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OPPRESSION IN XINJIANG: RHETORICAL PARALLELS TO THE CAUSAL MECHANISMS

by

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**Capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for graduation with**

University Honors

with majors in
International Studies and Global Communication

in the Departments of Political Science and Communication Studies and Philosophy

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Abstract

This paper compares the framings of ethnic conflict with theoretical political science explanations of the causes of such conflict. Framings are statements used to portray the who, what, and why of an issue through the emphasis or exclusion of information to create a specific agenda. The theoretical expectation from social science is that ethnic conflict is a result of a commitment problem, where the two parties in the conflict cannot credibly guarantee the protection of the other. This arises from situations where there is a large minority group population that is underrepresented from government and has grievances from economic disparities or religious or ethnic repressive policies which causes them to mobilize. I used the example of the conflict between Uyghur Muslims and Han Chinese in Xinjiang as narrated by Chinese newspapers and the Associated Press (a U.S.- based news organization) to analyze whether the causes of conflict are present in framings. I performed a comparative content analysis to uncover the framings that both internal and external actors are using, the differences between them, and their congruence with universal expectations from political science analyses of ethnic conflict. I found that the framings of the conflict by both internal and external actors are congruent to causes of ethnic conflict in many of the articles analyzed, though the actors use them to advance their own interests and narratives. The findings of the relationship between the communication around an issue and the theorized causes help us interpret narratives surrounding issues of ethnic conflict. A more effective policy response is possible because we understand which aspects are salient to the actors and which aspects have not been addressed.

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Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Background.....	1
Literature Review.....	3
Ethnic Conflict	3
Framing	4
Conceptualization	6
Methodology.....	9
Analysis.....	11
Economic Disparities	11
Religious or Ethnic Repression.....	14
Large Minority Group Population.....	18
Exclusion from Government/Lack of Political Power	19
Mobilization/Terrorism	21
Complexity	23
Incongruence	25
Conclusion	27
Capstone Reflection	30
Works Cited	32
Appendix.....	37
Author Biography	46

List of Tables and Figures

Table 1: <i>Incidents of Terrorism in China, 2009-2019</i>	2
Table 2: <i>Expected Framings Derived From Causes</i>	7
Table 3: <i>Actual Framings</i>	8
Table 4: <i>Comparison of Expected Framings to Actual Framings</i>	8

Introduction

Political scientists have identified factors that correlate with the onset of ethnic conflict through quantitative analyses. However, the connection of these theories to the ways that actors involved portray the conflict and frame it according to their interests is not well-understood. This research aims to bridge that gap by identifying whether the causes that have been established are present in the framing of the issue by actors within the country of the conflict and those commenting from foreign countries. The situation in Xinjiang with Uyghur Muslims has been chosen as the area of study because of its political relevance in Chinese-U.S. relations, the lack of evidence surrounding what is happening and the subsequent importance of the framings of the conflict to uncover what is driving the conflict, and the limited research exploring the causes of the conflict, especially as it connects to the rhetoric surrounding it.

Background

The Uyghurs are a large minority ethnic and religious group in Xinjiang, the westernmost province of China. Xinjiang, a resource-rich region which was integrated into the Chinese state in the 1750s, has been a region of discontent and unrest because of China's attempts to maintain its hold and Uyghurs' desire for autonomy and independence (Soloshcheva, 2017). Uprisings with an Islamist religious element have occurred since the late 19th and early 20th centuries, with two East Turkestan Republics gaining independence for a short time in 1933 and 1944 before being taken over quickly. This legacy has influenced contemporary separatist aspirations (Friedrichs, 2017). Since the 1980s, religious repressive policies have been instituted against Muslims by the Chinese state, resulting in further uprisings and subsequent crackdowns by the Chinese government, including what have been termed "Strike Hard" campaigns against terrorism (Friedrichs, 2017; Soloshcheva, 2017; Guo, 2015; Chung, 2018). The "global war on

terror” has influenced Chinese actions and the framing of Chinese discourse since the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001, allowing the government to justify their actions against the Uyghurs as counter-terrorism efforts (Tredaniel & Lee, 2016; Smith Finley, 2019). Major riots in Urumqi in 2009 led to the institution of another “Strike Hard” campaign, imposing strict rules on Islamic religious activities. This included the reporting of any action that was deemed questionable, such as growing a beard, the dissemination of religious materials, or connections abroad (Human Rights Watch, 2018). The campaign led to a substantial increase in occurrences of terrorism between 2013-2015, as shown in the data on the incidences of terrorism in China obtained from the World Terrorism Database (Table 1). Most of the instances before 2017 occurred in Xinjiang.

Table 1

Incidents of Terrorism in China, 2009-2019, World Terrorism Database

Year	Number of Incidents	Deaths	Injuries
2019	13	0	12
2018	1	2	2
2017	6	16	76
2016	5	13	18
2015	16	123	83
2014	37	322	478
2013	12	60	71
2012	4	27	38
2011	4	19	32
2010	1	7	14
2009	7	186	56

Note: The numbers do not include values for terrorist incidents where fatality and injury counts are unknown. Hence, the numbers are an under-estimation.

Beginning around 2017, people have been detained extrajudicially in what has been described by China as “vocational training” or “political re-education centers,” where Uyghurs are to receive job training, learn Chinese, and show support for the Chinese government (Chung, 2018). China has been accused of various abuses in these camps such as coercive secularization

and instances of torture, physical abuse, rape, forced sterilizations and birth control, and forced labor (Smith Finley, 2019). Such allegations have led to international outcry by human rights organizations and other states alike, some terming it genocide (Smith Finley, 2021; Zenz, 2019). The focus of my research will be the violence between the Chinese government and the Uyghur Muslims since 2017.

