Repression, opportunity, and innovation: The evolution of terrorism in Xinjiang, China

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To cite this article: Joshua Tschantret (2018) Repression, opportunity, and innovation: The evolution of terrorism in Xinjiang, China, Terrorism and Political Violence, 30:4, 569-588, DOI: 10.1080/09546553.2016.1182911

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2016.1182911

Published online: 16 Jun 2016.
Repression, opportunity, and innovation: The evolution of terrorism in Xinjiang, China

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ABSTRACT
How does state repression affect the incidence and impact of terrorism? This study conducts a process tracing analysis of the ongoing contention between the Uyghur separatist movement and the Chinese state to provide a plausible explanation for the present lack of consensus on this question. Relying on insights from collective action theory, it argues that although repression was initially successful in curtailing the opportunistic use of terrorism, novel political opportunity allowed some separatists to adopt innovations, such as suicide bombing, to circumvent repression. Repression has since proved ineffective in quelling terrorism, and will likely remain incapable of forestalling future terrorist innovations.

KEYWORDS
China; collective action; innovation; repression; suicide bombing

How does state repression affect the incidence and impact of terrorism? One of the most robust findings in the literature on repression and violence is the “Law of Coercive Responsiveness,” which entails that states employ repressive measures against challengers to the status quo. However, there is much less consensus on the effect of repression on dissent. Studies have variously found the relationship to be positive, negative, an inverted U-shape, or nonexistent. This represents a significant puzzle in the literatures on repression and political violence.

This article examines the ongoing contention between the Chinese state and the Uyghur separatist movement in northwest Xinjiang province for insight into the relationship between repression and the most radical form of violent dissent: terrorism. Terrorism in Xinjiang arose in the 1990s following a confluence of political opportunities, including the collapse of the Soviet Union. Initially, state repression in response to this separatist terrorism heavily suppressed violent contention against the status quo. However, leading up to the Beijing Olympics in 2008, there was a resurgence of terrorism in the region, including the use of innovations such as suicide bombings. Despite consistent state repression, Uyghur separatist terrorism has persisted, with 2014 witnessing a spate of new attacks including eight of the ten deadliest incidents in China’s recent history. This article argues that the observed mixed effectiveness of state repression in minimizing Uyghur separatist terrorism is best explained by exogenous political opportunity, allowing separatists to adopt innovations necessary to circumvent existing modes of repression.

This contention suggests that the lack of consensus regarding the relationship between repression and dissent may arise from the adaptation of dissenters, along with the stochastic nature of political opportunity.
Early work on the sociology of terrorism attempted to understand this form of political violence through the lens of collective action theory. Through the use of a recent case study, this article maintains that collective action theory indeed provides a useful framework for explaining variance in the emergence, timing, and tactics of terrorism. In particular, it argues that political threat and opportunity are especially salient independent variables because they are the dimensions of collective action most likely to change values quickly. The article proceeds as follows. The first section conducts a brief review of the literature on repression and dissent, including repression and terrorism. The second section outlines the theoretical orientation of the article, drawing upon the available studies of terrorism and collective action. The third section discusses the data sources and methodology of the analysis. The fourth section is the empirical segment of the article, which conducts a process tracing analysis of the Uyghur separatist movement in Xinjiang since the late 1980s. Finally, the fifth section concludes the article with an assessment of how China can mitigate terrorism in Xinjiang without continued violation of human rights. Indeed, this article concludes that continued repression will prove ineffective and counterintuitive, and that new humanitarian methods of dealing with dissent are necessary to combat new terrorism that is specifically designed to sidestep overt repression.

Repression, dissent, and terrorism

Despite a clear lack of consensus, there has been much fruitful scholarly debate on the relationship between repression and dissent. Similar to this study, most of these works have focused on the impact of repression on dissent as opposed to the inverse relationship. Sometimes it is concluded that this relationship is negative, whereas several studies have found just the opposite. Others have reached more nuanced conclusions. Starting from the rational actor assumption that groups seek to maximize the benefit they accrue from dissent, Mark Lichbach argues that nonviolent groups turn violent when met with repression, and vice versa, and that inconsistent repressive policies increase dissent. Karen Rasler contends that in the case of Iran, repression and dissent were positively correlated in the short run and negatively correlated in the long run. Will Moore finds support for Lichbach’s theory, but not for Rasler’s, when applied to conflict in Peru and Sri Lanka. Another possibility is that the effectiveness of repression depends in large part on the social network structure of the targeted population. Networks with unified leaders are found to be the strongest bulwark against repression and the most effective for facilitating collective action.

Regime type also might influence the likelihood that a group dissents when repressed. One time-series analysis of twenty-four states determines that dissent is predicted in part by regime type, finding that repression has a positive linear relationship with both violent and nonviolent dissent in democracies, but that the relationship has an inverted-U shape in non-democracies. Some studies have broadened this argument, contending that full democracies and full autocracies both improve the domestic human rights environment. Christian Davenport has produced several works explicating the links between regime type and the repression-dissent nexus. He examines the argument that democracy pacifies repression, concluding that this holds true only above a certain threshold of democracy, and that not all types of human rights are equally bolstered by democracy. Moreover, his research finds that variation in authoritarian regime type predicts repressiveness, with
single-party states being the least repressive; he concludes that a “tyrannical peace” therefore represents a plausible pathway to securing human rights when democratization is not possible.\footnote{15}

Repression, in its various forms, has also been posited as a cause of terrorism. In particular, respect for a subset of human rights known as physical integrity rights—rights that safeguard individuals from “extrajudicial murder, disappearance, torture, or political imprisonment by authorities”—consistently and substantially reduces the incidence of terrorism.\footnote{16} Although not related strictly to repression, it is also possible that minority group economic discrimination fuels terrorism.\footnote{17} On the other hand, suicide terrorism might be more frequently employed against democracies because they face institutional constraints in responding harshly and swiftly to terrorism.\footnote{18} Yet, variation in the tactics of terrorism in response to repression in authoritarian polities still requires explanation.

