

ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION

The Truth About Xinjiang

This is an edited transcript of the presentation of Sultan Hali to an online roundtable discussion sponsored by the Schiller Institute, "Great Power Cooperation Instead of War," February 27, 2021. Mr. Hali is a journalist and author from Pakistan, and has spent decades studying and traveling in China.

Good afternoon. My name is Group Capt. Sultan Mehmood Hali. I served in the Pakistan Air Force from 1970 until 2001. I operated a C-130 Hercules air transport aircraft. After my retirement, I took up journalism as a career, and I studied broadcast journalism in the U.S.A.

Before I come to the question of Uighurs and the number of allegations that have been levelled, I would like to point to the Uighur uprising which came about much later. The United States, especially its intelligence agency the CIA, bears some responsibility. You may recall that in 1979, the U.S.S.R. invaded Afghanistan. There was a likelihood that this invasion would



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have continued across Pakistan, and Peter the Great's dream of reaching the warm waters of the Indian Ocean would have been materialized. The CIA jumped into the fray to stop the U.S.S.R. in its tracks, and Pakistan became its frontline ally. But, of course, the CIA invited Muslims from all over the world to come and get training in guerrilla warfare, to join the Afghan mujahideen and stop the Soviet invasion from incurring any further.

The jihadists, or the volunteers, who came from all over the world, also included Uighur Muslims from China. All these people were imparted with frontline guerrilla war-

fare tactics—they were armed with the latest weapons; they were provided funds. I'm not repeating history, but just to sum it up, in 1989, the Soviets were forced to retreat.

Now here, the Americans made a mistake. The mistake was that they should have deradicalized these jihadist Muslims, and also taken back the weapons that



CC/Erwin Lux



The CIA brought Uighur Muslims from China into Afghanistan, provided them with money and advanced weapons, and taught them guerilla warfare techniques to fight the Russians. Shown on the left are two Mujahideen with captured Soviet field guns in Paktia Province, August 1984; on the right, Russian tank troops in Afghanistan, March 25, 1986.

they had supplied them. Instead, the CIA thought it was a job complete, and they departed in a hurry. The world had to pay the price, including the United States, because 9/11 is a direct result of that. Extremist organizations like al-Qaeda came into being, and they were trained in guerilla warfare, and they were looking for enemies.

Deradicalizing the Uighurs

Now, I'm not going to talk about the rest of the world, but as far as the Uighurs were concerned, they returned to their homeland in Xinjiang. At that time, in 1986, Deng Xiaoping introduced his theory of economic openness and China started developing economically, very rapidly. But it was the eastern region that received the largesse of the benefits, while the western region—mostly Xinjiang is in that part—was extremely backward, and there was disparity.

When these Uighurs came back, they saw the disparity, and they also saw an opportunity in organizations like the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) that came into being. They thought that they should demand separation from mainland China. Now, most of these people were extremists, and also, as the world of extremists goes, they tend to distort religion. They also tend to use verses of the Quran to their own advantage, and they tried to instigate the other Uighurs to rise, and they committed acts of terrorism. You may recall that in 2009, there was a mass uprising.

After that, the central government in China took very drastic measures. It was a two-pronged action. The first was that they cracked down on the extremists; they arrested them, they tried them, and those who were found guilty of indulging in separatism, extremism, and terrorism were punished accordingly. But on the same plane, the Chinese government decided that the causes of deprivation and disparity between the eastern region and the western region must be brought to a balance, so that there would be no cause for the Uighurs to be upset, as well as to find causes for terrorism or uprising.

At that time, I flew into China as [part of] an air crew on at least 70 different occasions, mostly to Xinjiang, and I have toured Xinjiang up and down. When I retired in 2001, I became a journalist and later a writer and an



Nouvelle Solidarité/C. Bierre

Since 2009, the Chinese government has improved living conditions and provided job training for the Uighur people. Here, young Uighur women are learning machine sewing at the Turpan Gaochang District Vocational Skills Education Training Center.

academic—so far I've authored five books, my sixth one is on its way, coming up on the 100th anniversary of the Chinese Communist Party. I've been visiting China, and mainly Xinjiang, for research and interviewing people, and I am an eyewitness to exactly what has been happening in Xinjiang. I've seen the marked difference that was made over there.

After the 2009 Uprising

After the 2009 uprising, the Chinese government removed the squalid camps and hutments and poor dwellings of the Uighurs, and instead erected high-rise apartments, and asked the Uighurs to move in over there. Of course, there was a catch here. What the Chinese did was, they also made a number of Han—the majority population in China—to move into Xinjiang and be neighbors of the Uighurs, so that there could be better amelioration, better understanding. Simultaneously, development projects were introduced so that the Uighurs would not feel deprived, and they would give up the acts of terrorism, extremism, and separatism.

Unfortunately, some detractors of China thought that Xinjiang is the soft underbelly of China, and perhaps they were envious of the rapid economic rise of China. They may have instigated some of these Uighurs, but I'll not go into that.

The fact is, that the Chinese government analyzed

what were the causes, and the main cause was, as I mentioned earlier, the sense of deprivation, which was addressed by installing development projects. But the other was the distortion of religion. To deal with that, there were institutions set up.

I have myself visited the Xinjiang Islamic Institute which was established some 30 years ago. I've met Abudulrekep Tumniaz, who is the president of the institute, and I have seen with my own eyes that this institute is parallel to some of the finest universities of the United States of America, like Stanford or Berkeley. It has fantastic facilities! But more importantly, it teaches imams, the religious leaders of especially Uighurs and other Muslims in China, the balanced theories of Islam. Because Islam, by the way, is not an extremist religion. It doesn't teach extremism. But extremists, they distort the verses of the *Quran*.