Literature Review

Ethnic Conflict

The increased onset of conflicts that have arisen between groups with salient ethnic or religious identities and the causes of such conflict have been the object of study by social scientists over the past four decades (Horowitz, 1985). Questions about definition of ethnicity as it relates to violence have been debated, but it has been generally accepted that ethnicity refers to a collective identity where membership in the group is related to descent, based on factors of constrained change and visibility (Chandra, 2006). Salience of ethnic or religious identity may lead groups to nationalism and this may lead to conflict with other groups over resources and rights (Varshney, 2009).

Ethnic conflict has also been asserted to be no different than other conflicts, and that it emerges because of a commitment problem. When it is impossible for either side to make credible commitments to not oppress, marginalize, or overturn the other side and there is a fear that it will get worse, they resort to violence because the potential benefits outweigh the costs (Fearon, 1995). This means that when there is a marginalized minority group that does not have access to power because of exclusion or underrepresentation in government, they are likely to rebel to strive to gain more power when they fear that the government will further limit their power in the future (Cederman et al., 2010; Fearon, 1995). The likelihood of conflict increases if

the group is large because they pose a more significant threat and ethnic identity is more likely to be mobilized because the government will make choices affecting the group specifically (Posner, 2004). If costs of fighting are low, which would be influenced by whether the group is more rural or not strongly reliant on the state economically, conflict is also more likely. If there is a shift in power within the population, the state will fear a threat to its power and crack down with violence to prevent a rebellion (Fearon, 1995). Ethnic favoritism or religious repression at the national level or economic inequalities can also create grievances that fuel conflict (Eifert et al., 2010; De Luca et al., 2015; Fjelde & Østby, 2014; Vinson, 2018; Vinson & Rudloff, 2022).

These established causes have explanatory power in the situation in Xinjiang. As a significant ethnic group in a rural region, they are politically salient and are viewed as a threat to Chinese interests. As the Uyghurs have mobilized, China has responded with violence and oppression (Chung, 2018). Economic disparities between Uyghurs and Han Chinese, and religious repression by the Chinese state, have been cited as influencing the mobilization of the group in terrorist activities (Smith Finley, 2021). Ethnic consciousness and identity in Xinjiang have also been cited as inducing the conflict (Zang; 2013).

Framing

The communication studies theory of framing refers to the way a problem is defined and portrayed by actors, where they highlight certain information as being important and omit other points to create an intentional narrative (Entman, 1993). There is some literature on the relationship between ethnic conflict and framing that focuses on how the causes of conflict are portrayed in news media and narrated by other domestic actors. Such studies have found that the causes of conflict were rarely referenced or were manipulated for certain ends and that this influenced the way that domestic audiences view the issue (Demarest & Langer, 2018; Kolas,

2017). However, these studies do not address how the issue is portrayed by governments to international audiences or by actors on the outside looking in. They also have focused on issues in Africa and India and not ethnic conflict in China.

Some research has been conducted on the framings of Islam and Muslims in Chinese state-sponsored news media. The findings show an emphasis upon negative stereotypes and non-acceptance of Islam in Chinese culture, as well as themes of assimilation and extremism (Luqiu & Yang, 2018; Lan & Navera, 2021; Stroup, 2021). The discovery of these frames shows the context surrounding the conflict and how this group is portrayed in media. There has also been some analysis surrounding the general framings of the uprisings in Xinjiang by the Chinese government, which focus on how the arguments have generally stayed the same over time, but more references of terrorism have emerged. Anti-Islam discourse has been the main theme that has emerged in this research (Rodriguez-Merino, 2018; Pokalova, 2013; Trédaniel & Lee, 2017).

Audience response to state media justification in online discussion has also been analyzed. This thread of research has demonstrated the minimization of some issues by the Chinese news media and the contrast of emotional framing that the government uses to show the destructive nature of the conflict to Chinese citizens (Zhang, 2017). In addition, comparative analyses between the United States and China regarding key events and scandals have found that the U.S. portrays China in a negative light by emphasizing details of particular events, while the Chinese government focused on maintaining credibility and evading responsibility (Feng et al., 2012).

I hope to add upon this research by comparing the differences between the Chinese and U.S. news media in the Xinjiang situation and how they frame the causes of conflict, an area that has not been studied in the framing literature.

Conceptualization

Framings of an issue may or may not be reflective of what is happening on the ground. It will be difficult to make policy decisions that will effectively deal with the issue if framings are not congruent with the way the politics are unfolding. I develop a framework of congruency and incongruency between framings and ongoing politics. The role of communication surrounding an issue is crucial because it is what promotes understanding and action. Finding the relationship between this communication to what the research has determined regarding the causes of conflict will help us find disparities or connections that will enable us to have a greater sense of what is occurring around the issue to better respond to it.

By internal actors, I am referring to individuals or groups who are communicating about a conflict within their own country or a group with interests that are embedded in the conflict. They may or may not have the capacity to change what is happening but are observing what is inducing the conflict and are directly embroiled in it. Internal actors may be motivated to hide or distort what is happening, especially when they are governments or groups who have culpability in grievances or desire to maintain control. External actors are those who are not participating in the conflict or do not have directly tied involvement in the conflict. As observers, they may have different information from those involved internally. They have different interests surrounding the conflict and use their framings to portray the conflict in a way that serves their interests and perspective.

The differences between the framings between internal and external actors are informative because they uncover understanding of the situation in greater depth. When there is a mismatch between these perspectives we can understand that there is discrepancy in the various intentions and that the actors are using the framings to shape the narrative in a way that will

serve their purposes. The diversity in framings also helps us construct a more complete picture of the situation and how different actors are perceiving it, whether anyone is recognizing the causes of the conflict and if they are choosing to portray those causes in a way that allows for action and reconciliation or one that dismisses the role of those issues in the conflict.

First, an expected framing is derived as a narrative that is closely related to the ongoing political processes as theorized within the political science literature. A corresponding framing – the words and phrases the actors might use – is connected to each cause. These words and phrases are what we would expect to see in the media if they were portraying the situation in a way that reflects what is happening at the root of the conflict; therefore, I refer to them as expected framings (Table 2).

