

The Uyghurs, China's Terrorist Narrative and Counterterrorism

Michael Clarke (ed.): Terrorism and Counterterrorism in China: Domestic and Foreign Dimensions

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. ISBN 978-0190922610

Sean S. Roberts: The War on the Uyghurs: China's Internal Campaign against a Muslim Minority

Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020. ISBN 978-0-69120218-1

Omnibus review by Björn Alpermann

What is terrorism? What constitutes a terrorist act? And who, then, can legitimately be labeled as terrorist? These questions are at the heart of two recent books on the unfolding human tragedy surrounding the Uyghurs, a mostly Muslim ethnic group, numbering about ten million and living in China's far-northwest Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR). Both books start from the same definition of terrorism originally proposed by Israeli scholar Boaz Ganor. According to this, violence, a political aim and targeting civilians as victims are the three core characteristics which set a terrorist act apart. This is an 'action-based' rather than an 'actors-based' definition, as commonly used e.g. in U.S. law, as Clarke — a prolific writer on both Xinjiang and terrorism — lays out in the introduction to his edited volume. While Roberts' monograph casts its net wider, discussing Chinese colonialization of today's Xinjiang starting in 1759, for a large part the two books cover similar ground. These common topics include the connection between increasing Uyghur resistance to Chinese rule and the transnational Uyghur diaspora (Clarke's contribution). Both sources describe the tightening screws in Xinjiang using counterterrorism legislation and the management of religion (Julia Famularo's and Zunyou Zhou's chapters). They show that China established its own sweeping yet vague definition of terrorism. Roberts' chapter in Clarke's volume as well as his monograph both highlight how the Chinese state constructed a 'terrorist threat' narrative as part of the 'Global War on Terror' (GWOT), while next to no 'real' terrorist activity was to be found within China and evidence for transnational instigation of political violence in Xinjiang remained extremely thin. Roberts' book, but also the chapters by Andrew Small, Mordechai Chaziza and Raffaello Pantucci in the edited volume cover at great length the transformation of one particular militant Uyghur group called Turkestan Islamic Party (TIP, an alleged successor of the internationally banned East Turkestan Islamic Movement or ETIM). It evolved from marginal player in Afghanistan and Pakistan to an active participant in the Syrian civil war. From being only loosely connected to the Taliban and al-Qaeda in the phase prior to the U.S. invasion, TIP transformed into a militant settlement community in Syria closely tied to al-Nusra Front (itself an al-

Qaeda ally). Finally, the exodus of tens of thousands of Uyghurs via Southeast Asia between 2010 and 2016, as repression in Xinjiang mounted, are treated both in Stefanie Kam Li Yee's chapter and Roberts' monograph. Yee explores the fate of those Uyghurs caught up in legal limbo during their travel, often repatriated by Southeast Asian states to China where they invariably face criminal charges and tough sentences. She acknowledges that the poor conditions of these refugees may make them easy targets for recruiters of global jihad or more local Islamic radicals, but argues that the outflow of Uyghurs itself should be seen as part of their fight to retain their cultural identity rather than tarring the refugees all with the same brush as extremists. These studies break significant new ground and bring together information that was previously available only in very scattered form. Compared to Clarke's edited volume which has some overlaps between individual chapters, Roberts' monograph has the distinctive advantage to be cut from one cloth.

"The War on the Uyghurs" is a major contribution to the study of Xinjiang and its predominant ethnic group's relations with the Chinese Party-state. The author, a cultural anthropologist who specializes in Uyghurs, Central Asia and China, has decades of fieldwork experience among Uyghurs — mostly in the diaspora. His main argument is that GWOT — declared by the U.S. after the 9/11 attacks of 2001 — has created a 'terror narrative' which China opportunistically applied to Uyghur resistance against Chinese rule of what Roberts calls the 'Uyghur homeland' (to avoid both the terms Xinjiang and 'East Turkestan'). Increasingly casting the Uyghurs themselves, especially their culture and its Islamic aspects, as source of 'extremism' which, in turn, is seen as hotbed for violence, the Chinese state, in Roberts' view, has 'dehumanized' this ethnic group. This has allowed it to pursue ever more extreme measures — justified as counterterrorism — with full support of the Chinese majority population and without effective censure from the international community. The bitter irony, in his telling, is that just as China declared the Uyghur challenge part of GWOT in the early 2000s, the number of violent incidents in Xinjiang dropped to near zero. Thus, while the terrorist threat was played up by Beijing and securitization ran its course, the real threat level declined. Essential for this to happen, is, in his view, that Beijing succeeded to have its terrorist narrative partially ratified by the U.S. and U.N. through the inclusion of a particular Uyghur militant group on international 'terror lists'. The group in question, the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), was allegedly the precursor of the above-mentioned TIP. Dissecting both the decision to officially designate ETIM/TIP as terrorist groups and the available evidence on their leading personnel, ideologies and activities, Roberts spends great care to show the hollowness of these claims. He finds no conclusive evidence that either of these groups ever organized violence inside China. Rather, TIP during 2004 and 2012, i.e., prior to joining the Syrian civil war, is characterized as akin to 'a video production company with a militant wing'. Moreover, based on Ganor's definition, most of the violent incidents connected to Uyghurs do not even qualify as 'terror acts' from the author's perspective, mostly because they were not deliberately

