevent alternative accounts of the situation in Xinjiang to reach the outside world, the Chinese authorities shut down the telecommunications supply following violent events. In the aftermath of the July 2009 riots in Ürümchi, China suspended the Internet, stopped mobile phone services, and cancelled international outbound calls, leaving the Xinjiang capital ‘cut off from the rest of the world’ (The Indian Express, 2009; RWB, 2009a; Blanchard, 2009). The government also ordered search engines and social networking and blogging sites to block sensitive terms related to the riots (China Digital Times, 2009; Cui, 2009). Similar blackouts were reported in 2013 following the Hanerik riots (Jacobs, 2013), or after violence erupted in Lükchün (RWB, 2013). From 2015, the Chinese government has also banned the use of virtual private networks (VPN) – broadly used to circumvent censorship- now described as ‘terrorist software’ (Mozur, 2015; RFA, 2016l).

Extending the idea of Xinjiang as China’s ‘black hole’ (Stone, 2013), and resuming practices from the 1990s, the Chinese government has curtailed the work of foreign journalists and academics working in and on the region. Speaking to the foreign media has become an offence. Sitiwaldi Tilivaldi was arrested in 2004 after discussing the crackdown with an American journalist (PBS, 2005). Ekberjan Jamal was sentenced to 10 years in prison in 2008 for the crime of leaking state secrets after he sent the sounds of a protest to friends in the Netherlands (RFA, 2009d). Uyghur journalist Gheyret Niyaz, who worked for the state media and was seen as a pro-government figure, was sentenced to 15 years of prison in 2010 accused of ‘endangering state security’ for giving interviews to the foreign media about the Ürümchi riots (RFA, 2010c). Meanwhile, the mother of an Uyghur man who disappeared after the Ürümchi riots was charged in 2016 with leaking state secrets for discussing her son’s disappearance with RFA (RFA, 2016d). In this sense, the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) and Reporters Without Borders (RWB) have singled out Xinjiang as a place where the Chinese authorities regularly obstruct the work of journalists, specifically when it comes to reporting on violent incidents (see IFJ, 2017, 2019; RWB, 2013). Foreign journalists were harassed and beaten by the Chinese police when investigating the Kashgar attack in 2008 (Kyodo, 2008b; IFJ, 2008) or the Ürümchi riots in 2009 (RWB, 2009b). Harassing does not only take place at the time of sensitive events. Foreign correspondents have been monitored, questioned, or arrested, by the police, their cameras and laptops being searched and seized, while carrying out regular reporting activities in the region (Makinen, 2014; BBC, 2015b; Hui, 2017). The Chinese authorities have also expelled journalists whose coverage of

Xinjiang displeased Beijing. In 2012, Melissa Chan, a correspondent for Al Jazeera English in China, became the first accredited foreign correspondent to be expelled from the country in 14 years. Chan, whose translators had suffered surveillance and intimidation practices while reporting in Xinjiang, was expelled for violating ‘relevant laws’, according to a Foreign Ministry spokesman (BBC, 2012a; Xia, 2012). Meanwhile, French journalist Ursula Gauthier did not get her press credentials renewed in 2015 in reprisal for criticizing the repression in the region (Gauthier, 2015). According to the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Lu Kang, Gauthier’s critique ‘overtly’ advocated ‘for acts of terrorism and killings of innocent civilians’ (K. Wang, 2015). In the latest of these developments, the Chinese government forced out reporters Megha Rajagopalan and Chun Han Wong for their critical coverage of the emerging surveillance state in Xinjiang (Reuters, 2018; Hutzler, 2019).

The Chinese state pressure on the production and circulation of information about Xinjiang has also affected foreign academics. The Chinese authorities have prevented scholars from entering the country because of their research agenda, their filiations, or specific works about the region. Japanese researcher Naoko Mizutani was arrested at the Beijing Capital Airport and sent back to Tokyo in 2010 for her links with Uyghur activist Rebiya Kadeer (RFA, 2010b). Similarly, the late Elliot Sperling, a historian of Tibet, was rejected entry to China at the Beijing airport, and sent back to the U.S., for his sensitive research and support for Uyghur scholar Ilham Tohti (Finney, 2014). Another case in point is that of the so-called ‘Xinjiang 13’, a group of mostly American scholars whose co-authorship of the book *Xinjiang: China’s Muslim Borderland* (Starr et al., 2004) earned them a backlash from the Chinese authorities, having their visas to China denied for years (Golden & Staley, 2011). The authors of the book, leading figures in Xinjiang studies, were described by a Chinese academic as a ‘hodgepodge of scholars, scholars in preparation, phony scholars, and shameless fabricators of political rumor’ (De Vise, 2011). As the historian James Millward, one of the co-authors of the book, suggests, the backlash may have resulted from a mix of circumstances that included the politicization of the book under the GWoT context (Millward, 2011). The case of the ‘Xinjiang 13’ illustrates how sensitive the information about violence in the region has become for the Chinese authorities. In their most recent effort to control narratives produced by foreign actors, the Chinese government has requested international academic publishers to self-censor their repositories of articles in their Chinese websites, under penalty of having these shut down (Lau & Mai, 2017). Articles about Xinjiang are, alongside other

topics such as Taiwan or Tibet, amongst the topics that China wants to see erased from the domestic Internet.

*Chasing and hunting 'terrorists' abroad*

The Chinese state has given new vigour to its international strategy in the post 9/11 context, placing the conflict in Xinjiang as a crucial element in its bilateral relations with other countries. China's success in establishing Xinjiang as a front in the GWoT is illustrated by the moral, diplomatic, and operational support that numerous states have given to its counter-terrorism agenda. Many countries have voiced their support for China's war on terrorism in Xinjiang, amongst these Kazakhstan (BBCMSAP, 2002b), Uzbekistan (AFP, 2015a; Xinhua, 2010), Turkmenistan (AFP, 2006a), Afghanistan (BBCMSA, 2002), Turkey (BBCMSAP, 2002d, 2003a; People's Daily, 2003a; Xinhua, 2012), Pakistan (CNN, 2001; VOA, 2011; Blanchard, 2011; Dawn, 2011), and Russia (PTI, 2002; BBCMSAP, 2003d). Signs of support have ranged from the acknowledgement that violence in Xinjiang is part of the global terrorist threat, to an explicit commitment to fight Uyghur militants and hand them over to the Chinese authorities. The SCO has also reiterated over the years its commitment to the fight against the three forces of terrorism, separatism, and religious extremism (Kammerer, 2002; Nekrasov, 2017). Despite the pageantry of the SCO institutional summits, the organization has for the most part not developed any substantial multilateral counter-terrorism tool (Weitz, 2012). Instead, China has relied on bilateral agreements with Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan to combat separatism, terrorism, and religious extremism (AFP, 2006b; BBCMCA, 2007; BBCMSAP, 2002f). Anti-terrorist cooperation has been equally intense with countries bordering Xinjiang such as Afghanistan or Pakistan. With these countries, China has exchanged aid and support for the Afghan and Pakistani security forces in exchange for intelligence, and protection for Chinese nationals working there (AFP, 2003b, 2004b; Xu, 2012; PTI, 2014; Reddy, 2004; PTI, 2005; BBCMSAP, 2008c; Global Times 2010). Other bilateral exchanges have included the creation of a Russian-Chinese anti-terrorism working group (BBCMSAP, 2001i), or specific agreements to share intelligence on Uyghur suspects with the Turkish (Intelligence Online, 2007) and Indonesian authorities (The Jakarta Post, 2010).

A direct outcome of China's internationalization of the war on terror in Xinjiang is the deportation and extradition of hundreds of members of the Uyghur ethnic minority who had previously fled Xinjiang (see WUC, 2016). Countries such as Malaysia, Laos, Thailand,

Indonesia, Vietnam, Myanmar, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Nepal, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan or Uzbekistan have acceded to the requests of the Chinese authorities and deported Uyghurs accused of illegal migration (Cheang, 2009), criminal activities (WUC, 2011c), human trafficking (Allard 2011), involvement in the 2009 Ürümchi riots (RFA, 2011e), or travelling with the purpose of joining militant jihadi groups (Blanchard, 2015; see also Zenn, 2014). It is difficult to establish the veracity of these claims. In some cases, particularly some extraditions from Pakistan, the suspects seem to have taken part in militant separatist activities (AP, 2002; The Indian Express, 2009). In other cases, the violent nature of the crimes that prompted the extradition is unclear. A case in point here pertains the Uyghurs extradited by countries such as Nepal (BBCMSAP, 2003e; AI, 2002), Cambodia (Cheang, 2009), Malaysia (RFA, 2013a), or Kazakhstan (WUC, 2012; HRW, 2011; RFA, 2011b), while they were in the process of applying for refugee status to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Meanwhile, other deportations have involved large groups of families including women and children, as reported in Pakistan (RFA, 2011f), Laos (RFA, 2010f), Myanmar (WUC, 2011c), or Afghanistan (Matta, 2015). In one of the most publicized cases, a group of more than 90 Uyghurs, including women and children, was deported from Thailand to China in 2015 (RFA, 2015l, 2015m). Far from criminals at large, the group was made up of families who had fled the country out of fear of being persecuted for their political activism (RFA, 2011f; WUC, 2012), or because of the state crackdown that followed the 2009 riots (Cheang, 2009; RFA 2010f, 2014e). For the most part, and once deported, the fate and whereabouts of the extradited Uyghurs are unknown, particularly when it comes to men (RFA, 2010f), although some have received sentences to prison terms accused of terrorism and separatism (RFA, 2012a, 2012p; Blanchard, 2015).

Where Beijing's extradition demands are not met, the Chinese state has exerted diplomatic pressure or used espionage or extortion to control Uyghur activists abroad. A case in point here concerns the 22 Uyghurs who were arrested in Pakistan and sold for a bounty to the US forces after the American invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. Held for years in the Guantanamo Bay prison (Cuba), and later declared as No Longer Enemy Combatant (NLEC) by the U.S. military, the so-called 'Guantanamo 22' were gradually resettled in third countries such as Albania, Bermuda, El Salvador, or Slovakia, with the whole group having found a host country by 2014 (Savage, 2013; Henriquez, 2015). During these years, the Chinese government unsuccessfully called on Washington to repatriate them to China, arguing that they were 'terrorists' who should face the Chinese law (Reuters, 2001b;

VOA, 2004; AFP, 2004d, 2009; AP, 2006; Reuters, 2008c; El País, 2010). This pressure turned into economic extortion and veiled threats for the countries that accepted them, or considered doing so at some point, including Palau (Carreon, 2011), Norway (BBCMSAP, 2004c), Switzerland (Swissinfo, 2010), Albania (BBCME, 2009), or Costa Rica (López, 2014). Uyghur exiles have thus developed a condition of ‘sensitive refugees’ that makes it very difficult for them to be accepted in many countries, even in those with a tradition of welcoming refugees, or with an already settled Uyghur community, such as Sweden (AFP, 2008b) or the Netherlands (RFA, 2011g).