Table 2

Expected Framings Derived from Causes

Causes	Expected Framing
Large Group (Cause 1)	X
Lack of Power in Government (Cause 2)	Y
Grievances from Ethnic Favoritism (Cause 3)	Z

Second, a comparison is made between the expected framings from the objectively identified causes within the political science literature and the actual framings that are evident in the media. This is done for both internal and external actors, which is demonstrated in Table 3.

These are described as actual framings because they are the published representations of the conflict.

Table 3

Actual Framings

Objectively Identified Cause	Expected Framing	Purported /Framed Cause by Internal Actors	Purported/Framed Cause by External Actors
Cause 1	X	X or Not X	X or Not X
Cause 2	Y	Y or Not Y	Y or Not Y

Finally, a comparison between the actual framings and the expected framings identify patterns of congruence and incongruence (Table 4). If the framings are congruent, there is alignment between the phrases and words the internal or external actors are utilizing to describe the situation and what scholars promote as the main causes of conflict. If framings are incongruent, there are no such connections to these causes and the actors are connecting back to other causes or there is no reference to a cause. I identify examples of these frames to aid in the analysis of the differences between the intentions and observations of the actors involved.

Table 4

Comparison of Expected Framings to Actual Framings

Expected Framing	Congruent? Y or N	Observations/Examples
X	No	
Y	Yes	

The general framework is used to analyze the conflict between Uyghur Muslims and the Chinese Communist Party in the People's Republic of China. Circumstances connected to the

various causes of a commitment problem are present in this conflict, making it a suitable candidate for study. I use this framework to see whether framings of the internal actors, or the Chinese news media, and the external actors, or the United States news media, are congruent with the causes that have been established.

Methodology

I used a content analysis to compare the framings used by the Associated Press (AP) and China in reference to the causes of conflict. The analysis used a sample of articles from the key Chinese news outlets (*The People's Daily* and *China Daily*) from the period of January 2017, the year when the allegation of internment camps started, to September 2022. The samples were selected by using the key words "Xinjiang" and "Uyghur," collecting 156 articles from the *People's Daily* and 321 from *China Daily*. Xinjiang shows up often in the articles as solely a region in China, hence 208 articles were not relevant to the issue and were eliminated from the population. A random sample of the remaining articles was formed by assigning a number to each article and generating 30 random numbers using a Python program.

Another sample was created to examine the narratives of non-Chinese actors regarding conflict in Xinjiang. I coded a sample of 30 articles of the 169 retrieved from *Associated Press* during the same time period, under the key words "Xinjiang" and "Uyghur," and using the same system to generate the sample. *The Associated Press* is the largest U.S.-based global news agency, providing information to 15,000 news media outlets throughout the world (Report for America, 2021). This means that while it does not represent every external actor or the voice of the United States government, it portrays the perspectives of U.S. journalists as they convey information throughout the world. This external perspective would be the one that much of the United States and the rest of the world is exposed to.

The statements referencing the causes of conflict in Xinjiang were coded for words related to the four expected frames. For example, words such as *ethnic minority group*, *rights*, *freedoms*, *counterterrorism*, *extremism*, *economic benefits*, *political opposition*, and *population growth*. The grievance frame in my analysis was expanded into two separate frames of economic disparities and religious repression because they are distinct in the context of the conflict in Xinjiang. Coding involved classifying the wording in the articles and extracting quotes that demonstrated the frames. If at least one frame was recorded, I categorized the article as congruent to the relevant causes of conflict. If there was no language related to any of the expected frames, it was grouped as incongruent, and I listed any words and themes that arose as reasons for the conflict in an “other” category.

My use of articles in the English language reflects the intent to identify the way China is portraying this issue to international actors. The media, which is tightly controlled by the state, is China’s primary instrument of propaganda efforts and there has been a clear division between its domestic and external systems, in which the latter’s target audience is the foreign community. The Chinese government’s main intention is to temper global concerns and wariness about their actions (Alvaro, 2015). The articles in the sample are therefore relevant in demonstrating how China justifies its dealings in Xinjiang and what they want the world to consider as the narrative of the issue, and hence the “truth” of what is occurring and why.

In many articles, especially the Chinese ones, a cause of conflict was not explicitly stated. I considered any implicit reference to the circumstances surrounding the conflict or words that demonstrated the framing of the type of conflict with an underlying issue to represent a legacy or acknowledgment of the causes and viewed these as instances of the framings of the causes. An example of an explicit cause being referenced is apparent in this quote: “In response

to the strong calls of people of all ethnic groups for combating violent terrorist crimes, Xinjiang has combined crackdown on terrorism with preventive measures.” It asserts that terrorist mobilization is the primary cause of crackdowns against the Uyghur majority. Contrast that with the following quote, which acknowledges religious repression or inequalities as causes of conflict while denying it is happening: “The state protects the lawful rights and interests of every ethnic group ... and protects the normal religious activities and fulfills the reasonable religious demands of believers in accordance with the law.” This is an example of an implicit framing because it uses the frame of ethnic grievance to justify why conflict is not happening, which is a reference to ethnic grievance as a source of conflict.

Analysis

Economic Disparities

Frames reflecting the cause of economic disparities were related to the economic state of the region, such as *prosperity*, *jobs*, and *economic benefits*. This framing was more present in the Chinese articles; eight of the Chinese articles had frames that reference this cause of conflict, whereas only two of the Associated Press articles did.

Internal Framings

The most common framing present related to economic disparities in the Chinese articles was that the government has promoted economic growth and prosperity and “all ethnic groups” have benefitted.¹ The articles contain this framing often to justify their actions in Xinjiang as vocational training centers to promote economic development. “All ethnic groups” is a phrase that is repeated across the articles, demonstrating the understanding that if there were disparities

¹ People’s Daily, December 9, 2019. See Appendix.

in economic development between the ethnic groups, this would cause grievances that would lead to conflict. However, because conflict, in their eyes, is not present, they use the economic growth of the region as evidence that there is no basis for conflict.