targeting civilians but rather representatives of the state (in which he includes state-sanctioned Islamic clergy). Only in the phase between 2012 and 2016 was there a series of attacks on civilians that could be labeled terrorist, following his logic. According to Roberts, these are, however, not proof that the Chinese state's terrorist narrative had been correct from the beginning. In contrast, he observes a 'self-fulfilling prophecy' at work: Only the ever more heavy-handed policing as well as repression of cultural identity and religious activities in Xinjiang — all justified as counterterrorism — brought these more extreme forms of resistance to the fore.

These broad arguments are embedded in a historical narrative spanning the long history of Chinese 'colonialism' in Xinjiang, from 1759 through 2001. While still somewhat controversial, Roberts makes a persuasive argument for his use of the term colonialism. Moreover, he argues that since the turn of the century the Chinese approach to Xinjiang has morphed from frontier colonialism to settler colonialism. This entails a complete integration of the region into China, including the currently observable 'cultural genocide' against the Uyghurs against the backdrop of 'counterterrorism' without a real terrorist threat. Roberts details all the available evidence on re-education camps, alleged coercive labor and the eradication of Uyghur culture right up until early 2020. While all of this will be familiar to those who follow the constant barrage of news on China's treatment of the Uyghurs, his is the first comprehensive account of recent appalling news. The strongest part of his monograph, from this reviewer's perspective, is, however, that on ETIM/TIP which adds considerable depth to the treatments of the subject available before, including Clarke's edited volume reviewed here. In contrast to earlier work, Roberts' account rests both on a more extensive analysis of propaganda videos produced by TIP in Uyghur language and on interviews with Uyghurs in Turkey, some of which were former TIP fighters in Syria. Overall, his book makes a lasting contribution to our understanding of what is happening in Xinjiang and among Uyghurs abroad.

In comparison, most of the authors in Clarke's edited volume tend to take the security threat posed by Uyghur militants and their connection to domestic violent incidents more seriously than Roberts does. They also examine extensively the state's counterterrorism response domestically and, crucially, internationally (e.g. through cooperation with Afghanistan). In contrast, Roberts uses Ganor's definition of terrorism to ostensibly limit the number of 'terrorist' incidents in China. One could take issue with that, for instance, pointing at some politically motivated attacks in Germany's recent past (e.g. the political assassinations of Detlev Rohwedder in 1992 or Walter Lübke in 2019 or a radicalized Islamic convert's knife attack on a federal police officer in 2016) that would also have to be excluded from the category of terrorism following this logic. More importantly, Roberts himself argues 'the academic debate about whether or not one should refer to modern China's relationship with the Uyghurs and their homeland as colonialism is less relevant than whether Uyghurs themselves view this

relationship as such' (p. 26). By the same token, one could argue that whatever definition outside analysts use to study inter-ethnic violence in Xinjiang might matter less than Beijing's own perception and framing of it. And some of the elements of Chinese rulers' current frame of understanding, such as the fear of 'foreign meddling', have a very long historical pedigree — going back at least to the Russian occupation of the Yili valley (1871–1881) while the south of Xinjiang was under the Islamic rule of Yakub Beg, a self-declared 'holy warrior'.

In sum, both books under review make significant contributions. Roberts' monograph may be better suited for classroom use, while Clarke's edited volume is primarily of interest for the specialist reader. However, it makes sense to combine both books for a balanced perspective on a hotly contested topic.

Björn Alpermann
Professor of Contemporary Chinese Studies, Julius-
Maximilians-Universität Würzburg
Bjoern.alpermann@uni-wuerzburg.de