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Management of Ethnic Minorities in China and Türkiye: A Comparative Study of Uyghur and Kurdish Issues Since 1991

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Abstract
In this paper, we undertake a comparative case study of state policies toward ethnic minorities in the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Republic of Türkiye, focusing on China's Uyghur population and Türkiye's Kurdish population since 1991. We analyze the evolution of each country's minority-management strategies, the effects on minority communities, and the interplay of international factors, especially China's influence on Türkiye. We employ a constructivist view of point to examine how nationalism and identity shape policy, and note the securitization of ethnic dissent by both states. Our findings show that both China and Turkey pursued assimilationist, security-oriented strategies: China's "Strike Hard" counterterrorism campaigns and mass re-education of Uyghurs mirror Turkey's militarized response to Kurdish political demands. However, their external influences diverge; Türkiye's shift toward China in the 2010s led Ankara to less support for Uyghur activism, illustrating Beijing's leverage. We also find that in both cases, human rights concerns and diaspora activism persist. Overall, the paper advances understanding of how the spread of authoritarian norms shapes ethnic policies, indicating that China's influence goes beyond economics to affect the political and ideological dimensions of its Middle Eastern partners.

Keywords: China, Turkey, Minority, Uyghurs, Kurds, Assimilation, Securitization

1. Introduction

The management of ethnic minorities is a continuing challenge for nation-states, and comparing cases like China and Türkiye offers insights into how different regimes handle ethnic diversity under similar security pressures. Both China and Türkiye face large non-titular populations with distinct identities (Uyghurs and Kurds, respectively) and histories of resistance. Studying them side by side illuminates how the majority of nationalism and state security priorities shape policy outcomes. This comparison is timely given China's rising global influence and Türkiye's evolving foreign policy. In recent years, Ankara's growing economic ties with Beijing have coincided with a marked shift in Türkiye's stance on Uyghur rights (Sandal, 2023; Akyol, 2022). Understanding these dynamics has implications for international human rights advocacy and regional stability.

2. Background on Uyghurs and Kurds

The Uyghurs are a Turkic-speaking, predominantly Muslim people native to China's Xinjiang Region in northwestern China. Historical migrations and the Soviet collapse have made Xinjiang geopolitically sensitive to Beijing (Shichor, 2009). The Kurds are a distinct Indo-European ethnic group mainly inhabiting southeastern Türkiye, northeastern Syria, northern Iraq, and western Iran. In Turkey, an estimated 15–20% of the population is ethnically Kurdish (HRW, 1999). Both groups have sought varying degrees of cultural autonomy or political recognition. The Uyghurs once briefly established independent East Turkestan republics (1930s), and many fled to Turkey in the 1950s. Erdoğan's predecessors offered asylum (Akyol, 2022). Kurds, by contrast, have long pressed for recognition of their language and political rights within Türkiye, and some (like the PKK) turned to armed insurgency (HRW, 1999).

3. Research Objectives and Questions

This study aims to answer the following questions:
1) How have China and Türkiye managed their respective ethnic minorities since 1991?
2) What similarities and differences exist in their approaches, and what role does national identity play?
3) How has China influenced Türkiye's ethnic policy, particularly regarding Uyghur issues?
4) What are the effects of these policies on Uyghur and Kurdish societies and diasporas?
By addressing these questions through a comparative lens, we seek to identify both general principles of ethnic policy and context-specific dynamics. Our methodology is a qualitative comparative case study drawing on secondary sources (academic articles mostly, human rights reports, official documents). We employ constructivist theory to interpret how nationalist ideologies shape policy, and we note securitization theory's relevance in understanding the framing of ethnic groups as security threats.

