Xinjiang and Central Asia since 1990: Views from Beijing and Washington and Sino-American relations

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The chapter explores how China and the United States have viewed Xinjiang and the Central Asian region since 1990. It focuses on the ways in which developments in Xinjiang and Central Asia have impacted on the interrelationship between China and the United States. Xinjiang is China’s most north-western region; many of its inhabitants belong to the Uygur minority, who are Turkic ethnically and Muslim by religion. The Chinese state has, at times, had a somewhat uneasy relationship with the Uygurs, even suspecting them of posing a threat to China’s territorial integrity and national unity.

Several aspects of how Xinjiang and Central Asia have affected Sino-American relations receive attention in this chapter. Following the September 11 incidents, the U.S. moved troops into Afghanistan and then, for the first time, established military bases in the part of Central Asia that had formerly been part of the Soviet Union, with negative implications for Sino-American relations. The provision and need for energy resources affect the complex interrelationships in the Central Asian region, and has seen rivalry between the rising China and the U.S. Another area in which Xinjiang affairs have affected this bilateral relationship is the imprisonment of some Uygurs in Guantanamo Bay.

The chapter takes two events as particularly important to the world and the Central Asian region: the collapse of the Soviet Union at the end of 1991 and the September 11 incidents of 2001. It argues that the former event is much the more important for the Central Asian region, because it altered the power arrangements of the region much more fundamentally, with more profound implications for the future.