The Chinese authorities have also intensified their efforts to obstruct the activities of Uyghur associations in the diaspora, which Beijing often frames as supporters of the ‘East Turkestan terrorist forces’. With the connivance of the local authorities, and sometimes the help of Chinese agents on the ground, Uyghur leaders and cultural associations have been under increased pressure in the realm of the SCO, notably in places like Kazakhstan or Kyrgyzstan (Working, 2001; BBCMNF, 2004). Following 9/11 and the GWoT, China’s clout has transcended the realm of the SCO. In 2003, the Chinese government published a list of wanted terrorists that included leaders of violent militant organizations as well as peaceful activists living in Western countries (Cloud & Johnson, 2004). The experience of Dolkun Isa, president of the WUC, and who featured on the list, epitomises Beijing’s capacity to harass Uyghur activists abroad by accusing them of having links with terrorism. Isa, who fled Xinjiang in 1997 and became a German citizen in 2006 (AI, 2009), has openly rejected the use of violent means to advance the Uyghur cause (Das, 2011). However, following China’s request, he became the subject of an Interpol red notice for terrorism (PRC, 2016). On the grounds of this notice, he has been temporarily detained in Italy (J. Huang, 2017), has seen his visa to India cancelled (The Times of India, 2016), and has been denied entry to South Korea (AI, 2009). The pressure on Dolkun Isa even reached the premises of the UN in New York, where security guards expelled him without explanation in 2017 as he intended to attend an event organized by the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (RFA, 2017g). Other Uyghur figures have seen their activities abroad obstructed because of Chinese pressure. They include Ahmadjan Osman, expelled in 2004 from Syria after 15 years living there because of his open support to the Uyghur rights cause (Cloud & Johnson, 2004); Erkin Alptekin, questioned by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) after Chinese embassy officials asked the U.S. Department of State to deny him entry to American soil (ibid); Mohammed Tohti and other Uyghur activists from Canada, detained and questioned

by the German authorities in 2004 when they intended to attend as delegates a meeting of the Uyghur diaspora (ibid); or brothers Omer and Akbar Khan, founders of the Omer Uyghur Foundation, blocked in Pakistan from travelling to Istanbul to attend a summit of the Uyghur nationalist movement (RFA, 2011c).

China has also resorted to espionage and extortion activities to achieve its ends. The presence of Chinese intelligence operatives spying on the Uyghur communities in the diaspora has been reported in countries such as France (Intelligence Online, 2016), Germany (Intelligence Online, 2007), Sweden (The Local, 2009), or the Netherlands (Expatica.com, 2012). Cases of extortion on Uyghurs abroad by pressing their families back in Xinjiang also abound. Dolkun Isa denounced in 2004 that government officials had invited him to cancel a meeting in Munich during a call made from China from a room where his parents were present (Cloud & Johnson, 2004). In 2012, the Chinese police reportedly threatened to confiscate the passports of the parents of dozens of Uyghur refugees seeking asylum in Europe unless they returned to China (RFA, 2012g). Chinese authorities also harassed for years the family of US-based Uyghur journalist Shohret Hoshur, prompting the complaints of the US Department of State in 2014 (Dietz, 2015). Meanwhile, many Uyghur students who studied Islam at Egypt's Al-Azhar University were ordered by Chinese authorities to return to Xinjiang in 2017, with family members held hostage in some cases to force them back (RFA, 2017f). Uyghurs abroad have also been cut off from their families in Xinjiang as punishment for their activities. This happened to some of the Uyghurs from Guantanamo resettled in Bermuda (NPR, 2009). In other cases, the espionage and extortion efforts overlap, as occurred to Erkin Urban, an Uyghur living in Canada who was urged by the Chinese police to spy for them on his fellow exiles if he wanted to see his family again (Mooney & Lague, 2015). Another illustration of the long reach of China's war against terror is the cyber-harassment of Uyghur associations and activists based in the West, who have seen their websites attacked and their computers infected by hackers based in China (Constantin, 2012; Mimoso, 2013).

Under China's war on terrorism, fleeing the persecution in Xinjiang by travelling abroad is not an immediate guarantee of achieving freedom or protection for Uyghur exiles and refugees. Outside China, they may become potential suspects, detained, questioned, arrested, and in the worst-case extradited accused of terrorism. For those Uyghurs who reach their destination, and even for those who have lived abroad for decades, the peace of mind is

never total, with the diaspora communities seeing their political or cultural activities monitored and obstructed, sometimes by the very countries that host them, increasingly hesitant to confront a powerful China.

*Sine die terroristization: surveillance state and 're-education' camps*

The latest developments in the terroristization of Xinjiang are the emergence of a surveillance state in the region and the internment of hundreds of thousands of members of the Uyghur and other Muslim ethnic minorities in so-called 're-education' camps, both undertaken in the name of countering extremism and terrorism. The deployment of a technological apparatus to scrutinize the population to limits previously unknown and the implementation of a massive scale campaign of 're-education' and 'de-extremification' (China Law Translate, 2017) of the Uyghur and other ethnic minorities signal a *sine die* structuration of the stage of 'terroristization'.

The 'security', 'police', or 'surveillance' (Rajagopalan, 2018; Chin & Bürge, 2017; Millward 2018) state of Xinjiang presents levels of intrusion that have transformed the region into 'one of the most closely surveilled places on earth' (Chin & Bürge, 2017). Described as a 'high-tech version of the Cultural Revolution' (A. Zenz, quoted in Rajagopalan, 2017), the Chinese surveillance apparatus in the region has emerged in parallel to the declaration of a 'people's war on terrorism' in 2014 and the appointment of Cheng Quanguo as the new Xinjiang Party Secretary in 2016. The police state entails a conglomerate of security practices focused on the Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslim ethnic minorities and epitomized by a 'grid-style social management' surveillance system, previously implemented by Chen in Tibet (Zenz & Leibold, 2017b). This system involves the segmenting of urban communities into geometric zones to enable practices such as fencing off neighbourhoods or installing checkpoints at their entrance (Zenz & Leibold, 2017b; The Economist, 2016). Another element of Chen's design is a network of so-called 'convenient' neighbourhood-based police stations, which serve as operational bases for police surveillance (Leibold & Zenz, 2016; see also Xinjiangnet, 2016) According to available estimates, there are up to 7,300 stations across the region, with 949 only in the region's capital Ürümqi (Energy News, 2017; Gan, 2017b). Inside the grid, thousands of CCTV cameras monitor the population (People's Daily, 2010e; P. Wen, 2017; Chin & Bürge, 2017). As some local media in Xinjiang put it, this system

allows for ‘complete coverage without any chinks, blind spots, or blank spaces’ (quoted in Zenz & Leibold, 2017a).

In this police state, the Chinese authorities control the movement of the population inside and outside the urban communities. They restrict and supervise internal travel around the region, with citizens, for the most part, members of the Turkic Muslim ethnic minorities, stopped and scrutinized. Uyghurs need official permission when they travel outside their home districts, or when they move from the rural areas into the urban cities (RFA, 2012i; The Economist, 2016). Restrictions include the creation of special identity cards known as *bianmin* (convenient), a sort of internal passport (The Economist, 2016), and an extensive system of checkpoints and facial-recognition systems aimed at identifying the population as they transit in transport hubs, roads, hospitals or hotels within and outside the region (RFA, 2012b, 2015e, 2015q, 2015e; Global Times, 2015c; Rajagopalan, 2017; Chin & Bürge, 2017; R. Li, 2017a). Travelling outside China is also severely restricted by the confiscation of passports or by refusing to issue new documents to prevent Uyghurs from moving overseas (RFA, 2012q, 2016j; BBC, 2016; E. Wong, 2016; HRW, 2016).

Besides monitoring and restricting their movement, the Chinese authorities have infiltrated the daily lives of the ethnic minority population through a variety of intrusive practices. Households and personal items, from knives to carpets, are identified, categorized, and scrutinized (The Economist, 2016; Lai, 2017; RFA, 2017c). The invasion of the private space is particularly aggressive when it comes to electronic devices such as cell phones, external hard drives, or laptops, which must be taken to the police for registration and scanning (O. Lam, 2017). Residents are forced to install a spyware app on their mobile phones to monitor ‘terrorist’ content and prevent them from accessing ‘terrorist information’ (RFA, 2017i; O. Lam, 2017), and pedestrians can be stopped at any moment, having their cell phones checked for sensitive content, from apps or messages, to ‘extremist’ videos (RFA, 2016a; Rajagopalan, 2017).

The surveillance state also relies on gathering data from citizens for security purposes. From 2017, the Xinjiang authorities have collected DNA samples and other biometric data including fingerprints, blood and voiceprint samples, or 3D body and iris scan images as a requirement to issue new passports (HRW, 2007b, 2016; RFA, 2016g), or under the guise of a free public health program (HRW, 2007c). According to some estimates, nearly 19 million

residents of all ethnicities, almost the whole population of Xinjiang, estimated in 21.8 million (M. A. Kuo, 2017), have been profiled. Data profiling can be used for a variety of applications, such as to regulate the household registration system known as *hukou* and by which people can access education, medical, and housing benefits in their region of birth (Griffiths, 2017). At this level, DNA matching can clarify the biological relations between fathers and their presumed children to uncover cases in which ethnic minorities have resisted state family planning measures by sending ‘extra’ children to relatives (M. A. Kuo, 2017). Meanwhile, non-biometric data collection includes surveying the Muslim communities for religious profiling according to parameters including praying habits, travelling patterns, or contacts abroad (Chin & Bürge, 2017). International human rights organizations have criticized the banking of biodata and other information as ‘a gross violation of international human rights norms’ (HRW, 2017c). This adds to the speculation that the emerging surveillance state in Xinjiang serves as a laboratory for the social credit system that China seemingly plans to apply nationwide (M. Wang, 2017). On their part, the Chinese authorities have defended data collection as a measure needed to ‘protect national security’ (R. Li, 2017b).

