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**CHINESE STABILITY MAINTENANCE POLICY: A TOOL FOR
HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS****Abstract**

Various repressive campaigns of the Communist Party of China, such as the 'Strike Hard', 'Anti-Gang Campaign, campaign against 'organised crime', have taken their validity and backbone from its vaguely described policy of National Security Maintenance. These mechanisms have resulted in widespread human rights violations such as arbitrary arrest, torture of human rights defenders and activists in Tibet, Xinjiang and Hong Kong. Mass arbitrary detention, surveillance, indoctrination, and the destruction of the region's cultural and religious heritage has been taken place in Xinjiang since 2017. Credible estimates indicate that about 1 million Turkic Muslims are being indefinitely held in concentration camps, the CCP calls them vocational centers, where they are forced to disavow their identity and become loyal government subjects. Even Hong Kong, the Special Administrative Region has now started feeling the pressure and influence of CCP under the sphere of its newly adopted, the National Security Law.

Keywords

Human Rights, Security Maintenance Policy, repressive mechanism, destabilizing elements, omnipresent state surveillance, endangering state security', 'leaking state secrets', 'inciting separatism', 'inciting subversion of state power', Strike Hard', 'Anti-Gang Campaign, arbitrary detention, political education" camps, indoctrination, National Security Law

Introduction

China's 'stability maintenance' policy is at the root of significant and persistent human rights violations and crimes against humanity in Tibet, Xinjiang and Hong Kong. The PRC has accelerated this policy to suppress a host of activities and issues that the Chinese party-state deems criminal or illegal. The 'stability maintenance' repression machinery is supported by a range of nearly omnipresent state surveillance and control mechanisms that are responsible for pre-empting or crushing any early signs of dissent against the Chinese party-state.

In the case of Tibet

The unprecedented level of state surveillance and control in Tibetan areas through technology, propaganda and repression has led to an upsurge in detentions and convictions of Tibetans.¹ It has resulted in widespread and systematic human rights violations and political repression, depriving Tibetans of a host of human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the rights to freedom of expression and information, freedom of religion and belief, freedom from torture and arbitrary detention, and education and language, development and a clean environment.

The objective of the 'stability maintenance' policy is to preserve and sustain the ruling status of the party-state and president Xi Jinping's perennial leadership of the 'world's largest political organisation.'² The policy primarily targets activists, dissidents, religious leaders, and petitioners who are viewed as "destabilizing elements" against the party-state and are thus punished under highly repressive laws.

Xi's ascension to the party's top leadership position in 2012 heralded an unending wave of attacks against and oppression of civil rights lawyers, human rights activists, and dissidents all over the PRC. A large chunk of stability maintenance resources is devoted to thwarting any threats posed by the so-called "five new black categories" (xin heiwulei or 新黑物类 in Chinese): human rights lawyers, religious leaders, dissidents, online commentators and marginalised and disadvantaged communities.³ Chinese authorities equate 'stability maintenance' with various vaguely-defined crimes such as 'endangering state security', 'leaking state secrets', 'inciting separatism', 'inciting subversion of state power', etc. Tibetans accused of these charges are denied the right to a fair trial and legal representation of their choice. Many Tibetans continue to be convicted of vaguely-worded crimes and suffer torture and maltreatment and unjust sentences.

The importance of 'stability maintenance' was reinforced at the 7th Tibet Work Forum, a major meeting held from 28 to 29 August 2020. Top party, government, and military officials, including President Xi Jinping, convened to devise and formulate China's Tibet policy. There, they decided to

¹ Relentless Detention and Prosecution of Tibetans under China's "Stability Maintenance" Campaign, Human Rights Watch, 22 May 2016, available at <https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/05/22/relentless/detention-and-prosecution-tibetans-under-chinas-stability-maintenance>

² Willy Wo-Lap Lam. 'Stability Maintenance Gets a Major Boost at the National People's Congress'

³ Willy Wo-Lap Lam. Xi Jinping Warns Against the “Black Swans” and “Gray Rhinos” of a Possible Color Revolution, 20 February 2019, available at <https://jamestown.org/program/china-brief-early-warning-xi-jinping-warns-against-the-black-swans-and-gray-rhinos-of-a-possible-color-revolution/>