The evolution of terrorism in Xinjiang, China presents a challenge to the existing theories of repression and dissent. Terrorism was innovated alongside other forms of dissent despite high levels of repression, and although harsher repression at first severely curtailed the use of terrorism, the tactic resurfaced during a period of constant levels of repression. This pattern of variation in terrorism over time is not readily explained by extant theories. Dissent did not simply increase in the long run, but underwent periods of innovation that included novel methods of conducting terrorism. Social network structures in Uyghur communities and within the separatist movement are not hierarchical, and this has not changed substantially in recent years. Existing explanations often do not consider the changing patterns of terrorism within single cases over time. However, such an approach is imperative for theorizing changes in terrorist activity over time and for developing an empirical understanding of the complex responses of non-state actors to repression. For instance, regime-type cannot sufficiently account for variation in violent dissent in this case because it remains constant. Although “tit-for-tat” models that sequence turns between actors help alleviate this problem,\footnote{19} detailed process tracing can help clarify the mechanisms through which repression leads to and influences dissent.

Collective action and terrorism

Terrorism is frequently abstracted from the social context in which it emerges. Sometimes this abstraction serves valuable analytical purposes, as in instances of transnational terrorism committed by networks of cells that have only limited reliance on local support. However, terrorism is also a subset of dissent utilized by actors embedded within larger, spatially constricted social movements—terrorism in the Chechen insurgency, the recently terminated Sri Lankan civil war, and the Kurdish independence movement. In these scenarios, terrorist activity cannot be fully grasped in isolation from social and political movements, comprised of various actors and forms of dissent, of which terrorism is simply an especially radical subset. Recent research on terrorism has addressed this imperative by situating the phenomenon within a larger radical milieu from which terrorist groups often arise.\footnote{20} Studying terrorism in Xinjiang will significantly benefit from this perspective, because Uyghur terrorism is undoubtedly part of a larger separatist movement and, more generally, of social resistance against Han rule.

One especially useful framework for elucidating the causes of terrorism within the context of wider social movements is provided by collective action theory. Although all
forms of collective dissent, or contentious politics, are subsumed under the category of collective action, for this analysis the most relevant subset of collective action is collective violence. Charles Tilly delineates three vignettes that potentially exhaust the realm of collective violence. The second is the case of Malaysian villagers attacking landlords, documented by ethnographer James Scott. This type of collective violence mirrors the inherently asymmetrical nature of terrorist campaigns. Scott’s theory of “weapons of the weak,” forms of covert dissent by actors otherwise unable to openly rebel, has been applied to Uyghur resistance to Han dominance in Xinjiang. However, in addition to everyday resistance, members of the Uyghur separatist movement have engaged in several more overt forms of dissent, ranging from local uprisings to suicide bombings. Terrorism in Xinjiang is therefore best viewed as the most radical segment of the Uyghur separatist movement, which itself is merely a subset of widespread Uyghur resistance that engages in less extreme—and generally nonviolent—forms of dissent.

Not only does collective action theory enable a contextual analysis of terrorism, but it also suggests that terrorism is not a fundamentally distinct form of dissent—it is driven by the same forces of collective action that lead to protest and revolution. Several notable attempts to explain terrorism through this lens of collective action have already been produced. Anthony Oberschall argues that terrorism, like other forms of collective action, can be explained through consideration of four dimensions of collective action: discontent, ideology-feeding grievances, capacity to organize, and political opportunity. Eitan Alimi demonstrates the utility of collective action theory in the study of terrorism by re-contextualizing the Tanzim contention with Israeli forces. In a previous study, Alimi uses the political process model to address the specific temporal context that gave rise to the high levels of social movement participation during the 1987 Palestinian Intifada. In reference to authoritarian regimes, one study finds the existence of opposition parties that lack access to a legislature increases the opposition’s collective action and thereby the probability it turns to terrorism. Another has argued that even ostensibly isolated, lone wolf terrorists derive ideological support from the frames of larger social movements. These findings are similar to evidence gathered from Jewish resistance during the Holocaust, demonstrating that selective repression against individuals can create skilled resisters that assist in the capacity for collective action of the population if indiscriminate repression follows later.

This article uses collective action theory to provide further explanation for the lack of consensus on the relationship between repression and dissent, to elucidate the effects of repression on terrorism in particular, and to demonstrate the potential effect that political opportunity has to spark innovation that can overcome repression that otherwise inhibits collective action. Because China’s political system is constant throughout the period under investigation, the changing patterns in terrorism cannot be attributed to institutional arrangements such as lack of a legislative outlet. Minorities in China have never enjoyed legitimate political outlets, but Uyghur terrorism has varied substantially over time. This article instead draws insights from Sidney Tarrow’s model of collective action, which uses political opportunity and threat as key independent variables for tracking changes in collective action. It demonstrates that political opportunity enabled Uyghur separatists to adopt terrorism into their repertoire of contention—elements of the “performance” of “collective claim making”—designed to circumvent previously effective repression. Political opportunity is shown to be especially salient because it is the value of collective
action most likely to change values quickly. By situating Uyghur terrorism within the context of the broader Uyghur separatist movement, this article reveals that the recent spate of terrorist attacks, including suicide bombings, is the latest form of innovation to circumvent repression by some separatists taking advantage of new political opportunities.

Data and methodology

This article conducts a process tracing analysis, charting the ebb and flow of terrorism in Xinjiang from China’s economic opening until the present. Such a methodological approach is advantageous for several reasons. First, process tracing is especially well-suited for within-case studies. In recent years, most of the research on repression and dissent has been quantitative or formal theoretical analysis. Process tracing can contribute to the understanding of these dynamics through the probing of individual cases, and can determine whether or not existing theories might require refinement. The case under examination is the campaign of Uyghur separatism in Xinjiang province, and its evolving repertoire of contention under pressure from repression by the Chinese state. The independent variables are state repression and political opportunity, and the dependent variable is terrorism. Although the number of terrorist attacks is significant, of greater interest here is simply the violent activity of separatist groups and not strictly the quantity of attacks as would be the case in a statistical analysis. This is appropriate for this analysis because terrorism in Xinjiang arose in the 1990s, and during that decade was heavily suppressed until 2008, meaning that the separatist movement can be described by the relative presence or absence of terrorism and the quality of terrorist actions as opposed to only the quantity of incidents.