To police the region and sustain the surveillance apparatus, the Chinese authorities have relied on the very ethnic minority population it monitors, displaying the popular dimension of the ‘people’s war’ on terror. As Zenz and Leibold (2017a) point out, the Chinese government has applied the colonial ‘imperial book’ to formally recruit a job-thirsty ‘native’ population for the incipient security industry. In parallel, the state has erected a scheming system of financial rewards in exchange for tips about suspect behaviour. This system, already applied in the months following 9/11, contemplates rewards of up to 5 million RMB for tip-offs depending on their counter-terrorist ‘value’ (see BBCMSAP, 2002a; Li & Kim, 2013; China Daily, 2013a; Jiang & Fang, 2014; Global Times, 2014a; RFA, 2016e; K. Huang, 2017). A quarter of the 400 terrorist suspects arrested in the first four months of the ‘people’s war’ crackdown launched in May 2014 came following tip-offs from informants of the general public (RFA, 2014n). In this scheme, the Chinese authorities have taken advantage of the precarious financial situation of much of the security workforce and other segments of the population, who see the tip-for-reward arrangement as means to make an extra salary (RFA, 2017l). Other measures mobilizing the public for surveillance purposes include constraining villagers into spying on their neighbours under threat of collective punishment (RFA, 2016f), organizing families into ‘anti-terror’ units to ‘encourage the masses to actively

provide tips related to terrorism' (RFA, 2017b), or forcing villagers into 'revealing errors', confessing their faults, and exposing other people's mistakes (RFA, 2017a). Uyghur cadres and officials constitute a core target of these campaigns, with the government particularly keen on obtaining tips that expose so-called 'two-faced' party members or cadres who do not demonstrate enough zeal in following the official directives, which are accused of disloyalty or of promoting extremism or separatism (RFA, 2017; Reuters, 2016a; Gan, 2017a; C. Liu, 2017). In enlisting the Xinjiang population to underpin the surveillance apparatus, the Chinese state has created an atmosphere of suspicion and distrust amongst the people, instrumental to the control and disciplining of the ethnic minorities.

All in all, and as a result of this heavy policing apparatus, Xinjiang has become the nationwide epicentre of criminal punishment. In 2017, the region accounted for 21 per cent of all arrests made by the Chinese state that year, even though the XUAR population is only about 1.5 per cent of China's total (CHRD, 2018). The period between 2013 and 2017 saw an increase of 306 per cent of the arrests in Xinjiang when compared to the previous five-year span (ibid). In turn, the year 2017 alone accounted for nearly 70 per cent of all the arrests made from 2013, showing the impact of a surveillance state erected to fight the 'war on terror' (ibid).

Where the Chinese government has informed of these statistics, a parallel extrajudicial counter-terrorist effort has developed in Xinjiang that finds no hint of official accountability or transparency. In the latest development of China's war on terrorism, hundreds of thousands of Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslim minorities, notably Kazakhs, have been arrested without trial and sent to so-called 're-education camps'. According to UN-cited estimates, and starting from 2017, up to two million have been forced without trial into these 'political camps for indoctrination' (Nebehay, 2018; CECC, 2018). The Chinese authorities have mapped the mass internment as part of the country's crackdown on terrorism and extremism, claiming it has successfully stabilized the region. A Chinese delegation to the UN acknowledged the existence of camps where 'those who are convicted of minor offences' are taught 'vocational skills in education and training centres, according to relevant laws' (L. Kuo, 2018; China Daily, 2018). In an op-ed, the *Global Times* claimed that the 'high intensity' of the regulations in Xinjiang has prevented the region from becoming 'China's Syria' or 'China's Lybia' (Global Times, 2018). For many concerned scholars, however, this unprecedented campaign represents no less than a 'vast new gulag' (Millward, 2019) or the

Chinese state ‘definitive solution to the Uyghur question’ (Zenz, 2019; also see Millward, cited in Shih, 2018). In 2018, the US Congressional-Executive Commission on China described the latest counter-terrorism step in Xinjiang constitutes ‘the largest mass incarceration of a minority population in the world today’ (CECC, 2018).

Due to the reporting restrictions in the region, journalists and academics only started to notice the extent of the mass internment of Uyghurs in 2017 (Zenz, 2018; Rajagopalan, 2017). The available information suggests a variety of reasons for internment. Some people have been arrested for motives related to the crackdown on ‘religious extremism’. They were confined for participating in unauthorized religious activities, wearing veils and other religious attire, or having ‘extremist’ or ‘separatist’ content stored in cell phones (HRW, 2017a; RFA, 2018b; Rajagopalan, 2017; Chin & Bürge, 2017). Others have been imprisoned for having connections abroad, either because they studied religion or travelled to Muslim nations, or because their relatives live in other countries (ibid). Some internees are in the camps not because of their deeds, but because their relatives have been previously arrested (ibid), or for past actions, as far as a decade ago, such as having attended Koranic studies classes or watched ‘terrorism’ videos (CHRD, 2018). In some cases, illiterate minority farmers with no criminal records have been detained and interned simply for not speaking Chinese (Shih, 2018). The broad scope of these categories signals an effort to net as many as possible into ‘re-education’ camps which, judging from their physical features – they include security walls, barbed-wire fences, reinforced doors and windows, watchtowers, camera surveillance systems, and entry checkpoints (Z. Li, 2018; Zenz, 2019)- look far from ‘vocational’ or ‘educational’ training centres.

Inside the camps, the Chinese authorities pursue a program of ‘de-extremification’ based on the idea of ‘transformation through education’, a concept previously applied in contexts like the persecution of the Falun Gong spiritual practice, disciplinary processes within the CPC, or drug addict rehabilitation (Zenz, 2019). An official research paper described ‘transformation through education’ as ‘a permanent cure’ for Xinjiang (Shih, 2018). This method, the paper pointed out, was applied on people ‘who did not know what they had done wrong when they were sent to re-education’, and who, only after being released, realized of their ‘mistakes’ (ibid). The idea of mass internment of bodies ignorant of their disease that need to be ‘de-extremized’ and ‘transformed’ fits into the bio-political and dehumanizing dimensions of the Chinese state terrorism discourse in Xinjiang (see Roberts, 2018).

Recalling metaphors used in the past, a Chinese official has praised the camps in the following terms:

‘You can’t uproot all the weeds hidden among the crops in the field one by one — you need to spray chemicals to kill them all... Reeducating these people is like spraying chemicals on the crops. That is why it is a general re-education, not limited to a few people.’ (quoted in RFA, 2018a)

Accounts on the life inside the camps provided by informants, former internees and their relatives explain how the Chinese state implements the ‘transformation’ and ‘de-extremification’ agenda. Their testimonies speak of a program of cultural sinicization, secularization, and patriotic indoctrination. Internees receive Chinese language and history lessons, which are taught as a matter of ‘patriotism’ (HRW, 2017a). History lessons present Xinjiang as a land ‘liberated’ by the CPC, its inhabitants rescued from slavery and backwardness (Shih, 2018). Chinese assimilation is paralleled by the rejection of religion as a harmful and dangerous practice. Chinese officials lecture internees on the dangers of Islam (ibid). They also invite them to disavow their Muslim beliefs, and apologize for and reject as ‘extremist’ many of the religious practices benchmarked as such in the official discourse (ibid; see Table 4.4). The re-education camps are a vehicle to replace the Uyghur ethnic identity, with Islam as its core market, for a patriotic affiliation loyal to the CPC and the state. The internees are forced to learn and recite Xinjiang laws and policies, watch pro-government propaganda videos, sing the Chinese national anthem, raise the Chinese flag, learn ‘red songs, attend lectures on Xi Jinping’s thought, and thank the CPC and Xi for their meals (HRW, 2017a; Shih, 2017, 2018). The program is implemented under a strong psychological pressure that reflects the same mechanisms of the surveillance state, forcing the internees not only to criticize themselves but also to denounce others members of their ethnic group (Shih, 2017). Resistance is met with a disciplining regime that, according to available accounts, includes abuses, tortures, solitary confinement, or food and sleep deprivation, and which has resulted in custodial deaths (BBC, 2018; Shih, 2017, 2018; EFE, 2018; Danoliva, 2018). Such conditions have led Western scholars and journalists to interpret the camps as an orchestrated effort of ‘coercive social re-engineering’ (Zenz, 2019), or a ‘cultural cleansing’ of the Uyghur ethnic identity (Shih, 2018).

In the process of terroristization, the surveillance state and the mass internment of Uyghur and other ethnic minorities for their ‘transformation through re-education’ signal the sine die structuration of the terroristization stage, one in which the systematic construction of violent tensions as a terrorism problem permeates the totality of the Xinjiang politics. As a massive dragnet for the incarceration of the thousands, the surveillance apparatus in place transcends religious or political boundaries. It does not (only) target mosques or universities, the politically sensitive or the devoutly religious. It is everywhere, affecting everyone. In the name of fighting terrorism, the Chinese state has terroristized Xinjiang, transforming Uyghurs, Kazakhs, and others in the Turkic Muslim communities into perennial terrorist suspects by virtue of their religious faith or their ethnic condition.

#### **4.4 Conclusion**

This chapter has explored how violence in Xinjiang has become terroristized following 9/11, and how this construct has been elevated to dominant status. Under this new paradigm, hundreds of thousands of Uyghurs in Xinjiang are systematically framed as terrorist suspects. The chapter has investigated how the representation of frictions as largely the result of a dissident separatist and religious extremist agency linked to international terrorist forces has been instrumental to the reproduction of an endless state of emergency in Xinjiang. The ensuing ‘war’ permeates all levels of life and politics in the region. The chapter has traced the reification of the terrorist threat in the everyday existence of the Uyghurs, whose lives are surveilled; their bodies and identity intervened. This threat is observable in the active checkpoints and convenient police stations that overrun the streets, in the show of force embodied in massive military parades, in the Chinese flags that hang from mosques in Xinjiang, or in the propaganda banners that flood the Uyghur villages and neighbourhoods (BBC, 2015a). The chapter has also investigated how the social construction of terrorism is latent in China’s bilateral and multilateral relations in the international stage. As it has been shown, Beijing has proved its capacity to increasingly intrude upon the Uyghur communities in the diaspora.

As this investigation suggests, the post-9/11 Chinese state discourse of terrorism in Xinjiang and the security practices it enables appear indefinite in the horizon. This is particularly the case in light of the increasing power of China in the international arena. In 2005, in the early

years of the process of terroristization, and under pressure from Washington, Beijing agreed on releasing Rebiya Kadeer from prison (RFA, 2015a). Under the current context of China's rise and counter-terrorist decisiveness, the tight grip on Xinjiang seems inexorable, and it is hard to imagine other fate for Ilham Tohti different from serving a full life sentence for 'separatism'.

## CONCLUSION

In January 2018, the Secretary of Defence of the United States, James Mattis, revealed that within US security strategy the main focus of national defence would shift from fighting terrorism to countering the growing military might of China and Russia. The announcement signalled a change of priorities already suggested in the ‘Pivot to Asia’ policy promulgated during President Barack Obama’s administration (2009-2017). Mattis’ statement confirmed Washington’s distancing, almost two decades after the 9/11 attacks in New York, from the Global War on Terror (GWOt). The same fight against terrorism that seems to lose its prime spot on the American security agenda continues, however, to be paramount to the domestic and foreign policy of Washington’s new rising contender.

