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*Please note that all recordings of the Uyghur Tribunal hearings can be found on You Tube: Uyghur Tribunal - YouTube
As I argue in my recently published book, *The War on the Uyghurs* (Princeton/Manchester 2020), I believe that what the Chinese state is doing to its Uyghur population and other indigenous Turkic Muslims in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) fits the description laid out by Raphael Lemkin in his original articulation of the term “genocide,” which he described as “the destruction of a nation or ethnic group.” Lemkin viewed genocide as a process that usually does not entail the “immediate destruction” of the group through mass murder, but that aims to systematically destroy its cultural distinctiveness, collective identity, and way of life, which Lemkin calls the “essential foundations of the life of national groups.” It is noteworthy that such a process of destruction is both more gradual and more commonplace in history than the attempted mass physical extermination of a people such as was seen in the Holocaust. In my own work, I refer to this gradual, yet intentional, destruction of a nation or ethnic group as “cultural genocide” to highlight its similarities to the pacification and removal of indigenous peoples during processes of colonization elsewhere. However, I also emphasize that my use of this term is not intended to suggest one way or another whether such actions qualify as “genocide” by international law. I will leave it to legal experts to make that determination.

My characterization of what is happening to Uyghurs and other related Turkic Muslim peoples in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) as ‘cultural genocide’ emerges from my analysis of both the actions taken by the state against these peoples since 2017 and the context in which they are taking place. The actions themselves are more than the implementation of a random collection of repressive policies. Rather, they form a complex of policies, which are destroying Uyghurs’ sense of nationhood. The context in which they are being carried out is that of China’s settler colonization of the territory Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims peoples view as their homeland. The People’s Republic of China (PRC) wishes to transform this region into a generic part of modern China with a Han majority population and views the indigenous population of the territory as, at best, superfluous to this process and, at worst, as an obstacle that must be removed.

Unfortunately, settler colonizing states do not usually publicly articulate goals of cultural genocide. Rather, they speak in euphemisms that suggest actual intentions while presenting them in a manner that is more palatable to others. In European colonialism during the nineteenth century, cultural genocide was often justified as a “civilizing mission” that was bringing a superior culture to “savages” or as justified in the name of settlers’ security due to the “savage” nature of the native peoples. In China’s case, the state justifies its actions against the indigenous peoples of the XUAR using eerily similar discourse adapted for the twenty-first century – poverty alleviation and counterterrorism. However, it is clear given the states’ intentions for the region’s development and settlement that the actual goal is to remove the native peoples of the XUAR to make way for development that is not actually intended for them, but for others in the PRC.

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2 Ibid.
Counsel – Can you please provide us with an overview of your statement?

SR – I am aware that the panel has been provided with a copy of my latest book and I will make some comments that particular remain from my research that went into my book today. I wanted to start by citing Raphael Lemkin’s original articulation of the term ‘genocide’ from his book Axis Rule in Occupied Europe published in 1944. He writes: “By genocide we mean the destruction of a nation or of an ethnic group...Generally speaking ‘genocide’ does not mean the immediate destruction of a nation, except when accomplished by mass killings of all members of a nation. It is intended rather to signify a coordinated plan of actions aiming at the destruction of essential foundations of the life of national groups with the aim of annihilating the groups themselves...Genocide is directed against a national group as an entity, and the actions involved are directed against individuals, not in their individual capacity, but as members of the national group.”

I cite Raphael Lemkin’s definition because I think it is fairly germane of what is happening to the Uyghurs and other related peoples in the Uyghur region of China today.

In my book, I refer to what is happening as ‘cultural genocide.’ This is an academic term. It is not a legal term and it is not meant to take any stance on whether what is happening should be determined as genocide by international law. I adopted this term primarily to highlight the similarities between the situation of Uyghurs and the faith of indigenous peoples elsewhere in the face of settler colonialism historically because that is pure cultural genocide is often used in that context and I think that context is the most appropriate to understand the Uyghur situation. In senses of cultural genocide around settler colonialization and removal of indigenous peoples, the aim is to neutralise the indigenous peoples by breaking their solidarity, severing their connection to the land, destroying their culture and replacing it with culture of the dominant people, and reducing their demographic footprint on the territory of their homeland to make way for development in settlement.
The reasons for my interpretation are that there is a gradual historical process of settler colonialisation of the Uyghur homeland by modern China. We have to understand this as taking place over time, accelerating with the founding of the PRC but lacking urgency for quite some time for as long as the state saw the region as a frontier and buffer zone, gaining intensity since the 1990s as the zone become viewed as a zone for opportunity in China’s export-oriented economy. I would suggest it becomes imminent with the declaration of the Belt and Road initiative in 2013 given that this region is particularly important to the Belt and Road initiative.

