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Xinjiang (China)

A look back at the history of East Turkestan and the geopolitics of Central Asia

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The Uighur question has suddenly become a stake in the political struggle in Belgium, between the PS and even more ECOLO, on the one hand, and the PTB, on the other hand. The former accuses the latter of complicity with the genocide of the Uighur people, the latter accuses the former of participating in a new imperialist cold war against China. ([1]

The knives are drawn, but it is striking that the two camps have a point in common : they are silent on the fact that, if Beijing represses the Muslim peoples of Xinjiang with the methods used by the United States in Iraq and by Israel in Palestine, it is for similar economic and geostrategic reasons. It is in reality a question of monopolizing the wealth, energy in particular, of this territory. For the benefit of the Hans, of course, but also for the benefit of the multinationals which take advantage of the conditions of super-exploitation in the workshop of the capitalist world. We can even go further and say that the oppression of the Uighurs contributes to reducing the cost of “Green Deals” and other formulas of the transition to green capitalism in the West. Let us try to see clearly what is happening.

Xinjiang has only been a Chinese province in its own right since its annexation by the Qing empire in the late nineteenth century [2]. The name given to it is unambiguous: “Xinjiang “in Chinese means “new march “, or “new frontier “. Although the Qing Empire cannot be equated with the Western imperialist powers of the time (such as Britain, France and ... the Belgian monarchy), it cannot be denied that Xinjiang was born out of a colonial conquest of Imperial China on its immediate periphery (in the same way as the Caucasus and parts of Central Asia were also colonial conquests of the Russian Empire on its periphery). It cannot be denied either that the various indigenous populations, which are the overwhelming majority - and overwhelmingly Muslim - in this region have never considered themselves Chinese and still do not consider themselves Chinese. Beijing’s current objective is precisely to drown them in a Han settler colonialism which discriminates against Turkic Muslims on all levels, considers that their religion and their ethnicity make them suspects of terrorism, and leaves them the “choice “. between forced Sinization or the hell of an Orwellian repression without equivalent.

East Turkestan: a little history

The reality of what that Beijing calls" Xinjiang “is better perceived by the older name of “East Turkestan “, although that term does not express the diversity of the people who live there. This very vast territory (one sixth of China, three times the size of France) in fact belongs to the immense Central Asia, with its high mountain ranges, its steppes, its deserts, its rich oases and its brilliant trading towns. For several millennia, the region has been a crossroads of North-South exchanges (between the Siberian steppes and the Indian subcontinent) and, above all, of East-West exchanges (between China, the Caspian, the Black Sea and the Mediterranean basin) along the “Silk Road”.

Long disputed over the centuries and composed of two entities (the Dzungarian steppes with its nomadic peoples to the north, the Tarim basin with its merchants and its cultivators surrounding the Taklamakan desert to the south), the region annexed by the Qing was - and remains - a hub for these commercial and cultural exchanges. The two main branches of the “Silk Road “in fact crossed through Xinjiang, bypassing the deserts and weaving between the mountains. The intermingling of peoples (Uighurs, Kazakhs, Tajiks, Mongols, Russians, Tatars, Chinese...) and religions (Muslims, Animists, Buddhists, Taoists ...) is the product of this very long history.

Throughout it, the empires (Persian, Ottoman, Mongolian, Tibetan and Chinese) sought to dominate the region in an attempt to secure strategic positions and levy taxes on its flourishing trade. More recently, the Industrial Revolution brought in from the West stirred up additional greed, because Xinjiang is rich in agricultural production (cotton

cultivation) and in mining resources (coal, oil, gas, iron, gold, copper, lead, zinc, uranium). With modernity, certain strata of the population, Sufi in particular, also developed democratic aspirations for development, education and liberation in the face of the double tutelage of tradition and of empires - principally Russian and Chinese.

In this context, the birth of the USSR appeared for some all too brief years as a hope of breaking what Lenin, speaking of the Russian Empire, called "the prison of the peoples". This parenthesis was suddenly closed with Stalin and the return of Great Russian chauvinism. Later, in 1933, in a very troubled context, a Republic of East Turkestan was proclaimed and then quickly crushed by the Hui (Chinese Muslim) warlords allied to the Kuomintang. A second attempt at independence took place in 1949, with ambiguous support from the USSR (which had dominated the region since 1941 and obtained there after the war the uranium necessary for its first bomb). Moscow, however, let China (now People's Republic) regain control in 1949, after a bizarre accident: the mysterious death of the eleven nationalist leaders of East Turkestan, who disappeared in a plane crash ... while on their way to Beijing to negotiate with Mao Zedong.