Two more explicit framings used in the articles related to economic disparities were evident. For example, the quote “poverty, unemployment, a lack of job opportunities are all conditions conducive to violent extremism and the process of radicalization”² demonstrates the framing that low economic well-being fosters terrorist activities. Thus by fostering economic development in the region, conflict is likely to decrease. This directly reflects the theorized cause that economic grievances lead to conflict. The internal actors use this framing again to justify the actions they took of building “vocational training centers” as necessary to curb the effects of mobilization and terrorism by fostering economic prosperity.

The next framing is seen in the following quote, “The gap between Xinjiang and the rest of China seemed far wider than anything that could be measured in terms of economy or security [in 1993].”³ This framing asserts that there was a difference between economic development in Xinjiang compared to the rest of China in the past, acknowledging that this could have contributed to conflict. However, this is used as a comparison in the context of current economic growth and prosperity in the region, again with the statement that this growth has “benefitted all ethnic groups.”⁴ This framing echoes the grievance cause but uses it to demonstrate that the Chinese government has curbed the impacts of this cause, signaling a narrative that conflict no longer exists in the region.

² China Daily, December 11, 2019. See Appendix.

³ Zao, February 24, 2021. See Appendix.

⁴ Zao, February 24, 2021. See Appendix.

It is advantageous for China to use this frame as a justification for their actions in the region. If the establishment of vocational centers is framed in terms of economic development and conflict is caused by economic disparities, the government's actions are portrayed as warranted to prevent conflict and ensure the prosperity of the region.

External Framings

The economic grievance framing is not as present in the framing of the situation by external actors, showing that emphasizing this cause may not be as relevant or important to their understanding of the situation. One article directly refers to the disparity between those of ethnic minority and the Han majority at the root of the grievances that caused mobilization by Uyghurs, leading to the Chinese government's crackdown. This statement says, "Uyghurs... have long resented Beijing's heavy-handed rule and the influx of migrants who have reaped economic benefits in the resource-rich region."⁵ The use of the words "long resented" demonstrate a grievance frame, which is connected to the "economic benefits" that were "reaped" by migrants and not by the Uyghurs. The phrase "In the resource-rich region" is part of a narrative intended to show that there was economic prosperity to be made, but the Uyghurs did not get to tap into those benefits because of the control of the Chinese government.

The other reference to an economic cause by the AP uses the words "voluntary job centers" to describe what Beijing claims they have established in the region. While not an explicit reflection of the economic grievance cause, framing it in terms of how China views the issue as economic demonstrates that the AP is, to some degree, acknowledging their perspective.

⁵ Leicester, February 5, 2022. See Appendix.

The appearance of only two examples of this framing demonstrates that the economic aspect is less salient for the AP than for China.

The economic disparities framing may not be as salient for the United States because many of the actions they have taken to counter China in this area have been to enforce economic bans on products exported from this region. If this cause was emphasized at the root of the conflict, it would not make sense for the United States to put economic bans on the region because that would further exacerbate the conflict.

Religious or Ethnic Repression

Framings based on the cause of religious or ethnic repression as a grievance were the most present of the causes. Many of these framings were implicit, especially on the Chinese side. The following words were used to code for expected framings: *ethnic group*, *religious*, *oppression*, *discrimination*, *assimilation*, and *restrictions*. Nineteen of the Chinese articles had this frame present and fourteen of the AP articles did.

Internal Actors

Some of the framings used in the Chinese newspapers relating to religious or ethnic repression may be interpreted as acknowledgment of external allegations of oppression based on ethnicity and religion. The language of the articles deny the claims, but including the frames of ethnic and religious repression that others have promoted shows that they recognize religious or ethnic repression as a potential cause for conflict if there were conflict and that the issue itself is related to ethnicity.

In response to this acknowledgment, the Chinese news articles emphasize repeatedly the protection of rights of the ethnic groups in the region through statements such as “legitimate

rights and interests of people of all ethnic groups in Xinjiang are fully protected.”⁶ It is interesting to note that they use close to the same wording across all the articles with this frame when talking about the rights of ethnic and religious groups. “Legitimate” or “lawful” or “according to the law” are words they use to describe the rights of the people and is used in every phrase that references “rights.” The only exceptions are specified, as in this statement: “rights to life, health, and development of the people of all ethnic groups.”⁷ In these framings, the articles always use the word “all” when referring to ethnic groups. This is an acknowledgment back to the cause of conflict, because if there is a certain group that is left out of this protection, that would be a cause for grievance. The articles emphasize repeatedly that this is not the case in Xinjiang. Every phrase referring to the rights also uses some form of the words “protect” or “safeguard,” which emphasizes that rights of the population are safe and secure in Xinjiang, contrary to what external actors and the religious repression cause of conflict imply.

Another framing present that is related to the religious repression cause of conflict is that people have religious and other freedoms in the province, again deflecting the allegations that there is religious repression in the region. This is apparent in phrases such as “all expressed satisfaction with local religious freedom,”⁸ or “laborers of all ethnic groups have complete freedom of choosing their jobs and careers destinations without any limitation on personal freedom.”⁹ The presence of the word “all” is again universal in these phrases, demonstrating

⁶ China Daily, December 26, 2021. See Appendix.

⁷ People’s Daily, December 9, 2019. *US double standard on anti-terrorism disdained by international community.* See Appendix.

⁸ Zao, February 24, 2021. See Appendix.

⁹ Chenglong, June 25, 2022. See Appendix.

China's emphasis that there is no targeted exclusion of any group and therefore, no cause for conflict.