For China, the GWOt continues to be a priority that justifies domestic repression in the name of counter-terrorism, a crackdown whose most recent manifestation is the internment of hundreds of thousands of Uyghurs in Xinjiang for ‘de-extremification’ and ‘re-education’ purposes. Ever since the 9/11 attacks, Chinese officials have labelled dissidence and turmoil in Xinjiang as *their* terrorist problem in a global fight against terrorism, making lobbying for international acceptance of this framing a core element of their foreign policy undertakings. In the first anniversary of 9/11, linking the ‘East Turkestan forces’ to Al-Qaeda, China reminded the world that it was ‘a victim of terrorism’ (AFP, 2002c). And, sometimes with ‘crude political opportunism’ (Sudworth, 2015), the Chinese government continues to do so with every violent event that is widely broadcasted as linked to international terrorism (BBCMSAP, 2001h, 2004b; AFP, 2003a; Dasgupta, 2008). While it fades in the American security agenda, the GWOt is very much alive for the Chinese state, which enthusiastically presents to the world its ‘people’s war on terror’ in Xinjiang as an example of what a successful counter-terrorism policy should look like (Yi, 2019). Interestingly, however, despite long-standing – and often violent- upheaval in the region, the threat of terrorism in Xinjiang did not exist in the Chinese government’s security repertoire before 9/11.

When the original field of terrorism emerged in the US in the 1960s (see Rapoport, 1984; Schmid, 2011), terrorism was conceived merely as a ‘new mode of conflict’ ready to be analysed with established positivist research tools and frameworks (Jenkins 1983, pp. 8-9). This study moved significantly away from the ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions of the positivist-realist tenets associated with this orthodox

camp. Exploring how terrorism is not simply 'given' it showed that while materiality matters, it does so in conjunction with discourse and the broader context in which the latter emerges and develops. Specifically, this thesis aimed at contributing to our understanding of how it was possible that Xinjiang became a 'terrorist' problem for China by investigating the origins and evolution of the Chinese state discourse about the conflict and tensions with the Turkic Muslim ethnic minorities, notably the Uyghurs.

To this end, the thesis developed a terroristization conceptual framework for the analysis of the discursive construction of terrorist threats in wider historical contexts. This was conceptually based on the core ontological, epistemological, and normative tenets of the critical and narrative turns in Terrorism Studies as well as on a discussion of the concept of securitization theory, as devised by the Copenhagen School and expanded in later interventions and debates, to explore discursive constructions of security threats by non-liberal regimes and within their broader historical context. Empirically, the thesis focused on examining the features of the phenomenology of Xinjiang-related violence, the Chinese state discursive representation of violent events, and the way Chinese official narratives enabled particular policies to respond to the conflict, both before and after 9/11. In particular, the study assessed how the materiality of violence has shaped the Chinese state discursive representation of Xinjiang-related violent events and how the ensuing official narratives have in turn moulded the security practices later enacted by the Chinese government to police the ethnic minorities.

Examining the question of how security discourses develop and change over time, including in non-democracies, is important because it contributes to our understanding of how, why, and with what consequences internal conflict and violent events are interpreted and represented as terrorism. As this thesis has shown, the problem of 'terrorism' exists in Xinjiang, not because of particular violent phenomena that can be objectively recognized as terrorist incidents by virtue of their features ranging from the motivation of the perpetrators to the ways they exploit violent means. Rather it exists because the Chinese state chose to discursively construct violence as such in the context of the global fight against terrorism after 9/11. The rationale for the 'war on terrorism' that the Chinese government has been waging for years in Xinjiang, including through a protracted crackdown on the Turkic Muslim ethnic minorities, is thus not phenomenologically grounded in a change in violent events in the region.

As this study demonstrates, the construction of the violent conflict in Xinjiang as terrorism is a contingent representation that is not inevitable. Indeed, as the thesis reveals, there was a time when violence in Xinjiang was not represented as terrorism, and when the Chinese state managed the tensions in the region through a moderate and restrained approach. This was an approach, the study emphasized, that far from interpreting violence as an emergency threat demanding a security crackdown, understood it as the outcome of long-standing structural factors including inter-ethnic mistrust and economic grievances, one that prioritized moderate policies towards the ethnic minorities.

### **Summary: Conceptual Framework**

To answer the core research question of how violent tensions in Xinjiang became understood as a terrorist problem for the Chinese state, Chapter One developed the idea of terroristization into an original conceptual framework. To this aim, and in line with critical approaches to the study of terrorism, the thesis adopted a post-positivist ontology and conceptualized terrorism as a social construct rather than as an objective extra-discursive object of knowledge. Based on the premise that terrorism does not exist independent from interpretation and representation, Chapter One turned its attention to discussing the core tenets securitization theory to develop the notion of terroristization. The chapter reflected on core elements of securitization such as the relevance of the state as the key author of political discourse that seeks to legitimize exceptional emergency measures that lay outside the realm of a 'normal' politics characterized by deliberation, dialogue, and compromise. This opened an analytical avenue to empirically study terrorism as something that is 'talked' into being by a country's political leadership to enable extraordinary counter-terrorism agendas.

Because of the significant shortcomings of the Copenhagen School's concept of securitization, the chapter built on existing interventions and debates expanding it to explicitly develop the terroristization framework in two directions. First, it widened the temporal scope of 'speaking terrorism' in order to account for how political agents construct generic security threats and specific violent events before, during, and after the emergence of the language of terrorism, which I have identified as pre-terroristization, proto-terroristization, and terroristization stages in the historical processes of the discursive construction of terrorist threats. Second, it reflected on how authoritarian regimes, although they do not require institutional approval for a repressive 'emergency' policy agenda, may

find a terroristization discourse appealing because it aids their legitimization of past or future action to curb internal resistance, including the enforcing of extraordinary controls amongst the population, and obtaining formal and moral support at the international level. In this way, the chapter introduced a conceptually productive analytical avenue for the study of the discursive construction of violent conflict in Xinjiang by the Chinese state during four decades.

Chapter One also engaged with recent Critical Terrorism Studies (CTS) scholarship to explore the discursive turn in the study of terrorism. Identifying terrorism as an instant securitizer, it reflected on the rhetorical power of the language of terrorism to confer a set of meanings to violent phenomena to enable some courses of political action while marginalizing others. While putting the socially constructed nature of terrorism at the centre-stage, the study reserved an important role for the materiality of violence in the terroristization framework, integrating a ‘minimal foundationalist’ perspective that permitted the investigation of how the materiality of violence shapes how terrorism is ‘talked’ into being and vice versa. Further examining how materiality and discourse are intertwined, the chapter explored the dominant scholarly definitions of terrorism as a structure of knowledge that provides the background to and influences the social construction of terrorism. Based on dominant scholarly definitional markers introduced here, the thesis created a mapping device that would allow interpreting the phenomenology of violence as terrorism according to observable characteristics of violent phenomena and considerations about the motivations of the perpetrators. This ‘scale’ of terrorism materiality enabled the examination of how well the interpretation and discursive representation of Xinjiang-related violent events map onto general understandings of what terrorism is and making inferences about the Chinese state’s terroristization moves.

### **Summary: Empirical Findings**

Part Two of this thesis consisted of an in-depth empirical analysis of the three main dimensions of the terroristization conceptual framework: the phenomenology of Xinjiang-related violence and its mapping (or not) onto prominent terrorism markers, the Chinese state discourse interpreting and representing violent conflict and constructing specific violent incidents in the region, and the political implications of this official discourse.

Chapters Two, Three, and Four analysed the terroristization of Xinjiang as a historical

process that evolved in the three key phases of pre-terroristization (1978-1990), proto-terroristization (1991-2001), and terroristization (2001-2018). Through this empirical investigation, the study explored the research question guiding this thesis – how Xinjiang became understood as a terrorism problem in the post 9/11 era. It helped uncover how security narratives about violent conflict, informed by the materiality of violent events and dominant discursive structures defining terrorism, are productive in the sense that they set the limits of political possibility and shape political action. This oriented the empirical focus of research on violence in Xinjiang away from a narrow analysis of the assumption that China faces a terrorist threat in the region that demands definition, explanation, and response. It also suggested a greater focus on the discursive patterns through which intrastate conflict, ethnic minorities, ‘dissident’ territories, or identity markers such as religion are constructed as terrorist elements, how these narratives have endorsed and informed subsequent counter-terrorism policies, and how they link in with pre-existing discursive contexts.

The empirical analysis in Chapter Two focused on what I described as the years of ‘counterrevolution’ (1978-1990), when the Chinese state securitized Xinjiang. The study showed how, despite sporadic violent outbursts with a primary socio-ethnic character in the early years of the ‘reform and opening up’ period, the Chinese government maintained a moderate discourse during much of the 1980s decade. Far from conceptualizing violence as a national security threat, it initially was represented as a social problem rooted in a long-standing history of ethnic mistrust and economic grievances between the Han Chinese population and the Turkic Muslim ethnic minorities. As I showed, this was a discourse that actively played down violent tensions in the region, displaying a moderation, pragmatism and restraint toward the issue. Yet despite the lack of significant violent events during the second half of the decade, the absence of evidence of an organized violent resistance in Xinjiang, and in a context of domestic and international challenges to the CPC authoritarian rule, the discourse of Chinese officials and state media underwent a gradual shift. From 1988 they began to represent violence and dissent in the region as a separatist ‘counterrevolutionary’ threat to the stability and unity of China. The study illustrated how this emerging discourse constructed religion as a major force pushing ‘hostile forces’ to undermine Chinese national unity and the survival of the communist regime. The Chinese government approach to Xinjiang changed in line with this discursive shift. Chinese authorities went from implementing moderate ‘gradualist’ policies that, even in the face of violent incidents, sought to defuse the tensions with the ethnic minorities by encouraging their religious, cultural, and

economic rehabilitation, to adopting an increasingly repressive approach characterized by a religious clampdown, the increased deployment of security forces, and a retrenchment in the liberalization of the ethnic autonomy. As the chapter emphasized, this shift culminated when the Chinese authorities linked their claims to the ‘real’ violent incident in Baren (1990), which was represented as a ‘counterrevolutionary rebellion’ and a ‘holy war’ and established Xinjiang as the locus of a lasting conflict. As I argued, the prescription of a political response to the Baren incident, a combination of domestic crackdown and militarization with early diplomatic moves aimed at obtaining support to neutralize Uyghur dissidents abroad, set the scene for the emergence of terrorism discourse and sustained repression as core features of the Chinese government’s approach to Xinjiang in the 1990s. Chapter Two thus showed the importance of understanding that there was a period in the contemporary history of Xinjiang when the Chinese government chose not to represent violent tensions with the ethnic minorities as a national security – let alone a terrorist – threat. It also emphasized how the Chinese authorities abandoned this approach through a politically driven discursive shift that proactively marginalized interpretations of these tensions as a reaction to the increasingly repressive policies, and favoured instead the representation of the violence as a direct religiously and exogenously inspired political challenge to the Chinese rule in the region.