Colony of settlement of Hans

Be that as it may, under the Qing, at the time of the Kuomintang and as part of the People's Republic (PRC), China sought to strengthen in Xinjiang the physical presence of the Han, who had for long time been settled along the Silk Road, but were an ultra-minority in this sparsely populated region (currently 21 million inhabitants, 60 per cent of whom are rural). This desire became more evident after 1949, when the situation in China and its borders calmed down somewhat. The Maoist regime accentuated a policy of colonization and settlement piloted by the central state. The proportion of Han people in the population rose from around 8 per cent in 1953 to over 40 per cent in 2000, with higher rates in the northern half of the province and a strong separation from the indigenous peoples. At the same time, the share of Uighurs (by far the most important indigenous people) has decreased from over 75 per cent to 45 per cent [3]. And it is not over: the current five-year plan (2016-2020) relies on the installation of an additional million Hans.

The Hans and Huis (a minority of Muslim Chinese) are concentrated along the communication routes and in the cities, in particular in the capital Urumqi and in the historic centers of medieval Uighur civilization such as Kashgar, Aksu, Tarim..., where they have become the majority. They are drawn by the national development plans for the Northwest implemented by the Xinjiang Construction and Production Corps (XCPC), a central government body responsible for development, security and ethnic harmony in the region. This XCPC employs 2.4 million people, 90 per cent Han, controls a third of arable land, a quarter of industrial production and directly administers several medium-sized towns. It is the dominant power in Xinjiang and the main lever of social, economic and administrative Sinization. The army is another lever of Han colonization: 1.3 million Chinese soldiers are present in Xinjiang: this number should triple in the coming years and 25 towns will be built to accommodate the troops. Finally, economic liberalization has the effect that a growing number of Hans settle in Xinjiang to pursue a career in the private sector (oil industry, textiles, tourism, etc.), in which the Han employers preferentially hire... Hans.

However, Xinjiang is an autonomous Uighur region, one might say? On paper, yes. In 1955, Beijing gave autonomy status to various regions of China populated by non-Hans, including Xinjiang. At the time, Mao Zedong drew attention to the fact that the PRC is 94 per cent populated by Hans but depends on the 60 per cent of mineral and energy resources located in regions where minorities dominate, including Xinjiang. As in the USSR, the Maoist one-party bureaucratic regime was very vigilant against the risk of dissent from any oppressed group. There have been periods when there were more paternalistic policies, others were more repressive, but in general, the "autonomy" of specific regions has been tightly controlled by the Party apparatus (where the Han dominate), therefore by the central power, and coupled with a hypocritical ideological discourse on "mutual aid", "harmony" and "unity" within the homeland.

In Xinjiang, this policy was accompanied from the outset by institutional mistrust and encouragement of the prejudices of the Hans vis-à-vis the Turkic and Muslim populations, suspected of being capable of betraying the nation for the benefit of the Islamic world in general, Turkish in particular. Thus, in 1966, the Uighurs were forbidden to leave China, so as not to be exposed to bad influences. After the death of Mao (1976), the 1980s saw a relative relaxation of control over the Turkic Muslims, but after the defeat of the USSR by the Taliban in Afghanistan (February 1989) and the crushing of the democratic movement in Tiananmen (June 1989), the regime resumed a policy of tightening the screws on the Muslims of Xinjiang, the local party apparatus was purged, and the tension rose by several notches. Several riots broke out in the 1990s and were violently suppressed. Hans and Uighur “collaborators” were attacked, sometimes killed. In Urumqi in 2009, inter-ethnic clashes claimed up to 197 victims. The data should be treated with caution, but it seems that it all started with a rally of students demanding an explanation of the circumstances of the death in a brawl of two Uighurs who were working in the south. Had they been victims of Han racism? In any case, as of that day, the authorities’ “Yanga” doctrine (“strike hard” against the autonomist threat) has become the systematic complement of development plans favourable to the Han [4].