The other aspect of my interpretation relates to the policies that have been employed against Uyghurs and other indigenous peoples since 2017 in the Uyghur region. I see these policies as mutually reenforcing and intent on accomplishing what Raphael Lemkin characterises as the two stages of genocide. The first stage destroying the national pattern of the oppressed and secondly imposing the national pattern of the oppressors. So, we see the mass internment and the imprisonment accompanied by mass surveillance basically serving silencing local people and ensure their compliance with other policies that are aimed at both, transforming their identities as peoples and territory of their homeland. This includes policies of development aimed at transforming the region, assimilation policies erasing local culture and replacing it with Han culture and I think most importantly policies aimed at reducing their population density and demographic footprint in the region to allow for unfettered development and settlement.

Let me start with the historical gradual settler colonialism that we witness. You can see the region, that is the Uyghur homeland, is very much on the periphery of the PRC and has been of the periphery of all modern states in China but is also connected to a lot of other countries to the West and South-West that would have been influential and so a key to the kind of colonialisation of this area has been the colonial metropoles understanding of the region as a frontier either to keep other influences out or as a bridge to protect China’s influence externally.

To briefly characterise the initiation of this region’s relationship with modern China, we can go back to the mid-18th century, the Qing Empire, the last empire based in China conquered this area controlled it as a dependency rather than a colony for around 100
years. After a century, local revolts evolved in the 1860s that expelled Qing rule from the region but a decade later the Qing Empire returned and establishes control and makes it a region of the empire in 1884, calling it “Xinjiang” or new territory. At the same time, it institutes a colonial regime with Han settlement and assimilating local people. However, this endeavour largely fails and falls apart in 1911. Republican China controls through Han governors, little oversight from the central government and in fact the Soviet Union has as much if not more influence on the region than does the Chinese state. That’s particularly true of the 1930s and 1940s.

The last point I want to make here is that in the 1930s and 1940s, we see the establishment of two regional independent proto states, the Eastern Turkestan Republic, the second one is supported by the Soviet Union. The leadership of the two different republics, the first leadership was more of Islamic character and the second republic is more influenced by Soviet socialism but it is important to note that both of these republics were based very much on anti-colonialism ideology. The idea that this was a region where the Uyghurs and other indigenous Turkic Muslims, that it was their homeland and that it was occupied by China.

Talking about the first 40 years of PRC rule, I believe there was a missed opportunity for de-colonialization between China and this region. At the same time, there are failed attempts at assimilating the region and integrating it. Initially PRC showed some promise in de-colonialising this relationship. Of course, they create the Xinjiang Uyghurs Autonomous Region although they stopped short of giving it any allowance for cessation or any real political autonomy based on the majority ethnic group. At the same time, by the late 1950s and in the 1960s and 1970s, you see a lot of attempts of assimilation, especially during the cultural revolution; that includes settlement development, and assimilation attempts and there are some successes in some sense in relation to demographic changes, by 1980s nearly 40% of the population is Han but they are mostly isolated in the Northern region and do not penetrate the Uyghur majority South and I think that the persistent view of this region is as a frontier buffer zone limiting the impact of assimilation measures.
Thus, in the 1980s once the cultural revolution ends there is a second opportunity for decolonisation and we see increased religious and cultural freedoms, even discussions of political autonomy but this is cut short by tow tendencies becoming important in subsequent years and that is the importance of developing the region and by increased fears of ethnic autonomy. That brings us to the reform period which really is the precursor to where we are today. Economic reforms in China changes the utility of the region from a frontier and buffer zone to a location for economic growth and international trade bringing an impetus for settlement and development but that happens at the same time in the 1990s when the Soviet Union fell and that China could go a similar way dissolving into independent separate nation states.