Chapter Three investigated the patterns and political consequences of the Chinese state discursive construction of the tensions in Xinjiang during the 1990s. I presented this period as a proto-terroristization stage to signify how the language of terrorism gradually emerged in official narratives, replacing the ‘counter-revolutionary’ jargon of the 1980s, but never to the extent of becoming dominant. The chapter showed how, following the Baren incident, violent events continued to rock the region in various forms, sometimes in ways that exhibited the tactical attributes associated to terrorism by scholarly definitions to a great extent. It also highlighted how violent incidents reached a peak between 1996 and 1998, following the Chinese government increased pressure and crackdown on the Uyghurs. As it was demonstrated, the Chinese state discourse continued to shape the policies in Xinjiang by articulating dissident separatism and religious ‘extremism’ as externally instigated core threats to national stability. This discourse, the study revealed, instilled a sense of emergency and exceptionalism in Xinjiang, dehumanising their enemies and calling for a ‘merciless’ fight in the region. The chapter revealed in detail how the official narratives prescribed the escalation of the crackdown in the region as the logical response to an ever-intensifying threat. In particular, it shed light on how the construction of religion as a negative threatening

force facilitated the securitization of Islam in Xinjiang during the 1990s, a drive accelerated by the publication of the official directive *Document No. 7* in 1996 and embodied by the launching of massive ‘strike-hard’ crackdown campaigns in the region. The study demonstrated how this directive, grounded in the official discursive construction of violent tensions in Xinjiang as a part of a ‘global terrorism’ problem, activated the internationalization of the crackdown. It also traced how the Chinese government used its economic might during these years to enlist the support of countries to suppress Uyghur dissident activities abroad, a strategy culminated by the establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the group’s commitment to fight the ‘three evil forces’ of terrorism, separatism, and religious extremism. The chapter revealed how Chinese officials who, during most part of the 1990s had maintained a low profile when it came to reacting to violent incidents, constructed the Ghulja riots in February 1997, an incident whose characteristics hardly mapped onto the general understandings of terrorism, as a terrorist incident with a global dimension so as to reify the terror claims. Noticing the contingent nature of the terrorism label, the chapter evidenced how, during years before the Ghulja riots, the Chinese government did not use the terrorist jargon to represent violent incidents in the region, even in the face of attacks that echoed most of the dominant definitional features of terrorism.

The final empirical chapter of the thesis analysed how the Chinese state terroristized the tensions with the ethnic minorities in Xinjiang following the 9/11 attacks in New York in 2001, enabling the launching of a ‘people’s war on terrorism’ in the region. Chapter Four demonstrated how Chinese leaders seized the post-9/11 *momentum* to reframe conflict in Xinjiang as China’s domestic front in the GWoT. By discursively linking historical tensions in Xinjiang going as far back as the beginning of the twentieth century to the events on US soil, Chinese officials and state media elevated a domestic issue to the category of a global terrorism problem. This move, the chapter showed, was sustained by narratives reproduced at the international level that lobbied to have the fight against the newly-labelled ‘East Turkestan terrorist forces’ recognized as part of the larger US-led GWoT. The study showed how, after bandwagoning on the GWoT, the Chinese state continued to represent Xinjiang as the scenario of an imminent terrorist threat, going to the extent of declaring the Beijing 2008 Summer Olympics under the threat of terrorism, despite the absence of significant violent incidents in the region between 1999 and 2008. This new-fangled official terrorism discourse, the chapter explained, constructed Islam as the ‘extremist’ force behind the violent

threat and articulated a pre-emptive and pro-active ‘people’s war’ of extermination as the logical and legitimate way of responding to an intensifying threat. As Chapter Four demonstrated, the Chinese state materialized what up to then had been an abstract threat when violence resurfaced in Kashgar in August 2008 following years of repression under the excuse of the fight against terrorism. This was done, the study showed, through the systematic construction of all subsequent violent phenomena as terrorist attacks or terrorism-related events, despite the fact that many of them did not map onto general understandings of terrorism. In line with other chapters, the study traced how the official discourse shaped the Chinese policies in the region, which consisted of an intensified crackdown on religious practices and political dissent that culminated with the erection of a surveillance apparatus in Xinjiang and the internment of hundreds of thousands of Uyghur and other Turkic-Muslim ethnic minorities in so-called ‘re-education’ camps for the purpose of ‘de-extremification’. The study also analysed how the Chinese state exported the representation of Xinjiang as China’s front in the GWO’T to the international stage, using its political and economic power to increase the pressure on Uyghur activists abroad and claim the deportation and extradition of hundreds of members of the Uyghur ethnic minority who had previously fled Xinjiang. Chapter Four stressed the relevance of appreciating how the Chinese state seized 9/11 to reframe as ‘terrorism’ long-lasting violent tensions dating from a time when the terror jargon was absent on the official discourse, how it constructed and inflated the terror threat in Xinjiang even in the absence of violent incidents in the region, how it appealed to that threat to legitimize an intensification of the crackdown on the ethnic minorities, and how it used the ensuing resurfacing of violence to justify previous claims and re-orientate the crackdown towards an institutionalized ‘people’s war on terrorism’.

### **Broader Lessons from the Chinese State Terroristization of Xinjiang**

As the foregoing chapters have shown, the Chinese state interpretation and representation of violent tensions in Xinjiang gradually changed between the early years of the ‘reform and opening up’ era (1978-1990), and the post-9/11 period. Chinese official narratives evolved from a moderate approach that perceived conflict in the region as the inevitable result of structural factors including the historical ethnic mistrust and economic gap between the Han and Uyghur populations, into a radical position that first constructed the frictions, the region, the ethnic minorities and their cultural and religious identity first as elements of a security threat, and later, spurred by 9/11 and the GWO’T, as a terrorism problem. This discursive shift enabled a change in the Chinese policies in Xinjiang, which evolved from a moderate,

restrained, and compromising approach to the tensions focused on the rehabilitation and liberalization of the Uyghur ethnic minority and the economic development of the region, into one that espoused a protracted crackdown on the ethnic minorities as the logical response to the threat. Through a gradual process that greatly relied on shaping specific violent events in ways that fixated and certified the core tenets of these overarching official narratives, the Chinese government used the terroristization of Xinjiang to articulate a crackdown, and to justify, legitimize, and rally support for its regional policies in the domestic and international arenas. These findings provide broader lessons for the study of terrorism and political violence in general and the understanding of the Chinese state policies in particular.

In this sense, the thesis underscores first and foremost the relevance of political discourse and the social construction of security and terrorism narratives in the quasi-causal shaping of political change and political outcomes. This study has highlighted how overarching state narratives can transform issues into security threats, defining the contours of the agents of the threat and their motivations, and shaping the political possibilities to confront them. These narratives, the study suggests, are consolidated through the representation of catalytic violent events in accordance with previously articulated discursive patterns, in a way that legitimizes and re-enacts existing political avenues. At the same time, the study reveals the revitalising role that the integration of politically productive vernaculars that resonate with the dominant geopolitical context may have for these narratives, as the Chinese state post-9/11 elevation of the terrorism jargon in the official discourse demonstrates. The focus of this lesson lies, therefore, not in merely stressing the importance of discourse in shaping political outcomes and having a quasi-causal effect on political change, but on investigating how and in which ways, this process unfolds.

Concerning the Xinjiang conflict, this thesis has revealed the contingent and unstable nature of the Chinese state construction of violence in the region as terrorism. This study problematizes the inevitability of the rationale behind China's 'war on terror', which prescribes a brutal crackdown as the only possible approach to govern the violent tensions that have historically characterized China's rule over the Turkic Muslim ethnic minorities in Xinjiang. This rationale, that constructs an externally instigated extremist separatist agency as the core factor driving the unrest, marginalizes other crucial factors that have enabled the incubation and eruption of violent outbursts in the region, in particular, the tensions created

by the counter-terrorist policies with which the Chinese authorities have been trying to placate the unrest. From a normative perspective, the thesis has thus revealed the abusive nature of the Chinese state systematic use of the terrorist jargon to represent the tensions in Xinjiang, emphasising how when the Chinese authorities have opted for a restrained interpretation of violent tensions and a moderate response through gradual policies, the result has been a defusing of the tensions and an improvement in the government's relation with the ethnic minorities in the region. The Chinese state social construction of terrorism in Xinjiang, this study underscores, is an example of a contingent avoidable discourse that renders crackdown and repression possible, while militating against moderate policies (see Jarvis, 2009, p. 19). It also stresses the importance of exploring the local context and historical experiences, in particular before 9/11, of contemporary scenarios of 'terrorism' (see Smyth, 2007, p. 261; Gunning, 2007a, p. 366).

Another lesson of this study is that definitions of terrorism, and more specifically dominant scholarly constructions of terrorism, have an unmistakable influence in the political arena, not because of the legal or political implications of the actual meaning/s that they attach to terrorism, but because they constitute a discursive structure of significance with a capacity to influence the interpretation and representation of violent events by political actors. These structures do not exist in discursive isolation, but in dialectal relation with the materiality of violence, which as this study has shown, influences the formation and articulation of security narratives, as well as their political productivity. In highlighting the relevance of scholarly definitions of terrorism for critical discursive approaches to this subject, this thesis opens space for bridging the traditional and critical divide within Terrorism Studies.

### **Implications for Future Research**

The arguments and findings in this thesis have important implications for future research on terrorism and violence and conflict in Xinjiang. First and foremost, the thesis has reiterated the need for security and terrorism scholars to recognize the socially constructed nature of the concept of terrorism and the unavoidable political cargo of using the language of terrorism to represent violent phenomena. Regardless of whether they are of a positivist or a post-positivist intellectual orientation, terrorism scholars must pay serious attention to the importance of having a conceptual discussion and interrogating the concept of terrorism before delving into research. This is not to say that the study of terrorism ought to be discursive in nature but to emphasize that there are conceptual, analytical, and normative

complexities in the use of terrorism as a concept guiding research on political violence. Studies on terrorism should at least be reflective, acknowledge, and ideally try to accommodate these complexities, explicitly recognizing the limits of the concept and the potential implications of these limitations in analytical and normative terms, when using this analytically productive but otherwise ‘imperfect’ concept.

This study also suggests the need for additional research on the ‘discursive past’ of localized conflicts that have become dominantly constructed as scenarios of terrorism before or after 9/11. Tracing the historical background of the representation of these conflicts may reveal pre-existing alternative ways of naming dissidents -and dealing with them- in turn unveiling the contingent nature of contemporary constructions of terrorism and the abusive nature of political approaches that are perceived as level-headed under dominant ‘counter-terrorism’ rationales. Studies in this fashion may consider the terroristization analytical framework developed in this thesis to investigate the historical processes by which violent conflicts have become dominantly represented as terrorism by looking at the material, discursive, and political dimensions of such constructions.

