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China: From Brutal Oppressor to Terrorist Victim

by James Bovard

Since 9/11, President Bush has endlessly reminded the world that he is leading a “freedom-loving coalition” to vanquish terrorists anywhere and everywhere. However, the more closely one examines the details of the Bush coalition, the more difficult it becomes to detect any love of freedom.

The Bush administration’s anti-terrorism partnership with China exemplifies its hypocrisy and contempt for human rights. Bush, commenting in Shanghai on October 19, 2001, hailed the government for China’s effort to fight terrorism:

We have a common understanding of the magnitude of the threat posed by international terrorism.... President Jiang and the government stand side by side with the American people as we fight this evil force.

At the time of Bush’s tribute, China was exploiting the war on terrorism to crush Uighur Muslims in its western provinces (where the Silk Road passed through), arbitrarily arresting and sentencing thousands of people guilty of nothing more than practicing their religion. Uighurs are Turkic-speaking Muslims (roughly eight million people) who were conquered by the Chinese communist government in 1949. A month after 9/11 Chinese government security forces razed a mosque and arrested 180 people who protested the destruction. Amnesty International reported that the government has

subjected the Islamic clergy to intensive scrutiny and “political education” ... campaigns which are reminiscent of those held during the Cultural Revolution [and] aim both to force participants to follow closely the party’s dictates and to identify potential opponents and dissenters.

Chinese government agents have burned Uighur books and closed down Uighur magazines. One Western expatriate living in the area observed,

Uighur literature is defined as distorted history and accused of inciting national separatism.

Joshua Kurlantzick of *The New Republic* noted that, starting before 9/11, the Chinese government

jailed thousands of Uighur writers for “advocating separatism,” which was so broadly defined that simply writing in Uighur qualified as an offense.

The U.S. government had long harshly criticized Chinese brutality toward the Uighurs. Francis X. Taylor, the State Department’s chief counterterrorism official, declared in December 2001,

The legitimate economic and social issues that confront the people of western China are not necessarily terrorist issues and should be resolved politically rather than using counter-terrorism methods.

Appeasing China

But, as the Bush administration strove to build international support for its plan to attack Iraq, Undersecretary of State Richard Armitage stunned the international community when he announced that the U.S. government had added the East Turkestan Islamic Movement [ETIM] to its official list of terrorist organizations. After a meeting with Chinese officials in Beijing, Armitage revealed on August 26, 2002,

After careful study we judged that [ETIM] was a terrorist group, that it committed acts of violence against unarmed civilians without any regard for who was hurt.

The U.S. government did not present any evidence at the time to support the designation. *The New York Times* noted,

The American condemnation of the group was a propaganda coup for China, which had sought to blunt criticism of its repressive tactics in Xinjiang [in western China], saying that it faces an organized, global terrorist threat.

A few days later, the State Department issued a background paper blaming ETIM for all of the alleged terrorist incidents that occurred in Xinjiang in the previous decade. But the Chinese government did not even publicly mention the group’s existence until a year before the State

Department's announcement. The Chinese government long attributed most of the violence in Xinjiang to other so-called terrorist organizations. The State Department's August 2002 assertions also starkly contradicted its own *Patterns of Global Terrorism* report, issued four months earlier, which blamed other groups for violence in that area. At that time, the State Department commented on the situation in western China:

Two groups in particular are cause for concern: the East Turkestan Islamic Party (ETIP) and the East Turkestan Liberation Organization (or Sharki Turkestan Azatlik Tashkilati, known by the acronym SHAT). ETIP was founded in the early 1980s with the goal of establishing an independent state of Eastern Turkestan and advocates armed struggle. SHAT's members have reportedly been involved in various bomb plots and shootouts.

After the designation of ETIM as terrorists sparked skepticism far and wide, the U.S. embassy in Beijing announced that ETIM was planning attacks on the U.S. embassy in Bishkek, Kirghiz. No evidence was supplied to support the charge, and no attack occurred. Two weeks later the United States and China announced that the United Nations had added ETIM's name to the official UN list of terrorist organizations. A Chinese foreign ministry spokesman hailed the formal UN condemnation of ETIM as

an encouraging result from China's cooperation with the United States and other countries in fighting terrorism.