Particularly in the Uyghur region, we see in the 1990s and early 2000 accelerated effort at development, in settlements and exerting control over the Uyghur population by suppressing any expression that hinted at a desire for more self-determination. First branded at separatism, then terrorism. In short, this situation initiated increased settler colonialism of the Uyghur homeland that intensified throughout 1990s and first decade of 2000s. I think there is a major turning point in 2009, when ethnic riots break out in the capital of the region Urumqi. I view these riots as emerging from the tensions of state-led development and migration of Han to the region. With Xi Jinping in power and the announcement of the Belt and Road initiative there is simultaneously less tolerance for resistance and more urgency for development and settlement.

This process finally intensifies in the declaration of the “People’s War on Terror” through extensive suppression of religion and securitisation and that really serves the precursor to the period we see since 2017, which I view as aiming to destroy the Uyghur and related indigenous nations of the region. Since 2017, we have seen mutually reinforcing policies in place that appear aimed at facilitating the regions development and settlement by side lining the indigenous peoples of the region, ensuring they cannot resist the developments, pacifying them, displaying them and essentially marginalising them. The intent, I believe is to destroy their identity and solidarity and to reduce their demographic footprint to allow for the unfettered transformation and settler colonization of the region.

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While I think the motivations have more to do with state plans for the region, the result is destruction of indigenous nations and cultures. That brings me to the complex of policies. It is important to understand what happened since 2017. It can look like a lot of separate atrocities but in fact they are very much mutually reinforcing and have very targeted results. The first part is, that most people are aware off is the mass internment coupled with mass surveillance. I see this more than anything as an attempt to completely immobilise the indigenous population of this region. It creates an atmosphere are fear that essentially ensures that all residents that are not in such institutions are compliant with whatever other policies the state undertakes. So, the state at the same time while having this mass internment and the immobilisation of resistance, we see the state transforming the landscape, destroying mosques and holy shrines, turning historical monuments into tourist sights and essentially creating urban spaces that are more like the generic open spaces of China than have any connection to the local culture or history. This serves to sever the connection between the indigenous peoples and this region and essentially eases their legacy.

There is also, what I term, cultural replacement, what Lemkin talks about in terms of the two stages of genocide, destroying the cultural pattern of the oppressed and replacing it what that of the oppressor. There are lots of different ways in which this is happening. It happens in the internment centres, it happens in the residential labour programmes but it also happens in villages, creating flag raising ceremonies and loyalty services and political education courses in the evenings. It happens through projects like a programme encouraging inter-ethnic marriage, which essentially encourages Han men to come to the region and marry Uyghur or other indigenous women. By the regulations of the region, it is criminalised to turn down a hand in marriage of someone from a different ethnic group or religion.

The other phenomena I like to mention is the boarding schools that have proliferated in the region in recent years and this is particularly effecting families and children that are separated from their parents because their parents are either in internment or in prison or residential labour programmes. This provides the opportunity to socialise these children in a completely state dictated Han cultural milieu and Chinese linguistic milieu.
The last point is reducing Uyghur population density and the population density of other indigenous peoples in this region really points to the motivations of the state. We think of this as in terms of the native Americans, the removal of the native Americans, we see a removal of this indigenous population part through coercive birth control programmes that have come to light recently but also through these residential labour programmes that have come to light over the last year and where we see both, former internees and rural residents being send to factories framed as a poverty alleviation programme, this programme moves local peoples either to residential factories in the region or more importantly to residential factories throughout China where they have limited movement and can be controlled.

The impact of these policies when we look at them together as mutually reenforcing their intent appears very clear. It is to dismantle the collective identity and actions of indigenous peoples, to transform their homeland and erase their historical connection to it, to destroy core elements of their social capital and cultural expression while replacing them with those of the dominant Han and to reduce their demographic footprint in the region through large-scale labour transfers to residential factories and forced sterilisation and birth control.

Counsel – I have two questions, interrelated so I will ask them together. In your opinion what triggered the massive reaction of the PRC towards the Uyghurs in and around 2017 bearing in mind that by that time, the general population had become more timid and, to a large extend, compliant. There was no further resistance as such and very little incidents reported. Another related question is that why in your opinion, the PRC takes on the heavy cost of building massive detention camps, monitoring them constantly, creating international outrage and resentment fore seemingly little gain in relation to a small proportion of its population.