Another type of repeated statement that references the religious repression frame is some variation on the phrase "ethnic unity and religious harmony,"¹⁰ demonstrating the emphasis that there is no conflict based on ethnicity and that ethnic and religious differences are not salient in Xinjiang. These frames are often present with the other frames of the protection of ethnic and religious rights, showing that a peaceful and united region is the result of these protections.

An additional framing that is present once in the articles is that the Uyghurs, rather than being repressed, receive preferential treatment. This is again an acknowledgment to the religious repression cause of conflict and a response to the allegations by external actors. This is apparent in the statement, "Ethnic minorities in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region enjoy preferential policies on giving birth and receiving education. Muslims in China have never been discriminated under the country's policy and law."¹¹ China reframes the situation in the opposite way from the repression frame, stating that ethnic minorities are those that are benefitted rather than repressed and emphasizes again that there is no discrimination against Muslims.

External Actors

Some articles from the Associated Press that used a framing related to ethnic or religious repression reference the framings of China, specifically that their efforts are to "restore order and ethnic cohesion."¹² The AP articles emphasize the Sinicization of Islam as a goal of Xi and use statements from the Chinese government in their discussion about the conflict. This demonstrates

¹⁰ China Daily, September 15, 2022. See Appendix.

¹¹ Global Times, December 18, 2019. See Appendix.

¹² Associated Press, May 24, 2022. Associated Press, May 23, 2022. See Appendix.

that the external actors view China's portrayal as important to the issue because it shows the justification and framing China has surrounding the issue and that ethnic and cultural differences are salient to them. They acknowledge and quote these statements from China and then frame the situation with words that have much more negative connotations. For example, the AP quotes Xi saying, "Islam in China must be Chinese in orientation" and "educating and guiding people of all ethnic groups to strengthen their identification with the Chinese nation,"¹³ demonstrating the Chinese perspective and justification. The article then frames the situation as Uyghurs "forced to reject their native culture" and "obliterate their distinct cultural identities,"¹⁴ evoking much stronger and more negative language. This shows that the AP is emphasizing the negative implications of the statements and framings by the Chinese government.

There are a few frames that focus on the historical nature of ethnic tensions in the area, demonstrating how religious or ethnic repression has fueled grievances leading to conflict. One of them says, "China has long suspected the Uighurs, who are mostly Muslim ... because of their distinct culture, language and religion,"¹⁵ showing directly that both ethnicity and religion have worried China for a long time and these sentiments have fueled potential for ethnic conflict now. Another frame shows the direct relationship between these repressive policies and grievance. The word "resentment" is closely tied to grievances and the phrase "severe restrictions on language, culture and religion and inflaming a cycle of resentment and radicalization"¹⁶ demonstrate a close relationship between repressive policy aimed at specific religious and ethnic

¹³ Associated Press, July 16, 2022. See Appendix.

¹⁴ Associated Press, May 23, 2022. See Appendix.

¹⁵ Mendoza, July 3, 2020. See Appendix.

¹⁶ Shih, August 3, 2017. See Appendix.

groups and brewing tensions that escalate to conflict. The AP is directly addressing religious and ethnic grievances as the reasons behind this conflict.

Many of the other instances of the ethnic and religious repression frame are very direct and specific references to repression based on ethnicity and religion. There was repetitions of similar words and phrases implying discrimination, such as “repression,” “oppressing,” “singled out and targeted,” “criminalized,” “discriminated against,” and “crack down.” All of these words are connected to words such as “ethnic groups,” “religion,” “Uyghur,” “minorities.” This usage demonstrates that the discrimination is on ethnic or religious basis and that the recipient of the discrimination is this minority group population with a salient ethnic or religious identity. There was also a repetition of words and phrases that emphasized that this discrimination is instituted into governmental programs, such as “program of repression” and “systematic attacks.” They also emphasize that the restrictions are “severe” across the different frames. These frames directly implicate the Chinese government in ethnic and religious repression and demonstrate that this is a cause of ethnic conflict.

The other framings that relate to this cause describe the issue as affecting Uyghurs as an ethnic group. This was not used as a direct framing of the cause of the conflict, but it does reflect that the conflict at its root stems from a salient ethnic identity.

Large Minority Group Population

The framing around a large minority group population was coded using words such as *population growth* or *large group*. This framing had only one instance in the sample of Chinese newspaper articles I analyzed and was not present at all in the AP articles.

Internal Actors

The only framing related to the salience of a large minority group in the Chinese newspapers was a reference to the population growth of the Uyghurs in Xinjiang. The article cited that “the population of Uyghurs in Xinjiang grew from 10.17 million to 12.72 million, registering a surge of 25 percent, a figure outnumbering the 14-percent increase in the total population of Xinjiang and the two percent increase in the Han population.”¹⁷ A reference to population growth would demonstrate the worrisome nature of a growing minority population to the maintenance of power in the region, illustrating a potential cause for conflict. The inclusion of this frame demonstrates that this is a reality that Chinese actors consider. However, they use this frame to defend against the implications of genocide allegations by asserting that they are not restricting births and that the group is prospering. This is another instance where Chinese actors acknowledge a potential cause for conflict and use it to justify why conflict is not happening in Xinjiang.

External Actors

There were no references to the population or the large nature of the group by external actors, demonstrating that this issue was not as relevant to their portrayal of the conflict. This may be because the population of the group is not a threat to them as they are not directly involved, or the population seems irrelevant or does not matter as much to their interests as other factors that contribute to the conflict.

Exclusion from Government/Lack of Political Power

Lack of political power or exclusion from government as a cause was coded by looking for words relating to government, politics, or law or acknowledgment of a desire for greater

¹⁷ China Daily, July 8, 2022. See Appendix.

freedoms, rights, or representation in government. This framing only had two references in both the Chinese and the AP articles.

