

A Xinjiang militia guards Xi's empire

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
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US President Donald Trump's administration on Friday last week announced it would impose sanctions on the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps, a vast paramilitary organization that is directly controlled by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and has been linked to human rights violations against Uighurs and other ethnic minorities in Xinjiang.

The sanctions follow US travel bans against other Xinjiang officials and the passage of the US Hong Kong Autonomy Act, which authorizes targeted sanctions against mainland Chinese and Hong Kong officials, in response to Beijing's imposition of national security legislation on the territory.

The sanctions against the corps would be implemented through the 2016 Global Magnitsky Act, which empowers US authorities to freeze the corps' assets in US jurisdictions and prohibit US individuals and companies from doing business with the organization and its members. Due to the extensive reach of the corps' business interests, these sanctions would significantly up the ante in the strategic standoff between the US and China.

Mao Zedong (毛泽东) created the corps in 1954, recruiting 175,000 former soldiers demobilized at the end of the Chinese Civil War, including members of the communist and Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) forces. The corps was initially a farming militia tasked with cultivating and developing sparsely populated regions of Xinjiang, such as the Taklamakan and Gurbantunggut deserts.

However, in addition to tilling the land, its members trained as a reserve military force to defend China's remote frontier region against the then-Soviet Union.

Over the years, the corps evolved from its farmer-settler origins into a multibillion dollar commercial enterprise. Primarily made up of Han Chinese, it has more than 3 million members, which is about 12 percent of Xinjiang's population.

According to reports from the Uyghur Human Rights Project, the corps runs a parallel government in the region, with its own courts and prison system, schools, hospitals and newspapers, and has played a central role in operating labor camps and prisons in the region

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for the past seven decades.

The corps produces nearly one-sixth of Xinjiang's GDP, including 40 percent of its cotton, one of the region's main cash crops. It is also one of the biggest makers of tomato ketchup. Its exports of the condiment comprised more than 17 percent of the global ketchup trade in 2009.

This means that everything from brand-name cotton clothing to cotton masks — and perhaps even the ketchup you dunk your fries into — might have been produced at a corps-administered camp in Xinjiang using ethnic minorities as forced labor.

Today, the corps is still very much a paramilitary outfit, organized into divisions and regiments and headed by Commander Peng Jiarui (彭加瑞). According to the CCP's own history of the corps, it “played crucial roles in fighting terrorism and maintaining stability” during ethnic riots in the region in 2009. By its very nature, the corps is also a Han Chinese “settler organization” that is central to the CCP's cultural and demographic genocide of Uighurs and other ethnic groups.

Xinjiang (新疆) means “new frontier” in Mandarin. The region, also known as East Turkistan, has been subjugated by various Chinese regimes, most recently by Mao's forces in 1949. As with Tibet, there exists an East Turkistan Government in exile.

During early imperial China, successive emperors relied on farming militias to protect the empire's exposed boundaries from barbarian tribes, just as the corps does today. Perhaps it is time to call it what it is and refer to China, not as a nation, but as an empire. Under the reign of “President for life” Xi Jinping (习近平), imperial China is alive and kicking.

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