SR – I think my answer is also interrelated in some ways. I think one problem and that’s often very difficult to define is the actions of states in a singular way. I think the turn that happens is a perfect storm effect. We do have a history of violent resistance happening in 2014/15. Then we also have the urgency of the Belt and Road initiative. We also have Xi Jinping’s authoritarian term and its influence on the party, which includes a policy of

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trying to change the concept of ethnic minority and ethnic identity in China and push an idea of a unified Chinese nation. I think these things all come together at once. Now why the Chinese government would do this to great cost is another question and I think that in my mind it is like reading tea leaves to understand the actions of a state. I think the Chinese Communist Party in its present configuration believes that it can get away with it. It felt that it was strong enough globally that it would not have much push back from the international community and I think the jury is still out as to whether they were right or not.

Panel – Can you elaborate for those who might not be familiar with the literature on settler colonialism by what you mean with that analogy. If you could specify for example because it is that a place that is already a part of modern China might still be a target of settler colonialism.

SR – This is something that I make reference to in my book actually. It was a question that arised for me as well. As I started to look at other examples, I think it is not very unique because we see in the case of the Americans for example. We don’t start to see a removal of native Americans until the colonists need more land. What drives the push to remove indigenous peoples from the equation is economic growth. It is something that we saw in the nineteenth century and maybe the early twentieth century and I think it’s a question that faces the international community now is that kind of behaviour still acceptable in the twenty-first century? If we look at the native Americans, it is not until the 1820s or 1830s that we really start to see a push to remove them partially from the East and the push goes on into the 1930s. It is not usually an immediate transition. It is also important to understand this distinction between frontier and zone of settlement. For a long time the Chinese state viewed this area as a buffer zone; an area to keep out external forces and it really only is int the 1990s where we see the Chinese government thinking about making this a forepart of its state and a forepart of its national engagement.

Panel – Is there a material difference between settler colonialism and what happened in the region, for example in the 1990s because you elaborate on how in the 1990s there was a liberalisation and a flourishing of culture. That is not true is it with settler colonialism.
where we stand? It is either marginalisation or attack? How do you explain this period of liberalisation and cultural flourishment?

SR – I think this information should not be seen as zero sum. This region could be integrated into China, even today, in a way that would be considerate of the populations. The issue gets down to a degree of where the Chinese government has given up on trying to integrate the indigenous on their own terms. Most of the 1990s, up to almost 2017, state strategy in the region was, what I call “carrot and stick” - there were incentives to assimilate like going to China to study and work. At the same time, there was a massive clamp down and suppression of religion and any kind of political voices in the region. Somewhat successful, some of the people who got caught outside of China after 2017 were actually from the Uyghur and Kazakh elite. They were studying abroad and their parents and themselves had really bought into the Chinese system, learned the Chinese language, went to Chinese schools, parents were party members and there is almost a switch then happens. I would say starting in late 2016 where the state starts to target these ethnic groups at large and it begins very much like to look like a situation of settler colonialism.

Panel – Do you discern that there is a bifurcated policy in relation to assimilation? My reading of your report seems to suggest, to some extent that there has been a dual policy in which there is an urban assimilation process, almost like an assimilated class, and a rural underclass – is this true in the present day? And if so how does that inform our analysis as a Tribunal. Should we be alert to urban rural policies and practices, which are quite different from another?

SR – I think this was the shocking part of the change that happened late 2016/2017. Up to that time that was pretty much the case. I mentioned earlier a lot of the inroads that the Chinese Communist Party has built in the North and there was a lot of development in the North and that region was connected by rail to Beijing and those occasions where there was more assimilation, more Uyghurs, Kazakhs and other ethnic groups were becoming part of China, speaking the Chinese language on a regular basis maybe better than their own language. In the South, which really was from the Chinese perspective an area that they had not penetrated and they also saw it as an area where the rural
population was particularly religious. I think that a lot of what the state is trying to do now is to colonise that area, that never really has been colonised to a large extend. It began by developing the city of Kashgar in the earlier 2000 but it has also gone on to develop cities alongside. I think they want to urbanise the entire region to a certain degree and get rid of villages and rural population that they felt were an obstacle to state aim.

Panel – What implications are of the region being a frontier since 1949 – how does its distance from Beijing impact state capacity and reach, and how does it impact governance? What I want us to understand is to what extent is there tolerated impunity, and to what extent is there a direct strong government line which can be shown and demonstrated?