Second, process tracing is useful for conducting plausibility probes and often serves as an intermediate step between hypothesis generation and hypothesis testing. While this article presents a novel explanation for the relationship between state repression and terrorism, it represents a plausibility probe of the argument since further empirical testing is necessary to further extrapolate general trends. Indeed, the inability to adequately generalize from a single case is one of the limitations of process tracing. Nevertheless, presenting new hypotheses based on evidence that does not conform to previous expectations and probing their plausibility are valuable steps in generating new knowledge.

This article relies partially on descriptive statistics from databases on the incidence of terrorism, and also on context-specific sources. The Global Terrorism Database, from the START initiative of the University of Maryland, lists 225 total incidents of terrorism in China between 1989 and 2014, including those that occurred in Xinjiang. However, for a case study, relevant context-specific sources should be incorporated. Sean Roberts, who has conducted extensive ethnographic research in Xinjiang, has compiled a list of the all reputed Uyghur terrorist attacks from 1990 to 2011, including those absent from START, and has provided critical comments on each individual event based on primary source material to gauge the likelihood that each event is adequately coded as an example of “Uyghur terrorism.” As is often the case in process tracing research, this article has a semi-narrative structure and examines the causal ideas embedded therein. Although this leads to a reliance on secondary source material, in accordance with the standards of rigor in qualitative research these evidences have been selected to best reflect the original primary sources instead of merely the conjectures of secondary source authors.
Terrorism in Xinjiang

Background

Conflict between the Chinese state and Uyghur separatists in contemporary Xinjiang is not without historical precedent. China’s imperial dynasties have had a history of westward expansion since the Han dynasty beginning in 120 BCE, at which time military colonies were instituted to stake political claims in the region. Xinjiang, meaning “new boundaries” or “new dominions,” was officially established as a province of the Qing Dynasty in 1884. During the Dungan Revolts leading up to this incorporation, between 1862 and 1877, the charismatic leader Yaqub Beg declared himself the leader of an Islamic state based on Sharia Law in Xinjiang. The similarities between these revolts and Uyghur separatism should not be overstated, since neither the Dungan people nor Yaqub Beg were Uyghur; Dungan refers to the people now identified as Hui, ethnically Han Chinese Muslims, and Yaqub Beg was from present-day Central Asia. Moreover, local Uyghur were unaccustomed to strict Islamic law and were less than welcoming of the changes imposed by Yaqub Beg. Nevertheless, the uprising and Beg’s short-lived emirate prefigured a future of Islamic separatism among the Muslim peoples of Xinjiang.

Recently, both sides of the ongoing contention have constructed historical narratives to lend credibility to their respective claims over Xinjiang. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) claims that “Xinjiang has since ancient times been an inseparable part of China,” while some Uyghur maintain the equally dubious countervailing claim that “Uyghurs have been living in what is now Xinjiang for six thousand years.” China, however, is a modern state whose construction can be located no further back than the late nineteenth century, dispelling any assertions of sovereignty based on the amorphous boundaries of the Central Plains dynasties. Evidence for a Uyghur kingdom also cannot be validated until the 8th century CE, although nomadic steppe peoples collectively known as the Uyghur did exist there previously. However, corresponding with the arrival of Islam to the region, this identity disappeared between the 15th and 20th centuries, leading some scholars to argue that the supposed continuity between the 8th-century Uyghur and the Turkic groups that became known as the Chinese minzu, or “nationality,” called the Uyghur today was a creation of early 20th-century Chinese warlords and Russian leaders who found it convenient to justify unifying various regional groups under a single ethnic banner. By the 1940s, Russian pull in Xinjiang considerably outweighed that of China and “this was especially true in the strategically located and resource-rich Yili area,” which by the late forties became the heart of the East Turkestan Republic separatist regime “headed by anti-Guomindang (anti-Han) minority nationals trained and backed by Moscow.”

This history of contention ostensibly lends authority to the “ethnic hatreds” theory of ethnic conflict. But this explanation fails to account for variation in outbreak of inter-ethnic fighting. Repression of the Uyghur after the establishment of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) was more or less constant, and coordinated violent dissent was almost entirely absent. During the late 1950s, many minority cadre members were purged, especially those who openly expressed approval of the former Eastern Turkestan Republic organization. Later, during the height of social anomie of the Cultural Revolution, from 1966 to 1969, the CCP put Xinjiang under direct military control. State control of the region was dampened slightly following Deng Xiaoping’s economic
reforms, and remained constant until the implementation of the “strike hard” campaigns in 1997. Incidents of terrorism began in the early 1990s, and repression in the late 1990s suppressed them again. Table 1 delineates this sequence of events in greater detail. Yet, despite near constant levels of oppression, terrorism resurfaced heavily in 2008. This sequence does not conform to previous theories of the repression-dissent relationship, and this variation cannot be explained by “ancient hatreds” that do not vary. Discontent, one element of collective action, in this case was a necessary condition for terrorism. But political opportunity at crucial times directly galvanized separatists into various forms of dissent including terrorism.