4. Genesis and Early History

4.1. Pre-1991 Ethnic Policies in China

Since the founding of the PRC in 1949, China has officially recognized 55 non-Han nationalities and promised regional autonomy under its socialist nationality policy. In practice, however, policies oscillated between accommodation and assimilation. The early Mao era (1950s) granted some cultural and language rights to minorities, even establishing the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in 1955. But during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) and other campaigns, minority cultures suffered harsh repression (Red Guards destroyed religious sites, etc.). After 1978, China again promoted minority development and bilingual education. Yet at the same time, Beijing maintained strict controls over minority self-expression. Maurer-Fazio and Hasmath (2015) note that China's official fixed ethnic identification system was a pragmatic state invention to manage diversity. Unlike Western countries that allow self-identification, China insists on officially classifying every citizen into one of 56 groups. In Xinjiang, this meant Uyghurs were legally defined as a distinct nationality, but subject to assimilationist pressures. Throughout the 1980s, China's public stance was one of official multiculturalism, but covertly it pursued assimilation. Dwyer (2005) observes that "official (overt) cultural policy is egalitarian and accommodationist. But its unofficial (covert) policy, since the 1980s, has focused on assimilating Xinjiang's major minorities, particularly the Uyghurs, to the dominant Chinese culture. In sum, pre-1991 China mixed assurances of autonomy with gradual encroachment on Uyghur language, religion, and education, laying a complex legacy for later policies.

4.2. Pre-1991 Ethnic Policies in Turkey

The Republic of Türkiye (founded 1923) pursued a staunchly unitary Türkiye nationalism, effectively treating Kurds as "Mountain Turks" and banning expressions of Kurdish identity. The 1924 and 1961 constitutions forbade non-Turkish names or languages in public life. Until 1991, Turkey's policy was assimilationist: laws explicitly banned the Kurdish language and any organization claiming Kurdish distinctiveness (HRW, 1999). For example,

Law 2932 (1983) criminalized all non-Turkish communication without naming Kurdish explicitly (HRW). Kurds who pressed for cultural rights were labeled traitors (HRW). The state occasionally made limited concessions, such as allowing the Kurdish New Year (Newroz) as a public festival, but heavy-handed enforcement nullified such gestures (New Year celebrations were often banned by police (HRW). Security forces conducted mass operations in the southeast; villages were evacuated or destroyed to root out insurgents (the village guard system and forced displacements during the 1990s were pervasive (HRW). By the late 1980s, Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) guerrillas had launched an insurgency, to which Ankara responded with martial law and extraordinary counterterrorism measures. The result was deep mistrust: as HRW reports, "the denial of cultural and political rights has generated a long-standing sense of grievance" among Kurds, fueling the very violence the state aimed to suppress. In summary, pre-1991 Turkey's ethnic policy toward Kurds was rigidly assimilationist and repressive, in marked contrast to its treatment of recognized minorities (Greeks, Armenians, Jews) under the Treaty of Lausanne.

4.3. Uyghur-State Relations in China Since 1991: A Historical and Political Overview

The Uyghurs are a Turkic, Muslim people traditionally inhabiting Xinjiang (literally "New Frontier"), a strategically vital region along the Silk Road. In the early 20th century, Xinjiang saw intermittent Uyghur-led autonomy movements (the First East Turkestan Republic, 1933–1934), but Chinese Nationalist forces always regained control. After 1949, Mao's government initially extended minority rights to Uyghurs under a Soviet-inspired model of autonomous regions. However, Uyghur identity also overlaps with pan-Turkic sentiment and Islam, making it a potential rallying point. During the Cold War, Türkiye, sharing a Turkic heritage, expressed solidarity with Uyghurs, as many fled Chinese rule. In 1952, Turkey accepted thousands of Uyghur refugees (Akyol, 2022). Yet between 1954 and 1971, when Ankara first recognized the PRC diplomatically, Turkey was officially silent on Xinjiang issues under pressure. Only after the 1970s, with China's opening and the Soviet collapse, did Uyghur activism resurge.

4.4. Kurdish-State Relations in Turkey Since 1991: A Historical and Political Overview

Kurds have inhabited southeastern Anatolia for centuries, but the modern Kurdish question emerged after World War I, when new nation-states (Türkiye, Iraq, Syria, Iran) denied them a unified homeland. In Türkiye, Kurd-populated provinces saw state-led Turkification: schools and administration were in Turkish only. From the 1920s on, Kurdish revolts (1925 Sheikh Said, 1937 Dersim) were brutally suppressed. Through the 20th century, Kurdish intellectuals and political activists campaigned for recognition; some pursued armed struggle, but rarely gained mainstream acceptance. The rise of the PKK in the late 1970s introduced a violent phase, provoking increasingly severe Turkish crackdowns. By 1991 (the end of the Cold War), around one million Kurds had migrated from rural southeast to western cities or abroad, setting the stage for a powerful Kurdish diaspora in Europe.