Considering securitization theory, future research in the social construction of terrorism might also adopt the Copenhagen School’s reverse idea of desecuritization to explore processes of what could, in turn, be conceptualized as deterroristization. Where desecuritization refers to the process by which political actors declare an issue not to be an existential threat, in a way that enables the opening up of domestic space for open political struggle and deliberation and non-emergency politics (see Wæver, 1995), deterroristization could be developed into an analytical framework for the study of discourses which refrain from using the language of terrorism to construct violent conflict. This framework would inform the study of modes of representation that avoid uncritical stances constructing violence and perpetrators as an ‘evil’ that ought to be eliminated, and instead reflect upon social and historical contextual factors to offer a more nuanced view of violent conflict, in the way rendering possible political solutions different to the counter-terrorism crackdown or ‘war’ approach. These research avenues could, for instance, approach the Chinese state discourse on the violence of the early 1980s as an example of restraint and moderation that departs from previous more radical discourses during the Cultural Revolution. Another case study in this direction could be the recent peace agreements between the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), which have

refrained from using the terror jargon instead prioritizing terms such as ‘conflict’, ‘bilateral hostilities’ and ‘guerrilla organizations’, opening up a less confrontational route of engagement between the two parties (Gobierno de Colombia, 2012, 2016; see also Homolar & Rodríguez-Merino, 2019).

A final avenue for future research suggested by this study involves investigating in greater detail how the Chinese state discourse has been contested and destabilized. The social construction of terrorism is an open-ended inter-subjective process and, while having a powerful position, the Chinese state is not the only political actor interpreting and representing violence in Xinjiang. As the study of the official and alternative narratives constructing violent events in the region has demonstrated, there are a number of actors, from Uyghur groups in the diaspora to other governments around the world, that have provided alternative interpretations and representations of the violent tensions in Xinjiang and the incidents taking place there, in the way challenging and destabilizing the Chinese government’s version of the facts and enabling the imagination of political possibilities different to the ‘war on terrorism’. This line of inquiry may also examine how political actors resisting the state discourse have relied on underscoring that the phenomenology of violence in Xinjiang does not reflect general understandings of terrorism, prompting the terroristization move to lose political track and potentially backfire.

## **Conclusion**

In the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution, during the first years of the ‘reform and opening up’ era, the Chinese authorities adopted a moderate approach towards the violent tensions that had historically characterized the relations between the state and the Uyghur and other Turkic Muslim ethnic minorities in the region. This approach did not play up the tensions between the Han and Uyghur ethnic populations by constructing them as a dissident challenge to China’s rule in the region. Rather, it sought to defuse them by taking into consideration their historical, cultural, and economic dimensions. The policies that resulted from this gradualist agenda made the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region live up to its name. They were based on the religious, cultural, and economic rehabilitation of the Uyghurs, whom today look at those years as a sort of ‘golden age’ for the affirmation of their ethnic identity. This trajectory, one in which the ethnic minorities could have found accommodation within the Chinese state under a political-administrative setting sensitive to their cultural and religious traits, stands nowadays as a historical curiosity. More than three

decades later, the region seems closer to the days of the Cultural Revolution than ever. As this thesis has demonstrated, the securitization, first, and terroristization, later, of Xinjiang and the Uyghurs, is the result of a discursive and political choice of the Chinese state, which regardless of how these tensions developed abandoned a moderate and gradualist approach in favour of a ‘war on terrorism’ whose latest manifestation is the emergence of a surveillance state where hundreds of thousands of ethnic minorities are interned for ‘re-education’ and ‘de-extremification’ purposes. The terroristization of Xinjiang was, thus, not inevitable.

In this thesis I have advanced a straightforward argument: the Chinese state has discursively constructed violent tensions with the Uyghurs in Xinjiang first a security threat and then as a terrorism problem by shaping the interpretation and representation of these tensions and specific violent incidents in ways that fitted an overarching security narrative that advances and legitimizes crackdown in the region for stability purposes. The terroristization of the Uyghur ethnic minority and the transformation of Xinjiang into a front of the GWO’T are the latest in a string of discursive and political strategies used by the Chinese state to crack down on ethnic groups that it has historically regarded with mistrust. This latest development, however, is one that transcends the very purposes for which it was originally constructed. The rationale behind the Chinese policies in Xinjiang is not cracking down on political dissidents under the alibi of fighting terrorism anymore. The sine die terroristization of Xinjiang suggests that there is no end to this localized war on terrorism, which has become institutionalized and now underpins an ulterior agenda aimed at diluting the ethnic consciousness of the Uyghur to assimilate them into the Chinese nation.

#### **APPENDIX: List of Violent Events**

<b>Date</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Brief description</b>	<b>Source</b>
1981	Payzawat County (Kashgar prefecture)	Failed armed uprising by the Eastern Turkestan Prairie Party.	Dillon, 2004; Rong, 2003; X. Chen, 2014; Reuters, 1988b
10/1981	Kashgar	Ethnic riot triggered by a street scuffle in which an ethnic Han Chinese killed an Uyghur peasant.	Wren, 1983; Rong, 2003; L. H. Sun, 1985; Y. Liu, 2014; Oziewicz, 1983; Dillon 2004.
1983	Kashgar	Unspecified attacks against CPC cadres.	Abel, 1985.

12/1985	Ürümchi, Beijing, Shanghai.	Student protests.	AP, 1985, 1986; AFP 1985; Burns 1985; UPI 1985; Roche, 1988e.
5/1989	Ürümchi	Rioters storm government compounds, beating officials and police.	Mudin, 2012; BBCMSAP, 1989a, 1989b.
4/1990	Baren township (Akto County, Kizilsu Kirghiz autonomous prefecture)	Riot and clashes with the Chinese security forces following a religious protest in the streets of Baren.	BBCMSAP, 1990a; Dinmore, 1990a; Paula, 1994; S. Long, 1990b, 1990c; Kynge, 1990a, 1990b; Millward, 2007; Kyodo, 1990; AI, 1992.
1991	Ürümchi	Riots erupt following a protest against the exploitation of the resources of Xinjiang.	SCMP, 1991c.
2/1991	Kuchar (Aqsu prefecture)	A device explodes at a video theatre, killing one person and injuring 13 other.	SCIO, 2002; S. Wang, 2004.
2/1992	Ürümchi	Two bombs explode in public city buses.	Reuters, 1992; AP, 1992; Grace, 1992; BBCMSAP, 1995e.
3/1992	Kashgar	Chinese security forces suppress a pro-independence protest, killing some demonstrators.	Preston, 1992.
8/1993	Yeken county (Kashgar prefecture)	A device explodes in a government-affiliated building.	SCIO, 2002.
8/1993	Hotan	A device explodes in front of the Cultural Palace.	SCIO, 2002.
8/1993	Qaghiliq county (Kashgar prefecture)	Murder attempt against Abliz Damolla, imam of a mosque and CPC cadre.	SCIO, 2002.
7/1995	Hotan	Riots erupt after hundreds of protesters occupy the CPC headquarters protesting the arrest of local cleric Abdul Kayum, imam of the Baytulla mosque, and clash with the police.	AI, 1999.
2/1996	Onsu county (Aqsu prefecture)	Premeditated and organized murder of two Chinese policemen.	Dickie, 1996.
1996	Unspecified	Chinese government confirms the killings of several rural CPC cadres.	Earnshaw 1996b.
1996	Unspecified	Chinese government confirms the killings of several 'progressive religious leaders' in the region.	Earnshaw, 1996b.
2/1996	Ürümchi	Explosion blows military jeep in front of the Xinjiang Military District Teachers Training Centre.	Kang Lim, 1997c.
2/1996	Toqsu county (Aqsu prefecture)	Two masked men shoot pro-government religious cleric Akenmu Sidike dead.	Dickie, 1996.

3/1996	Toqsu county (Aqsu prefecture)	Pro-government imam Hakimsidiq Haji, vice chairman of the local Islamic Association is assassinated.	SCIO, 2002.
4/1996	Qunas Village (Alaqagha township, Kuchar county, Aqsu prefecture)	Attack against CPC cadre Qavul Toqa, his relatives, and three local Uyghur grassroots officials are attacked.	SCIO, 2002.
5/1996	Kashgar	Assassination attempt against Aronghan Aji, vice president of the China Islamic Association and president of Xinjiang Islamic Association, and the preacher of Id Kah Mosque, and his son.	Dow Jones, 1996
5/1996	Kuchar (Aqsu prefecture)	Chinese police kill nine suspected 'Islamic separatists' on the course of a security operation.	AP, 1997c; AFP, 1997c; Macartney, 1996a.
8/1996	Jianggelesi township (Qaghiliq county, Kashgar prefecture)	Six men in 'combat fatigues' attack a government office, killing two local government officials, one police officer, and three security guards.	SCIO, 2002.
11/1996	Hotan	Uyghur attackers open fire with a machinegun against a group of Chinese policemen, killing 16.	The Economist, 1997; Meyer, 1997.
1997-98	Unspecified	Reports on 18 cases of assassination of police officers.	BBCMSAP, 1998n; Reuters, 1998b; AFP, 1997r.
1997	Unspecified	Official source reports wave of attacks against police officers and their families.	AFP, 1997q.
1997	Yingmaili village (Ghulja, Ili Kazakh autonomous prefecture)	Uyghur policeman Kesemu Nasser is killed in an explosion.	AFP, 1997q.
1997	Hong Kong	Two Uyghur suspects and a Chinese police officer die during the course of a police operation against a 'separatist group'.	Fong, 1997; Kang Lim, 1997d.
2/1997	Ghulja, Ili Kazakh autonomous prefecture.	Riots and clashes with the police erupt during demonstrations against the Chinese government's religious policies.	Hutzler, 1997a, 1997b; Sina News, 2001; BBCMSAP 1997e, 1997k, 1997o; Hills 1997; Leicester, 1997; WUC, 2013; SCMP, 1997a Grabot, 1997a; Reuters, 1997a, 1997b, 1997c; Kyodo, 1997b AFP, 1997a, 1997c; Grabot 1997; Kyodo 1997a.
2/1997	Ürümchi	Five explosive devices destroy two buses in Ürümchi, killing nine and wounding a further 68 people.	BBCMSAP, 1997r; Kyodo, 1997b.