**Opportunity and dissent in the early 1990s**

Deng Xiaoping’s prodigious economic reforms had far-reaching implications for all of China, including Xinjiang. While reform brought economic development and some increased religious freedom to the region, moderate levels of repression remained constant. In fact, China’s hold on the region by the early 1990s was perhaps the greatest in its history, due to the influx of the overwhelmingly Han paramilitary Xinjiang Construction and Production Corps, which controlled 48% of the province’s land and has been used by the CCP to ensure regional Han predominance. Nevertheless, during the early 1980s, increased latitude gave rise to some intermittent forms of public dissent, and in 1989 the first large-scale, collective incident took place, when 3,000 Uyghur students in Xinjiang turned out in solidarity with Beijing hunger strikers. Uyghur protesters seized this opportunity after Hui Chinese were practically supported by Beijing in protest against a publication offensive to Muslims, although dissent from Uyghur for the same cause was ultimately repressed. Combined with elite divisions, another salient dimension of political opportunity, within the CCP, this event likely signaled an opportunity for Uyghur activists to stage dissent.

As numerous scholars have noted, the collapse of the Soviet Union had a profound impact on the frequency and character of dissent in Xinjiang, including the resurgence of separatism. Witnessing the independence of several of its Central Asian neighbors rekindled hope among some Uyghur that achieving independence was possible. In line with the interpretation that terrorism was inspired by Soviet dissolution, terrorism was virtually absent in China until 1991 when a bomb exploded in a Kuqa county bus terminal, after which terrorism persisted until the late 1990s. We can confidently assert that this was an exogenous political opportunity because Beijing did not capitalize on Soviet collapse to repress the Uyghur, but adopted its draconian strike hard policy, explained below, only after the emergence of dissent in the late 1990s. Although initially intended to secure and defend the long border of Xinjiang, the Construction and Production Corps switched priorities from deterring external threat to quelling ethnonationalist unrest, but only after the fall of the Soviet Union and the advent of popular uprisings. This follows the predictions of the aforementioned “Law of Coercive Responsiveness.”
Yet, the terrorism in Xinjiang during the early 1990s was merely a small subset of Uyghur collective action taking advantage of the opportunity given by the collapse of the Soviet Union. Violent activity has been broken down into three constituent waves during the 1990s: the 1990 armed uprising in Baren, the series of bus bombings in 1992 and 1993, and the series of bombings and assassinations lasting from 1996 until February 1997 that culminated in the Yining incident, which ended in large-scale clashes with the police. Of these events, the first and third ones involved hundreds of participants in protest or insurrection.

These developments were expedited by another essential facilitator of collective action around the same time: new social connections. In particular, new pathways for transnational communication and connection provided a valuable political opportunity for dissent. One of the earlier examples is the opening of the Karakoram highway between Xinjiang and Pakistan, which fostered greater Islamic awareness and the rise of radical Islam in Xinjiang in the 1980s. China possibly even condoned the radicalization of its citizens in Afghanistan and Pakistan during the 1980s “as part of the struggle against Soviet hegemonism.” If true, this would have signaled PRC acceptance of religious dissent that was nonetheless ultimately proscribed in Xinjiang. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, new railways and transportation routes were constructed between Xinjiang and the newly established Central Asian states. In addition to moral support for establishing a separate Muslim state in Xinjiang from Uyghur interactions with Pakistanis and Afghans in the 1990s, the greater connection to the former Soviet Union imported a national liberation ideology to Uyghur in Xinjiang, aided in part by the emergence of Uyghur nationalist groups in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. This naturally facilitated the flow of people, goods, and ideas among these groups, and fostered “ideology-feeding grievances” among Uyghur separatists.

On a more general level, the creation of new transnational networks and trade routes strengthened Uyghur cultural ties to Central Asia. The Uyghur typically feel that Central Asian languages, being closer to their own, are easier for them to learn than Chinese, which affirms the cultural divide between the Uyghur and Han vis-à-vis many Central Asian people. This gap is further exacerbated by the CCP decision to provide university instruction exclusively in Mandarin, giving rise to complaints that the CCP has reneged on promises against attempts to Sinicize minority groups. The flow of cultural products, such as political satire, between Xinjiang and neighboring states through internet and “underground” trade networks also helps build a stronger Central Asian identity among Uyghur youth. Moreover, the divide between the Xinjiang provincial government and the Uyghur population it represents remains wide. Party members are mostly Han, and are only granted the “freedom to . . . not believe in religion,” which implicitly proscribes Uyghur from holding office since they are overwhelmingly Muslim.

Given the failures of ethnic reconciliation, it is not surprising that some Uyghur grasped another political opportunity, China’s re-acquisition of Hong Kong, to stage public dissent. Marches were held in early 1997 to protest government policy, and a violent response by police turned the event into a riot that resulted in numerous dead. Rumors also began circulating in Xinjiang that its independence would be achieved on the day of Hong Kong’s reincorporation. Although no mass uprising took place, 1996 and 1997 saw the greatest number of terrorist attacks in Xinjiang’s history, including several bombings in Xinjiang’s capital city, Urumqi, coinciding with the day of ceremonial
mourning for Deng Xiaoping. START documents sporadic attacks until 1996, during which there were reputedly 49 bombings; however, very little evidence has been offered on these incidents. Isolated acts of terrorism followed the Baren uprising and the Yining incident, suggesting that they were merely a radical subset of contention within a much wider circle of dissent. Roberts, for instance, documents four cases that were maybe Uyghur terrorism in 1997 following the Yining incident. Terrorism was therefore added into the repertoire of contention alongside other forms of dissent following periods of political opportunity in the 1990s. This burgeoning trend of terrorism was only dampened after the implementation of the draconian “strike hard” campaign.

