

## A Two-Dimensional Analytical Model of Uyghur Separatism

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### ABSTRACT

Uyghur people are a Turkic-speaking ethnic minority living in northwest China, mainly in the Xinjiang province, and they account for a large percentage of the entire Chinese Muslim population. Uyghur separatism waxes and wanes but never completely ceases. Prior researchers primarily focused on analyzing the causes of Uyghur separatism, but this paper seeks to explain why the Uyghur separatist movements vary from small-scale protests to large and violent rebellions through the establishment of a two-dimensional model incorporating both international and domestic factors. This paper analyzes three historical periods when the Uyghurs gain temporary but successful independence: the Yaqub Beg Rebellion and the founding of the first and second East Turkestan Republics. I argue that it is the variations of international lobby actors' support and the Chinese government's strength that determine how the Uyghur separatist movements develop. Furthermore, I predict that non-state actors will play more important roles in the development of Uyghur separatism in the future. This research contributes to the broader study of the pattern of separatism across the globe.

### FACULTY MENTOR

**Juliann Emmons Allison**

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Megan was already ahead of the "game" when she joined our department's honors program in Fall '09. As the program's director, I have worked with a very large number of students writing theses on questions related to international relations and comparative politics. Megan is easily a stand out among them. Her thesis develops a model to explain the role of domestic political repression and international intervention on the intensity of ethnic separatism. She applies her model to the Uyghurs, a Turkic ethnic group currently living in Uyghur Autonomous Region of Xinjiang, China, who have repeatedly sought independence. Unlike most scholars, who account for occurrence of Uyghur uprisings, Megan focuses on the intensity of these protests. She finds that consideration of both domestic and international politics is necessary to understand the historical behavior of Uyghur separatists. I consider Megan's thesis to be a significant scholarly and practical contribution to our understanding of ethnic separatism.



AUTHOR

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Meng Yuan is completing her B.A. in Political Science, with a specialization in International Relations. She has studied in China and Britain, as well as the United States. She will be interning at Peace Corps headquarters this summer as part of the UCDC program, and pursuing her Masters at the University of Chicago in the fall of 2010. She hopes to concentrate on the subject of political violence in graduate school, and pursue a career in international affairs in order to help secure a better future for our world. Meng would like to thank Professors Allison and Tajima for their help throughout her research.

## INTRODUCTION

The word “Uyghur” can be traced back to the Uyghur Empire (744-840 C.E.), founded by a Turkic, nomadic, and shamanistic society in today’s Mongolia and Central Asia. The empire was defeated by the Kyrgyz and then broken into several small states that survived as vassals of the Mongol Empire. Then, the term Uyghur was especially used to refer to a sedentary, primarily Buddhist, and highly civilized society centered in Turpan, an area in the east of today’s Xinjiang, a northwestern province in China. As Uyghurs converted to Islam in the 15<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> century, their ethnonym faded, and oasis-based localism thrived (Rudelson 1997, 6; Gladney 2004, 194). The term “Uyghur” came back into use when nationalism grew in the former Soviet Union’s Central Asia in the 1930s, and now it refers to the Turkic-speaking ethnic group living northwest China, predominantly in Xinjiang. Some of them are scattered in Central Asia and Europe.

Uyghurs were not under the Chinese empire’s control until 1755, when the Manchurian troops of the Qing Dynasty annexed the Zunghar Empire, thus gaining control over today’s Mongolia and Xinjiang. Xinjiang officially became an administrative unit of China in 1844; it was inherited by the Republic of China and later the People’s Republic of China. In 1955, the Chinese government established the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, the largest provincial administration in China (almost one-fifth the size of the continental United States).

Xinjiang holds a pivotal position in Central Asia, sharing borders with Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Mongolia, India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. Xinjiang is also home to 1.2 million Kazakhs and another million people of other ethnic backgrounds, including Uzbeks, Kyrgyzs, Tajiks, and Mongols (Becquelin 2004, 359). There are three major resident areas in Xinjiang: the Hungarian Basin in the north, the Turpan Depression in the east, and the Tarim Basin including the Taklimakan desert in the south.

### Causes of Uyghur Separatism

Prior researchers primarily focused on analyzing the causes of Uyghur separatism, and they provide my study with a

solid foundation for understanding the social movements among the Uyghurs. The major theories on the causes of Uyghur separatism concern cultural distinctions between Han Chinese and Uyghur people, the leadership of the intelligentsia in the Uyghur community, the economic inequality in Xinjiang, and the institutional structures of regional autonomy.

