

# Australia and Xinjiang (October 2019 update)

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International outrage continues to grow in the face of Beijing's mass detention, forced indoctrination and vice-like control of its Turkic Muslim population in Xinjiang, with estimates of over a million (about 40 percent of the Xinjiang population) held in internment camps. The US recently announced visa restrictions on People's Republic of China (PRC) officials involved in the 'detention or abuse of Uighurs, Kazakhs, or other members of Muslim minority groups in Xinjiang',<sup>1</sup> as well as export restrictions on 28 PRC governmental and commercial organisations.<sup>2</sup>

While the Australian Government has strongly criticised the PRC's actions in Xinjiang insofar as diplomatic parlance will allow, it has not indicated any material shift from a position it re-articulated in July this year, when Foreign Minister Marise Payne stated the Australian government would not be imposing targeted sanctions.<sup>3</sup> The opposition Australian Labor Party (ALP) continues to be broadly supportive of this approach. The Australian Greens, on the other hand, continue to push for sanctions.

The vice-chairman of the Xinjiang government, Alken Tuniaz, claimed on July 30 that 'most' Turkic Muslims being held in Xinjiang's internment camps had 'completed their study and found new jobs'.<sup>4</sup> This assertion has been strongly questioned by many – including those who had recently travelled to Xinjiang and by relatives of those in detention.<sup>5</sup> One Xinjiang expert also pointed out that '[e]vidence shows that control over [the Uighurs] does not end by releasing people from the vocational training camps', stating that released detainees are put into compulsory work placements.<sup>6</sup>

The maltreatment of the Turkic Muslim minority in Xinjiang is not confined to the internment camps. *The New York Times* reported on August 9 that there has been a 'record surge in arrests, trials and prison sentences in the past two years' in Xinjiang, with 230,000 people sentenced in 2017 and 2018.<sup>7</sup> There have also been accounts of the separation of children from their families,<sup>8</sup> the forced sterilisation of Uighur women in Xinjiang detention centres,<sup>9</sup> the refusal of accommodation by increasing numbers of hotels to Uighurs travelling within the PRC,<sup>10</sup> and the destruction of Turkic Muslim burial grounds.<sup>11</sup>

The PRC has made some attempt at a campaign to soften perceptions of its actions in Xinjiang by taking select diplomats and journalists on tightly controlled tours of the province and facilitating chaperoned meetings with its Turkic Muslim residents, which, according to observers who have participated in such meetings, only yield seemingly scripted answers.<sup>12</sup>

In line with this campaign, the PRC published a white paper on July 21 entitled 'Historical Matters Concerning Xinjiang', which stated:<sup>13</sup>

Conversion to Islam was not a voluntary choice made by the common people, but a result of religious wars and imposition by the ruling class.

This perception management campaign has not appeared to dovetail with any drawdown of current PRC policy in Xinjiang. Indeed, on September 2, Xinjiang Communist Party Secretary Chen Quanguo said in a

speech in the lead up to the PRC's 70th anniversary: 'We should...keep the alarm bells ringing and stay constantly vigilant, maintaining high-pressure'.<sup>14</sup>

This fact sheet is an update on the author's August 2 2019 briefing on the Australian government on Xinjiang.<sup>15</sup>

## July 12 2019

In response to an earlier letter signed by Australia and 21 other countries collectively raising concern in the United Nations (UN) about the PRC's detention of a significant percentage of its Uighur minority, the PRC rallied 37 countries, including North Korea, Russia and Saudi Arabia, to submit a letter in defence of the PRC's policies in Xinjiang. It 'commended China's remarkable achievements in the field of human rights' and stated 'safety and security has returned to Xinjiang'.<sup>16</sup>

## July 17 2019

Shadow Minister for Defence Richard Marles reiterated the ALP's 'significant concern' about the situation in Xinjiang and his party's support for the government's position on the matter:<sup>17</sup>

We are concerned about the Uighur population in China. We support the Government in its efforts in raising this issue with the Chinese Government and we support the position that the Federal Government have taken in relation to this.

It is obviously a matter of significant concern and we would join with the Government in saying to China that the question of human rights for the Uighur population in western China is one which absolutely needs to be front and centre in terms of how the Chinese Government operates.