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continue the state's policy of absolute control and assimilation in Tibet.⁴ Xi's 'strategy of governing Tibet in the new era' includes 'Sinicizing Tibetan Buddhism' and improving the ability of Chinese Communist Party organizations and members at all levels 'to deal with major struggles and prevent major risks.'⁵

In the case of Xinjiang

Reporting indicates that 1 to 3 million people—including Uyghur, Kazakh, and Kyrgyz minorities—have been detained in a network of nearly 1,200 recently constructed camps, where they are subject to forced re-education and political indoctrination. PRC authorities have also increasingly sought the involuntary repatriation of Uyghur migrants or asylum seekers in third countries, while placing diaspora networks under unprecedented pressure.⁶ What explains recent changes to China's domestic security strategy in Xinjiang?

Typical explanations in media and scholarly work highlight domestic factors: unrest among China's Uyghur population that escalated in 2008–09, the CCP's shift toward a more assimilationist minority policy, and the leadership of Chen Quanguo, who became XUAR party secretary in 2016.⁷ These factors provide important context for understanding the CCP's recent security buildup and repression in Xinjiang. The strategy shift described above, however, may also have been catalyzed by the CCP's changing perceptions of its external security environment, a factor that is an important complement to domestically focused explanations.

China claimed that the significant factor that contributed to the CCP's change in internal security strategy in Xinjiang was its desire to prevent terrorism from diffusing into China via radicalized transnational Uyghur networks, particularly those suspected to have link with terrorist groups in Southeast Asia, Syria, and the broader Middle East. Until recently, studies of China's approach to counterterrorism have been relatively sparse within the literature on terrorism and political violence, as well as in scholarship on China's security behaviour.⁸ A focus on terrorist threat, however, is valuable for understanding PRC security policy in Xinjiang, now described as the "main battlefield" in China's fight against terrorism.⁹ Over the course of 2014–16, the CCP appears to have concluded that China's Muslim population was broadly vulnerable "infection" from transnational jihadist networks, and that the primary vector for potential infection was the Uyghur diaspora's increasing contact with militant groups in Southeast Asia and the Middle East. This heightening threat perception sheds light on some of the most distinctive, consequential aspects of the CCP's approach.

⁴ Tibet's importance seen at major meeting promising more repression, International Campaign for Tibet./

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Bethany Allen-Ebrahimian, "Exposed: China's Operating Manuals for Mass Internment and Arrest by Algorithm," International Consortium of Investigative Journalists, November 24, 2019; and China's Repression and Internment of Uyghurs hearing.

⁷ Adrian Zenz and James Leibold, "Chen Quanguo: The Strongman behind Beijing's Securitization Strategy in Tibet and Xinjiang," China Brief, Vol. 17, No. 12 (September 2017), <https://jamestown.org/program/chen-quanguo-the-strongman-behind-beijings-securitization-strategy-in-tibet-and-xinjiang/>.

⁸ A notable exception to this characterization is Michael Clarke, ed., *Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism in China*:

Domestic and Foreign Policy Dimensions (London: Hurst, 2018)

⁹ “Xinjiang weiwuer zizhiq dangwei nanjiang gongzuo huiyi jintian juxing” [Southern Xinjiang work forum convened], Yangguangwang, November 3, 2015, <http://m.cnr.cn/news/20151103/>.



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The shift from individual to collective detention and re-education; why authorities focused so much on re-education; why repressive policies were externalized to the diaspora.

The CCP has long framed counterterrorism as a struggle against the “three evil forces” of terrorism, separatism, and extremism, which PRC officials claim have mired Xinjiang in violence, instability, and poverty since the early 1990s.¹⁰

In 2017–18, the CCP began to employ an internal security strategy in Xinjiang that had three notable features: escalated use of collective detention, intensive ideological re-education, and the application of intensified coercion to the Uyghur diaspora.