Internal Actors

On the Chinese side, there were only two implicit references to a lack of political power: a reference that “all ethnic groups in the region... have their rights guaranteed by law”¹⁸ and that “Xinjiang enjoys political stability.”¹⁹ Both cases reference political freedom and stability as important to mitigating conflict, again justifying why conflict is not occurring in this region through framing the relationship between government and the people as stable and inclusive. There were so little mentions of political power in their framings because, as newspapers that are highly monitored and censored by the government, they would not want to directly reference Uyghur exclusion from government. Such reference would undermine the government’s authority and put them at fault. Instead, the narrative used political stability and rights as evidence for why conflict could not be happening.

External Actors

The two framings in the AP news articles were more explicit than those utilized by Chinese actors. They employed this frame as a direct reference to the cause for conflict by demonstrating that China’s political system creates possibility for grievances and that the conflict stems from the Uyghurs’ desire for greater freedoms. One of the statements is in active voice, giving agency in the conflict directly to the Chinese government: “China's ruling Communist Party allows no political opposition and strictly limits free speech and rights to assembly and

¹⁸ People’s Daily, December 9, 2019. *China allows no one to back terrorist forces*. See Appendix.

¹⁹ Jin, December 25, 2021. See Appendix.

religious expression.”²⁰ The other is more passive, demonstrating the desire for further freedom in the conflict, but not emphasizing who is responsible for the situation: “people imprisoned over calls for greater religious, political and cultural freedoms.”²¹ These framings of the conflict demonstrate that external actors are more willing to emphasize the Chinese government’s exclusion and restrictions on freedoms as a cause of conflict than the Chinese newspapers, but it is not a major focus in their framing of the conflict.

Mobilization/Terrorism

The final cause of conflict, mobilization of the group, was prevalent in the frames on both sides. There was also an equal number of articles between the actors, with 16 articles with the frame present from both samples. This was a prominent framing because of the close relationship between the mobilization and the government’s actions.

Internal Actors

The mobilization or terrorism cause was the only cause of conflict that is directly acknowledged as a cause of the conflict and reason for their actions in the frames by the Chinese newspapers. This may be because the government’s actions were a direct response to terrorist activities that threatened their peace and power. It also does not incriminate the government as the actors responsible for the conflict and their actions can be justified when framed as a “war on terror” just as other nations have framed their actions.

The government’s actions are repeatedly referred to as “China’s de-radicalization and anti-terrorism efforts,”²² demonstrating that this is how they want their actions to be perceived

²⁰ Associated Press, May 24, 2022. See Appendix.

²¹ Associated Press, May 23, 2022. See Appendix.

²² People’s Daily, December 9, 2019. *US double standards on anti-terrorism disdained by international community.*

and what they feel is at the root of the conflict. The narrative even says that “to address the problem at its source,” the government established centers to “educate and rehabilitate law-breakers and those who have committed minor crimes” to “eliminate the influence of terrorism and extremism on them.”²³ This narrative emphasizes the cause of the conflict to be terrorism and justifies government actions in those terms. The articles also emphasize that the terrorist attacks were frequent and spreading, and therefore, the government needed to institute “crackdown” “with preventive measures.”²⁴ This emphasis on the destructive and problematic nature of the terrorism justifies government actions further.

The Chinese narrative also emphasized what has happened with terrorism since their crackdown in their framing of the issue to defend their actions further. The phrase “safe and secure” is repeated to describe Xinjiang now because of their counter-terrorism measures. There is a repetition of the word “now,” to emphasize the present state of Xinjiang. There is a sense that before, there was a problem but because of their effective policy, there is no present conflict.

Another frame that emerged was a repeated emphasis that the conflict is not about religion or ethnicity, but terrorism. This was obvious in phrases such as “not about human rights, ethnicity or religion, but about fighting violence, terrorism and separatism.”²⁵ The narratives aim to escape culpability and the framings of external actors by using the terrorism frame as the main cause of the conflict.

External Actors

People’s Daily, December 9, 2019. *China allows no one to back terrorist forces*. People’s Daily, December 5, 2019. China Daily, December 11, 2019. See Appendix.

²³ english.ts.cn, July 19, 2019. See Appendix.

²⁴ english.ts.cn, July 19, 2019. See Appendix.

²⁵ People’s Daily, December 9, 2019. *China allows no one to back terrorist forces*. See Appendix.

The framings by the AP news media focus on China's narrative of the situation as counter-terrorism. They acknowledge that violent mobilization did occur in substantial amounts, by saying things such as "the resentment erupted into a series of violent incidents"²⁶ or "China saw a wave of Xinjiang-related terrorist attacks through 2016."²⁷ They do not separate China as an actor from those phrases, however, and use phrases such as "China says" or "labeled terrorism by China"²⁸ to emphasize that this is China's framing of the issue.

Complexity

While it is informative to analyze each of the framings of the causes of conflict to discover the interests of the actors surrounding the issue, much more emerges in the analysis of the relationships between the framings and the presence of multiple framings together. Thirteen of both the Chinese and AP articles had at least two of the frames present.

Internal Actors

In the Chinese framing, terrorism frames were interconnected with economic disparities and religious repression frames. In those frames, the media attempted to emphasize terrorism as the primary problem and detach it from the root cause. However, as has been asserted, terrorism does not emerge from nothing. It is fueled by the grievances emanating from economic disparities and repressive policies. This is acknowledged in the Chinese framings, demonstrating that they do recognize this, though their other framings seek to deny it.

For example, one sentence that references both the economic grievances frame and the terrorism frame connect the two: "poverty, unemployment, a lack of job opportunities are all

²⁶ Leicester, February 5, 2022. See Appendix.

²⁷ Lederer, May 12, 2021. See Appendix.

²⁸ Leicester, February 5, 2022. See Appendix.

conditions conducive to violent extremism and the process of radicalization.”²⁹ This justification of the “vocational centers” to combat the possibility of economic disparities that might fuel terrorism demonstrate that the Chinese media sees a relationship between economic well-being and terrorism. We can then deduce that because terrorism was happening, there were economic disparities. This shows that China, though it denies any conflict is occurring and that they had a part to play, in their justification of the issue acknowledge that economic disparities is the root of the problem.

