It is now commonplace to speak of the “rise” of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in international affairs. Scholars vigorously debate the effect of China’s increased material power and influence on such things as the balance of power in the Asia-Pacific or the global economy. Few mainstream discussions of China’s “rise”, however, address the effect of China’s “rise” on the country’s ethnic minorities.

Although China’s fifty-five officially recognised non-Han Chinese ethnic minority groups account for a seemingly insignificant 8.49% of China’s population of 1.339 billion, they nonetheless amount to some 113.79 million people – more than the populations of many other nation-states. Their importance can also be gauged by noting that they are concentrated in 64.3% of the country’s total land area and 90% of China’s border regions. They thus have an importance beyond what basic demographic data would suggest. The issue of Han-ethnic minority relations, if not carefully managed, therefore holds the potential to generate domestic instability, complicate Beijing’s foreign relations and, in worst case scenarios, threaten the territorial integrity of the PRC.

These factors intersect with great intensity in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. Xinjiang is not only China’s largest province, it is also endowed with significant oil and gas resources, populated by many non-Han ethnic groups such as the Uyghur, and acts as both a strategic buffer and gateway to Central Asia sharing borders with the post-Soviet Central Asian Republics, Russia, Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Since the foundation of the PRC, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has sought to integrate this large and strategically important region into the Chinese state. Yet the manner in which it has attempted to do so has generated cycles of ethnic minority opposition and state repression.
since the 1990s Beijing has been fixated to the point of obsession on the potential for the spread of radical Islamist ideas from Central Asia and Afghanistan amongst the Uyghur. This has resulted in a heavy-handed approach to religious and cultural expression in Xinjiang including regulation of religious observance, including restrictions on mosque attendance, and restriction of the use of Uyghur language in schools and universities.

State-Building and its Discontents
Under Deng Xiaoping and his successors the CCP has increasingly relied on economic growth and development as a palliative for ethnic minority discontent with Chinese rule. Since the mid-1990s in particular, Beijing has sought to use the region’s strategic position at the cross-roads of Central Asia to its advantage by investing heavily in infrastructure and oil and gas developments that link the region simultaneously to Central Asia and to China. The logic is that opposition from ethnic groups such as the Uyghur can be assuaged by delivering economic development, which in turn can only be ensured by opening up the region to Central Asia.

While economic development has certainly arrived in Xinjiang, questions remain as to its effects. Economic development and increased government investment have also brought increasing numbers of Han Chinese into Xinjiang. For example, in 1990 37% of Xinjiang’s population was Han, while by 2000 that had risen to nearly 41% (these figures did not account for the significant "floating population" of seasonal Han migrants). This has raised the spectre of the dilution of the Uyghur in their homeland. Additionally, there are major economic disparities between Han and ethnic minorities and between urban and rural populations, with the Uyghur tending to make up a large majority of the rural population.

The opening to Central Asia, while benefitting the region economically, is also a source of grave concern for Chinese authorities. Indeed, since the 1990s Beijing has fixated to the point of obsession on the potential for the spread of radical Islamist ideas from Central Asia and Afghanistan amongst the Uyghur. This has resulted in a heavy-handed approach to religious and cultural expression in Xinjiang including regulation of religious observance, including restrictions on mosque attendance, and restriction of the use of Uyghur language in schools and universities. The desire to control foreign influences has also resulted in the imposition of travel restrictions on Uyghurs to limit their ability to visit Central Asia and beyond.

The Xinjiang Issue and China’s Rise in Central Asia
Since the 1990s, Xinjiang and Uyghur issues have been of increasing salience in China’s diplomacy in Central Asia. In particular, they were central drivers of China’s efforts in establishing the “Shanghai Five” dialogue of China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in 1996 and the evolution of this grouping into a fully-fledged multilateral body, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) in June 2001. China has used its growing strategic and economic weight in Central Asia to persuade the governments of the Central Asian states, both bilaterally and multilaterally through the SCO, to support its position on Xinjiang and the Uyghur issue. The SCO prior to the events of 9/11, for example, declared in its founding statement of principles that its members would cooperate to oppose the “three evils” of “separatism, terrorism and extremism”. This reflected Beijing’s desire to maintain its control of Xinjiang and limit the influence of radical Islamism on the Uyghur.