In March 2017, new regional “Regulations on De-extremification” called for transformation-through-education via both individual and centralized measures.¹¹ Over the next few months, XUAR authorities began to apply involuntary detention and re-education on a mass scale; they also began to discuss a re-education-based strategy designed to produce “comprehensive stability” (quanmian wending) in the region.¹²

These steps, in practice, meant the establishment of a wide-scale extra-judicial detention and internment system, aimed at mass indoctrination and political-ideological re-education. Human rights groups estimate that 30 percent of southern Xinjiang’s Uyghur population has been detained for re-education, as have smaller numbers of the region’s Kazakh and Kyrgyz minorities.¹³ Although the exact scale of imprisonment is unknown, scholars Adrian Zenz and Rian Thum arrive at agrees of around 1.5 million people between 5 and 10 percent of China’s Uyghur population; U.S. government estimates have ranged over time between 800,000 and 3 million. Formal arrests in Xinjiang, which are separate from “transformation-through-education,” also rose: in 2017, Xinjiang had 1.5 percent of the PRC’s population, but 21 percent of its recorded arrests.¹⁴ In a publicly released letter to U.S. Ambassador to China Terry Branstad in early 2018, the bipartisan chairs of the U.S. Congressional-Executive Commission on China referred to events in Xinjiang as “the largest mass incarceration of an ethnic minority in the world today.”¹⁵ This broadening of repression shifted the CCP from selective repression (targeting individuals because of what they do) toward collective

¹⁰ “Xinjiang to Crack Down on ‘Three Evil Forces,’” Xinhua, March 6, 2012, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2012-03/06/content_14766900.htm.

¹¹ “Xinjiang Weiwu’er zizhi qu jiduan hua tiaoli” [XUAR de-extremification regulations] (Xinjiang, China: Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region [XUAR] Government, March 30, 2017), <http://www.xinjiang.gov.cn/2017/03/30/128831.htm>.

¹² Wang Mingshan, “Kaichuang weihu shehui wending he changzhijiu’an xin jumian” [Create a new situation of social stability maintenance and long-term peace and stability], Renmin gong’an, November 7, 2017, <http://www.mps.gov.cn/n2255079/n5590589/n5822616/n5822768/c5860294/content.html>

¹³ This estimate includes nonresidential re-education: 20 percent are in “noncustodial” classes, and 10 percent are in a network of mass internment camps. See “China: Massive Numbers of Uyghurs and Other Ethnic Minorities Forced into Re-education Programs,” Chinese Human Rights Defenders, August 3, 2018, <https://www.nchr.org/2018/08/china-massive-numbers-of-uyghurs-other-ethnic-minorities-forced-into-re-education-programs/>

¹⁴ Josh Rudolph, “Xinjiang Arrests Account for 21% of Total in China in 2017,” China Digital Times, July 25, 2018, <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/2018/07/xinjiang-arrests-account-for-21-of-total-in-china-in-2017/>

¹⁵ “[CECC] Chairs Urge Ambassador Branstad to Prioritize Mass Detention of Uighurs, Including Family Members” Dejurenexus.com

of Radio Free Asia Employees” (Washington, D.C.: Congressional-Executive Commission on China, April 3, 2018), <https://www.cecc.gov/media-center/press-releases/chairs-urge-ambassador-branstad-to-prioritize-mass-detention-of-uyghurs>



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repression (targeting people because of “who they are, where they live, and to which identity group they belong”).¹⁶

Consistent with revised regulations, re-education programs in Xinjiang are heavily aimed at curtailing religious practice and bringing it under the party-state’s discipline. Much of the curriculum in detention facilities is patriotic education aimed at instilling ethnic unity and nationalist loyalty to the CCP, accomplished by replacing Uyghur language with Mandarin Chinese (which officials call “the country’s common language”) and substituting secular cultural habits for Muslim religious practice. Re-education also places a strong emphasis on indoctrination against the “three evils,” since Chinese thinking generally treats them as interrelated: religious extremism is the root cause of both separatist inclinations and terrorist tactics.

In the case of Hong Kong

China’s top legislature adopted the broadly-worded Law of the People’s Republic of China on Safeguarding National Security in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (the National Security Law). This is one of the most recent and visible approaches of CCP attempting to extend its greater control over the former British colonial city which thanks to the Sino-British Joint Declaration of 1984 enjoys a significant extent of freedom.

The local government in Hong Kong escalated its crackdown on pro- democracy activists and opposition leaders and used national security as a pretext to interfere in the media and education sectors. The right to freedom of peaceful assembly was further curtailed by seemingly arbitrary enforcement of physical distancing regulations in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Immediately after the law’s passage, authorities started to use it to crack down on legitimate and peaceful expression.¹⁷ People were arrested for possessing flags, stickers and banners with political slogans. Police and officials have also claimed that slogans, T-shirts, songs and pieces of White Paper could endanger national security and lead to criminal prosecution.