There were also connections between the ethnic and religious repression frame and the terrorism frame, where articles emphasized again the idea of “all ethnic groups” and how they were calling for terrorism to end. The narrative was trying to show that the conflict is not an ethnic issue by emphasizing that all ethnic groups feel the same way about terrorism. However, the articles are still referencing the salience of ethnicity in this issue by including that frame and are detaching terrorism from its source. Another frame is an acknowledgment that the extremism and terrorism is “religious” in nature, which indicates that there may be religious repression at the root. This frame is contradictory to another frame that is repeated in the articles, they assertion that it is “not an ethnic or religious matter, but a matter of separatism, terrorism and extremism.”³⁰ In this way, the media is attempting to use the terrorism frame as the only cause to justify why ethnic and religious repression is not happening, even though in other framings where both framings are present, there is an acknowledgment that there is a relationship between religion and terrorism.

External Actors

²⁹ China Daily, December 11, 2019. See Appendix.

³⁰ Global Times, December 16, 2019. See Appendix.

For the AP, articles with multiple framings together emphasized more of the relationship between the causes and that they are present and influence one another. For example, one article says, “Uyghurs, who are culturally, linguistically and religiously distinct from Han Chinese, have long resented Beijing's heavy-handed rule and the influx of migrants who have reaped economic benefits in the resource-rich region. The resentment erupted into a series of violent incidents labeled terrorism by China.”³¹ This directly demonstrates how ethnic and religious differences, government policy, and economic disparities led to mobilization. They more directly acknowledge the role of grievances in contributing to terrorism and the conflict than China does.

This contrast between the Chinese and the AP framings shows that Chinese actors may be trying to only emphasize the causes that are most apparent and shy away from possible implications of guilt in the grievance cause. When the Chinese actors have other intentions in bringing up other causes to justify their actions they try to disconnect them from the mobilization; though this sometimes backfires when a relationship between the causes is developed in their narrative. The external actors, on the other hand, intend to bring up the causes that are in the background, because they have no strategic interest to exclude the drivers of the conflict. They may be desirous to emphasize what is behind the conflict in the province to highlight China’s responsibility for the conflict.

Incongruence

The analysis demonstrated that most of the articles did connect back to the causes of ethnic conflict. This shows that the way actors surrounding the situation talk about it in a way that does recognize what fuels conflict and that these causes have explanatory power. Eleven AP

³¹ Leicester, February 5, 2022. See Appendix.

articles and three Chinese articles did not frame the situation in the context of the causes. It was more prevalent for China to reference these framings because they were trying to justify the assertion that there is no conflict and their actions, and refuting the causes of conflict would be a logical way to make this argument. However, in their acknowledgment of these issues, they demonstrated that there is salience surrounding the causes, at least in the form of the allegations they receive from other actors that they then must refute.

The AP articles that do not have references to the causes of conflict have other objectives and do not talk about the situation in depth. Instead, they use it as an example of abuses that the Chinese government are instituting. The reference to Xinjiang was often in a list with other issues. Uncovering the roots of the situation is not portrayed as important to external actors in the framing in many of the articles, but it is an additional argument that they cite to demonstrate why there are tensions with China. These tensions are the main concern for external actors rather than the causes of Xinjiang conflict and what is happening there, and the framings they use highlight this.

The framework of incongruence and congruence asserts that when framings are incongruent they are disconnected from the root causes, and when they are congruent they are reflecting an acknowledgment of the causes of conflict. Both actors used framings that were congruent, but there were also cases where their framings were incongruent. This finding is parallel with framing theory because it demonstrates that actors modify the narratives they use to define the situation depending on their intention and purpose in describing the situation (Entman, 1993). For the Chinese actors the majority of their framings were congruent, because their intention was to justify that conflict is not happening by refuting a case for the causes. The few articles that were incongruent tried to call attention to other actors' actions in the conflict, such

as international bodies that put forth allegations or bans on the region. This may indicate that when Chinese voices cannot refute the causes they try to shift attention away from what is happening internally to the way that others are “attack[ing] and smear[ing] Xinjiang” and “interfer[ing] in China’s internal affairs.”³² The AP framings are congruent when they attempt to outline the situation and demonstrate what is fueling the conflict, especially when it comes to China’s guilt in creating grievances and oppressing the Uyghurs. The AP framings are incongruent when they are merely using Xinjiang as an example of human rights violations in China in a discussion about other issues. In the case of the incongruent framings, they do not see it as important to outline the connection to the causes but use the incident generally as evidence for why tensions with China are high.

Conclusion

This analysis has demonstrated that the framings of the AP, as an external actor, and China regarding the situation in Xinjiang have been mostly congruent with the causes of ethnic conflict. Media narratives use wording that demonstrates that they acknowledge what could be causing the conflict. As is consistent with the concept of framing, they intentionally use the frames that would further their purposes and interests. In the case of the Chinese media, the framings related to the causes of conflict are used to justify their actions and deny that conflict is happening. However, as the relationships between the frames were examined more closely, some inconsistencies emerged, such as the relationships between economic and religious grievances and terrorism, demonstrating that in recognizing these causes and referencing them these issues are present and need to be addressed. In the case of the AP articles, there are more direct

³² China Daily, May 25, 2021. See Appendix.

references to the causes, especially to show China's guilt in the situation. They also choose to echo the framings of China often to emphasize the Chinese perspective vis-à-vis the outside perspective on what is happening. They do not place as much emphasis on the economic nature of the conflict as the Chinese media, which could be because of their economic policies against China and against this region. The framings of the AP thus emphasize continued tense relations in U.S.-China competition and frame the situation in Xinjiang as further justification against Chinese governance and way of life.