4/1997	Ghulja, (Ili Kazakh autonomous prefecture)	Uyghur ‘radicals’ attack Han Chinese dwellers, hanging their heads and bodies on a bridge.	BBCMSAP, 1997n; AFP, 1997e.
6/1997	Ghulja, (Ili Kazakh autonomous prefecture)	Fire exchange between members of the Chinese military police and a group of Uyghur suspects during a house search.	BBCMSAP, 1997v.
8/1997	Aqsu prefecture	Chinese officials are attacked when they returned from a banquet.	BBCMSAP, 1997z.
1/1998	Qaghiliq county, Kashgar prefecture.	Assassination of Abliz Haji, executive committee member of the CPPCC Qaghiliq County Committee and imam of the county’s Great Mosque.	SCIO, 2002.
4/1998	Ghulja	Police and Uyghur suspects clash on the course of a security operation.	Kyodo, 1998; Reuters, 1998c; BBCMSAP, 1998j.
7/1998	Hotan	Two artifacts explode in a watchtower used by the police to regulate the traffic in front of the town hall.	AFP, 1998d.
10/1998	Alik village (Awat county, Aqsu prefecture)	Village CPC secretary Aliqiong Bozli is stabbed to death at home by a group of attackers led by a former imam.	AFP, 1999d.
2/1999	Ürümchi	Uyghurs clash with the police after dozens shouted pro-independence slogans.	AP, 1999b.
8/1999	Poskam county (Kashgar prefecture)	Attackers kill Hudaberdi Tohti, political instructor of the police station of Bosikem Township, and his son.	SCIO, 2002.
10/1999	Poskam county (Kashgar prefecture)	Attack with ‘guns, machetes, incendiary bottles and grenades’ against a police station.	BBCMSAP, 1999l.
1999	Unspecified	Nineteen policemen are killed in Xinjiang during 1999.	BBCMSAP, 2000b.
2/2005	Wuluwati village (Qaraqash county, Hotan prefecture)	Maishalihan Aihemaiti, Uyghur cadre and party secretary in a village in Hotan, is killed for preventing the building of an unofficial mosque.	Reuters, 2005.
1/2007	Pamir plateau (Aqto county of Kizilsu Kirghiz autonomous prefecture)	Chinese security forces shoot dead 18 suspected ‘terrorists’, and one policeman is killed, during a raid against an alleged ‘terrorist’ training camp. Alternative sources describe the incident as a clash between Chinese police officers and Uyghurs who protested against the acquisition of a local coal mine by an ethnic Han businessman.	CRI, 2007; Poch, 2007.
2-7/2008	Ürümchi	Seven Uyghur suspects accused of planning to attack the Beijing	Xinhua, 2008a, 2008c.

		Olympics are killed in two counter-terrorism operations.	
6/2008	Sangong township, (Manas county, (Changji Hui autonomous prefecture)	An attack with rocks and petrol bombs hits the local police station, allegedly triggered by the pre-Olympic crackdown.	Macau Daily Times, 2008.
8/2008	Payzawat County (Kashgar prefecture)	Two security officers and six terrorist suspects are killed during a police operation in a cornfield.	Sina News, 2008b.
8/2008	Kashgar	A vehicle-ramming and knife attack against a jogging border police patrol kills 16 Chinese officers and injures another 16.	Tarn & Choi, 2008; Xinhua, 2008e.
8/2008	Yamanya township (Yéngisheher county, Kashgar prefecture)	Knife-wielding attackers ambush and kill three Chinese security officers in a checkpoint.	BBC, 2008b.
7/2009	Ürümchi	Riots erupt after the repression of a demonstration by thousands of Uyghurs, leaving at least 197 dead and hundreds of injured, most of them Han Chinese killed by Uyghur violent mobs.	China News, 2009; Xinhua, 2009f; Hu & Lei, 2009; Xinhua, 2009a; Wu, 2009; Marquand, 2009; Sainsbury 2010.
8/2010	Yiganqi township, Aqsu city (Aqsu prefecture)	A vehicle-ramming attack against a border police patrol leaves seven officers killed and 14 injured.	Ifeng News, 2010; People's Daily, 2010c.
11/2010	Kashgar and Hotan prefectures	Han Chinese migrants are assassinated in different villages.	RFA, 2010e.
7/2011	Hotan	Clash erupts in a police station between the Chinese police and a dozen Uyghur men who protested the arrest of fellow Uyghurs who had earlier demonstrated against a local clampdown on women wearing black veils and traditional outfits. The incident results in nearly 20 people killed, including a policeman, a security guard, and 14 Uyghurs shot down by the police.	Xinhua, 2011b; Shao, 2011; WUC, 2011a; SCMP, 2011b; L. Liu, 2011.
7/2011	Kashgar	Uyghur assailants use knives, explosives, and vehicle-ramming tactics to launch a twin attack in a pedestrian street and a restaurant, leaving 14 killed and 42 injured over the course of a weekend.	People's Daily, 2011; Shao & Zhao, 2011.
12/2011	Guma county (Hotan prefecture)	Chinese police intercepts a group of Uyghur migrants who were trying to cross over the border into Pakistan, killing seven members of the group, and arresting several women and children.	RFA, 2011i; Yang 2011.
2/2012	Qaghiliq county (Kashgar prefecture)	A group of knife-wielding Uyghur youths go on a stabbing spree against Han Chinese bystanders,	Global Times, 2012a; RFA, 2012c.

		and are later shot dead by the police.	
3/2012	Towurchi village (Korla city, Bayingholin Mongol autonomous prefecture)	Chinese police shot dead four Uyghurs after storming by mistake what they thought was a bomb-making operation in a farmhouse.	RFA 2012f, 2012d.
9/2012	Mekit county (Kashgar prefecture)	A Muslim Uyghur kills a Han prostitute offended with the construction of a brothel.	RFA, 2014f.
10/2012	Qaghiliq county (Kashgar prefecture)	Vehicle-ramming attack against a PAP border guard base in a rural area.	RFA, 2012m.
10/2012	Korla city (Bayingholin Mongol autonomous prefecture)	Uyghur knife-wielding assailants attacked members of the PAP in a police station.	RFA, 2012n.
2013	Poskam and Yeken counties (Kashgar prefecture)	21 Uyghurs killed and 20 injured in three different police raids against a training camp, a private residence hosting an assembly, and a house.	RFA, 2013n, 2013o, 2013p.
3/2013	Gujiang Bage township, Hotan	Attack with petrol bombs against a police station.	Oriental Daily, 2013
4/2013	Sëriqbuya (Maralbëshi county, Kashgar prefecture)	A violent clash erupts when community workers inspected the house of an Uyghur family, forcing the women to unveil and men to shave off their beards. Fifteens police officers and officials and six Uyghurs who confronted them are killed.	Grammaticas, 2013; RFA, 2013g, 2012o; Cui, 2013a.
06/2013	Hanerik township (Hotan prefecture)	Clashes erupt after the police blocks a demonstration against the arrest of a young iman and the closure of a mosque. The repression leaves 15 killed and 50 injured.	Qiu, 2013; RFA, 2013j.
6/2013	Lükchün township (Pichan county, Turpan prefecture)	Uyghur attackers use incendiary devices and knives in a combined assault against a township's governmental building, a police station, a station of auxiliary police, and a construction site run by Han Chinese, leaving 27 people killed, amongst them nine police and security guards, and ten 'rioters' shot dead by the Chinese police.	Buckley, 2013; Xuyang, 2013; Qiu & Yang, 2013.
7/2013	Qaraqash county (Hotan prefecture)	Five knife-wielding Uyghurs kill seven Han Chinese workers who were building a dam on the Qaraqash River.	RFA, 2013k.
8/2013	Yilkiqi township (Qaghiliq county, Kashgar prefecture)	A Chinese SWAT team guns down 22 suspected Uyghur terrorists after surrounding the house where they were praying.	Boehler, 2013.

8/2013	Ayköl town (Aqsu city, Aqsu prefecture)	Violent clashes erupt after government officials prevented hundreds of Uyghur residents from attending prayers in the mosque on the eve of the Eid Muslim festivity, leaving three people dead and about a dozen injured when the security forces open fire to disperse the crowd.	RFA, 2013m.
10/2013	Beijing	Three members of an Uyghur family launch a vehicle-ramming attack with sport utility vehicle (SUV) through a crowd in Beijing's Tiananmen Square, killing three pedestrians and injuring 39.	Cui, 2013c.
11/2013	Sëriqbuya (Maralbéshi county, Kashgar prefecture)	Nine Uyghur youths, armed with knives and sickles, stormed the local police station killing two Uyghur auxiliary police officers.	Global Times, 2013.
12/2013	Yeken county (Kashgar prefecture)	Eight 'terrorist' suspects are shot dead by the police during an attack with knives and explosive devices against a police station. Non-official accounts describe the incident as a peaceful demonstration against arbitrary arrests repressed by the police.	Wan, 2013.
1/2014	Yéngi-Ériq town (Awat county, Aqsu prefecture)	Uyghur men armed with sickles attack a group of auxiliary guards at the local police station.	RFA, 2014a.
1/2014	Toqsu county (Aqsu prefecture)	Two blasts rock a beauty salon and a grocery market.	Qiu & Chang, 2014.
1/2014	Pikertyk (Kyrgyzstan)	Kyrgyz security forces shoot dead a group of 11 Uyghurs trying to flee China.	Trilling, 2014.
3/2014	Ghadir village (Karakal township, Aqsu city)	Uyghur local CPC secretary Jume Tohtiniyaz is stabbed to death.	RFA, 2014b.
3/2014	Kunming (Yunnan province, China)	Uyghur assailants launch a stabbing rampage at Yunnan's capital Kunming railway station, leaving 35 dead, including four attackers, and 143 injured.	Sina News, 2014; Xinhua, 2014k.
3/2014	Ürümchi	Attackers kill police officer Osmanjan Ghoji.	RFA, 2014d.
4/2014	Ürümchi	A suicide bomber immolates at Urumqi's South Railway Station, killing three and injuring 79.	Wan & Ng, 2014; SITE Intelligence Group, 2014.
4/2014	Qaghiliq county (Kashgar prefecture)	Three senior county level Han Chinese officials are murdered on during a fishing expedition.	RFA, 2014h.
5/2014	Muji township (Guma county, Hotan prefecture)	Two Uyghurs are shot dead by the police during a security operation against the attackers of a police station.	RFA, 2014i.