Dispossession, humiliation, discrimination: from bad to worse

Between Chinese and non-Chinese, tensions have built up over the centuries. Far from appeasing them, the policy of the PRC has sharpened them, especially over the last thirty years. This phenomenon is linked to the regime’s desire to make China the capitalist “workshop of the world” in order to raise it to the rank of a great power. The world workshop, in fact, requires a lot of energy, which has greatly increased the importance of Xinjiang. It comes first among Chinese provinces for known reserves of fossil fuels (38 per cent of coal, 21.5 per cent of oil, 23.3 per cent of natural gas), to which must be added uranium. The province also has enormous potential for renewable energies (wind, solar, hydroelectric) which is only very partially exploited. [5]

The Chinese administration is banking on this energy Eldorado both to support the industrialization of the entire country - through the export of electricity and gas to other regions of China - and to industrialize the province. A gas pipeline is to link it to Shanghai. On site, low-cost coal makes it possible to produce cheap electricity, which is decisive for the competitiveness of industry, in particular for the manufacture of polycrystalline silicone. This production is in fact extremely energy intensive. Suddenly, the law of profit requires that nearly half of the polycrystalline silicone used in the world to manufacture photovoltaic panels is produced in Xinjiang. Without this resource acquired at bargain prices, the cost of the capitalist “green transition” and “green deal” would increase very substantially. [6] We understand better, in these conditions, how the European Union has put human rights in the closet in order to sign its recent trade agreement with China... [7]

Settlement colonization with the grabbing of resources has cascading social and ecological consequences. For example, coal mining requires large amounts of water. Xinjiang is not lacking in water, but it is also a country of deserts and oases. In order for industry to have sufficient access to the resource, Beijing decided that agriculture should consume less. The Chinese regime therefore organized the massive rural exodus of indigenous populations. Between 2004 and 2020, it is estimated that more than ten million people had to leave the countryside to work in an economy dominated by the Han. Those who showed signs of a possible “Islamic radicalization” were railroaded into forced labour as part of their “re-education”. ([8])

The capitalist multinationals are among the great beneficiaries of this system: between 2017 and 2019, 83 multinationals are estimated to have benefited from the forced labour of some 80,000 recalcitrants from the Muslim communities of Xinjiang. As for the lands thus recovered, they are offered to Chinese investors. This is how the industrial cotton monoculture exploded, making Xinjiang one of China’s main regions for textile production and processing. Overall, the province has certainly emerged from the poverty that characterized it previously, but social

inequality has also exploded, especially if we take into account the ethnic-religious divide: the average income of Han households is up to four times higher than that of households made up of Uighurs, Kazakhs and other oppressed Muslim groups. [9]

New Silk Roads, increased oppression

A colonial dynamic with racist and Islamophobic overtones has taken hold. It has been further strengthened over the last period in the framework of the Chinese “New Silk Roads” project. Xinjiang is indeed at the heart of one of the components of this vast economic and geostrategic plan, which aims both to strengthen China’s global trade with the West and to reduce its dependence on fossil fuels imported from the Middle East (by importing Russian gas and oil from Kazakhstan, on the one hand, by developing its own fossil reserves, as well as nuclear power and renewables, on the other hand) and by establishing terrestrial means of communication through Eurasia (roads and railways) which could prove useful in the event of tensions on sea routes. In other words, the “new silk roads “mean that the territory is no longer just a reservoir of resources: it becomes the point of passage for huge international flows of goods. Nothing must be allowed to interfere with the smooth circulation of goods. Suddenly, the strict control of the oppressed Muslim peoples of Central Asia has become for Beijing a decisive geostrategic question: order must reign in Xinjiang and its surroundings, more than ever [10]

This plan did not come out of nowhere. Already in 2001, following the terrorist attacks in New York, China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan had founded the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (extended in 2017 to India and Pakistan). The initiative came mainly from Putin. The Russian leader had, according to his own words, “hit the terrorists everywhere, right down to the toilets “in Chechnya: in other words, he had crushed the Chechens who had risen up against the stranglehold of Moscow. China is at least as motivated as Russia by the objective of this cooperation, which is “to ensure the collective security of its members in the face of threats from terrorism, extremism and separatism. [11] The participation of the “four Stans” helps us to understand the aim of Putin and Xi: to use the carrot and the stick to ensure the collaboration of the police apparatuses of the former Soviet republics of Central Asia in the fight against opponents who are characterized as “terrorists “, “separatists “, or vaguely “extremists “. From that moment, the Muslim populations and other oppressed communities of Central Asia were clearly in their sights. They are even more so today. This is how China obtained from Kazakhstan a ban on Uighur organizations.

