



The Impact of the Repression in Xinjiang on China's Relations with Other Countries

Marcin Przychodniak

The policy of repression of Uyghurs in Xinjiang has become a significant element of criticism of China in the world. In March this year, the EU, U.S., Canada, and the United Kingdom imposed sanctions on China over the matter. Moreover, the Netherlands, the U.S. and Canada described China's actions as genocide. For China, however, its actions involving Uyghurs are a key element of domestic politics, which is why it presents accusations as disinformation. It has imposed counter sanctions, including on the EU, and their wide scope indicates that for China, Xinjiang is more important than, for example, the ratification of the Comprehensive Investment Agreement (CAI) with the EU.

The Uyghurs are an ethnically Turkic minority living in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in China. The region has more than 12 million Uyghurs, mostly Muslim (Sunni), identifying with the culture of Central Asian nations and speaking their own language. In 1949, China took over Xinjiang and liquidated the rule by the Uyghurs and others of the then Second Republic of East Turkestan. For China, the region is strategic, including in the context of transport routes to Central and South Asia and the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), as well as the economy (production of food and cotton, sources of coal, natural gas, and rare-earth metals).

Repression of Uyghurs. Since the 1950s, the Chinese authorities have accused Uyghurs of separatism. They tried to level the proportions of the population between the Uyghurs and the indigenous Chinese (Han) through economic incentives to settle in the region and other measures. Currently, the two groups account for around 40% each of the population (the rest are Kazakhs, also subject to repression). At the same time, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) restricted the practice of Islam. In the 1990s, this resulted in the radicalisation of the Uyghurs, followed by terrorism, which the Chinese authorities blamed on the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM). It was supposedly behind bomb attacks in Urumqi (1997, 2014) and knife attacks in Aksu (2015) and Kunming (2014). More than

a thousand Uyghurs joined the ranks of ISIS, which declared it was fighting China over the repression of Muslims.

The turning point in Chinese policy in Xinjiang was a clash between Han and Uyghurs in 2009, in which several hundred people were killed. The Chinese authorities described it as terrorism, saying it had become one of the "three forces of evil" alongside separatism and religious extremism. In 2014, President Xi Jinping, during a visit to the region, ordered that all means be used to combat the three. In the same year, Uyghur Professor Ilham Tohti, who called for a peaceful settlement between the Han and Uyghurs, was sentenced to life imprisonment for alleged separatism. In 2016, Chen Quanguo, previously involved in the repressive policy in Tibet, became the new provincial secretary of the CCP in the region. Since then, a system presented in international media as *de facto* concentration camps has been gradually established in Xinjiang (currently there are about 400 of them), to which, pursuant to administrative decisions, Uyghurs are transferred for an indefinite period and without informing their family (the UN, based on the calculations of research institutions, estimates the number of prisoners at over a million). There, the prisoners undergo "political re-education" and are likely to be used as forced labour, such as harvesting cotton or in the factories of Chinese suppliers of large foreign companies, for example, Apple or Volkswagen (although both deny these accusations). The practice of forced sterilisation is also evidenced by the sharply declining

number of Uyghur births in the region. Identification of “suspicious” persons is possible thanks to Chinese tracking systems developed by companies including Hikvision, Huawei, or Dahua, using, for example, facial recognition and ethnic profiling.

International Reactions and the Chinese Response.

Condemnation of the systematic repression in Xinjiang has been a significant element of the international criticism of China since 2017 when information about the camp network appeared. This criticism was visible in the UN General Assembly in October 2020 when 39 countries, including Poland, supported the protest against China’s policy towards the Uyghurs. However, some countries, including Russia and Belarus recognise China’s actions as a form of combating terrorism, and criticism of it as interference in the country’s internal affairs. Fearing harm in trade relations with China, the Uyghurs lacked support from Arab states (including Saudi Arabia), among others, and even Turkey has limited its criticism despite the ethnic proximity.