First, some scholars believe that Uyghur separatism is an overt refusal to assimilate into Han or Chinese culture. For example, Dru Glandney notes that a critical factor for understanding the relationship between an ethnic group and the Chinese state is the geographic-symbolic locations of political, cultural, economic and religious centers on which the group is based (2004, 379). According to him, most Uyghurs center their idea of the state either on an independent East Turkestan or on a pan-ethnic Central Asian caliphate, not on Beijing; the religious centers are clearly Islamic, located in Saudi Arabia, while the cultural centers are Turkish and Central Asian (Glandney 2004, 379).

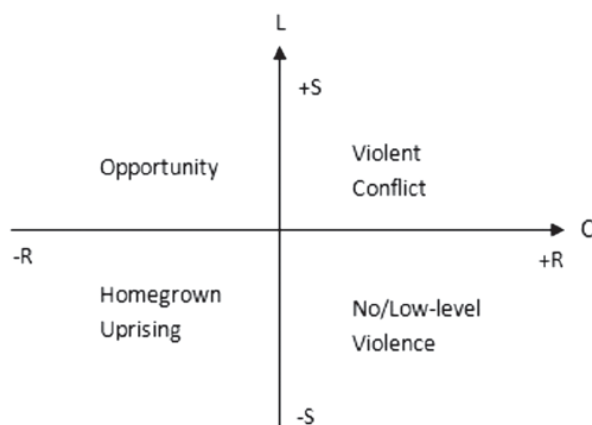
Second, another theory claims that the awakening of the Uyghur intelligentsia fueled separatist movements. As secular Uyghur intellectuals searched for a new rationale for themselves and their community, they found that traditional religious explanations no longer sufficed, and therefore they produced “cultural nationalism.” As Colin Williams suggests, Uyghur intellectuals “challenge the legitimacy of the state system, and claim their own moral right to national self-determination as a full and equal partner in the international political system” (1982, 1).

Third, some scholars understand Uyghur separatism from the perspective of economic inequality. They claim that if the “members of the subject minority have received a less than proportionate share of wealth and power,” it is more likely for the minority to mobilize around demands for autonomy or secession (Williams 1982, 1). The Uyghur population primarily depends on “the rural economy, and is mainly engaged in oasis agriculture, household stockbreeding, small trade and handicraft industries in southern Xinjiang” (Cao 1999, 11). As newly arrived ethnic groups compete for scarce posts, the competition revives ancient and latent ethnic antagonism.

Fourth, some theories attribute Uyghur separatism to the system of regional autonomy. For instance, Svante Cornell argues that “autonomous regions, by their very nature, are conducive to secessionism” (2002, 252). He points out that territory and ethnicity are not naturally linked, and therefore cultural difference does not necessarily lead to the claim of territorial autonomy. What causes the inclination toward the separation is the institutionalization and promotion of the separate identity of a titular group, such as the Soviet-type ethnic classification that the Chinese government adopted. Artificially drawing clear-cut lines between ethnic groups increases the groups’ cohesion and willingness to act against the central government (Cornell 2002, 250-253).

### Analytical Model of Uyghur Separatism

In order to fully understand Uyghur separatism, both international and domestic factors should be taken into consideration. Inspired by the bargaining theory of minority demands by Erin Jenne, Figure 1 is a two-dimensional coordinate system. The system has two axes, the central government (C) and the international lobby actors (L) (2004, 736). The central government’s action ranges from repressive (+R) to not repressive (-R), and the lobby actors’ behavior varies from supportive (+S) to unsupportive (-S). The four quadrants represent four possible relationships between a majority government and an ethnic minority.



**Figure 1.** A two-dimensional coordinate system with axes for central government (C) and international actors (L) to model repressive (R) and Supportive (S) relationships.

When the central government is repressive while the international lobby actors are supportive, the tension between the minority group and the central government is likely to escalate and develop into violent conflicts that might involve organized rebellions and the regular army. When the central government acts repressively, and the international lobby actors turn a blind eye to the minority group’s problem, the minority usually does not have adequate strength to challenge the central government, and is thus forced to tolerate the status quo of low-level violence. When the state’s government is not repressive and the international powers are supportive, the minority has the opportunity to maximize its political claims, usually to the point of complete self-determination. Finally, if the central governance over the minority is lax and international factors are not favorable to the minority, there might be conflict, but the violence is less organized and more along the lines of a homegrown uprising. In order to verify the model, I examine the major historical separatist movements: the Yaqub Beg Rebellion and the founding of the first and second East Turkestan Republics.