SR – It probably depends on the time period we are talking about. The early PRC period, though cultural revolution, most of the research suggests head of communist party in the region was trying to shield them from egregious cultural revolution to assure there were not revolts in the area. Part of acknowledging the state didn’t have strong reach beyond the northern areas of Urumqi in particular. By the 1990s that changes – when I first entered there I came from soviet Uzbekistan - I was shocked at how much more cultural revolution existed on other side of the border – they have similar culture and languages but there had been much less development than the soviets. That continues even to early 2000s – attempt in 1990s where Chinese state begins to capitalize on sports and pushing development everywhere. Studies show development in the west lagged behind what happens in the east. In 2000 they announced master development program to open up the west, focused on developing this area. Back to Xi Jinping, who really has anything can be accomplished by state led efforts, want to make that link urgently and that there is no impunity.

Panel – Given your expertise in international development, what is your assessment of how development in that region is approached? Can you elaborate on the economic proposition?

SR – The labour programs in many ways are more about population transfer and there is sense that the state does not to a limiting these people, and want to make sure they are useful citizens. We see deliberate attempt, really from 2016/7 this kicks in, in terms of
great factory workers bringing them in from rural parts. This has not spread throughout China. The other question is whether the Chinese model... important to know the Chinese models of development are stuck in retro ideal of modernization - it's about top-down infrastructure and industrialisation and all of that will lead to development. Thinking in development today is much more human centric. In places you have indigenous population, to make sure development doesn't become disruptive, is to ensure that population plays a major role. That has been the key lacking from what the Chinese state has been doing from the early 2000s.

Panel – You describe how since 2014 there has been concerted attempt to break solidarity and break people’s sense of collective identity, from point of view of institutions, is this attempt being played out through the institution of the family, and does that account for how much we are seeing in particular reports allegations of violence, including sexual violence towards women?

SR – Is played out through family, also through other institutions such as religion, and also through village informed structures. Must understand about Uyghur culture is that it very much community becomes the location where you uphold life cycle where everybody is invited. It becomes almost a sub governmental level of orientation which will work together to solve community problems. Those are the things that are being targeted. In my opinion I think the sexual violence in the camps is more related to humiliation. There is a certain effect where a lot of view reproduction through a gendered lens, humiliation for instance becomes seen as a violation. I think the goal with that is humiliation and the narrative of terrorism, talk more about this in my book, really serves a humanise the people of the region which allowed this atrocity to be carried out.

Panel – Can I offer you an alternative, if we say violence has an end of humiliation, then we might miss what its material basis is, which is target women because they do certain sorts of labour, if you attack that point in social solidarity, you attack the material basis on which the solidarity is formed?

SR – One of the labour programs which takes people to residential factories, are meant for stay-at-home mothers and are essentially half day care. Effort to separate from parent to children so children can be institutionalized in state institutions rather than reproducing.
Uyghur cultural norms. There is a potentially part of why they are targeted in different ways.

Panel – What do you see as relationship between inside penal institutions and outside? Reason to understand the way in which our witnesses express the view ‘we are imprisoned even when we are free’.

SR – Person in region not been in penal institutions and told me what it was like to be outside. It was an immobilising experience. Sense that become knocking on your door – break down of trust – person said they didn’t feel comfortable speaking to anybody about their fear. It’s an inevitable thing that happens in this situation. We don’t have many stories yet – but if dust ever settles and things change, we will hear stories about how people had to sexually sell out their selves. We have seen people forced to do testimonies against children abroad. Your neighbour can report you to think they may be kept out of an institution but may put you in it. Nobody wants to talk about it. One of my colleagues who went to the region in 2016, she would meet with friends and informants and would be terrified to talk about anything about the weather and sports for example. They had to leave the city to have a discussion about anything else. There is an incredible fear which is immobilising and silencing and pacifies everybody in this ethnic group and in this nation.

Panel – Policies don’t have intentions; people have them. Who are the people or bodies behind these policies which merged in 2017?