Designating terrorists

No evidence is required to add an alleged terrorist group to the UN list. Instead, it is an "honor" program: each member government of the United Nations effectively takes another government's "word" that some group is actually terrorist.

Erkin Dolat of the exiled Uighur Information Agency complained that the Bush administration's terrorist designation is "disastrous to the Uighur freedom movement" and "opened the floodgates of Chinese persecution." Another Uighur Muslim commented to United Press International,

We are fighting for our freedom, not for the overthrow of Western governments. Our anger is not directed against the U.S. and the international community, but against the Chinese government.

A *Washington Times* analysis noted,

Xinjiang specialists consider the Uighurs among the most liberal and pro-U.S. Muslims in the world, and in Kashgar women interact freely with men, run businesses and hold political office.

China did not need the U.S. government's permission to repress its own subjects. But the U.S. terrorist designation of ETIM shielded China against international criticism. Wang Yong, a specialist in international relations at Beijing University, observed, "The U.S. action on ETIM was probably a posture in exchange for China's support on Iraq." (China is a member of the UN Security Council and could veto a UN resolution endorsing military action against Iraq.)

When Attorney General John Ashcroft visited China in late October 2002 he declared that the ETIM terrorist designation was

not based on political negotiations or a sense of timing. It is based on the availability of evidence that supports the designation.

However, the U.S. government still did not release any of the evidence. Ashcroft happily announced that the Chinese government had finally given permission for the FBI to open a liaison office in Beijing.

Since the U.S. government blessed the Chinese crackdown, Chinese leaders have revved up the rhetoric. Simayi Tielwardi, the Chinese Communist Party-appointed ruler in the region, announced,

People of all ethnicities in Xinjiang deeply hate the movement and are strongly against it. The East Turkestan Islamic Movement is like a mouse crossing a street and everyone is yelling, "Kill it!"

And anyone who chose to publicly disagree with Tielwardi's assertion would be likely to be squashed by the Chinese military.

Hollow criticisms

The U.S. government occasionally returns to its hectoring ways — but the Chinese government apparently safely concludes that the United States is not serious. The U.S. assistant secretary of state for democracy and human rights, Lorne Craner, visited China earlier this year and gave Chinese leaders a message from Bush that "no nation can use the war on terror as an excuse to repress its minorities." Craner urged local Chinese government officials to not

use terrorism to go after a whole class of people. What is important is if there are 100 people walking down the street and two are terrorists, then you go after the two terrorists, not the 100 people.

Craner would have had more credibility if, before departing for China, he had visited Ashcroft and delivered the same message. (The Justice Department's inspector general report in June made it clear that the FBI had arrested immigrants with visa violations from certain countries almost indiscriminately in the wake of 9/11.)

Craner's admonitions rolled off the Chinese government like water off a duck's back. Wang Lequan, Communist Party secretary of Xinjiang, vowed to intensify the crackdown on the "three evils of terrorism, separatism, and extremism" immediately after Craner's visit. To equate terrorism and extremism creates a dragnet large enough to justify pulling in almost anyone the Chinese government decides to neutralize.

The Bush administration hypocrisy on China and terrorism should be a warning sign to anyone who expected that the war on terrorism would raise the level of political morality — or basic decency — practiced by governments around the world. *The Economist* recently noted,

It was only after the September 11th attacks in America that China began to portray terrorism as a significant law-and-order problem within its borders.

Mike Jendrzeczyk, the Washington director of Human Rights Watch's Asia division, commented in early 2003,

China hijacked the terrorism issue and used [it] to justify its repression of religious freedom and ethnic minorities. It's a very worrying trend. For years, China has used its anti-subversion legislation to try to repress dissidents. Now it's adding to that anti-terrorism to crack down and justify [it] on terrorism grounds.

Americans should be wary of how the Bush administration is undermining the reputation and honor of the United States in its war against terrorism. Unfortunately, the war on terrorism is proving far more effective at unleashing governments than at ending terrorism.

*James Bovard is author of **Lost Rights** (1994) and [**Terrorism and Tyranny: How Bush's Crusade is Sabotaging Peace, Justice, and Freedom**](#) (Palgrave-Macmillan, September 2003) and serves as a policy advisor for *The Future of Freedom Foundation*.*

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