“Strike hard” and the threat of repression

In response to the unrest in Xinjiang, the CCP initiated its first “strike hard” campaign in 1996. The alleged targets were the “three evils” of separatism, terrorism, and fundamentalism—three concepts the CCP frequently conflates and uses interchangeably. Following the Yining Uprising, further crackdowns, referred to as “rectification[s] of the social order,” were introduced in 1997 and 1998. China also strengthened ties with its neighbors to suppress Uyghur capacity to organize abroad. The creation of the Shanghai Five—now the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), consisting of China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan—in large part served to provide border security and disperse any groups potentially contributing to terrorism. China has pressured the Central Asian members into identifying and stamping out Uyghur separatist movements and other groups that the CCP believes may jeopardize the security of Xinjiang. Kazakhstan has forced several separatist groups to break up and leave the country; Kyrgyzstan has forbidden its Uyghur residents from forming a “Xinjiang Uighur party-in-exile,” and both states have sent Uyghur dissidents to the CCP. China’s desire to foster relationships with neighboring countries to ensure Xinjiang’s stability is evinced by the fact that China has been more likely to make territorial concessions in exchange for cooperation that increases its control of its border regions than it has for other purposes.

Furthermore, the CCP was able to capitalize on its own political opportunity as a pretext for continued repression in Xinjiang. After the September 11 attacks, Beijing framed its battle with Uyghur separatists as part of the larger global war on terror. While the US has proclaimed that nonviolent, domestic separatists cannot be classified as terrorists, this is easily circumvented because a small number of individuals or groups in China have committed acts of violence and because the line between international terrorism and domestic separatism is sometimes blurred. The distinction between genuine counterterrorism and repression of minorities is similarly difficult to make when information is limited. However, as the curtailing of basic religious freedoms and systematic minority discrimination suggests, the CCP has not applied repression on a purely selective basis. In a 1999 report, Amnesty International exposed human rights violations in Xinjiang, and instead of targeting criminal activity alone it has been noted that the CCP has attempted to impose strict control over society at large.

Despite the CCP’s opportunistic use of the September 11 attacks to ramp up its repression in Xinjiang, there had been no corresponding increase in terrorism since 1997. In fact, Chinese officials themselves admitted on several occasions that during this
time terrorism in Xinjiang was virtually nonexistent. Repression also unlikely served any preemptive function, since September 11 provided little political opportunity for Uyghur separatists to advance their claims. None of the Uyghur diaspora organizations identify themselves as Islamic, and certainly not as radically Islamic, partly because the states from which they draw support, such as Turkey, have themselves struggled with their own radical Islamists. Moreover, decades of Communist rule in Central Asia have largely erased the Islamic identity of the groups therein, including the Uyghur, on which the Uyghur separatists of Xinjiang rely for support. Although an official PRC document referencing the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), a terrorist organization reputedly established outside of China in 1997, was released in November 2001, there is little reliable information on the group post-9/11. Evidence of its existence post-9/11 resurfaced only in 2006 under the name the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP). Therefore, the political milieu in Xinjiang since 1997 has been one of substantial threat against very limited opportunity for collective action. During this period, the CCP used overt force in its attempt to minimize the inherent tradeoff between keeping open the borders to Central Asia needed for economic development and fully suppressing any dissent in Xinjiang. Since the beginning of the strike hard campaigns, a Uyghur has been executed in Xinjiang on average every four days. Those Uyghur captured and extradited to China on charges of terrorism, crime, or nationalism have occasionally been executed. And the repression has been far from selective; there have been “widespread arbitrary arrests, closure[s] of places of worship, crackdowns on traditional religious activities, [and] prohibition[s] of personal religious practices in state-controlled institutions.” The threats signaled by the CCP against collective action are patent: any unofficial networking activities, especially those tied to foreign organizations, are severely punished, and as a preventative measure the CCP maintains strict control over religious and social life.

The reemergence and innovation of terrorism

Repression during the “strike hard” campaigns was undoubtedly disproportional to the threat of terrorism from Uyghur separatism, especially following the September 11 attacks when the CCP preemptively heightened its indiscriminate suppression in Xinjiang. Scholarship during this period rightly posited that the presence of terrorism in Xinjiang was largely a threat manufactured by the CCP, and that when violent dissent did occur it was mostly the result of human security violations. Although only a very small number of Uyghur separatists are involved in violent dissent, the resurfacing of overt acts of terrorism in recent years despite constant levels of oppression and human rights violations warrants a reevaluation of the situation in Xinjiang. One study in 2007 accurately predicted the adoption of suicide attacks by Uyghur separatists, including their strategic use in faraway strategic locations such as Beijing. These trends are best explained using the framework of collective action theory.

According to START data, between 1998 and 2007 only one terrorist attack was launched by Uyghur separatists. However, Roberts lists three events in 1998, including a series of arsons and the bombing of a Chinese consulate in Istanbul, as maybe cases of Uyghur terrorism; other incidents between 1998 and 2000 include a series of poisonings, an act of sabotage against a cotton factory, and the possibly criminal kidnapping and
murder of a Han businessman. Notably, this kidnapping occurred in Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan, and not in Xinjiang. However, of nine reputed Uyghur terrorist attacks between 1999 and 2007 all but one are recorded as not or probably not instances of Uyghur terrorism based on available evidence; the exception is a 1999 murder of a police official and his son. Terrorism not only failed to reach 1996–97 levels, but was virtually nonexistent after 2000. However, as documented by Figure 1, START lists numerous terrorist attacks committed in Xinjiang starting in 2008. Seven such attacks were perpetrated in 2008 alone. The evidence suggests that most of these attacks were deliberately intended to coincide with the 2008 Olympics in Beijing. The TIP first released videos in March 2008, five months prior to the Olympics, stating that the group intended to strike the Games and admonishing Muslims that they should avoid attending. From August 4th to the 27th, directly preceding and following the Games, as many as six different attacks were perpetrated in Xinjiang, all of which were claimed by the TIP. Although the CCP did not attribute any of these to the TIP, it conducted a series of raids against TIP facilities later in the year and seized weapons it claimed were intended for use against the Olympics. Whether or not the TIP was actually behind the attacks or simply claimed them to inflate its capabilities is uncertain.

