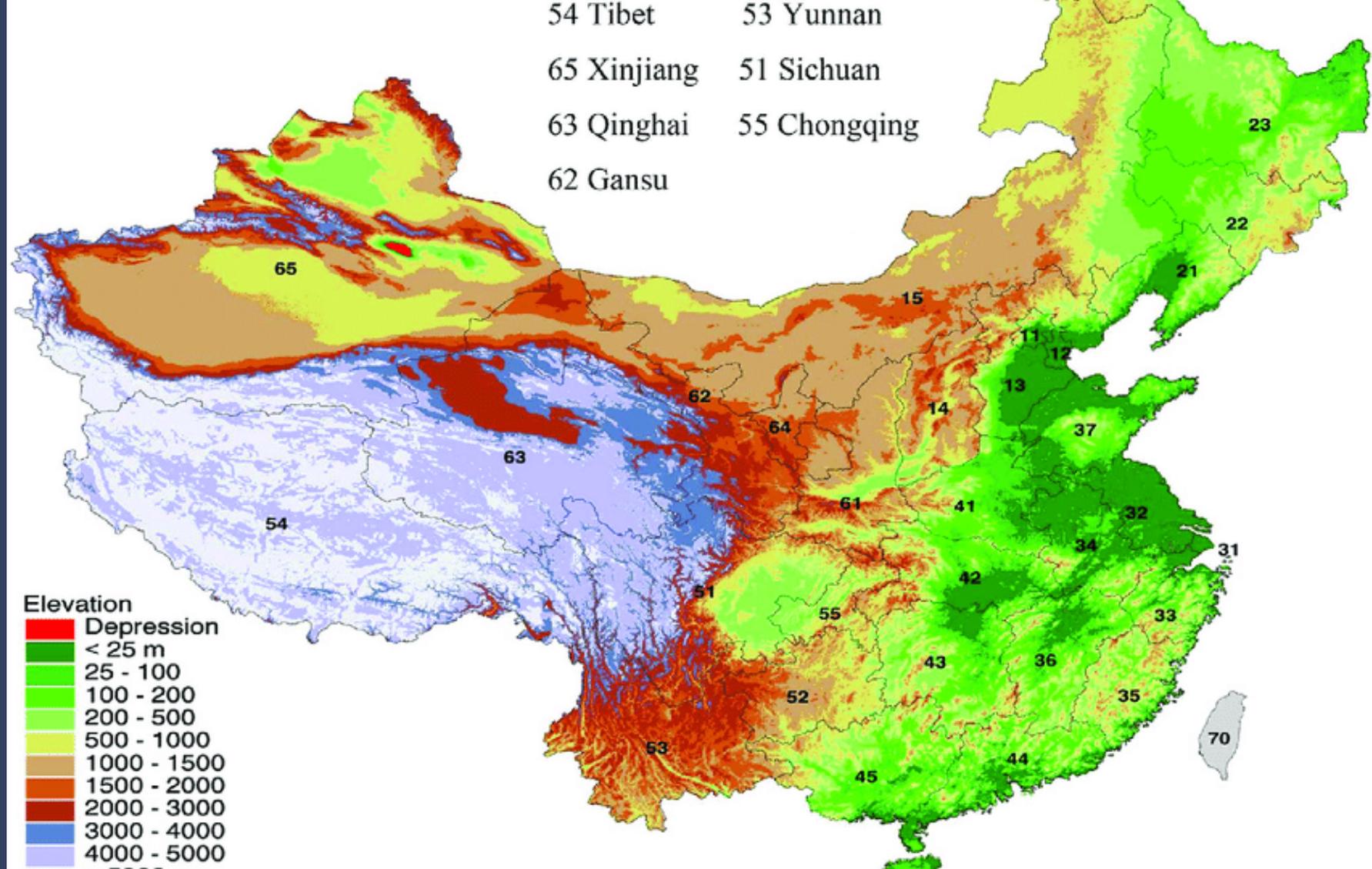


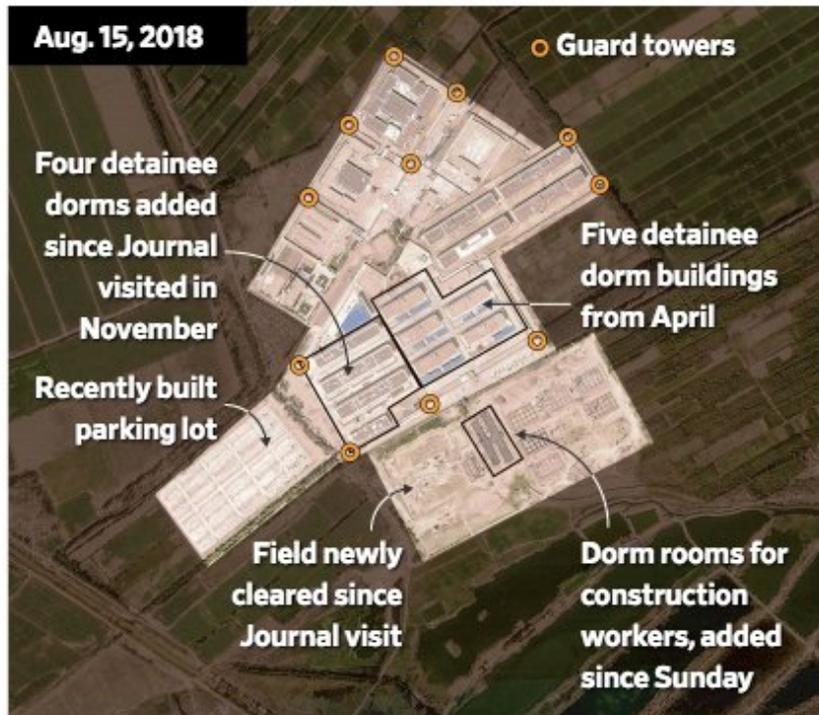
'Deny the "lie of the century"; all Uyghurs are happy'

The CCP's Campaign to Manipulate International Opinion around Xinjiang



Background: Why is Xinjiang so important?

1. The mountainous geography of China's land borders makes Xinjiang one of the easiest land passage point in and out of the region.
2. Consequently, Xinjiang is China's gateway to the rest of the Eurasian continent; acting as a critical point in the Old Silk Road and for the PRC's current Belt and Road Initiative.
3. Successive Chinese rulers have made dominating the region a priority, Designating the area Xin Jiang (Frontier Territory) in the 16th Century. Often they met opposition from the Uyghur population (who migrated from the steps and have been majority Muslim since the 11th Century).



Sources: Planet Labs (photos); Melissa Hanham, expert in analysis of satellite imagery at the Middlebury Institute of International Studies (structures)

Background: Repression in Xinjiang

Towards the end of 2018 reports began to emerge that China was building a widespread network of compounds in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region. It was being used to detain hundreds of thousands of – some estimates suggested over a million – members of the Muslim Uighur community.

The mass detention and persecution of the Uyghur population of Xinjiang is regarded as one of the prime examples of growing repression in China during Xi Jinping's tenure as head of the CCP.

It has also marked a significant evolution in China's methods of manipulating international opinion and the commencement of aggressive pushback on allegations of human rights abuses.

The CPP's information campaign has followed three phases ...

Phase 1: Denial

- Initial reports regarding Uyghur repression were met with no official comment by Beijing, and flat out denials by diplomats directly confronted by it (these diplomats are known as 'Wolf Warriors' for their aggressive style).
- At the same time, The United Front Work Department called on Chinese diaspora to support the CCP narratives on Xinjiang.
- This followed the traditional approach to allegations of human rights abuses by Beijing.



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Things to know about all the lies on Xinjiang: How have they come about?

2021/04/28

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Thursday, September 1, 2022

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Fact Check: Lies on Xinjiang-related issues versus the truth

Source: Xinhua | 2021-02-05 17:22:19 | Editor: huaxia

Phase 2: Obfuscation

- As the scale of oppression grew, including the development of large concentration camps revealed through satellite technology and testimonials of victims (as well as the more recent Xinjiang Police Files), it became harder to hide/deny.
- In response, China acknowledged the presence of these facilities but renamed them "reeducation centres" to counter extremism.
- They also invited journalists to view these camps and the larger Xinjiang region while deploying mass videos of alleged Uyghurs pushing back on accusations of repression that were inflated by bots (300 on twitter in January of 2021 alone), but these methods were often clumsy ...