SR – Difficult thing to pin down completely. My feeling is to large degree it comes out of the sector of the communist party in Beijing. We can see already Beijing calls Xinjiang committee meeting which began in 2014 – they seem to be in attempt to bring in central party members to map out a strategy for the region. We see already yin 2014 the state starting to put a place on a lot of things – such as the integrated database which compiles information about all people in the region such as where they have been, reports from workplace, neighbourhood, etc. People’s war on terror in 2014 we see the implementation of programs in re-education. They don’t look like the centres we see in 2017 – first they are more limited number of people and there are several different types, experimenting with residential or not, day re-education done in different regions. Determining who made out the plan for these policies can be very complicated but that said, it’s clear that the

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communist party brought in the party secretary of the region in 2016 Chen to implement this. I don’t know if he is the architect, but he is certainly the manager.

Panel – Can you discern policies that are similar to those in acted in Tibet when Chen was party secretary in Tibet before he moved to this region?

SR – The main one, is he implements this ‘convenience police stations’ - ensures the state has the ability to manage society at every level and geography of the place. He replicates this immediately after he finishes in Tibet. I assume that is the main reason why he is brought to Xinjiang.

Panel – Do you discern a subtitling of these policies in recent years because of the international attention on the region or successful colonization of indigenous population in the region?

SR – I do see a certain softening. It’s more in response to the success or perceived success than to international pressure. There has been spy government officials saying everyone has left them, there are other reports saying they are very much being used, or used in slightly different ways. The residential labour programs have ramped up. We see an attempt to move people who have been in extra-legal internment centres moved them into prisons and moved them into actual prison sentences. Shouldn’t be seen as softening or just moving in a different stage or direction. At the same time being able to cover up the traces of what took place.

Panel – Your observation the PRC does not want to ‘eliminate the Uyghurs forever’, means that any legal genocide based on that must fail, correct?

SR – I meant it on a physical level … I’ll leave that to the lawyers.

Panel – Genocide in your version is a process that continues over time, not instantly, your account of the reforms in 1980s and 1990s means there can be no continuing intent starting before those reforms and continuing after?

SR – There has only been drive to eliminate them as a collective since 2016. Prior to that I think the approach I mentioned was a carrot and stick of trying to separate out Uyghurs.
and Kazakhs, etc however I think that the intent is to destroy the collective identity and ideally over time to dilute it.
UYGHUR TRIBUNAL
TESTIMONY

SEAN R. ROBERTS
THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
JUNE 4, 2021
RAPHAEL LEMKIN’S ARTICULATION OF GENOCIDE

By “genocide” we mean the destruction of a nation or of an ethnic group… Generally speaking genocide does not necessarily mean the immediate destruction of a nation, except when accomplished by mass killings of all members of a nation. It is intended rather to signify a coordinated plan of actions aiming at the destruction of essential foundations of the life of national groups, with the aim of annihilating the groups themselves… Genocide is directed against the national group as an entity, and the actions involved are directed against individuals, not in their individual capacity, but as members of the national group.

- Raphael Lemkin, *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe* (1944), p. 79
CULTURAL GENOCIDE

• Academic term, not taking a stance on legal definitions of genocide

• Adopted to highlight the similarities between the situation of Uyghurs and the fate of indigenous peoples elsewhere in the face of settler colonialism

• Aim is to neutralize the indigenous people by breaking their solidarity, severing their connection to the land, destroying their culture and replacing it with the culture of the dominant people, and reducing their demographic footprint on the territory of their homeland to make way for development and settlement
REASONS FOR MY INTERPRETATION

- The gradual historical process of settler colonization of the Uyghur homeland by modern China
  - Accelerated with founding of the PRC, but lacking urgency as long as the state viewed the region as a frontier
  - Gaining intensity since the 1990s as the region became viewed as a zone of opportunity in China’s export-oriented economy
  - And becoming imminent with the declaration of the Belt & Road Initiative in 2013
- The policies being employed since 2017 against Uyghurs and related peoples are mutually reinforcing and intent on accomplishing what Lemkin characterizes as the two stages of genocide — ”destroying the national pattern of the oppressed” and “imposing the national pattern of the oppressors.”
  - Internment/imprisonment accompanied with mass surveillance silence local peoples and ensure their compliance with policies aimed at transforming both their identity as peoples and the territory of their homeland
    - Policies of development aimed at transforming the region
    - Erasing local culture and replacing with Han culture
    - Reducing their population density and demographic footprint in the region
FROM FRONTIER TO SETTLEMENT –
THE GRADUAL SETTLER COLONIZATION OF THE
UYGHUR HOMELAND
A HISTORY OF CONQUEST AND OCCUPATION OF THE UYGHUR REGION PRIOR TO COMMUNIST RULE