This analysis, while it has some explanatory power as an initial examination of the issue, has some limitations. One of those limitations is the use of only *The Associated Press* as the source for the external perspective. There are many external actors with interests in this issue, but this analysis only examines the narrative from one news agency source in the United States. Other actors may see things differently. Another limitation is the coding was only performed by one person, so the interpretations of the articles are subject to my understanding of what they were trying to say. A more effective analysis would have had multiple people code and compare the differences between their results. The sample, though significant in number, was not comprehensive. The results should be considered in the context of the study and further analysis is necessary to confirm and generalize the results, though the conclusions can still be utilized as basis for consideration and further study.

Understanding that the situation is framed as connected to the causes of conflict allows us to recognize that there is room for policy to be made as based in those causes. However, those actors that have agency in the situation need to be determined and need to confront these causes directly for change to be made. Further analysis could show how the framings of the situation

have influenced the perceptions of the conflict by those involved and what is felt regarding agency and capacity for change and who is viewed as those who need to address the conflict.

Word Count: 8181 words

Capstone Reflection

Completing the capstone was a rigorous process, but it was meaningful to expand my undergraduate experience beyond what was expected of me and show myself what I am capable of. The hard work and effort it required was difficult to manage on top of my other work, but I also felt that I was given the tools to have success through the mentorship of Dr. Colin Flint and the encouragement from Honors. This experience has set me on the path to success in my future because of the discipline, determination, and drive I developed as chose to do something that stretched me.

One thing that was crucial to my success with the capstone was the choice to reach out to professors about their research early in my time as a student. As I got acquainted with the research process and the work that professors do, I became more comfortable with the idea of research and created connections that set the pace of my entire undergraduate career. Because of that initial meeting, I was able to develop a relationship with Dr. Flint, help him with his research, learn about further opportunities to deepen my learning and understanding, and prepare for my own capstone research.

Dr. Flint demonstrated that he believed in me early on by trusting me with projects related to his research and expressing his observations about my capacity, which then continued into his willingness to mentor me in my capstone. His confidence in me was an empowering force throughout the time I worked with him. I always felt so frustrated with my progress before each of our meetings, but every time we met, I left inspired and assured that I could continue forward. He came to embody for me a perfect balance of positive encouragement, support, and motivation that enabled me to have success in this project. I admire the way he took the time to see me, see where I was, and acknowledge that place while transforming and reframing what I had accomplished as a springboard to further progress. I wish that I had reached out to him more frequently over last summer when I had a meeting with another professor and experiences with research in an internship that led to a lot of burnout. I never wanted to disappoint him, so it was hard to go to him in moments where I felt I had failed, but I never regretted the times I did because those were the moments that I found newfound perspective and motivation. His mentorship demonstrated to me the power that kindness and caring can have on a person's life and success, which I hope to take into the relationships and leadership roles I have in the future. I have learned about my strengths, like writing, critical thinking and engaging with ideas, and my aspirations, such as presenting with more clarity and choosing to encourage others, through his investment and involvement in my success.

The project itself was a direct extension from the concepts I learned throughout my undergraduate experience. Engaging with projects in my classes and considering the relationships between them allowed me to develop the framework for this research. My favorite part was taking the tools of both communication studies and political science research I had learned and applying them to a more ambitious endeavor that I feel represents the growth and skillset I have gained in my undergraduate career. It is a clear summation of my experience because it demonstrates the interplay between the two disciplines I have studied and how they interact in a conflict situation. This has immense value to me because it has helped me discover

and articulate why both of my fields of study are important in understanding what happens at a global level and how systems interact. I would recommend that any student should get involved in research because of the deepened learning I gained as I engaged with the process of developing a theoretical framework and analyzing and communicating results.

I was grateful that I began to think about the project early because it gave me the opportunity to work on it methodically and have sufficient time with other things on my plate. A challenge I faced was balancing such an extensive project with the other demands on my time. I should have used the work plan as more of a guide in this and redeveloped the schedule as time went on to have a clear big picture laid out, but the deadlines Dr. Flint and I set in our meetings pushed me forward and enabled me to finish the project in the end. Those meetings were crucial to my progress.

My research has obvious global implications because I was able to gain new perspective on how conflict is presented and what developments and current events are occurring in our world. I have developed a passion for aiding people in conflict and finding the root causes to empower them, which I feel will translate directly into the future work I hope to do in the areas of immigration law, peacebuilding, diplomacy, or mediation. However, one other meaningful thing that happened in this process was the experience of presenting my work to my local and national communities. I tried to demonstrate the significance of the work I did, and I was also able to learn from others' research and feel more informed about the challenges that researchers across disciplines and regions of the world are working through. As I listened to others and engaged with their questions, I saw the connections between my work and theirs and how everything in our world interacts. This has given me a more well-rounded understanding of our many world systems and the importance of education, as well as encouraged me to continue to learn, ask questions, and engage with the community around me.

The biggest triumph of this process to me was that it was a *choice* to further engage and get involved and it has paid dividends in my experience, competence, and confidence. It was demanding and has been a source of a lot of pressure over the past year, but I feel so much more prepared to enter the workforce and articulate my abilities because of what I was able to accomplish through it. It has become a defining factor in my development over my college experience.

Word Count: 1060 words

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Appendix

Sample of Articles from *The People's Daily* and *China Daily*

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Christina Elizabeth Anderson is pursuing Bachelor's of Arts degrees in International Studies, with an emphasis in Peace and Security, and Global Communication, along with a certificate in Global Peacebuilding. Throughout her college career, she has participated in discussions as a Merrill Scholar, presented at the Utah Conference on Undergraduate Research and the National Conference on Undergraduate Research at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, and interned with the Spanish non-governmental organization El Camí de la Solidaritat. She is passionate about empowering groups and individuals in her community through seeing their humanity and providing them with resources for success and hopes to continue developing her skillset through involvement with organizations in the community and further education in the future.