While no successful attacks were launched against the Olympics themselves, Uyghur separatists capitalized on the political opportunity of the Games to commit several terrorist attacks in Xinjiang. Selecting this time increased the likelihood of garnering international attention, and struck when the CCP was most preoccupied with maintaining its security and security image. This is perhaps an unsurprising development, since terrorist groups have long targeted the Olympics or timed attacks to coincide with them.
However, it is more interesting and significant that innovations were adopted during this series of attacks. In July 2008, the TIP claimed responsibility for a suicide bombing that took place in Wenzhou province. Despite the limited information surrounding this attack, a string of a dozen other attacks targeting police stations and government buildings in Xinjiang included several suicide bombings. One attack claimed by the TIP during this series of events includes the stabbing of police officers by nine suspects. Both of these new methods of attack, suicide bombings and knife assaults, were not only used during the political opportunity of the Olympics, but became permanently integrated into the Uyghur separatist repertoire. Pre-Olympics repression is a poor explanation of this resurgence, since new crackdowns in Xinjiang occurred on a yearly basis between 1996 and 2004.

Table 2 presents a list of all potential suicide attacks committed by Uyghur separatists in China. Two such attacks possibly occurred in the 1990s, but there is insufficient evidence to corroborate them with a high degree of certainty. In the 1990 incident, three Uyghurs committed suicide with hand grenades to escape capture from police; it is unlikely that this was an act of terrorism intended to inflict damage on others, but it possibly established a precedent for such attacks. Both START and a separate database record a suicide bombing in March 1997, but there are no sources provided to corroborate the nature of this attack, which coincided with a succession of non-suicide bombings. Even if this purported incident of isolated suicide bombing did in fact occur, in contrast to the series of suicide bombings since 2008 there was no repeated or systematic use of the tactic during the 1990s. Moreover, there is much stronger empirical support for the recent suicide bombings. Even when there is ambiguity as to whether a given event was a suicide bombing, they manifest other adaptations of the separatist repertoire, such as the high-profile SUV attack on Tiananmen Square.

Why did some Uyghur separatists use and continue to perpetrate suicide bombings? This article argues that suicide bombing is an innovation utilized to circumvent repression. Although the Beijing Olympics provided a window of opportunity for terrorist attacks, the problem of getting around the repressive measures that had hitherto proved effective in suppressing terrorism still had to be overcome. There are several likely reasons that suicide bombing was adopted to circumvent the repression that was efficacious at stopping traditional terrorist attacks. First, suicide bombing enables attacks against “hard targets” that are otherwise impenetrable and therefore too risky to attack conventionally; being able to hit strategically valuable, heavily defended locations might outweigh the loss

<table>
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<th>Date</th>
<th>Weapon</th>
<th>Target</th>
<th>Killed</th>
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<td>open air market</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>04/30/2014</td>
<td>belt bombs</td>
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<td>car bombs</td>
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<td>11</td>
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<tr>
<td>01/24/2014</td>
<td>bike bombs</td>
<td>market, salon</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/28/2013</td>
<td>car bomb</td>
<td>Tiananmen Square</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/01/2012</td>
<td>bike bomb</td>
<td>guard post</td>
<td>1+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>08/10/2008</td>
<td>pipe bombs</td>
<td>police station/gov’t bldgs.</td>
<td>11 [2] (w/below)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>07/17/2008</td>
<td>unknown</td>
<td>Wenzhou</td>
<td>1+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>03/07/2008</td>
<td>plane</td>
<td>plane</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>03/01/1997</td>
<td>bombs</td>
<td>security officials</td>
<td>unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>04/06/1990</td>
<td>grenades</td>
<td>military and police</td>
<td>3 +</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. List of potential suicide attacks committed by Uyghur separatists.
of a group member.\textsuperscript{92} Since apprehension is not possible after a completed suicide attack, suicide bombers can also be deployed to strategic, faraway locations without the increased risk of capture or leaked information. Suicide bombers may be screened more thoroughly than other group members to ensure that they are highly committed to the task, which may decrease the likelihood of defection.\textsuperscript{93} Screening is especially likely if the recent attacks were indeed launched by the TIP, a small organization with limited resources. Second, it has been argued that suicide attacks are deadlier than other types of terrorist attacks.\textsuperscript{94} Because repression has resulted in political threats that inhibit the ability to execute successful protests or attacks, suicide bombings may have been incorporated into the separatist repertoire to maximize the casualties that can result from a single effort.

Taken together, these two tactical advantages would ensure the ability to strike heavily protected targets, avoid apprehension, and cause maximum damage. All of these help circumvent the political threats of repression that significantly curtailed the use of other forms of dissent in Xinjiang. Heavy securitization in Xinjiang dissuaded attacks by rendering valuable targets well-defended, thereby increasing the threat of capture and punishment. Suicide bombings sidestep this threat by penetrating the most guarded security targets, ones that often represent detested forms of social control. Avoiding arrest through the use of suicide bombings also evades key forms of repression utilized in the strike hard campaign, such as threats of lengthy prison sentences and executions for dissent. Suicide bombing, although radical, allows dissenters the opportunity to communicate the extent of their commitment and their lack of fear concerning capture or execution; these threats are evaded by the very nature of the act. Since repression effectively reduced the number of terrorist attacks, there is increased incentive to make any given attack more dramatic. This can be accomplished by suicide attacks if they result in a higher number of casualties, and if they enable attacks on high-profile targets.