Two days after the law was passed, the Hong Kong government declared that “Liberate Hong Kong, the revolution of our times”, a common political slogan during last year’s protests, “connotes ‘Hong Kong independence’, or separating Hong Kong from China, and effectively forbade its use.¹⁸ These examples show how the law and its usage contravene international human rights laws and standards. These stipulate that peacefully expressing one’s opinion about political systems does not constitute a threat to national security

Recently 53 pro-democracy politicians arbitrarily arrested on January 6, 2021. All were arrested for “subversion” under Hong Kong’s draconian National Security Law (NSL), which the Chinese government imposed on June 30, 2020. They include veteran politicians and activists, such as Leung “Long Hair” Kwok-hung and Claudio Mo, and newcomers who joined the movement during the 2019 protests.¹⁹ The latter include Jeffrey Andrews, a social worker serving the city’s ethnic minority

¹⁶ Evgeny Finkel, “The Phoenix Effect of State Repression: Jewish Resistance during the Holocaust,”

¹⁷ Human Rights Watch, “World Report” : China’s Global Threat to Human Rights, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2020/country-chapters/global#>

¹⁸ Amnesty international, 2020 report : Hong Kong’s national security law

https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/07/hong-kong-national-security-law-10-things-you-need-to-know/?utm_source=annual_report&utm_medium=pdf&utm_campaign=2021&utm_term=english

¹⁹ Hong Kong Freedom Press <https://hongkongfp.com/>



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community, and Lee Chi Yung, a disability rights advocate. Many represent a broad cross-section of grassroots society long excluded from the city's governance.²⁰

Conclusion

China's 'stability maintenance' budget in 2019 was 1.39 trillion yuan, which was 16.8 percent higher than the country's official military expenditure.²¹ In reality, this figure is just a fraction of the actual budget considering that 'stability maintenance' is now embedded in both state-owned and large private enterprises and firms. There stability-maintenance' personnel, equipment, and operations contribute to, and overlap with, the functions of the state apparatus."²² The bulk of the budget is devoted to running a 24-hour highly sophisticated digital surveillance machinery epitomised by the "nets in the sky, traps on the ground", a motto for tracking, identifying and capturing criminals, dissidents and fugitives.²³ In the last five years, China's human rights violations have doubled along with the 'stability maintenance' budget. Observers agree that the budget will continue to increase in the foreseeable future portending challenges ahead for situation in Tibet, Xinjiang and Hong Kong. Severe and wide-ranging repression of ethnic minorities continued unabated under the pretence of "anti-separatism", "anti-extremism" and "counter-terrorism" in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (Xinjiang) and the Tibet Autonomous Region (Tibet). In June 2020, 50 independent UN human rights experts strongly criticized China for the repression of religious and ethnic minorities in Xinjiang and Tibet, among others. On 6 October, 39 UN member states issued a joint statement expressing grave concerns about the human rights situation in Xinjiang, Hong Kong and other regions, urging China to allow immediate, meaningful and unfettered access to Xinjiang for independent observers, including the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and relevant UN special procedure mandate holders. Capitalizing on its rising political and economic influence and expanding role within the UN, China continued to seek ways to challenge established human rights mechanisms.

²⁰ Human Right Watch, Hong Kong: Mass Arrests of Pro-Democracy Politicians, 8 January 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/01/08/hong-kong-mass-arrests-pro-democracy-politicians>

²¹ Official media: Stability maintenance budget has doubled to nearly 140 billion yuan in five years, Radio Free Asia, 14 March 2019, available at <https://www.rfa.org/mandarin/yataibaodao/zhengzhi/ql1-03142019093727.html>

²² Willy Wo-Lap Lam. 'Stability Maintenance Gets a Major Boost at the National People's Congress', 22 March 2019, The Jamestown Foundation, available at [https://jamestown.org/program/stability-](https://jamestown.org/program/stability-maintenance-gets-a-) maintenance-gets-a-

[major-boost-at-the-national-peoples-congress/](#)

²³ Tibet: A Glossary of Repression, Human Rights Watch, 19 June 2017, available at <https://www.hrw.org/video-photos/interactive/2017/06/20/tibet-glossary-repression>



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