### Case Study 1: Yaqub Beg Rebellion

Yaqub Beg, a general from Khan of Kokand (a country now part of Uzbekistan) seized power after the Qing administration in Xinjiang was destroyed in political chaos in 1865, and he dominated all of southern Xinjiang and some parts of northern Xinjiang, controlling a population of over 1 million (Hsu 1965, 28). The Yaqub Beg Rebellion started with tremendous foreign support as well as recognition (+S) and minimal checks from the Chinese court (-R), but as the central government had suppressed most Han rebellions, it gathered adequate military strengths to turn against Yaqub Beg (+R). As such, the Yaqub Beg Rebellion falls in the category of “opportunity,” but moves to “violent conflict.”

The imperial Qing court’s rule in Xinjiang was merely military, and on top of that, the court was fully preoccupied with various rebellions throughout China proper. Internationally, Russia built up strong commercial ties with the Yaqub Beg regime. The British Empire viewed an independent Islamic state between its Indian possessions

Meng Yuan

and an expansionist Russia in a favorable light and consequently acknowledged the regime's legitimacy and offered them weapons (Clarke 2007, 267). The Ottoman Empire also established diplomatic relations with the new regime and provided it with weapons. Yet, when General Zuo Zongtang pacified the rebels in China proper, he mercilessly stormed Xinjiang in 1876. The battles were extremely brutal, even involving massive genocides, and the Qing court eventually took back Xinjiang due to its experienced armies and military tactics.

### Case Study 2: The First East Turkestan Republic

In 1933, Sabit Damolla announced the founding of the Turkish Islamic Republic of Eastern Turkestan (TIRET), also known as the first Eastern Turkestan. The founders of the TIRET were inspired and influenced by Jadidism<sup>1</sup> and the incipient communism in Eurasia, which can be viewed as international support (+S). They saw an "opportunity" to rise up as the newborn Chinese republic had little representation in Xinjiang (-R). Unfortunately, no governments were willing to officially recognize or support the TIRET (-S). Thus, the TIRET comes down to the quadrant of "homegrown uprisings."

Despite its democratic and modern political ideals, the Republic of China was extremely weak in the shadow of the feudal economic and societal structures left by the Chinese empire. As it was incapable of controlling northern China, Xinjiang was ruled by Han warlords. Russia intended to establish a puppet government in Xinjiang, since Japanese troops had already annexed Manchuria and Inner Mongolia, but it did not want the puppet to be the TIRET because Uyghur independence might affect other Turkic nationalities in Central Asia. Instead, Russia supported the Chinese warlord Sheng Shicai's efforts to eradicate the TIRET. The TIRET also dispatched envoys to Afghanistan, Iran, and British India in search of political recognition and military support, but these countries preferred to avoid challenging the Soviet Union or China.

### Case Study 3: The Second East Turkestan Republic

In 1944, Ali Khan Tore, "an Islamic scholar and charismatic orator" declared the birth of the Turkestan Islam Government, also known as the second East Turkestan Republic (ETR) (Millward 2007, 216). The ETR falls in the "violent conflict" quadrant at the beginning, as the warlord who was associated with the Chinese government tightened his control over Xinjiang (+R), and the Soviet Union sponsored the Uyghur separatist rebellions (+S). However, the movement was meant to move to the quadrant of "no/low-level violence," as the Soviet Union withdrew its help (-S). As Russia was busy with building socialism in one country (-S), and China was swamped with the civil war (-R), the de facto ETR government came back, falling into the "homegrown uprising" quadrant.

The Soviet Union sponsored the Uyghurs' efforts to confront the Chinese government's army by offering military aid and guidance. By September 1945, the ETR controlled the majority of northern Xinjiang and some major cities in the south. However, the Soviet Union soon changed its position and started supporting the Chinese government in order to further its interests after Yalta Conference. The ETR's strength decreased dramatically to the point that it agreed to form a coalition government with the Chinese Guominang (Nationalists). Yet, in 1947, the de facto ETR government returned and administrated northern Xinjiang for two years. The ETR collapsed when a plane carrying ETR representatives to Beijing for negotiations went down.