Current trends in terrorism since 2008 lend empirical support to these claims. First, the recent innovative attacks in Xinjiang have produced casualties that far outstrip previous traditional bombing attacks. Table 3 lists the ten most successful terrorist attacks committed by Uyghur separatists by number of fatalities, and demonstrates that recent attacks are by far the deadliest; eight of the ten occurred in 2014, and all but one after 2008. Moreover, this does not result solely from selecting “softer” targets, since many of the devastating recent attacks have been leveled against “hard” security targets similar to the ones targeted in the 1990s. Second, however, in addition to its renewed assault against security targets, Uyghur terrorists have recently started to target civilians. Prior to 2008, very few attacks connected to separatist groups had been leveled against civilians.\textsuperscript{95}

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\caption{Ten deadliest terrorist attacks committed by Uyghur separatists.}
\begin{tabular}{llll}
\hline
Date & Method & Target & Killed \\
\hline
07/28/2014 & knives & civilians/gov’t/police & 48 (2 attacks) \\
09/21/2014 & bombs & police/civilians & 48 (4 bombings) \\
05/22/2014 & suicide bombing & civilians & 36 \\
03/01/2014 & knives & civilians & 33 \\
10/12/2014 & knives, bombs & police, civilians & 22 \\
02/28/2012 & knives & civilians & 22 \\
10/01/1997 & bombs & government & 22 \\
11/28/2014 & knives, bombs & civilians & 15 \\
06/21/2014 & bombs & police & 13 \\
01/24/2014 & suicide bombing & civilians & 12 \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\end{table}
However, four of the five most recent suicide attacks targeted civilians. These also include some of the deadliest terrorist incidents in Xinjiang, lending credibility to the argument that Uyghur separatists have launched these attacks for their effectiveness. Third, terrorist attacks have recently spread beyond Xinjiang, which had previously been the location of every incident related to Uyghur separatism. For instance, in 2013 three Uyghur relatives drove an SUV into Tiananmen Square, resulting in five deaths. We can expect these trends to persist, as they have been adopted into the separatist repertoire of contention and as terrorists continually perfect their techniques. Table 2 shows that since 2008 suicide bombing has resulted in an increasing number of fatalities, suggesting a high degree of adaptation and learning on behalf of violent separatists.

Furthermore, as previously mentioned, knife attacks have increasingly been used since the knife assault surrounding the Olympics. Although it may seem counterintuitive to refer to knife attacks as anything other than a tactical regression, their efficacy and use alongside bombings suggests that they are strategically employed. For instance, again apparent in Table 3, half of the ten deadliest terrorist attacks were perpetrated with knives, including three of the five deadliest ones. This means that some combination of features associated with knife attacks—easy concealment, increased agent mobility, ability to kill so long as the perpetrator remains alive, and so on—can allow them to become more successful than bombings. And while some of these attacks have concentrated specifically on state security and police forces, Han civilians were also likely targeted by the “knife-wielding terrorists” during these missions.96 These terrorist innovations emerged around the same time as larger movements of collective action. In August 2008, clashes with the police followed investigations into the post-Olympics stabbings. The July 2009 Urumqi riots, in which substantial violence was carried out by Uyghur and Han Chinese, were perhaps the largest incidents of civil unrest since the Tiananmen Square conflict in 1989.97 This timing suggests that the recent innovations in terrorism arose in tandem with greater dissent in general, and are therefore part of the same underlying collective action processes.

**Alternative explanations**

This sequence of events suggests that the Beijing Olympics provided the political opportunity for some Uyghur separatists to adopt innovations to circumvent the threats of repression, and that these new tactics were permanently incorporated into the repertoire of contention for their efficacy in evading hitherto effective repression. However, there are other ways in which opportunity may have led to innovation. One of the most salient political opportunities is the social network connections among terrorist groups with common goals and incentive structures. Michael Horowitz has found that transnational ties accurately predict the diffusion and adoption of innovations such as suicide bombing. He demonstrates that terrorist organizations with links to al-Qaeda, and other groups that have honed the use of suicide terrorism, are most likely to adopt the tactic.98 This finding provides valuable insight for understanding the implementation of suicide attacks by some Uyghur separatists. Most significantly, the leader of the ETIM, Hasan Mahsum, met with Osama bin Laden during the late 1990s.
However, this explanation is incomplete for several interrelated reasons. First, these ties existed during the late 1990s and early 2000s, implying that these networks are insufficient for explaining the adoption and continued use of suicide bombing at a later point. Although there is little information regarding these ties, the CCP’s claims concerning these purported networks have remained consistent over this time period, suggesting that no novel social network developments are directly responsible for suicide bombing beginning in 2008. Some transnational ties were possibly a necessary condition for the adoption of innovations through the mechanisms of learning and training that provided the capabilities, if not the impetus, for their use. Yet, the evidence does not suggest this was sufficient cause for innovation in absence of renewed political opportunity. Second, the recent terrorist attacks occurred well after these ties were strongest. Hasan Mahsum was killed by the Pakistani military in 2003. The TIP, potential successor to the ETIM, might have retained ties with the Taliban, but there is little evidence that it received material or financial support from it or al-Qaeda. Third, there is insufficient evidence of the organizational capacity for either group to carry out large-scale terrorist attacks. The ETIM was primarily engaged in operating “training camps,” which had but one automatic rifle and were perhaps Uyghur expat communities, and the TIP has not evinced any increased capacity.

Furthermore, comprehensive research on the subject has concluded that the reputed links among the ETIM, al-Qaeda, and the Taliban are “circumstantial and fragmentary.” There is insufficient evidence to confirm which terrorist attacks related to Uyghur separatism are actually committed or sponsored by the ETIM or TIP, since the group has incentive to claim responsibility for every attack to inflate its image of its power. This supports a collective action reading of Uyghur terrorism in China, since upon close scrutiny it appears probable that the individual terrorist incidents arise from disparate, radical actors in the broader separatist movement, rather than from a highly coordinated campaign committed by a single group.

Although there are numerous other alternative explanations for the recent innovations, they all suffer from similar limitations; in particular, other explanatory variables remain constant throughout the time period under investigation. For instance, Pape has argued that suicide bombing is motivated by nationalist ambitions to drive foreign occupants from the groups’ ethnic homeland. Uyghur dissent is indeed frequently motivated by separatist ambitions. However, this has been a constant for nearly the entire history of Xinjiang’s inclusion in the PRC, making occupation an insufficient explanation for variation in dissent and the adoption of suicide bombing. “Ethnic drowning,” the inflow of Han Chinese into Xinjiang, has possibly exacerbated ethnic tensions in Xinjiang. Yet this process has been underway since China’s economic opening.