• Conquered by Qing Empire in mid-18th century – controlled as a dependency
• After a century, local revolts in the 1860s expel Qing from region
• A decade later, Qing re-establishes control, making it province of the Empire in 1884 called Xinjiang or “new territory”; institutes a colonial regime with Han settlement and attempts at assimilating local peoples, but this effort largely fails
• Republican China controls region through Han governors with little oversight from central government; Soviet Union frequently plays more a role than the Chinese state in region (especially in the 1930s and early 1940s)
• Local revolts in the 1930s and 1940s respectively establish regional independent proto-states, both named the Eastern Turkistan Republic (the 2nd one is assisted by the U.S.S.R.)
THE EASTERN TURKISTAN REPUBLICS — 1933-34 & 1944-49

First Eastern Turkistan Republic — 1933-34 in South (Kashgar, Khotan)

Second Eastern Turkistan Republic, 1944-49 in north (3 counties around Kuldja)
FIRST FORTY YEARS OF PRC RULE – MISSED OPPORTUNITY FOR DE-COLONIZATION & FAILED ASSIMILATION ON THE FRONTIER

• The PRC initially showed promise for decolonizing relationship with people and region – adopted some ethnic federalism, but incomplete

• At same time, it failed to integrate region through settlement, development, and assimilation; major demographic changes by 1980 – almost 40% Han, but isolated in northern region; persistent view as frontier and buffer zone limited impact of assimilation attempts

• 1980s provide second opportunity for decolonization – increased religious and cultural freedoms, discussion of increased ethnic political autonomy, but cut short by increasing importance of developing the region and by increased fears of ethnic autonomy
THE REFORM PERIOD –
FROM FRONTIER TO SETTLEMENT

• Economic reforms change the utility of the region from a frontier and buffer zone to a location for economic growth and international trade – impetus for development

• By the early 1990s when the Soviet Union fell, the government also became increasingly concerned that China could face a similar fate and dissolve into separate independent nation-states (particularly concerning the Uyghur region and Tibet)

• This accelerated efforts at development, settlement, and at exerting control over the Uyghur population by suppressing any expression that hinted at a desire for more self-determination (first branded as separatism, then as terrorism)

• In short, the situation initiated increased settler colonization of the Uyghur homeland that intensifies throughout 1990s and first decade of 2000s
2009-2017 – LOCAL RESISTANCE AND INTENSIFICATION OF SETTLER COLONIZATION

• The pressures of increased development and settlement lead to increased resistance and civil disturbances in the region – most notably with the 2009 Urumqi riots

• With Xi Jinping’s rise to power and the announcement of the Belt & Road Initiative, there is simultaneously less tolerance for resistance and more urgency for development and settlement

• This process intensifies in the declaration of the “People’s War on Terror” through extensive suppression of religion and increased securitization, serving as a precursor to the draconian policies since 2017 aimed at destroying the Uyghur and related indigenous nations of the region.
• The mutually reinforcing policies put in place in 2017 appear aimed at facilitating the region’s development and settlement by sidelining the indigenous peoples of the region, ensuring they cannot resist these developments, pacifying them, displacing them, and essentially marginalizing them.

• The intent is to destroy their collective identity and solidarity and reduce their demographic footprint to allow for the unfettered transformation and settler colonization of the region.

• While the motivation has more to do with state plans for the region, the result is the destruction of indigenous nations and cultures.
THE COMPLEX OF POLICIES TO DESTROY THE UYGHUR NATION
CREATING ATMOSPHERE OF FEAR AND COMPLIANCE

(AP Photo, 2019)
TRANSFORMING THE LANDSCAPE

2011

2019

(NY Times, 2020)

(Patrick Wack, Wired 2020)
CULTURAL REPLACEMENT
REDUCING UYGHUR POPULATION DENSITY
IMPACT OF COMPLEX OF POLICIES

• Taken together, these policies’ intents appear clear – to dismantle the collective identity and action of indigenous peoples:
  • Transform their homeland to erase their historical connection to it
  • Destroy core elements of their social capital and cultural expressions while replacing them with those of the dominant Han
  • Reduce their demographic footprint in region through large-scale labor transfers to residential factories and forced sterilization and birth control