



# **BBC World Service**

## **BBC Weekend**

### **Xinjiang - China's Image in the World**

**Robert Lawrence Kuhn**

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**BBC HOST: New research seen by the BBC this week based on government policy papers and propaganda reports online, suggests that China is forcing hundreds of thousands of Uyghurs and other minorities to pick cotton in its western Xinjiang region. The crop, which is difficult and exhausting to pick and which makes up a fifth of the world's total cotton supply, has led many human rights campaigners to accuse China of using forced labor on a far larger scale than had been previously thought. The Chinese government denies the claims, saying that a program to transfer more than two million people into jobs in Xinjiang factories and fields is part of a massive poverty alleviation campaign. But Adrian Zenz of the US-based "Victims of Communism Foundation", who discovered the documents, says his research has major implications for the global fashion industry.**

**ADRIAN ZENZ:** Now, for the first time, we have comprehensive evidence of a government-wide Xinjiang region-wide scheme of coercion for picking cotton, I think is an absolute game changer for global supply chains.

**BBC HOST:** Writing in The Guardian newspaper this week, the UK's chief rabbi, Ephraim Mirvis, stated, sadly, the weight of evidence of persecution of the weaker Muslim minority in China is overwhelming. He urged all the readers to speak out against what he called an unfathomable mass atrocity against weaker people.

**BBC HOST:** Joining us on the line now is Robert Kuhn, a US-based long term adviser to China's leaders and to multinational corporations. He received the China Reform Friendship Medal and is author of the book How China's Leaders Think.

**BBC HOST:** Mr Kuhn, welcome back to the program. To what extent do you think China can bear this level of international scrutiny and criticism without changing its policies?

**ROBERT LAWRENCE KUHN:** China will not be pressured by international condemnation. We've seen that in Hong Kong, we've seen it in many areas. So, the best way to understand the situation from China's point of view is to take a historical look. Religion in general has long been monitored and really controlled by the state in China. That's not something new under the communist regime since 1949. But it has continued that approach. And we see that with the so-called "patriotic religions" of the Catholics and Protestants, the crackdown against home churches and crosses on churches that have been removed.

**KUHN:** So all religion in China has this state control. And under the Communist Party, it has become even more

**accelerated, because whereas freedom of religion is guaranteed — we could discuss what that means — on an individual basis, when there is a sense that an organization is coming together that's different than the Communist Party, the Party will react very strongly against this — and this is irrespective of whether the religion is Muslim or Christian or Buddhist or whatever. That is the principle.**

**KUHN: Now, let's go to the Uyghurs in particular. If we go back several years, whatever the causes were, there was some very severe violent atrocities that occurred in multiple places, multiple times. And if you talk to many Chinese people, they are supportive very strongly so [of measures to stop the violence] — intellectuals, people who may criticize the control of information in China, they are all supportive of these [anti-terrorism] policies of what China is doing — because the leadership thinks that all religion is, shall we say, archaic. And the best thing for the new generation will be to have education, learning, so they can participate.**

**KUHN: And indeed, the poverty alleviation campaign is something that's very significant to understand, to appreciate China. Xi Jinping, who many in the West will criticize for many different things, has said on multiple occasions that that alleviating poverty is his singularly most important area that he focuses on in terms of his energy and his time and his commitment, more than anything else.**

**BBC HOST: I think I get that you say that China is more or less impervious to criticism of its internal policy. It wouldn't be impervious to economic sanctions, would it? It's just that people don't dare take them.**

**KUHN: Well, if we look at the world, I think it was last year, 22 nations condemned China for its actions in Xinjiang at the UN. If you look at the nations, it was led by the UK, France,**

**Germany, the Scandinavian countries, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, the 22 — and almost immediately, 30 countries supported China and then soon thereafter, another 20. So it's about 50 — I think it may have been even higher since — and many of those, maybe half or more, were Muslim-majority countries, whereas the ones that condemned China, the 22 countries, none of them were Muslim-majority. Now we can figure out why that motivation is.**

**BBC HOST: Yes, it's quite a simple answer. It's economics.**

**KUHN: Yeah, it's economics in both directions. And so those countries are supporting China because of their own perceived self-interest. And to be fair, many of those countries themselves have suffered from radical Islam. So in terms of the current governments.**

**BBC HOST: China will work quite hard to demonize its critics abroad. It's not that it doesn't care that people are speaking out against Beijing, is it?**

**KUHN: Yeah, I think that's a fair comment. China has become very aggressive in the last few years. Before it wasn't; it was more sort of reactive and passive and just not making any waves. But in the last several years, the so-called Wolf Warrior diplomats have been attacking back and have garnered great favor among the Chinese populace. Not everyone, of course, but many. And this new sort of aggressive — not to sit back and take it passively when it feels it's being attacked.**

**KUHN: Now, the result of that, among other things, has been a severe decrease in China's image in the world. In the last couple of years, in general, in Western countries, the favorability of China, the indexes they use, has dropped 15, 20 percent in many countries, such that in the U.S. and other**

places, the unfavourability rating of China now is in the 70s percentage, whereas historically it was in the 40s. So the impact of what China is doing is definitely in Western countries has been very negative.

**KUHN:** But frankly, in other areas of the world — Africa, parts of Asia, South Asia, Pakistan — it has been very positive. And so, you know, we're dealing with a complicated world. China wants its image to be good, but it judges that its internal political stability and organization is by far the most important thing. We're also heading towards a critical Party Congress in 2022, less than two years from now, the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party, which by all measures, Xi Jinping will get a third term as Party leader, which is unprecedented in the modern era since Mao Zedong and since the beginning of reform.

**KUHN:** And so in order for this to happen smoothly, which seems to be the plan, internal stability in China and a robust nationalism is an important kind of structural situation that they want to have prior to that event.

So the attitude of the domestic populace and how they feel is far more important by an order of magnitude or maybe two versus international feelings, especially those from the West. Following 2022....

**BBC HOST:** I have to end it there because I want to involve our guests as well on the subject for now. Thank you very much, Robert Lawrence Kuhn, who's a long term advisor to multinational corporations and to Chinese leaders.

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/w172x7d6jk5ly3y>  
Starts around 30:30 (only 30 days)