Seeking to utilize China's financial wealth to advance Beijing's international aspirations, Chinese President Xi Jinping has discarded the policy of Paramount Leader, Deng Xiaoping: "hide your strength and bide your time" to launch the "The One Belt, One Road Initiative" (OBOR), writes Joseph E Fallon. An ambitious and expensive series of "credit-fueled" infrastructure projects to increase world trade, at a projected cost to China of $4 trillion, OBOR seeks to integrate economies of Eurasia and China. Whether OBOR enhances Beijing's global power or bankrupt's the government, may be decided by events in China's rebellious, Muslim Xinxiang Uyghur Autonomous Region.

The history of the Uyghurs in what is today Xinxiang has alternated between independence and subjugation to an outside power, usually China. Twice in the Twentieth Century, Uyghurs revolted and declared independence from the Republic of China. For six months, from November 1933 to April 1934, they established the short-lived East Turkestan Republic centering on Kashgar. It was overthown by Chinese Nationalist forces.
For five years, November 1944 to December 1949, Uyghurs, backed by the Soviet Union, created a second East Turkestan Republic in northwest Xinxiang, in today's Ili Kazakh Autonomous Prefecture. This second republic was conquered by Chinese Communists; the Uyghurs incorporated into the People's Republic of China as the Xinxiang Uyghur Autonomous Region.

There are five reasons why Xinxiang is vital to China's growing economic and political power. These same five reasons explain why Beijing will not relinquish control of the region.

First, Xinxiang "serves as a major foreign trade hub, and hosts important transportation routes connecting China with the rest of the world." It is China's principle source of cotton and possesses vast mineral wealth including "gold, copper, nickel, lead, zinc, asbestos, salts, bentonite, limestone and vermiculite".

Second, Xinxiang is, itself, a vital source of China's energy wealth, accounting for 38 percent of coal production, 13 percent of oil production, and 30 percent of natural gas production.

Third, as the Chinese economy's hunger for energy grows, Xinxiang's importance has shifted to its strategic location. It is the gateway to the oil and gas reserves of Central Asia. OBOR pipelines, like an umbilical cord, run from Central Asia through the Xinxiang Uyghur Autonomous Region to China proper.

Fourth, Xinxiang is to serve as a conduit for China's imported energy needs from the Middle East as well. It is the lynch pin for the "China-Pakistan Economic Corridor". This OBOR "corridor" will direct oil shipments from the Persian Gulf to Pakistan's port of Gwadar and through new pipelines to China via the Xinxiang Uyghur Autonomous Region.

Fifth, Xinxiang is planned to be hub of a proposed OBOR high-speed 2000-mile-long rail network linking China and the five republics of Central Asia to Iran. The projected railroad will facilitate delivery of oil and gas to Beijing and could run passage trains, as well as container trains.

For these reasons, political instability in Xinxiang may be China's "Achilles' heel". "The Chinese government acknowledges that social stability in the region is essential for the success of the OBOR initiative." Social stability in Xinxiang means Chinese control is absolute and uncontested.

Beijing seeks such "social stability" through the "Great Western Development" campaign. The "...overriding aim of the government has been to bind Xinjiang more closely to the rest of the PRC: by neutralizing the impact of the new Central Asian states; by developing communication axes linking Xinjiang with the rest of China; by reinforcing military and paramilitary forces in Xinjiang, especially in the south; and above all through measures aimed at speeding up Han migration to the region."

Through government incentives, an estimated 250,000-300,000 Chinese migrate to the Xinxiang Uyghur Autonomous Region annually. The demographic impact of this policy on the Uyghur population is shown in official statistics. In 1953, the population was 75% Uyghur and 6% Han. In 1964, the percentages had changed to 54% Uyghur and 33% Han. By 2010, the percentages were 46% Uyghur and 39% Han.

The impact of this migration has been to effectively "partition" Xinxiang into a Chinese north and a Uyghur south. This "partition" closely conforms to the geographic division of Xinxiang into a south (Tarim Basin) separated from the north by the Tian Shan Mountains, and a north, which is, in turn, divided into the Dzungarian Basin and Turpan Depression.

The economic impact of this migration has disproportionately benefited Chinese settlers.

"Han Chinese now make up 40% of the 22 million people populating the region, and they've monopolized its economy. In fact, the central government's policy of creating safe-havens (i.e. colonial outposts) for Han Chinese immigrants is one of the major reasons why Uyghurs and Kazakhs, both living in Xinjiang, are the sole peoples in China among whom the proportion of farmers increased between 2000 and 2010. This is in sharp contrast with the Han Chinese who are increasingly making a living in the industry and services sectors. As a result, although the region is developing at a rapid pace and creating employment opportunities for and catalyzing the urbanization of incoming Han Chinese, locals are largely excluded from such a process."

The locals, the Uyghurs are a Sunni Muslim, Turkic people who have more in common with Kazakhs and Kyrgyz, fellow Muslim, Turkic peoples, than they do with Chinese. This bond of "ethnic" and religious identity is reinforced by shared homelands. An estimated 300,000 Uyghurs live in Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan; while more than 1.5 million Kazakhs and nearly 200,000 Kyrgyz live in Xinxiang.

Beijing views all three Turkic peoples with suspicion. While Uyghurs are perceived by Beijing as possible "separatists" or "terrorists", The Diplomat reported on November 28, 2017, "Kyrgyz and Kazakhs are increasingly seen by the Chinese authorities - as at the least - potential confederates of the Uyghurs."

