



## **Official Chinese White Paper Claims Uyghurs, Xinjiang Have Long Been ‘Inseparable Part of China’**

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A Chinese government policy paper has claimed that the Turkic-speaking Uyghur ethnic group, whose homeland is in northwest China’s Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR), has no Turkic ancestry, a move critics said was a further bid by the ruling Chinese Communist Party to erase Uyghur culture and identity.

The report, released by the State Council Information Office on Sunday, also made the claims that Islam isn’t an "indigenous" belief system of the Uyghur people, that the XUAR has long been inseparable from China, and that minority cultures have "developed in the embrace of the Chinese civilization."

“Since the modern times, some Pan-Turkism advocates with ulterior motives have described all peoples of the Turkic language family as ‘the Turks’ using the untenable argument that the Turkic-speaking tribe integrated with the ancestors of the Turkish people after migrating westward,” the report said.

“A language family and an ethnic group are two essentially different concepts. In China, ethnic groups speaking Turkic languages include the Uyghurs, Kazaks, Kirgiz, Uzbeks, Tatars, Yugurs, and Salars, each with its own history and unique culture. These peoples cannot be referred to as ‘Turks.’”

The report suggested that conversion to Islam by Uyghurs “was not a voluntary choice made by the common people, but a result of religious wars and imposition by the ruling class,” although the government under the People’s Republic of China now protects “the Muslims' right to their beliefs.”

In an article on Sunday, the official *Global Times* newspaper welcomed the report, saying it would help people to “distinguish between right and wrong,” while forcing “malicious agitators [to] zip their lip.”

Uyghur exiles, academics, and rights groups, however, dismissed what they deemed a revisionist history Beijing is using to justify a crackdown in the XUAR that has seen authorities detain up to 1.5 million Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities accused of harboring “strong religious views” and “politically incorrect” ideas in a network of internment camps since April 2017.

Though Beijing initially denied the existence of internment camps, China has tried to change the discussion, describing the facilities as “boarding schools” that provide vocational training for Uyghurs, discourage radicalization, and help protect the country from terrorism.

Reporting by RFA’s Uyghur Service and other media organizations, however, has shown that those in the camps are detained against their will and subjected to political indoctrination, routinely face rough treatment at the hands of their overseers, and endure poor diets and unhygienic conditions in the often overcrowded facilities.

The mass incarcerations are part of a broader set of policies in the region that include widespread security deployments, the regular surveillance of residents, and the political indoctrination and cultural assimilation of the Uyghur community.

"The purpose of Beijing's white paper is to deny the history and culture of the Uyghurs, to use lies to weave a so-called historical basis for its rule, and to cover up its colonial-style political, economic, and cultural policies in Xinjiang," Dilshat Rashit, spokesman for the exile World Uyghur Congress (WUC), told RFA.

"China is becoming more and more concerned at Uyghur resistance and anger, because they fear losing control over Xinjiang," he said.

### **Territorial claims**

WUC president Dolkun Isa rejected the report’s claims that the XUAR has always been “an inseparable part of China,” saying the area came under Chinese control after it was invaded by the People’s Liberation Army in 1949 and “colonized” by China’s ruling Communist Party.

“The very name ‘Xinjiang’ [meaning New Territory] testifies that it is an occupied and colonized territory,” he said.

“The incessant Chinese claim ... in fact proves that it has never been part of China, but rather occupied territory. China never bothers to claim that ‘Beijing or Shanghai has been part of China since ancient times’ in its propaganda, because these places are indeed part of the country.”

The report, he said, is merely part of a bid by Beijing to “whitewash the truth and deceive the world.”

A Kazakh historian who gave only a single name, Aksay, also challenged the territorial claims made in the white paper.

"Until the People's Liberation Army invaded in 1949, the Great Wall was the true border with

China," he said. "It wasn't just [the XUAR]: nothing outside the Great Wall was part of Chinese territory. Tibet and Inner Mongolia too; they were invaded by China only a few decades ago."

"There is no historical connection between their territories and China ... in spite of what they say, they are rewriting history," Aksay said.

Omer Kul, an associate professor of Turkish history at Turkey's Istanbul University, said Beijing's suggestion that Uyghurs are not Turkic "is not something that reasonable scholars would claim."

"Historical truths have already confirmed that Uyghurs belong to the Turkish race, and the place and period of their appearance in history has already been defined," he said.

"It is not just the historical books written by the Turkish and foreign historians that confirm these facts, but also books written by Chinese historians defined them as such. The Chinese government has a habit of rewriting history according to the dictates of its own interests."

### **Rewriting history**

Mustafa Akyol, a Turkish-American senior fellow at the Washington-based Cato Institute's Center for Global Liberty and Prosperity, told RFA that China's claims "cannot be taken seriously," and not just because they "go against what objective historians, linguists, and ethnologists would say about the Uyghurs."

"The more obvious reason is that these revisionist claims clearly serve a political objective: the enforced cultural assimilation of Uyghurs into the majority Chinese culture," he said.

Akyol said that the job of recording history should be left to independent historians and the people whose history is being written, as "Uyghurs know who they are ... more than some official who sits in Beijing and whose job is state propaganda."

"Chinese authorities must understand that their ambition to forcefully assimilate the Uyghurs will also fail, despite all the official stories they may produce to justify it," he said.

"In fact, such tyrannical measures will probably make the separatist tendencies among Uyghurs stronger. What China should rather do is to respect the Uyghur people as who they are, respect their identity and religion, and to make them feel as first class citizens. Only then Uyghurs may feel happier in China, and Beijing's fears of 'separatism' may calm down."

Sean Roberts, director of George Washington University's International Development Studies Program, told RFA that the claims presented in the Chinese government's report "have virtually no bearing on the present situation in the region."

"Uyghurs generally should be recognized as the indigenous people of this region, regardless of how you define that term, and I think that the Chinese government is on very weak ground if it wants to suggest that a Chinese power did not conquer the region that became the XUAR," he

said.

“To the outside world, it appears to be a strange initiative of a state to publish this sort of speculative historical information, and I think it does suggest some things about the way that the Chinese government is presently approaching the idea of ethnic identity and the relationship between it and its minorities.”

### **Call for accountability**

Mass incarcerations in the XUAR, as well as other policies seen to violate the rights of Uyghurs and other Muslims, have led to increasing calls by the international community to hold Beijing accountable for its actions in the region.

In May, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, in an apparent reference to the policies of Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Soviet Union, cited “massive human rights violations in Xinjiang where over a million people are being held in a humanitarian crisis that is on the scale of what took place in the 1930s.”

U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom Sam Brownback recently told RFA in an interview that countries around the world must speak out on the Uyghur camps, or risk emboldening China and other authoritarian regimes.

The U.S. Congress has also joined in efforts to halt the incarcerations, debating legislation that seeks accountability for China's harsh crackdown on the Uyghurs. The Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act would appoint a special State Department coordinator on Xinjiang and require regular reports on the camps, the surveillance network, and the security threats posed by the crackdown.