The national question is generally only the envelope of the social question. When oppressed ethnic-religious communities are dispossessed and discriminated against economically and socially, it should come as no surprise that their legitimate protest takes a nationalist and/or religious form. Lenin understood this. Belatedly realizing the Great Russian brutality of Stalin against the Georgian Communists accused of “social-nationalism “, he had gathered his last strength, in 1922, to warn: “An abstract presentation of the question of nationalism in general is of no use at all. A distinction must necessarily be made between the nationalism of an oppressor nation and that of an oppressed nation. (...) In respect of the second kind of nationalism, we, nationals of a big nation, have nearly always been guilty, in historic practice, of an infinite number of cases of violence; furthermore we commit violence and insult an infinite number of times without realizing it. (...) That is why internationalism (...) must consist not only in the observance of the formal equality of nations but even in an inequality of the great nation, that must make up for the inequality which obtains in actual practice. Anyone who does not understand this has not grasped the real proletarian attitude towards the national question (...) and is sure to descend to the bourgeois point of view” [12]. Lenin must be turning in his grave: it is in the name of “communism “that the Chinese regime is committing an infinite number of acts of violence, injustices and atrocities, organized quite deliberately in Xinjiang on a mass scale.

Under the pretext of anti-terrorism, forced

assimilation

How to characterize this violence? The US government and many capitalist media are talking about “genocide “. A genocide is an enterprise of physical extermination of a people. There is today a disastrous tendency to use this notion indiscriminately. It is not genocide that we are talking about in Xinjiang. ECOLO’s repeating of this accusation is quite inappropriate. By formulating it, the Greens help to trivialize the real genocides - Jewish, Tutsi, Armenian... - and the horrors committed by imperialism in the four corners of the world throughout its history (Hiroshima and Dresden, for example). In addition, they help Beijing to get off the hook in the face of an accusation that is clearly propaganda.

In reality, China does not want to physically liquidate all Uighurs any more than Israel wants to physically liquidate all Palestinians. Beijing’s intention is different: culturally destroy the indigenous Muslim peoples of Xinjiang, Sinicize them by purely and simply eliminating their identity and employ them as cheap labour. It is this project that materializes in the book burning, the measures against mother tongues, the restrictions on religious freedom, the re-education camps, the system of spying on and denouncing people, the checkpoints, the systematic biometric registration, the abduction of children from their “suspicious “parents, the employment of Uighur workers to fill the holes created by COVID in other provinces, not to mention the particularly perverse practice of the so-called “Han cousins”, these Chinese officials instructed to live for one week a month in the privacy of Uighur families ...

Although China is making great efforts not to let any of its policies in Xinjiang filter through, enough is known from the diaspora organized in the Uighur World Congress - which has nothing to do with jihadism ! - to affirm that the Chinese Northwest is the scene of a crime against humanity. A heinous crime, perpetrated with the aggravating circumstance that it is perpetrated behind closed doors by a powerful state against victims who are very much in a minority and have no escape route. An Orwellian crime in which multinational capitalists and Western states are in fact complicit - despite the accusations of “genocide” that the leaders hypocritically launch to maintain the myth of “Western democracy”.

Furthermore, as the article we have published shows, China is implementing in Xinjiang methods taken from the strategies of repression deployed by US imperialism in Iraq and by the Zionist state in Palestine. With four differences, which make Beijing’s policy worse than the original: 1) the strategy is implemented preventively; 2) it is structurally based, Maoist style, on the collaboration of the party’s neighbourhood committees and on that of individuals from the colonizing nation; 3) it uses tracing and facial recognition technologies on a very large scale; 4) locked up in their own country as in open-air prisons, the populations are not only subjected to humiliating control, like the Palestinians, but also to an attempt at forced assimilation on a mass scale.

As in the West (and in Russia), the “fight against terrorism” is used in China as a pretext for a policy of colonial plunder which carries with it racism and Islamophobia. As in the West (and in Russia) this “fight against terrorism” is the breeding ground for terrorism ... in such a way that the terrorism which does develop can effectively serve to justify the fight against terrorism and to make it more repressive. The Chechen case which inspired the Shanghai Cooperation is instructive: the “anti-terrorist” military operations continued officially until 2009, to such an extent that Moscow had to declare a second time the end of the war that had supposedly been won in 2001. What happened during this period was also the “Chechenization” of the conflict, that is to say, the establishment of a brutal local government towards which Moscow outsourced the exercise of repression, which persists until today. All the experiences of the war against jihad converge towards the same conclusion: these policies do not only produce explosions and brutal conflicts, they create hidden situations where the political question (the demand for autonomy of the population in question) is never settled and where cycles of violence appear that feed endlessly on one another.