Resentment at being marginalized in their homeland has led to unrest among the Uighurs. There were "protests, riots, and bombings" in the 1990s. Unrest in Khotan in 2008. Riots in Urumqi, the capital, July and September 2009. Riots were suppressed by mass arrests. Nevertheless, individual acts of violence have continued such as in Kashgar in 2014. According to Reuters, May 13, 2017, in the past few years "hundreds have died" in clashes between Uyghurs and Chinese; heightening Beijing's fear over the continued territorial integrity of the state.

In a 2014 analysis, China's Strategy Toward South and Central Asia: An Empty Fortress, the Rand Corporation observed: "Beijing's greatest fear is linkups between internal challenges and external threats, notably the Uighur Diaspora that spills across national border...Chinese leaders recognize that the country's westernmost regions are poorly defended and vulnerable to internal dissent and external threats..."

Challenged by a weak military position, Beijing has responded to events in Xinxiang by launching the "strike hard campaign against terrorism, separatism, and religious extremism." This campaign is one extensive and expanding "counter-terrorism" operation that critics maintain has turned the Xinxiang Uyghur Autonomous Region into a "surveillance state".

Surveillance includes the "home stays" campaign. Chinese officials visit Uyghur and other Muslim homes in Xinxiang, during which families are required "to provide officials with information about their lives and political views, and are subjected to political indoctrination." Since 2018, Government cadres now "spend at least five days every two months in the families' homes. There is no evidence to suggest that families can refuse such visits."

Such traditional surveillance methods are being augmented by advanced technology. According to Sean Roberts, scholar on Uyghur and Asian affairs at George Washington University, "Recent events are suggesting that the Chinese state is creating a security state within Xinjiang like never seen before..."In [creating a security state, Chinese authorities] are taking full advantage of the new technologies that allow states to control their populations — they are making residents install tracking devices in vehicles, they are randomly searching cell phones of Uyghurs without probable cause, they are using public surveillance cameras and biometrics..."

Mass arrest and mass surveillance has been followed by mass internment in "reeducation centers", officially termed "vocational training centers", which are "to engineer 'thought transformation'". In August 2018, the U.N. Committee on the Elimination of Racial

Discrimination released a report estimating "the number of people detained in these secret [reeducation] camps [in Xinxiang] runs from 'tens of thousands to upwards of a million.'" Gay McDougall of the Committee said China has converted the "Uighur autonomous region into something that resembles a massive internment camp that is shrouded in secrecy..."

Mass internment has been coupled with increased bi-lateral and multi-lateral agreements on border security. If its "strike hard" campaign against Uyghur "separatists" and "terrorists" is to succeed, China needs the cooperation of the Central Asian Republics. To that end, "...China has wielded its growing regional power to bring its neighbors in line with Beijing's anti-Uyghur policies."

On August 3, 2016, China created the "Quadrilateral Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism in Counter-Terrorism by Afghanistan-China-Pakistan-Tajikistan Armed Forces". According to Xinhua, China's state news agency, "All parties reaffirmed they would cooperate to respond to these (terrorist) forces, and safeguard all member countries' peace and stability."

By establishing a base in Afghanistan's Wakhan Corridor, offering to build "11 new border checkpoints and a new military facility along the Tajikistan-Afghanistan border," and sending security "advisers" to Pakistan, China is attempting to seal the southwest border of Xinxiang to prevent Uyghur separatists from establishing bases in adjoining countries.

Beijing's concern with security in Xinxiang extends to the on-again, off-again peace negotiations between the Afghan government and the Taliban. "China wants to make sure Uighur militants do not have sanctuaries in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Beijing wants this issue to be part of the negotiations."

China's obsession with security in Xinxiang and its harsh policies toward the Uyghurs in pursuing security led The Economist to warn the Xinxiang Uyghur Autonomous Region was "a Chechnya in the making."

"A Chechnya in the making", which is consuming increasing sums of money that otherwise could go to OBOR projects inside and outside of China. In 2017, the government of Xinxiang spent an estimated $9.1 billion dollars on domestic security measures. This was a 92 percent increase over the previous year.

"A Chechnya in the making", which is jeopardizing China's foreign policy objective for OBOR to reach "strategic parity with the United States in Asia and reshape its security environment to ensure its rise is unrestrained."

"A Chechnya in the making", which is confronting Beijing with two possible scenarios.

The best case scenario allows China's robust economy to continue to spend endless sums of money to maintain control over the region. As long as Beijing has the finances, it can do so. But this is a costly "holding operation", not a permanent solution. Achieving the permanent solution Beijing sought of utilizing mass Chinese migration to convert Xinxiang into a region populated by a Chinese majority, insuring pacification, integration, and exploitation, is precluded by geography. Xinxiang is a "vast, inhospitable desert punctuated here and there by bazaar towns, ancient ruins, oil camps and Chinese cities." Only 9.7 percent of the land can sustain human habitation. And even that limited availability for habitation has been placed in jeopardized by Chinese migration, which has put a strain on "human access to clean water...for drinking, irrigation and agriculture".

The worst case scenario sees Beijing's heavily indebted banking system "collapse". According to a report released by the Financial Stability Board on March 5, 2018, "about 15%, or roughly US$7 trillion, of the world's riskier non-bank loans were held in China. Linked to the supply of credit, these loans could pose 'systemic risk'". Hui Feng, senior research fellow, Griffith Asia Institute, warns; "A distressed financial system [is likely to] trigger a systemic economic collapse." The resulting economic instability would likely unleash a reverse migration of Chinese from Xinxiang to the wealthy, coastal, provinces of China, which, in turn, would foment social instability there. Without money and migrants, and facing social instability in China proper, Beijing would likely lose the ability to effectively control all of Xinxiang. The resulting financial retrenchment would adversely impact both OBOR and Beijing's foreign policy.

For China, the choice is "between a rock and a hard place."

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