

# FORCED LABOR IN THE UYGHUR REGION: WHY IS THIS HAPPENING?

Issue Brief 2  
April 2023

## Introduction

The Peoples' Republic of China (PRC) has created an expansive system of unprecedented state control over the 13 million Uyghurs, Kazakhs, and other minoritized ethnic and religious groups of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (Uyghur Region or the XUAR). As described in the first Sheffield Hallam brief in this series ("[Forced Labor in the Uyghur Region: The Evidence](#)"), the PRC government has embarked upon a program designed to erase Uyghur livelihoods, behaviors, and beliefs. One of the major mechanisms of repression unique to the Uyghur Region is the PRC's systematic state-sponsored program of forced labor.

As the Chinese government works to make the repressive apparatus of the state less visible (by removing walls around camps, fencing around shopping centers, cameras, etc.), forced labor increasingly becomes the fulcrum through which the government maintains control over the minoritized populations in the region and continues its genocidal practices. **Forced labor in the Uyghur Region facilitates the forcible migration of people, the separation of families, mass surveillance, land expropriation, cultural erasure, militarized discipline, and religious persecution.**

Many people ask why the PRC government has developed such a problematic and potentially expensive program to expand manufacturing and compel people to work in the Uyghur Region – and why at this particular moment and in this particular place. This brief discusses four inter-related reasons for the development of state-sponsored forced labor programs in the Uyghur Region.

*The second installment in a series of briefs about forced labor in the Uyghur Region, this brief explores the reasons state-sponsored forced labor is so pervasive in the Uyghur Region today.*

## Key Points

An enormous and multi-faceted system of forced labor exists in the Uyghur Region for several interrelated reasons:

- **Control:** The PRC government is anxious about its authority in the region, and forced labor is a way of controlling the population.
- **Racism:** People across China harbor a virulent racism against the Uyghur and other minoritized people of the region that relies on a notion that the people are lazy, backward, and radicalized, and thus need to be transformed through labor.
- **Ideology:** The PRC government does not accept Uyghur traditional forms of work and farming as legitimate and seeks to “develop” the region by forcing them all to work in factories.
- **Cost:** With wages rising for workers across China, low or unpaid Uyghur workers provide legions of laborers to fill the country's labor gap.

There are other contributing factors in the growth of manufacturing in the region that are not sufficient explanations for forced labor but are relevant to the issue. The Uyghur Region's geographic proximity to Europe and other markets makes it a powerful hub for manufacturing and the exploitation of its natural resources brings production costs down.

## Why Is This Happening?

### CONTROL

**Compulsory labor is one method the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) deploys to neutralize threats – perceived or real – to its authority.**

*Uyghur and other minoritized people are seen as critical threats to China's political stability, the maintenance of the country's borders, and the absolute authority of the CCP.*

In spite of its economic and political power globally, the Chinese party-state is extremely sensitive to perceived threats to the CCP's monopoly on power domestically. The CCP's concern over the stability and integrity of its borders is heightened in the Uyghur Region, where the indigenous peoples are ethnically, linguistically, culturally, and religiously distinct from the majority Han population of China, are resistant to the CCP's efforts to assimilate their cultures, and have a history of existing as independent states. Uyghur and other minoritized people are seen as [critical threats](#) to China's political stability, the maintenance of the country's borders, and the absolute authority of the CCP. Since 2014, the Chinese government has classified practically the entire population of the Uyghur Region as influenced by the [“three evils”](#) of separatism, terrorism, and radicalism. The PRC's complex system of state-sponsored forced labor in the Uyghur Region is designed to ensure that Uyghurs and other minoritized citizens are subjected to [military-style discipline and trained to be docile, obedient workers](#), and thereby unable to pose a serious threat to the CCP. Victims of these forced labor schemes do not have the autonomy to resist the government or organize opposition, as they work under [constant surveillance](#) and can be interned or imprisoned for [expressing grievances at work](#). Furthermore, state labor programs compel people to [assimilate into Han-defined Chinese culture](#) by speaking Mandarin, embracing Xi Jinping thought, adopting Han cultural norms

and ideologies, forgoing their religion, and (often) moving away from their tightly-knit hometowns into large cities. This serves to alienate minoritized individuals from their culture, religion, families, and community, in a deliberate attempt to undermine political unity in the region and to preserve the CCP's power there.