The Xinjiang repression is increasingly affecting U.S.-China relations. In June 2020, the Trump administration imposed sanctions on Chen Quanguo, then in July 2020, it followed with restrictions on 11 Chinese companies. In January this year, the U.S. described China’s policy towards the Uyghurs as genocide. This stance remains under the Biden administration, which on 22 March extended the sanctions to include other Chinese officials. The UK and Canada followed suit and their parliaments adopted resolutions describing China’s policy in Xinjiang as genocide. The EU adopted in December 2020 a sanctions mechanism for human rights violations, prohibiting entry to the EU of four Xinjiang CCP politicians and freezing their assets (although Chen Quanguo was not included). In April, Japan also appealed to China to change its policy towards the Uyghurs.

The Chinese authorities first denied the existence of the camps, and with increasing criticism, presented them as a form of fighting separatism and terrorism. They describe the reaction of Western countries as hypocrisy. In this context, they cite Germany’s crimes during World War II or the similarity to the activities in Xinjiang of the anti-terrorism policy of France (in 2015, China refused to renew the visa for a journalist for the French weekly *L’Obs* who disputed China’s claim). For the Chinese authorities, the fight against the “three forces of evil” in the region legitimises their overall policy and demonstrates the systemic advantage China has over the West in terms of ensuring the security of its citizens. Therefore, China’s response to the sanctions in March was severe. Besides the ban on entry and forfeiture of property in China of European politicians, including MEPs (8 people), researchers studying the situation in Xinjiang (2 people), employees of analytical institutions (Mercator Institute for China Studies, 2 people), it also targeted the Political and Security Committee at the Council of the EU. Similar restrictions in March applied to researchers and politicians from the UK, Canada, and the U.S. China also launched

a campaign to discredit these individuals and institutions, accusing them of perpetuating “anti-Chinese lies”.

Impact on Relations with the EU. The situation in Xinjiang influences the EU’s policy towards China, but is not the key element. For example, the EU advocated a fair trial for Ilham Tohti, and in 2019 the EP awarded him with the [Sakharov Prize for freedom of thought](#). Monitoring the situation in Xinjiang is difficult due to the lack of free entry by EU diplomats. Despite this, the EC decided in December 2020 to finalise the CAI negotiations, part of which included simple declarations by China of its intention to ratify the ILO conventions on forced labour. The situation of the Uyghurs and the sanctions were not, however, mentioned in a conversations between Xi Jinping and President Macron in February this year, nor with Chancellor Angela Merkel in April. According to Chinese authorities, the imposition of sanctions by the EU in March is part of a “policy of lies” orchestrated by the U.S. China’s harsh reaction has strengthened European opposition to the CAI, including by France and the Netherlands, which have made voting for the agreement’s adoption in the Council of the EU conditional on China lifting its counter sanctions. This year, Denmark, the Netherlands, Belgium, and the United Kingdom adopted resolutions recognising China’s policy in Xinjiang as genocide. In March, a similar project appeared in the Italian parliament, and in April in the Lithuanian parliament.

Conclusions and Perspectives. China’s actions against the Uyghurs are an important element of CCP internal policy. In this context, the ratification of the CAI by the EU, important for China, is giving way to the logic of the ideological rivalry with the Western world (in which the actions in Xinjiang are supposed proof of a more effective policy against terrorism). In the short term, the sanctions will worsen EU-China relations and make the CAI adoption process more difficult. However, ratification of the agreement is still possible, especially since it is supported by the largest grouping of the EP, the European People’s Party. Moreover, the EC emphasises that the CAI is an economic instrument and is not related to the EU’s human rights policy.

Poland, in addition to supporting statements critical of China in the UNGA, may call for the degree and scope of the EU’s dialogue with China to be conditional on the latter’s withdrawal of sanctions on Europeans and for closer coordination with the U.S. It may also support the restriction of EU imports of goods produced in Xinjiang, as well as the participation of Chinese companies involved in repression in the region in projects financed by the EU, or the suspension of CAI ratification. The extension of EU sanctions to senior Chinese politicians or persuading business sponsors to boycott the Winter Olympics in Beijing in 2022 may also be used. Coordinated sanctions from March this year indicate that human rights will be an important element of the policy of the U.S. and its partners towards China, which should be taken into account both by the EU and Poland in bilateral relations with China.