Phase 2: Obfuscation

1. The videos often followed similar scripts.:

- The videos repeated unconvincing messages like: "We have so much freedom here, we are very, very free" repetitively, revealing their nature.
- An expression meaning "hogwash" to describe US Secretary of State's accusations appeared in over 600 videos.

2. "Official visits" appeared heavily scripted:

- One video aired on the BBC showed a crowd of Uyghurs singing along to "if you're happy and you know it, say Yes Sir!"
- One journalist likened footage of Uyghurs to "hostage videos" and the entire region feeling like a dystopian Disneyland.

3. The deployed bots lacked authenticity:

- Many only became active on the day the US officially labelled Xinjiang a genocide.
- Often they copy and pasted the exact same message.
- Some of the posts contained computer code; indicating automation.

Phase 2: Obfuscation



Phase 3: Increased Sophistication

As of 2021, China's methods of manipulating the narrative have become much more sophisticated ...

1. The bots became of a higher quality, occasionally criticising the CCP (though over issues of corruption that are often followed by praise of Xi Jinping's anti-corruption campaign) and use AI-generated faces rather than stolen profile pictures.
2. China began relying on foreign influencers to push their narratives, recognising that state media is less credible outside of China.
 - Between January 2020 and August 2021, 156 Chinese state-controlled accounts on US-based social media platforms have published at least 546 Facebook posts, Twitter posts and shared articles from CGTN, Global Times, Xinhua or China Daily websites that have amplified Xinjiang-related social media content from 13 influencer accounts.
 - As the Winter Olympics approached, it is reported that the CCP relied on these influencers even more.



Phase 3: Increased Sophistication

3. Whataboutism

- Wolf warrior diplomats have seized on issues such as the Black Lives Matter movement and the January 6 insurrection to accuse the USA of human rights abuses.
- Xinhua News ran an article on August 26th 2022 describing the US as the "factory and dealer of lies" while highlighting historical instances of genocide and forced labour in incarceration.

4. The PRC began to focus on messaging in the Global South:

- Chinese missions and diplomats in Chad, South Africa, the DRC, Rwanda, Liberia, and Lesotho among many others all posted statements about the purportedly great quality of life for Uyghurs in Xinjiang.
- China's envoy to Pretoria, published a column on the partially-Chinese-owned South African news site IOL that singled out current and former U.S. government officials for having "launched groundless accusations and attacks on China's policies in Xinjiang, spread numerous disinformation and misinformation."
- Xinhua in particular has significant penetration in Africa, giving it an advantage in establishing its narrative.

"In places that don't have access to a great deal of media, that repetition, those storylines have an ability to take hold."

- Former US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo

Impact

1. Multiple states in the Global South have expressed support for CCP policies in Xinjiang, often citing CCP propaganda:
 - a. In March 2021, the ambassadors to China from Burkina Faso, the Republic of Congo, and Sudan spoke in Beijing at an event entitled “Xinjiang in the Eyes of African Ambassadors to China.” They extolled Chinese authorities’ success in raising the standard of living in the region and dismissed Western criticism of China as driven by ulterior motives.
2. People on YouTube, TikTok and other platforms have cited the testimonials to argue that all is well in Xinjiang – and received hundreds of thousands of additional views.
3. Xinjiang has given the CCP an opportunity to adapt its tactics information operations, which are now being replicated to encourage anti-western sentiment in the Global South, obfuscate facts around the Ukraine War, and continue to denigrate international norms surrounding Human Rights.
4. This messaging and narrative will gain traction in areas disillusioned with democratic narratives.
5. Learning from the tactics utilised by the CCP regarding Xinjiang must be pursued alongside a reinvigoration of the democratic narrative; it must not just be what the facts are, but what they mean.

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