### RACISM

**Widespread racist and Islamophobic beliefs encourage the government to engage in the “transformation” of Uyghurs through labor.**

Many people in China – including corporate executives – hold the racist and Islamophobic belief that Uyghurs are [less productive](#) than Han people, that they're [slow and lazy](#), and that their “radical” interpretation of [Islamic faith](#) has purportedly made them [uninterested in work and desirous of poverty](#). As noted above, there is also the widespread perception that Uyghurs are inherently drawn to terrorism. Many companies [discriminate against Uyghurs](#) due to these biases. Of course, none of these biases against Uyghurs are true, and, in fact, the majority of the people who are transferred for work are fully employed professionals, business people, farmers, craftspeople, etc. Nonetheless, central and regional government agencies have justified the use of compulsory [vocational training and labor](#) by claiming that they serve to [“transform”](#) Uyghurs and other minoritized citizens into disciplined, “civilized” factory workers, and from an attitude of [“I must work”](#) to [“I want to work.”](#) This program serves similar purposes as the country's [“re-education through labor”](#) program, which the PRC committed to ending in 2013. The widespread de-humanization of Uyghurs is an official justification for compelling them to work; in turn, forcing Uyghur people to work is designed to speed up the process of erasing Uyghur culture, practices, and beliefs.

*Many people in China hold the racist and Islamophobic belief that Uyghurs are less productive, slow, and lazy, and must be transformed through labor.*

## IDEOLOGY

**The government seeks to transform the livelihoods of the Uyghur population to conform to “Socialism with Chinese Characteristics in the New Era.”**

*In the XUAR, the government deliberately pursues this goal without regard for the wishes of the people whose landscapes, lives, and social structures the government seeks to transform wholesale, all within the unique environment of mass detention.*

Central to Socialism with Chinese Characteristics is the integral connection between “modernization” and industrialization through [urban development](#) and [labor programs for disfavoured populations](#). Under this rubric, the PRC central government has explicitly called for [advancing industrialization](#). The Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps has increasingly been deployed to [transform the region’s economy from agricultural to industrial](#), which is intended to result in increased inter-ethnic “[stability](#)” by making Uyghur workers dependent on Han employers. The CCP’s discourse continues to romanticize industrial labor as the route to “development.” For the Chinese government, the ideal form of labor is factory work. Until the last few years, [only a small percentage](#) of rural Uyghurs were employed in factory work. In the Uyghur Region, the government now gives minoritized citizens no choice as to whether they will be “[transformed](#)” into factory workers. Government agents achieve this transformation by coercing farmers with threats of internment rather than through incentives. Uyghurs sometimes [try to avoid these programs](#), but with the advent of the internment camp system and mass imprisonment, refusal of a government program has effectively been eliminated. Shifting the population from small-scale farming to factory work is a goal the government promotes [for the entire country](#). In the XUAR, however, the government deliberately pursues this goal

without regard for the wishes of the people whose landscapes, lives, and social structures the government seeks to transform wholesale, all within the unique environment of mass detention.

## COST

**Compelling people to work in the Uyghur Region addresses the labor crisis in other parts of China.**

As the [price of labor has risen significantly throughout China](#), the use of the underpaid/unpaid labor in the Uyghur Region serves as a way to keep Chinese manufacturing competitive. [Internment camp victims](#) and [prisoners](#) toil in factories making products for international markets, reducing some companies’ low-skilled labor costs to practically nothing. Outside of the camps and prisons, companies do seem to pay transferred laborers in the Uyghur Region (it is the inability to refuse the placement that makes it forced labor), though reports indicate that wages are [reduced](#) to [little or nothing](#) as workers are expected to pay the company for mandatory housing, transportation, and other fees. Even when they are compensated, pay rates for minoritized citizens of the Uyghur Region are much lower than in the rest of China. For instance, while the [pay rate for a cotton loom operator](#) in Jiangsu province can be as much as CNY 12,000 per month, the [same position](#) in the Uyghur Region can pay CNY 2,200 per month (and only 4,500 for people promoted to management). This lower cost labor is extremely attractive to companies, and the savings are multiplied in the Uyghur Region where the government

*This lower cost labor is extremely attractive to companies, and the savings are multiplied in the Uyghur Region where the government provides compulsory vocational and language training programs, transport, and non-stop surveillance/security for transferred laborers.*

provides compulsory vocational and language training programs, transport, and non-stop surveillance/security for transferred laborers. Essentially, the mobilization of indigenous populations as factory workers in the Uyghur Region responds directly to the country's need for a new source of cheap labor domestically.

## Other Factors That Make the Uyghur Region Important to the PRC's Ambitions

When asked to explain why the PRC government is repressing minoritized citizens and deploying a forced labor regime in the Uyghur Region, commentators often rely on economic justifications that mistake context for explanation. They suggest that the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) explains forced labor in the Uyghur Region, even though the BRI is central to the country's ambitions in other regions, where forced labor is not institutionalized. Others suggest that the availability of the region's natural resources are a reason for forced labor, even though the mining and processing of these resources do not require compulsory labor elsewhere in the country. These theories are not sufficient for explaining how forced labor has emerged as a system in the Uyghur Region.