Explanations that rely on macroeconomic trends are not supported by the evidence. In the case of growing income equality, the situation in Xinjiang conforms to previous findings that suicide bombers tend to come from better socioeconomic backgrounds than their ethnic compatriots. Perhaps the most prominent example is of a Uyghur militant from a wealthy background who performed a suicide bombing that has been described as the largest such operation in Kabul. More importantly, recent ethnographic research has concluded that Uyghur youth are more inclined towards adaptation than resistance to the CCP regime and Chinese society than they were a generation ago. This is the opposite of what would be expected if large-scale, long-term social changes are driving dissent. Separatists make up only a subset of the Uyghur population, and those employing terrorist attacks are still a much smaller number.
Conclusion

Do the unpredictable nature of many political opportunities and the ability of innovations to circumvent repression suggest a lack of viable solutions to violence in Xinjiang? The evidence presented in this article suggests that a resolution is possible, but that the repressive tactics the CCP has hitherto employed will continue to be ineffectual. While innovations such as suicide bombing evade the threats of repression, they do so partly because they require limited participation and resources when compared to other forms of dissent such as protest and rebellion. Therefore, the indiscriminate repression used by the CCP invariably ends up targeting the largely peaceful Uyghur population while eluding the very actors whose violence the CCP purportedly wants to punish. Ironically, this indiscriminate repression can only further fuel discontent among the Uyghur, and potentially push more separatists into adopting violent tactics that effectively bypass repression. Moreover, it has been postulated that the fluidity of small, non-state actors allows them to adapt faster than large, bureaucratic states. This implies that the CCP has little chance of imposing measures that separatists could not adapt to and overcome.

Oberschall contends that political opportunity is the easiest dimension of collective action to control for undermining terrorism. This article argues otherwise. Many political opportunities are simply unavoidable—the CCP had no control over the collapse of the Soviet Union—and other political opportunities such as external support and transnational ties seem to have only limited influence on internal terrorist activity in the case of Xinjiang. Of the other dimensions of collective action—discontent, ideology-feeding grievances, and capacity to organize—discontent might be the easiest to address. Preferential treatment of Han Chinese in Xinjiang has fueled considerable discontent among Uyghur in Xinjiang. To counteract this trend, the CCP might institute measures designed to provide equal opportunity to the Uyghur without insisting that they completely disregard their ethnic and cultural identities. Uyghur youth are increasingly taking an adaptive approach to living with the CCP and finding overt political action less appealing. Therefore, if the CCP wants to avoid inadvertently radicalizing a new generation, it should adopt more inclusive and humanitarian policies that reflect the desire of personal fulfillment sought by many Uyghur youth. Although political opportunity arises quickly and unpredictably, an efficacious policy of reducing the other dimensions of collective action will diminish the likelihood that opportunity leads to violence when it does resurface.

Finally, the trajectory of terrorism in China can potentially provide insight into terrorism in other non-democracies. Collaboration with China in repression by the Central Asian members of the SCO might be fueling terrorist innovation within their borders. In 2010 and 2011 respectively, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan both experienced their first suicide bombings, and the latter event was followed by a string of violent incidents. Although more cross-national research is needed to further generalize these findings, repression in authoritarian regimes might prove ineffective in the long run as dissenters adapt at critical junctures of political opportunity. At the very least, the steady growth of terrorist attacks in Xinjiang since 2010 ought to signal to autocracies that humanitarian approaches to handling dissent might be necessary to counter terrorist innovations.
Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank Bryan Early and the editors and anonymous reviewers at Terrorism and Political Violence for their helpful comments and suggestions. An earlier version of this article was presented at the 2014 Northeastern Political Science Association Annual Meeting.

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Notes

2. Following insights from collective action theory, as described below, terrorism here is conceptualized as the most radical subset of dissent within a social movement’s repertoire of contention. This is not to suggest that most types of dissent, many of which are nonviolent, constitute acts of terrorism. Terrorism refers to specific types of violent action within the repertoire of contention, whereas dissent refers to all the forms of resistance that constitute the repertoire.
19. Moore (see note 9 above).
23. Oberschall (see note 3 above), 27.
29. Aksoy, Carter, and Wright (see note 26 above).
30. Tarrow (see note 4 above), 32.
31. Tilly (see note 21 above), 45.
42. Bovingdon (see note 38 above), 24–25.
43. Ibid., 26.
46. Ibid., 709–10.
47. Oberschall (see note 3 above).
51. Tarrow (see note 3 above), 166.
52. Dreyer (see note 49 above); Chien-peng Chung, “China’s ‘War on Terror’: September 11 and Uighur Separatism,” Foreign Affairs 81, no. 4 (July–August 2002): 8–12.
55. Tarrow (see note 3 above), 65.
60. Roberts (see note 35 above), 10.
82. Roberts (see note 35 above), 19–21.
83. J. Todd Reed and Diane Raschke, *The ETIM: China’s Islamic Militants and the Global Terrorist Threat* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2010), 64–67; Roberts (see note 35 above) lists only five attacks, one of which he concludes cannot be considered Uyghur terrorism.
87. Reed and Raschke (see note 83 above), 66.
88. Becqueline, “Criminalizing Ethnicity” (see note 77 above), 41.
89. Captain Miller’s suicide bombing, the first committed by the LTTE in Sri Lanka, was quite possibly an accidental death, although the tactic was nonetheless firmly adopted by the organization.
91. The location of the attack itself, on a distant high-profile target, is nonetheless a recent innovation. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.
93. Ibid.
97. Roberts (see note 35 above), 23–24.
100. Roberts (see note 35 above), 10–12.
101. Ibid.
102. Clarke (see note 78 above), 294.
103. Pape (see note 18 above).
104. Cheek (see note 61 above), 20.
106. Gunaratna, Acharya, and Wang (see note 85 above), 71.
109. Oberschall (see note 3 above), 36.
110. Baranovitch (see note 107 above).