



**NATO DEFENSE COLLEGE FOUNDATION**

**STRATEGIC TRENDS**

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**China and Islam**

Throughout most of its history, China has been a land of many beliefs and no religion. Confucianism and Daoism, the two major doctrines that have shaped the Chinese culture, are not religions but philosophies of life and have always coexisted peacefully. Buddhism which has also been practiced in China since it was imported from India two thousand years ago, is not a religion either but a mental discipline with no reference to god or gods.

Religion as such was first brought to China by Islamic traders in the mid-7th century, a long time before the arrival of the first Christian missionaries, and Islam, though representing a small minority of the Chinese population (2%), has today more followers in China than in the European Union.

Chinese Muslims live all over China but the highest concentrations are found in the northwest provinces of Xinjiang, Gansu, and Ningxia, with significant numbers also present in southwest and central China.

More than half of Chinese Muslims belong to an ethnic group called Hui who, apart from their religion, are virtually indistinguishable from China’s Han majority. Partly because of their cultural affinity to the Han and partly due to their geographic spread, the Hui are well integrated into mainstream Chinese life and can practice their faith with little if any restrictions. With a 10,5 million-strong population, the Hui are the second largest of China’s 55 officially recognized ethnic minorities.

By contrast another predominantly Islamic ethnic minority, the Uyghurs, who are concentrated in the province of Xinjiang, have always had a strained relationship with the authorities in Beijing. They were largely unknown to the rest of the world until they were put in the spotlight by western media in connection with a series of incidents in the months leading to the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games and violent street riots that took place in 2009 in Urumqi, the capital of Xinjiang, causing over 200 deaths.

Since then Uyghur insurgents have allegedly carried out terrorist attacks not only in Xinjiang but also in other parts of China. In March last year a mass knife assault at the Kunming train station, in the province of Yunnan, killed 29 and left 140 injured. In May 43 people were killed and 90 wounded in another attack in a busy street market in Urumqi..

For years, before these explosions of violence, there have been suggestions in China of potential Uyghur involvement in Islamic terrorism. After the Bush Administration rolled out its global war on terror following 9/11, China utilized the opportunity to rebrand those Uyghur rebels it once called “separatists” and “counter-revolutionaries” as “religious extremists” and “terrorists” despite the fact until 2008 the Xinjiang province remained quiet. From 2008 onwards began the series of the above-mentioned violent incidents that China labelled as “terrorist attacks” but to outside observers looked more like a reaction against all sorts of discriminations and restrictions the Uyghurs have been made target of.

Although the Xinjiang territory is technically an autonomous region, ever-greater control over the area by the Chinese central government since 1949 has correlated with the diminishing rights of the Uyghur people. An internal migration drive led by the CCP, which has moved well over 1,2 million ethnic Han settlers to the region in the last twenty years, has made the Uyghurs increasingly fearful for the survival of their culture and way of life.

State controls on religion restrict Uyghurs’ organized religious activities and schools as well as their behaviour and even their appearance. The Chinese government even censors versions of the Koran and regulates what imams are allowed to preach. Authorities regularly conduct surveillance on mosques, and any expression of frustration with the government’s policies is equated with “separatism,” a state security crime punishable by death under Chinese law.

Moreover the Uyghur language has been banned from schools under the claim that it is primitive and unsuitable given China’s “scientific development.” State-owned workplaces have even arranged mandatory lunches for their employees to force Uyghurs to eat during the Ramadan season as part of a “good health” campaign against fasting. Authorities have similarly argued that Uyghur veils and scarves cause Vitamin D deficiencies by blocking women’s skin from the sun.

These restrictions and cases of discrimination have provoked violent unrest amongst some Uyghur factions and international Islamist groups, effectively playing into the hands of the Chinese government and Uyghur advocacy groups outside of China often claim that the Chinese Communist Party has embarked upon an intentional campaign of cultural genocide against the Uyghurs.