*The Belt and Road Initiative is not a sufficient explanation for the emergence of systemic forced labor in the Uyghur Region.*

Nonetheless, it is worth noting that geography and the exploitation of the resources and environment of the Uyghur Region are indeed critical to the PRC's ambitions to become the premier global economic power and the center of global trade. Understanding those aspects of the PRC's ambitions in the region lends context to the other factors that account for the use of forced labor in the region.

## GEOGRAPHY

The Uyghur region is [vital to the trade interests](#) of China and neighboring countries.

The region is bordered by eight different countries (Mongolia, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India) and is the Western-most region of China. The PRC's "[Belt and Road Initiative](#)" (BRI) economically and physically links Asia with Europe and Africa through railroads, shipping, and ground transport in a metaphorical modern Silk Road – with the Uyghur Region as a hub. The [Chongqing-Xinjiang-Europe](#) rail line links manufacturers in the interior of China to Germany through the XUAR, and it also increases the value of manufacturing closer to China's western border. Though the transport costs from the XUAR had rendered manufacturing for international markets untenable in previous decades, manufacturing in the Uyghur Region is now be a cost saving mechanism. Of course, expansion this massive requires legions of new laborers.

## EXPLOITATION (OF RESOURCES AND ENVIRONMENT).

The Uyghur region is relatively [rich in natural resources and raw materials](#).

The region is home to 40% of China's coal reserves, 34% of its natural gas, and 30% of its oil. Companies mine critical minerals in the region, and also process local and imported minerals into the steel, aluminum, alloys, polysilicon, and other materials necessary for a wide range of industries, including the [solar](#) and [automotive](#) sectors. Because much of this energy-intensive processing is conducted using coal as the energy source, industry in the region has an extraordinarily high carbon footprint. Furthermore, much of the production is extremely hazardous for both workers and the environment. Companies are allowed to use [processing](#) and [manufacturing](#) methods in the Uyghur Region that are largely outlawed in other parts of China and the world because of their extraordinarily detrimental environmental effects. The result has been [increased blood lead levels](#) around battery plants, [mercury released into the air](#) near PVC plants, and extremely hazardous working conditions at [smelters](#) and [mines](#). The availability of resources and the regulatory permissiveness of the government is a powerful incentive that has rapidly increased manufacturing in the region and has consequently increased the need for low-skilled workers.



## Conclusion

Driven by the convenient geograph position and exploitable natural resources of the Uyghur Region, the PRC government has turned its mind to the distant and largely overlooked region as a new frontier for its global ambitions. In the last ten years, the government has created a program of [incentives](#) and [subsidies](#) to encourage companies to farm, mine, or manufacture in the Uyghur Region to advance towards its ambitions of being the solitary global economic superpower and to advance its Belt and Road Initiative.

This increased industry requires a significant labor force. In response, XUAR regional and local governments have ordered that every person able to work be [required and mobilized to do so](#). The government has created a highly organized, region-wide program that monitors every single citizen of the region, assigns them a point value, and places them into work as the state deems fit. No one is allowed to refuse these programs.

But even rapid industrial growth does not require state-sponsored forced labor to power it. [Some commentators](#) have relied on the BRI as explanation for the oppression in the Uyghur Region, but this is insufficient. It is the pernicious undercurrent of political anxiety, racism, Islamophobia, and labor crisis concerns across China that explains the development of an ethnic- and region-specific regime of pervasive oppression that uses work as a mechanism for control, assimilation, and surveillance.

Essentially, **the people and the lands of the Uyghur Region are treated as disposable**, and it is in this unjust and unregulated environment that forced labor thrives.

*It is the pernicious undercurrent of political anxiety, racism, Islamophobia, and the labor crisis across China that explains the development of an ethnic- and region-specific regime of pervasive oppression that uses work as a mechanism for control, assimilation, and surveillance.*

### OTHER USEFUL RESOURCES IN THIS SERIES

Sheffield Hallam University's Helena Kennedy Centre for International Justice has produced a series of evidence briefs designed to assist stakeholders in addressing Uyghur forced labor. Briefs in this series cover the context of forced labor in the region, products made with Uyghur forced labor, common concerns about addressing the issue, and various guidance for businesses, journalists, governments, affected community members, advocates, consumers, and others seeking to address the issue. Readers who want to learn more should [visit our website](#).