## August 22 2019

US Ambassador to Australia, Arthur B. Culvahouse, met for the first time with Australian Uighur leaders in Adelaide. He drew attention in an interview on the meeting to the pressures the Australian Uighur community were facing from the PRC in Australia, noting that he 'thought it was past time to meet with them face-to-face to...better understand their particular concerns, the pressures they're under. Not only by the Chinese Government in China, but also by the Chinese Government in Australia'.<sup>18</sup>

He said:

In our view, freedom of association, freedom of speech, freedom of assembly means that foreign powers don't follow you around.

It's a form of oppression that is inconsistent with the values that Australia and the United States both stand for.

## September 9 2019

In the Australian Senate, Greens Senator Nick McKim described the actions of the PRC government in Xinjiang as 'rampant human rights abuses on a scale that the world has never seen before'. He stated that Australia 'used to join economic boycotts against regimes who did this kind of thing, albeit on a smaller scale'.<sup>19</sup> These remarks were made in support of a motion by Centre Alliance Senator Rex Patrick calling for an inquiry into Australia's relationship with China.<sup>20</sup>

## September 17 2019

A video recording was uploaded onto YouTube appearing to show aerial footage of hundreds of Turkic Muslim men in Xinjiang with their heads shaved, sitting on the ground in rows while blindfolded and with their hands bound behind their backs.<sup>21</sup> The footage depicted the men later being led away by numerous armed guards. While there are conflicting conclusions from security analysts in Australia and Europe about when the video might have filmed, there is agreement between them that the video is authentic.<sup>22</sup>

Foreign Minister Marise Payne on September 23 described the video as 'deeply disturbing':<sup>23</sup>

I am aware of the deeply disturbing video that has been published online.

I have previously raised Australia's concerns about reports of mass detentions of Uighurs and other Muslim peoples in Xinjiang.

We have consistently called for China to cease the arbitrary detention of Uighurs and other Muslim groups.

We have raised these concerns – and we will continue to raise them – both bilaterally and in relevant international meetings.

Treasurer Josh Frydenberg in an interview on the same day labelled the footage ‘absolutely shocking’ and ‘really, really terrible’. Pressed on what more Australia could do, the Treasurer reiterated the Foreign Minister’s comments that Australia would continue to raise the issue in bilateral and multilateral fora.<sup>24</sup>

Opposition Leader Anthony Albanese during an interview on September 24 said that while he had not viewed the footage, reports detailing its scenes sounded ‘completely horrific’.<sup>25</sup>

## September 24 2019

On the sidelines of the annual UN General Assembly (UNGA) meeting in New York, Canada, Germany, the Netherlands, the US and the UK co-hosted an event on Xinjiang, attended by over 30 countries including Australia. During the meeting, US Deputy Secretary of State John Sullivan said the UN and its member states had a ‘singular responsibility to speak up’ and urged ‘others to join the international effort to demand and compel an immediate end to China’s horrific campaign of repression’.<sup>26</sup>

Foreign Minister Payne on the same day met with her PRC counterpart, Wang Yi, on the sidelines of the UNGA. She told journalists that she had raised Xinjiang in her discussions.<sup>27</sup>

## September 25 2019

Wang Yiwei, a former PRC diplomat and currently Professor International Studies at Renmin University, one of three PRC academics visiting Australia on a PRC government-backed speaking tour, in a television interview forcefully asserted the video released on September 17 was ‘fake’ and that Australia had ‘sponsored a deal to bash China over this video’ in the UN.<sup>28</sup>

In a separate interview he said:<sup>29</sup>

I have visited Xinjiang many times for research. Why [don't] Australians cover the real picture about China.

You only select something to please you or your moral high ground and embarrass China. What benefit is there in that?

## October 1 2019

PRC Ambassador to Australia Cheng Jingye gave an interview to *The Australian* in which he claimed Beijing’s policies in Xinjiang were ‘not targeted at any religious group or any ethnic group’. He dismissed accounts of over a million Turkic Muslims held in internment camps as a ‘fake story’.<sup>30</sup>

For some accounts from members of the Uighur diaspora with family and friends in detention in Xinjiang, read/watch:

- [China’s police state goes global, leaving refugees in fear](#), AFP via the *The Straits Times*, July 23 2019
- [‘I won’t stop’: The Australian Uighur fighting for his family](#), *Al Jazeera*, July 26 2019
- [Tell the world](#), *ABC Four Corners*, July 26 2019
- [Australian Uyghur gets surprise phone chat with incarcerated mother](#), *Radio Free Asia*, August 19 2019

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## Endnotes

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