5/2014	Yeken county (Kashgar prefecture)	A bomb explodes in front of a Chinese police department.	RFA, 2014j.
5/2014	Toqsu county (Aqsu prefecture)	A house-raid in search of two bomb-making suspects leaves four Uyghurs killed and one police officer stabbed to death.	RFA, 2014k.
5/2014	Ürümchi	Vehicle-ramming attack against pedestrians, mostly Han Chinese, in a groceries street market, killing 39 and leaving 94 dead.	People's Daily, 2014
6/2014	Qaghiliq county (Kashgar prefecture)	A vehicle-ramming and explosives attack against the main police station leaves 13 attackers and three police officers dead.	Meng, 2014b.
6/2014	Qaraqash county (Hotan prefecture)	Attackers stabbed to death two police officers guarding a checkpoint, killing three others by setting fire to the room where they slept.	RFA, 2014l.
6/2014	Mekit county (Kashgar prefecture)	Police clashes with 'terrorist' suspects during an inspection of a house to retrieve a cache of bladed weapons. Two Uyghur police officers and three Uyghur suspects die in the operation.	RFA, 2014m.
6/2014	Purchaqchi township (Hotan prefecture)	A three months police operation leaves three Uyghur suspects killed and two jailed, all members of the same family.	RFA, 2015d.
7/2014	Payzawat County (Kashgar prefecture)	Attackers stage a motorcycle accident to lure and murder the head of the local traffic police, Li Hongjiang.	RFA, 2014p.
7/2014	Uchturpan county (Aqsu prefecture)	Six Han Chinese farmers and landowners are stabbed to death in a village.	RFA, 2014q.
7/2014	Qaraqash county (Hotan prefecture)	Assailants wielding axes and knives attack party secretary Rejep Islam, killing his wife.	RFA, 2014s.
7/2014	Aqsu city	Five Han Chinese businessmen are killed after attackers waylay their car.	RFA, 2014t.
7/2014	Elishku township (Yeken county, Kashgar prefecture)	A gang armed with knives and axes attack a police station and government offices, assaulting civilians and smashing vehicles as they pass, according to Chinese official sources. Alternative accounts describe hundreds of Uyghurs, some of them carrying farm tools, marching on a road to protest for the killing of innocent villagers, later being shot down by the police.	Xinhua, 2014h; Haas, 2015; RFA, 2014r.

8/2014	Kashgar	Three assailants kill pro-government cleric Juma Tayier, imam of the Id Kah Mosque.	Cui, 2014a.
8/2014	Hotan prefecture	Nine Uyghur suspects are shot dead and one was arrested during a security operation reportedly joined by 30,000 civilians.	Xinhua, 2014g.
9/2014	Bügür city, Yengisar and Terekbazar townships (Bügür county, Bayingholin Mongol autonomous prefecture)	Three attacks with bombs and knives target Chinese officials and police officers in government buildings and police stations.	RFA, 2014u
9/2014	Bügür county (Bayingholin Mongol autonomous prefecture)	Several explosions rock a shop and a market, killing six bystanders and injuring dozens.	RFA, 2014u.
10/2014	Maralbéshi county (Kashgar prefecture)	Four Uyghur men armed with knives and explosives attack a farmers' market. 22 people are killed, including police officers, Han Chinese stall owners, and the attackers.	RFA, 2014w
10/2014	Guma and Kokterek townships (Guma county, Hotan prefecture)	Two Uyghurs go on a stabbing spree killing three police officers on patrol and three government officials.	RFA, 2014v
11/2014	Yeken county (Kashgar prefecture)	A group of Uyghurs attack bystanders in a food street, injuring 14, with 11 assailants shot dead by the Chinese police.	Xinhua, 2014j.
12/2014	Guangxi province (China)	One Uyghur is shot dead during a Chinese police operation that results in the arrest of 21 members of several Uyghur families who sought to cross into neighbouring Vietnam.	RFA, 2014x; Xinhua, 2015b.
3/2015	Tagharchi township (Yeken county, Kashgar prefecture)	The head of the People's Armed Police (PAP) local Fang Kezheng and his wife are killed in a targeted attack.	RFA, 2015a
5/2015	Lop county (Hotan prefecture)	Three Uyghurs carry out two suicide bombings against a security checkpoint, killing three police officers and injuring four.	RFA, 2015g.
5/2015	Layqa township (Hotan county, Hotan prefecture)	A knife-wielding Uyghur kills the head of the local government, a Han Chinese.	RFA, 2015h.
6/2015	Duwa township (Guma county, Hotan prefecture)	At least eight Uyghurs are shot dead during a raid against an illegal gathering outdoors.	RFA, 2015j.
6/2015	Tahtakoruk district (Kashgar)	A group of 15 Uyghurs launch a vehicle-ramming and knife attack against a police traffic checkpoint,	RFA, 2015k.

		killing five police officers and injuring four.	
7/2015	Shenyang (Liaoning province)	Chinese police officers shoot dead three Uyghur ‘terrorist’ suspects when they were in route to leave the country.	A. Chen, 2015.
8/2015	Bangkok (Thailand)	Uyghurs criminals are accused of the Erawan Shine bombings that killed 20 people and injured 125 in Thailand’s capital.	Reuters, 2016d.
9/2015	Bay county (Aqsu prefecture)	Knife-wielding assailants attack a colliery leaving at least 40 people dead or injured, including police officers, security guards, workers, and mine owners, as well as the attackers.	RFA, 2015o; BBC, 2015c.
2/2017	Guma county (Hotan prefecture)	Three knife-wielding Uyghur attackers randomly stab pedestrians in the streets, killing five.	Ng, 2017.

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## **Newspaper & Other Media Articles (Archival)**

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(1991a). China protests German documentary on Xinjiang, 24 September.

(1991b). Party chief warns against ethnic disunity, 4 October.

(1991c). Chinese police to target hostile foreign forces in 1990s, 8 November.

- (1991d). Chinese security chief warns of religious dissent, 10 November.
- (1991e). China calls for tightening of ethnic control, 26 December.
- (1992a). Xinjiang situation unstable: official, 18 March.
- (1992b). Xinjiang newspaper calls for firm hand against separatists, 7 April.
- (1994a). Nine prisoners, including “counter revolutionary murderer” executed, 2 March.
- (1994b). In Central Asia, China buys action against dissidents, 25 April.
- (1994c). Uyghurs, anti-nukes protest during Li Peng's visit, 26 April.
- (1995a). Uprising reportedly breaks out in China's Xinjiang region, 16 June.
- (1995b). Beijing to act against “religious fanaticism” in Xinjiang, 6 November.
- (1996a). China tightens control over Moslems in Xinjiang, 22 April.
- (1996b). The Uighurs-sacrificed on central Asia's chess board, 25 April.
- (1996c). Xinjiang separatist jailed for three years, 20 May.
- (1996d). China calls for harsh punishment for separatist cadres, 27 May.
- (1996e). China sets up quick reaction forces to counter Xinjiang terrorists, 29 May.
- (1996f). Chinese officials say deaths in Xinjiang are "pure lies", 1 June.
- (1996g). China looks to Central Asian pact to deal with Moslem separatists, 17 June.
- (1996h). China admits problems with Moslem separatists, 5 July.

- (1996i). Chinese authorities arrest 18,000 Uygurs: report, 11 July.
- (1996j). Chinese authorities deny mass arrests in Xinjiang, 12 July.
- (1996k). Rebels kill 450 Chinese troops and militia in Xinjiang, 15 July.
- (1996l). Serious unrest in Xinjiang will be beaten down without mercy: China, 21 August.
- (1996m). Moslem minority riot in Chinese camps: report, 26 August.
- (1996n). Chinese leader says Uighurs backed by "foreign forces", 6 September.
- (1996o). Uigur militants "forced underground by Chinese repression", 16 September.
- (1996p). China rejects mass dismissals of Uighur officials in Xinjiang, 3 October.
- (1996q). Eight Uighurs executed in China's Xinjiang region: opposition, 6 December.
- (1997a). 30 ethnic Uighurs said killed in Xinjiang riot, 10 February.
- (1997b). Ten dead, 100 wounded in Moslem separatist riots in China: report, 10 February.
- (1997c). Mass trials, executions follow Moslem riots in China, 12 February.
- (1997d). Separatist bomb attacks in China killed nine, 5 March.
- (1997e). Uighur radical says his creed to "kill the Chinese", 5 March.
- (1997f). China strengthens anti-terrorist laws to control Tibet, Xinjiang, 6 March.
- (1997g). Beijing bus blast carried out by criminals: state television, 8 March.
- (1997h). Beijing bus bomb was work of Uighur separatists: claim, 11 March.

- (1997i). Repression fails to stop Xinjiang separatists: report, 17 March.
- (1997j). Beijing tells Central Asia Republics not to harbour separatists, 25 March.
- (1997k). China expels three BBC journalists, 24 April.
- (1997l). Pakistan deports 12 Chinese Moslems to troubled Xinjiang province, 4 May.
- (1997m). Xinjiang "terrorists" have lost a battle but not the war, 5 May.
- (1997n). Beijing mayor denies March bombs caused by unemployed workers, 6 May.
- (1997o). Violent fight needed against fundamentalism in Moslem region, 4 June.
- (1997p). Hundreds denounced to police in troubled Chinese province: report, 28 June.
- (1997q). Chinese official blames police attacks on Moslem separatists, 3 August.
- (1997r). Uighur separatists kill three police, two informers in China, 10 August.
- (1997s). Call for Moslem separatists in Xinjiang to be eradicated like "rats", 22 August.
- (1998a). Jiang Zemin says more work needed to quell ethnic unrest, 7 March.
- (1998b). Xinjiang women demonstrate against China in Turkey, 9 March.
- (1998c). Religious extremism threatens Kazakhstan: security chief, 22 June.
- (1998d). Moslem separatists set off two bombs in Xinjiang, 4 August.
- (1998e). Ethnic Turks from Xinjiang protest China in Istanbul, 10 December.

- (1999a). Chronology of China bombs and mystery blasts, 29 January.
- (1999b). Hundreds arrested in Xinjiang in last year, China admits, 1 February.
- (1999c). China executes two Moslem separatists after public rally, 5 February.
- (1999d). Chinese authorities arrest Muslim separatist for Communist official murder, 25 February.
- (1999e). China executes 10 Moslem separatists in Xinjiang, 1 March.
- (1999f). One dead, at least 50 hurt in bus blast in southwestern China, 25 June.
- (1999g). China and Uzbekistan vow to fight Islamic fundamentalism, 9 November.
- (2000a). Chinese leader to discuss Muslim separatists during Turkey trip, 18 April.
- (2000b). Five Muslim "terrorists" executed in China's Xinjiang province, 16 June.
- (2000c). China hoping development of west will dampen Xinjiang separatism, 22 August.
- (2000d). China calls on Turkey to help it fight separatism, 11 September.
- (2000e). China says Xinjiang explosion accident, not terrorist act, 12 September.
- (2000f). Chinese diplomats to call on Taliban supreme leader, 12 December.
- (2001a). China's Xinjiang says ethnic unrest under control despite Han influx, 8 March.
- (2001b). China executes two men for murder of family planning worker, 31 July.
- (2001c). China pledges to battle internal "terrorism", 11 November.
- (2001d). China conducts anti-crime and "education" campaign in Xinjiang, 14 November.

- (2001e). China warns religion should not be front for 'sabotage', 6 December.
- (2002a). China to scrutinize Muslim religious and folk customs in Xinjiang, 8 January.
- (2002b). Separatists alleged to have infiltrated Xinjiang schools, 31 January.
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