In the post-9/11 period, Beijing has also been successful in turning international concern with terrorism to its advantage, both domestically and in its foreign relations. Internationally, Beijing has painted Uyghur opposition and unrest in Xinjiang as “terrorism” and linked it to the dynamics of Islamist terrorism in neighbouring Central Asia and Afghanistan. This effort to gain a measure of international approval for its repression of Uyghur opposition achieved a measure of success with the US administration of President George W. Bush recognising the “East Turkestan Islamic Movement” – a group identified by Beijing as an al-Qaeda surrogate – as an international terrorist organisation in October 2002.

Domestically, the “war on terror” permitted China to not only deploy significant repressive force, in political, legal and police/military terms, to confront the perceived threat of Uyghur “terrorism” but also to establish the political and legal framework through which to confront any future challenges to state power. China moved toward the achievement of these goals through three main avenues: amendments to China’s Criminal Law; the deployment of an expansive definition of ‘terrorism’; and security and counter-terror cooperation with the states of the SCO. Each of these has had negative effects on the human rights situation in the region.

In December 2001 the National People’s Congress (NPC) of the PRC adopted a number of major anti-terrorism amendments to the Criminal Law of the PRC. The major changes wrought by these amendments concerned widening the scope of actions that are now criminalised as “terrorist” acts and increasing punitive measures for such acts. In particular, the amendments lacked precision regarding what constitutes “terrorism”. A wide range of activities, including peaceful expression of dissent or opposition, were defined as “terrorist” acts and the death penalty could be applied under the majority of the amendments.

Internationally, China has also concluded agreements with its partners in the SCO and other states such as Pakistan and Nepal that has allowed it to extradite alleged Uyghur “terrorists” from those states to China. The subsequent fate of those extradited to China has been of grave concern to NGOs such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, with Amnesty reporting that the majority of those returned have faced accelerated and closed trials and lengthy prison terms or the death penalty.

Conclusion
Despite China’s efforts to ameliorate ethnic minority discontent with Chinese rule through the delivery of economic growth and development to the region and its hard-line approach to opposition, Xinjiang remains beset by ongoing unrest. Most
notable in this regard were the inter-ethnic riots between the Uyghur and Han Chinese population of the region's capital Urumqi on 5 and 6 July 2009 which left at least 156 dead and many hundreds injured.

This event has been followed by numerous incidents of violence in the region in 2010 and 2011, including an attack on a police station in Khotan in July 2011 and a bombing in Kashgar in August 2011. Most recently reports emerged of the shooting by Chinese police on 29 December 2011 of seven "violent terrorists" in Khotan Prefecture, close to the border with Pakistan and India. Local officials claimed that the men had attempted to cross into Central Asia to receive "jihadist training" before becoming "lost" near Pishan before kidnapping a number of hostages. The police, in an attempt to free the hostages, subsequently shot and killed seven of the men. Significantly, this official account is contradicted by other reports which describe the incident as a result of a heavy-handed attempt by the authorities to prevent a group of Uyghurs – dismayed at the continued restrictions on religious observance - from fleeing to Central Asia. This latest incident highlights one of the major contradictions of Chinese policy in Xinjiang. Although China's grip on the region is tighter than ever due to its economic development of the region and its close relations with the states of Central Asia, it remains obsessed to the point of paranoia about "collusion" between "hostile external forces" and "separatists" in Xinjiang. As long as Beijing remains fixated on this aspect of its Xinjiang problem, it is more likely than not that it will continue to buttress its strategy of attempting to attain Uyghur acquiescence to Chinese rule through the delivery of economic development with a zero-tolerance approach to dissent. The tragedy is that Beijing seems unwilling or incapable of recognising that this approach seems destined to keep the region locked into the cycles of ethnic minority unrest and state repression that have characterised it for decades.

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Endnotes
3 The Uyghur are a Turkic ethnic group and profess the Islamic faith.