### Analysis of the Ongoing Uyghur Separatism

In the past decade, the Chinese government has successfully cut off almost all official foreign support to the Uyghur separatist movement (-S) and intensely tightened its control in Xinjiang (+R); the current Uyghur separatist movement is expected to fall in the quadrant of "no/low violence." However, ethnic conflicts seem to have escalated, because non-governmental organizations and transnational social movements, especially cross-border terrorist groups, have begun playing important roles in the development of Uyghur separatism.

China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan formed the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in 2001. The organization claims that “pan-Turkic sentiment is not in their interests” (Mackerras 2001, 295). This was a big blow for Uyghur separatism, since its greatest support was supposed to come from the large Uyghur population in Central Asia, especially Kazakhstan, with a Uyghur population of 250,000 out of its total of 16.93 million (Mackerras 2001, 295). While the United States and Europe have affirmed that the Uyghur separatist movements are justified from the perspective of human rights, they offer no official or political support. Since the Bush administration began waging the “war on terror,” the US government has acknowledged the Chinese government’s suppression of Uyghur separatists as counterterrorism.

The Chinese government has been cracking down on separatist movements in Xinjiang for decades, and it reached its peak during the “Strike Hard” campaign in 1996. This campaign was geared specifically towards the destruction of unofficial political organizations dedicated to various separatist movements in Tibet, Inner Mongolia, and Xinjiang. Thousands of students from Islamic schools were arrested, many “illegal” mosques and religious schools were shut down, and numerous suspects who showed sympathies to the separatists were detained after having their homes searched by the military (Dillon 2004, 87-88). In 1997, ten to twenty Uyghur separatists were executed, and it ignited the disastrous Yijing rising (Dillon 2004, 94).

Despite the unfavorable environment for Uyghur separatist movements, Uyghur activists have received millions of dollars from one single American organization: The National Endowment for Democracy (NED). NED reports that it has been providing grants to the World Uyghur Congress, the Uyghur American Association, the International Uyghur PEN Club, and the *International Uyghur Human Rights and Democracy Foundation* for around five years. The funding ranges from \$146,000 to \$269,000 for each institute per year in order to sponsor “human rights research and advocacy projects” (National Endowment for Democracy Factsheet). NED gets yearly funds from the US Congress through four “core foundations”:

The National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, linked to the

Democratic Party; the International Republican Institute, tied to the Republican Party; the American Center for International Labor Solidarity, linked to the AFL-CIO US labor federation, as well as the US State Department; and the Center for International Private Enterprise, linked to the US Chamber of Commerce (*China Daily* 2009, July 16).

It is believed that Washington would like to see a restless Xinjiang, because it serves to fulfill America’s manifest destiny of promoting democracy around the world, and because it upsets its rivals, China and Russia. The American government transfers its funds and ideological acknowledgement to a seemingly independent institute, and in this way, avoids openly articulating its political standings while still strategically supporting certain groups.

At the same time, transnational terrorist networks are increasingly helping Uyghur separatists as well. The recently released Uyghur detainees from Guantanamo Bay were trained by Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan to be suicide bombers and wage jihad against the Chinese government and civilians. China believes that “bin Laden’s forces trained more than 1,000 Uyghurs in Afghanistan, with approximately 110 returning to China, about 300 allegedly captured or killed by U.S. forces, and approximately 600 escaping to northern Pakistan” (Van Wie Davis 2008, 23). Newly emerged transnational terrorist networks put the jurisdiction of states at stake.

## CONCLUSION

This paper introduces Uyghur people and their political struggles through history, and answers the questions as to why Uyghur separatist movements vary from small-scale incidents to intensely violent events. The discontinuous history of Uyghur independence verifies that it is the variations of international lobby actors’ support and the Chinese governments’ strengths that determine how the Uyghur separatist movements develop. The increasing role of NGOs and transnational terrorist networks deserve further studies in the era of globalization. This paper contributes to a broader study of the pattern of separatism and its future development across the world.

## ENDNOTE

1. Jadidism means “new method of teaching,” and its general idea was that “Muslims of Central Asia needed to change to meet the challenges of a new age, and that Islam provided the best framework for engaging the modernist ideas that characterized this new age” (Millward 2004, 4; Roberts 131). The Jadid movement enhanced communication among Muslims in Eurasia and cultivated the nationalist identity of the Uyghurs.

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