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Why Xinjiang is emerging as the epicenter of the U.S. cold war on China

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Map showing the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region

On March 22, 2021, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken [authorized](#) sanctions against Wang Junzheng, the secretary of the Chinese Communist Party Committee of the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (XPCC), and Chen Mingguo, director of the Xinjiang Public Security Bureau (XPSB). These sanctions, Blinken said, have been put in place against Wang Junzheng and Chen Mingguo because they are accused of being party to “genocide and crimes against humanity in Xinjiang.” The U.S. Treasury Department followed [suit](#) with its own sanctions.

Both Wang Junzheng and Chen Mingguo [responded](#) by condemning these sanctions

that were not only imposed by the U.S. but also by Canada, the UK and the EU. Wang Junzheng said that the sanctions “are a gross slander,” while Chen Mingguo said that he was “very proud of being sanctioned by these countries.”

The United States Pivots to Asia

In October 2011, then U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton had [announced](#) a “[pivot to Asia](#),” with China at the center of the new alignment. While Clinton had said on numerous occasions—including in [Hawaii](#) in November 2011—that the administration of former U.S. President Barack Obama wanted to develop “a positive and cooperative relationship with China,” the U.S. military buildup along Asia’s coastline told a different story. The 2010 U.S. Quadrennial Defense Review [noted](#)  “China’s growing presence and influence in regional and global economic and security affairs” and called it “one of the most consequential aspects of the evolving strategic landscape.” In 2016, U.S. Navy Admiral Harry Harris, head of the Pacific Command, had [said](#) that the United States was ready to “confront China,” a statement given strength by the U.S. military buildup around China.

The Trump and Biden administrations have largely followed the “pivot to Asia” [policy](#), with a special emphasis on China. The United States has been struggling to keep up with China’s rapid scientific and technological advancements and has few intellectual or industrial tools in place to compete. This is the reason [why](#) it has tried to stall China’s advances using diplomatic and political power, and through information warfare; these elements comprise what is called a “hybrid war.”

Focus on Xinjiang: Information Warfare

Prior to a March 2019 [event](#) co-hosted by the U.S. Mission to International Organizations in Geneva, most people in countries like the United States were largely unaware of the existence of the Xinjiang region in China, let alone of the [13](#)

[million](#) Uyghur people (one of China's 55 recognized ethnic minorities). Given that the Uyghurs are the demographic [majority](#) in this westernmost province of China, the official name of the administrative unit is the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region.

The March 2019 [event](#) featured [Adrian Zenz](#), a German researcher and a senior fellow in China studies at the [Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation](#), an organization [founded](#) in 1993 by the U.S. government to promote anti-communist views. In April 2020, this foundation—against all [evidence](#)—[accused](#) China of being responsible for the global deaths resulting due to the spread of COVID-19. Zenz is also associated with the conservative defense policy think tank the [Jamestown Foundation](#), [founded](#) by William Geimer, who was close to the Reagan administration.

Zenz and Ethan Gutmann, another [researcher](#) at the Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation, would continue to repeat their conclusions regarding the genocide in Xinjiang to the [U.S. Congress](#) and in a range of [mainstream](#) publications. Hosted by the [BBC](#) and [Democracy Now](#), Zenz provided what appeared to be documentation of atrocities meted out by the “Chinese authorities” against the Uyghur population. Zenz and Gutmann would be joined by organizations funded by Western governments but which—as NGOs—pose as independent research and advocacy groups (such as the [Global Center for the Responsibility to Protect](#) and the [Uyghur Human Rights Project](#); the former is [funded](#) by Western governments and the latter by the U.S. government's [National Endowment for Democracy](#)).

In June 2020, then U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo attacked the Chinese government, basing his [statements](#) on Xinjiang on the “German researcher Adrian Zenz's shocking revelations.” Zenz, who is a U.S. government-funded researcher from the intelligence-connected Jamestown Foundation, provides a set of scientifically dubious and politically charged papers, which are then used as fact by

the U.S. government in its information war against China. Anyone raising questions about Zenz's claims is, meanwhile, marginalized as a conspiracy theorist.

Diplomatic and economic warfare

The U.S. government's information warfare against China has produced the "fact" that there is genocide in Xinjiang. Once this has been established, it helps develop diplomatic and economic warfare.

On March 22, 2021, the same day as the [U.S. sanctions](#), the Council of the European Union unilaterally [imposed](#) asset freezes and travel bans on four Chinese government officials, including Wang Junzheng and Chen Mingguo as well as Wang Mingshan and Zhu Hailun. The [United Kingdom](#) and [Canada](#) also joined in this venture that day. It appeared to be a coordinated diplomatic assault on China in order to portray China as a country violating human rights. This assault came soon after China had [achieved](#) a major human rights goal, lifting 850 million people from absolute poverty. The U.S. government and its media outlets tried to [challenge](#) this remarkable human rights achievement.

Trump had pushed a [trade war](#) with China as soon as he came into office in January 2017; his policy framework [remains](#) in place under Biden. To draw together the trade war and the Xinjiang information war, in mid-December 2020, Adrian Zenz and the Newlines Institute for Strategy and Policy ([formerly](#) the Center for Global Policy) released an intelligence [brief](#)  on "coercive labor in Xinjiang." The claims in this briefing—building on a 2019 Wall Street Journal [article](#) on the supply chains and Xinjiang—created a media firestorm in the West, amplified by [Reuters](#) and then picked up by many widely read [outlets](#); it led to the U.S. government [ban](#) on Xinjiang cotton.

A [third](#)  of the world's textiles and clothing come from China, with the country accounting for \$120 billion in exports of these products per year and \$300 billion in

exports of all merchandise annually. According to China's [National Bureau of Statistics](#), [87 percent](#) of China's total cotton output comes from Xinjiang. Most of the high-quality Xinjiang cotton—and the textiles produced from it within China—go to Western [apparel companies](#), such as H&M and Zara. In 2009, many of these companies created the Better Cotton Initiative (BCI), which has—until last year—been upbeat about developments in Xinjiang ([including](#) co-ops of small farmers in Xinjiang). As recently as March 26, 2021, the BCI made a clear [statement](#): “Since 2012, the Xinjiang project site has performed second-party credibility audits and third-party verifications over the years, and has never found a single case related to incidents of forced labor.”

Despite the BCI's recent confident statement and its optimism, things are rapidly changing for Xinjiang cotton farmers as the BCI appears to get on board with the U.S.'s intensifying hybrid war on China. The BCI closed down its [page](#) on its work in China, [accused](#) China of “forced labor” and other human rights violations, and set up a [Task Force on Forced Labor and Decent Work](#).

Officials from Xinjiang's government [contested](#) these claims, saying that much of the field labor for cotton in Xinjiang has already been replaced by machines (many of them imported from the U.S. firm [John Deere](#)). A recent [book](#) edited by Hua Wang and Hafeezullah Memon — *Cotton Science and Processing Technology*—confirms this point, as do a range of media [reports](#) from before 2019. Facts like these don't seem to stand a chance in the overwhelming information war. Xinjiang—two and a half times the size of France—is now at the epicenter of a cold war not of its own making.

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