

Executive Summary – Dissertation Project 21/22

The Relevance of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region to the China Dream. The Belt and Road Initiative as a case study.

Author: Antonella Lacarrubba – **Supervisor:** Alejandra Peña González

May 2022

Over the last few years and, increasingly, in these previous months, the situation in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) and the measures implemented by the Chinese Government regarding the so-called "re-education camps" and alleged forced labor have raised some concern amongst some Western countries. Some countries have even taken measures against the Chinese government measures in Xinjiang. On the other hand, Beijing has declared that said accusations are false and that the government is trying to deal with "terrorist threats" through education to eradicate extremism. Beijing has found itself with the need to attain "stability" to open up the region to advance with the development of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and, ultimately, realize Xi's plan to fulfill the China Dream. The aim of this project is, thus, to analyze the relevance of the XUAR to the China Dream, studying the BRI as a vehicle to advance in said endeavor.

In preceding literature, the role of XUAR in the BRI has been studied by other scholars. As well as the relation of the XUAR with the China Dream. There have been previous efforts to analyze the significance of the XUAR to the China Dream and the BRI, but, as mentioned before, lately, the measures taken by the government in the region have become stricter. Therefore, there is a need to evaluate what is behind these 'tougher' policies, and how intertwined the XUAR, the BRI, and the Chinese Dream are today. Hence, this dissertation goes over some vital elements to discern the relevance of the XUAR to the China Dream, especially taking the BRI into account.

The study's focal point is on the relevance of the Xinjiang region in the completion of the China Dream, taking the BRI as the case study. In light of this, the research aims at answering the overarching research question, *how relevant is the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region to the completion of the China Dream?* Moreover, the study will answer the case-oriented research question of *the extent to which the BRI in the XUAR constitutes a foreign policy instrument to fulfill China's Dream?* As for the hypothesis, the main conjecture is that exerting control over the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region is decisive to the Chinese leadership to fulfill the China Dream due to economic, political, and security factors. The BRI has served as a vehicle to achieve China's foreign policy goals since it is being used to obtain economic advancement, establish security and stability in the XUAR, and advance China's quest for great power status. This study

used a qualitative approach and followed an explanatory sequential design to answer the research puzzle.

In analyzing the research puzzle, the dissertation analyses the issue from a Neoclassical Realist perspective. This theory argues the dominant factor shaping the nation's foreign policy over time is its relative material power in relation to the rest of the international system (Rose, 1998, p. 150). Stressing the role of both independent (systemic) and intervening (domestic) variables. (Carlsnaes, 2013, p. 309).

As for the analysis, this thesis considered geopolitics and security issues in the XUAR by pointing out the strategic location of the region, considering it represents the only border China shares with Central Asia, as well as the separatist sentiment of ethnic minorities in the area due to specific policies implemented by the CCP to 'maintain' stability. (Tukmadiyeva, 2013, p. 89) Then, it looked at the concept and main objectives of the China Dream. The Chinese Dream parts from an idea of rejuvenation of the Chinese nation through some concrete goals to be fulfilled in "two centennials". Highlighting the importance of reunification of the motherland and the role this Dream plays in the CCP's legitimacy. (Wang, 2013, p. 2) Finally, the study considered the BRI implications for the China Dream and the XUAR, drawing attention to the "double-opening approach" of the initiative to integrate and develop the Xinjiang are with Central Asia while establishing stability, security, and cooperation in the zone. (Clarke, 2016, p. 304)

Moreover, the fulfillment of the China Dream would be completed when China is modern, strong, wealthy, and is, ultimately, a global power. Also, unification under the "One-China Principle" is of the goals of the China Dream. The BRI is a keystone for China, both economically and strategically. Therefore, given Xinjiang's strategic location, the BRI's success cannot be possible without total control over the Region. (Hayes, 2019, p. 14) As the central hub for the BRI to connect with other countries, Xinjiang is relevant for the BRI to run smoothly and consolidate China's power position in Central Asia.

Consequently, a project such as the BRI is an instrument to strengthen material power capabilities, therefore shaping China's foreign policy. Those mentioned above are independent and intervening variables; in this case, the BRI in Xinjiang plays both roles since it is used to obtain economic advancement and establish security and stability in the region.

The analysis confirms the main conjecture that exerting control over the XUAR is vital for the Chinese Government to fulfill the China Dream due to economic, political, and security factors. Economic factors play an essential role in the XUAR in the BRI. The political factor related to the Party's credibility on whether they achieve all the objectives of the Dream, and the security aspect is maintaining stability and establishing China's value to avoid separatist sentiments.

References:

- Carlsnaes, W. (2013). Power and International Relations. In W. Carlsnaes, T. Risse, & B. A. Simmons, *Handbook of International Relations* (pp. 308-309). London: SAGE.
- Clarke, M. (2016). "Beijing's March West: Opportunities and Challenges for China's Eurasian Pivot". *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, 304.
- Hayes, A. (2019). Interwoven 'Destinies': The significance of Xinjiang to the China Dream, the Belt and Road Initiative, and the Xi Jinping Legacy. *Journal of Contemporary China*, 2-10. doi:10.1080/10670564.2019.1621528
- Peña, A. (2021). China's Belt and Road Initiative: Implications for Central Asia. (F. Serra, & F. Izquierdo Brichs, Eds.) *Political Regimes in Central Asia and Neopatrimonialism. A sociology of Power Perspective*. doi:10.1007/978-981-15-9093-1_3
- Rose, G. (1998). *Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Tukmadiyeva, M. (2013). Xinjiang in China's Foreign Policy toward Central Asia. *Partnership for Peace Consortium of Defense Academies and Security Studies Institutes*, 87-108.
- Wang, Z. (2013). The Chinese Dream: Concept and Context. *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, 1.