Lenin's warning

The PTB denounces these infernal dynamics when it comes to Iraq or Palestine. Suddenly, confronted by the Uighurs, it is rather embarrassed. It says that it "disapproves of the Chinese response to terrorism", which it finds "too broad" (Interview with Nabil Boukili on RTL). This elusive argument actually gives credence to the idea that the basic problem in Xinjiang is terrorism. However, if Uighurs have joined the jihad in Afghanistan and Syria, and if terrorist attacks have been committed in China by Uighurs (on Tiananmen Square in 2013, in Kunming and Urumqi railway stations in 2014, perhaps on other occasions) [13], there is no doubt that the root of the problem, as in Palestine, is settler colonialism, the grabbing of resources for the benefit of the contemptuous colonizer, the explosion of discrimination and humiliation. imposed on people dispossessed of their own country and, in the case of Xinjiang, of their own culture. That this intolerable situation of injustice (of which women are the specific victims, in Xinjiang as elsewhere) provokes outbursts of anger, no Marxist worthy of the name should be surprised. The iron repression applied to prolong injustice can only fuel the jihadist movement, represented by the Islamic Movement of East Turkestan. [14]

There is nothing to be expected from the Greens, who manage neoliberalism and support the very hypothetical "green capitalism". As for the PTB, it finds itself confronted with demons from its own past. Will it take the opportunity to question its ideological affiliation with Stalin, which it hides from his own members but has never denied [15] To do that, it would have to face the reality of what historian Moshe Lewin called "Lenin's Last Struggle". [16] The question that is posed is: why was the leader of October so virulent in his denunciation of Great Russian nationalism within his party? Because he considered the attitude towards the small oppressed nations as a question of principle, that is to say a question which cannot be transgressed without consequences: "Anyone who does not understand this (...) is sure to descend to the bourgeois point of view".

Do not think that Lenin, in asserting this, underestimated the importance of the united front against the imperialism which besieged the USSR. On the contrary, here is what he said about it: "One thing is the need to stand up against the imperialists of the West, defenders of the capitalist world. It is another thing to engage ourselves in imperialist relations (this must be emphasized, DT) with regard to oppressed nationalities, thus arousing suspicion on the sincerity of our principles, on our principled justification of the struggle against imperialism".

Let us recall that Lenin, with these words, castigated the Great Russian nationalist backsliding of a limited circle of Soviet leaders ... at a time when the victorious revolution seemed ready to completely extirpate the capitalist cancer! One can easily imagine what the leader of October would say in the face of the Grand Han nationalism defended unanimously by the Chinese leaders, who are cheerfully conducting the reestablishment of the most brutal capitalism ... As the man said: "sure to descend to the bourgeois point of view". The left's task is to assert its support for the Uighur people against China's attempted cultural strangulation, not to shamefacedly cover up Beijing's crimes.

28 April, 2021.

PS:

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[1] RTL Info, 18 April 2021 "[Le PTB enchaîné à la Chine?](https://www.rtl.be/info/video/778281.aspx)"
"<https://www.rtl.be/info/video/778281.aspx>].

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[2] A partial protectorate had been established in 1750.

[3] Cairn.info 2006 "[La Région autonome des Ouïghours du Xinjiang \(RAOX\) : un territoire stratégique mais potentiellement instable](#)".

[4] Idem.

[5] *PowerMag*, 1 January 2016 ["[The Energy Industry in Xinjiang, China: Potential, Problems, and Solutions](#)"].

[6] Bloomberg, 10 February 2021 "[Why It's So Hard for the Solar Industry to Quit Xinjiang](#)".

[7] Attac France, 25 January 2021 "[Première analyse de l'Accord d'investissement UE-Chine](#)".

[8] Cairn.info L'Homme 2020/3 (n° 236) "[Chine et Ouïghours
Un colonialisme interne civilicide](#)".

[9] Cairn.info, 2006 "[La Région autonome des Ouïghours du Xinjiang \(RAOX\) : un territoire stratégique mais potentiellement instable](#)".

[10] Sciences Po Centre de Recherches Internationales, October 2019 "[The fight against terrorism and extremism in Xinjiang: which methods for which results? State of play and perspectives](#)".

[11] Wikipedia "[Shanghai Cooperation Organisation](#)".

[12] Lenin, Selected Works 3, Progress Publishers, Moscow.

[13] *Le Monde*, 20 May 2014 "[Attentats ouïghours : la Chine confrontée au terrorisme de masse](#)". None of these attacks has been claimed.

[14] The role of this group seems so far marginal, although the Chinese authorities obviously claim the opposite: see Cairn.info 2006.

[15] From the war in Bosnia to the war in Syria, via Libya, this filiation continues in particular to inspire the PTB with a vision of the "campist" world, in black and white ... inherited from the "Cold War" that it accuses the Greens of stirring up.

[16] New York, Random House, 1968.