The Belt and Road Initiative

When President Xi Jinping came into power in 2013, he installed the Belt and Road Initiative [BRI], which is exactly on the same route of the ancient Silk Road. The major beneficiary of the BRI is the province of Xinjiang, the Uighur Autonomous Region. Fantastic facilities have been built! I visited Kashgar; in fact, I've toured every inch of Xinjiang, and I have noticed the facilities that have been created.

The Uighurs have been given the chance to get into higher positions, by providing them with vocational and specialist training. Kashgar, once upon a time, much earlier, was like in the boondocks, and a neglected place. Although in the age of the Silk Road, it was one of the major trading posts. But now, if you go there, you find 7-star hotels and fantastic factories and so on. The Belt and Road Initiative meanders all the way, reaches Kashgar, and from there it fans into Central Asia and onwards into Europe. On the other side, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, or CPEC as it is called here, starts from the Pakistani port of Gwadar, and goes on and meets the BRI at Kashgar, and becomes a part of it.

Condition of the Uighur People

The Belt and Road Initiative has really paid dividends. My last visit to Xinjiang was in July 2019. After



Adam Ludwiczak

A street bazaar in Urumqi, capital of the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region, China.

that, I have obviously been deprived of any further visit owing to the coronavirus; because I used to visit regularly for the research of my books, as well as being invited by various universities to deliver lectures and seminars. But I have seen that the Uighurs there are living there in prosperity, and a far cry from the propaganda.

What some of the Western reports have said about concentration camps or labor camps, they are in fact indoctrination centers. Those people have been judged as having been misled or have gone astray from the teachings of Islam or the teachings of normalcy. They are asked to engage their thoughts about the Chinese Constitution and Chinese law, and they are also given the opportunity for vocational training. There is nothing of the so-called concentration camps, of the alleged rapes being carried out, or of people living in squalid conditions. In fact, I found them extremely happy. I would like to mention here that I also met a number of Pakistanis who have settled in Xinjiang province, who have married Uighur women; they have children. I have spoken to them, and I found them to be very satisfied people.

Coming back to the Belt and Road Initiative, the United States has serious reservations to it, but the question arises that if 70 countries of the world have joined it—especially the majority of Europe—what are the reservations of the United States? It says that there is lack of transparency. But this transparency can be taken care of, if the United States sits on the board and

has a close look at what's going on....

You cannot criticize things sitting from the outside—you have to get into it. There are propaganda and fake stories. There are people like the born-again Christian Adrian Zenz [the German who is the source of virtually all the lies about the Uighurs, such as the “one million incarcerated in concentration camps,” gathered from a few Uighur exiles and from his own warped imagination, as well as his training at Cambridge



Adrian Zenz, a German anthropologist, is the source of virtually all the lies about the Uighurs.

—ed.] who are distorting the stories about the Uighurs, talking about genocide. I have not seen a single instance of genocide. On the contrary, if you visit the terrorism museum in Xinjiang, in the capital of Urumqi, you will see ample evidence of what the Uighur terrorists had done, and how the Chinese government has overcome it.

I Expected More from the United States

I expected more from the United States. As I mentioned, I studied in the United States, my sons also graduated from U.S. universities, and one of the most impressive things I found was, as I entered the building of the Supreme Court, there is the frieze of eighteen leading law-givers, and prominent among them are the prophet Mohammad, peace be upon him, the prophet of Islam, as well as Confucius. The Founding Fathers of the United States did not base the U.S. Constitution, nor the U.S. judiciary nor the U.S. law, on a figment of their own imagination. They concentrated their attention on all of these law-givers, and chose the best of them.

This means that some of the people who blame the U.S.A. for Islamophobia, they are not fully informed. Yes, in the near past, we saw, during the Trump era, there have been instances of Islamophobia; it has been people like Mike Pompeo and Donald Trump who had their own agenda, and they thought that confrontation was the best approach to deal with China.

I would like to tell you as someone who knows the United States very well, who studied there, and studied their system, and also has studied China closely, I can tell you that China is misunderstood. Mostly it has been viewed from the position of ethno-centrism, in which

former imperialistic powers say that China is into hegemony, that China is interested in occupying territory. I don't think so. I have studied the Chinese psyche. One of my books is *Gems of Chinese Culture*. Chinese culture, its traditions, its mores, are more than 4,000 years old. They are based on very deep thought.

China does not want to occupy the world. Yes, it is interested in enhancing its own economic position. But if you study the ideas of Xi Jinping, he wants that there should be the Belt and Road Initiative, an extension of reaching

out to the world, to have mutual trade, to develop infrastructure, so that the underdeveloped countries can stand on their own feet, and the dividends are divided. Nowhere have I found any trace of hegemonic tendencies.

Engage China

In my opinion, there is a great chance for the Biden Administration to turn back some of the extremist actions which were taken by President Donald Trump, for example taking the ETIM [East Turkistan Islamic Movement] off the list of terrorist organizations. This has sent a dangerous message. People whose terrorist and separatist tendencies which have been suppressed, will rise and find a chance to become activated. The world is faced with extreme challenges....

I think there is a great opportunity for Joe Biden to engage China, and not go on the path of confrontation. If the U.S. leadership is to mimic what Pompeo was doing or what Trump was doing, it would be unfair.

On February 22, China organized a very important international seminar in which 310 leaders and important personages representing 190 political parties and organizations from 80 plus countries, with over 100 from Islamic countries, were involved in an in-depth discussion on the theme, “A better life for all.” They reached a broad consensus.

My closing comments would be, please, engage China, not confront it. Why go the route of the Indo-Pacific strategy, which can lead into conflict, into a nuclear conflict? Instead we can pool resources, pull the world out of this morass, and have a better life for all. Thank you so much.