4.5. Research Gaps and Future Directions

Economic relations, infrastructural investments under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and China's strategic interest in natural resources are the main topics of the literature now available on China's participation in the Middle East. Exploring how China's domestic governance models—specifically, its strategies for managing ethnic minorities—affect international norms and practices, particularly among its strategic partners like Turkey, is conspicuously lacking. The majority of studies approach China's foreign policy stance in the Middle East and its domestic issues (such as the persecution of Uyghurs in Xinjiang) as distinct fields. This mismatch ignores the potential for diplomatic and economic alliances to legitimize or spread authoritarian governing paradigms internationally, particularly securitization and assimilationist programs. By arguing that China's influence in the Middle East is both economic and ideological, our study marks a significant turning point. China's approach to domestic stability, especially regarding ethnic minorities, is gradually influencing the strategic and normative behaviors of its allies as it deepens relationships with countries like Turkey. Türkiye's evolving stance on the Uyghur issue and its securitized Kurdish policy suggest a convergence with China's minority management

approach. This alignment is driven by both internal and external forces, as well as strategic cooperation with Beijing.

In this regard, our study adds to three neglected areas.

- Comparative Minority Management. Although China and Türkiye have been thoroughly examined for their respective domestic treatment of Uyghurs and Kurds, few studies have systematically compared these strategies after 1991, particularly when viewed through the prisms of cultural violence and securitization theory.
- The understudied phenomenon of authoritarian norm diffusion is examined in this paper, which shows how China's internal policies—such as surveillance, reeducation, and securitized ethnic identity may inspire or have an impact on comparable policies in partner nations, Diaspora politics, and transnational repression.
- Few studies have examined the effects of China-Türkiye bilateral ties on expatriate safety, activism, and political clout in host nations, despite the increased activity among Uyghur and Kurdish diasporas.

4.6. Prospective Research Paths

1. Scholars should look beyond China and Türkiye to investigate how other governments deal with disruptive minority populations, especially those that practice surveillance-led governance or have close relations to Beijing.
2. Quantitative Study of Policy Diffusion: Upcoming studies could map the connection between exposure to Chinese political, economic, and technological influence and modifications in minority policies across the Global South.
3. Diaspora-State Relations: In the age of worldwide authoritarianism, it is worthwhile to look into how diaspora communities handle double repression, which is when both host and home regimes exert pressure or monitor them.
4. Effect of International Norms: Studies should examine whether China's growing assertiveness on the global stage is altering or compromising international human rights norms, particularly concerning cultural rights and state sovereignty over minority affairs.

5.. Ethnic Policies Since 1991

5.1. China's Uyghur Policies: Key Policies and Strategies

After 1991, Beijing's approach to Xinjiang became increasingly security-driven. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the rise of global Islamism prompted China to view Uyghur activism through an international lens (Shichor, 2009). The CCP implemented three overlapping campaigns: "Strike Hard" against separatism, terrorism, and religious extremism. In 1996-1999, Beijing initiated its "Go West" development program to economically integrate Xinjiang. The 9/11 attacks further framed Uyghur separatism as a terrorism issue, leading China to label the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) as a terrorist group. Since the mid-1990s, the government has **sinicized** education and culture: Mandarin was made the primary language in schools, and Uyghur-medium classes were sharply reduced (Dwyer, 2005). In the 2000s, new laws targeted "illegal religious activities" (e.g., banning the wearing of beards, veils outside mosques). Security presence was massively increased: checkpoints, surveillance cameras, and neural networks track Uyghur movements. In 2008, before Beijing's Olympic Games, Xinjiang saw a crackdown after ethnic riots, tightening media censorship. The decisive turning point came post-2014: following a terror attack and the 2016 second Istanbul airport attack (somehow blamed on Uyghur militants), Xi Jinping personally prioritized Xinjiang stability. In 2017–2018, re-education camps began to detain an estimated 1–3 million Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims under the guise of "poverty alleviation" or "de-radicalization." The new Xinjiang Security Regulations gave police sweeping powers to detain and surveil. State propaganda lauds these measures as counterterrorism, while leaked internal directives (e.g., "Break Their Lineage, Break Their Roots") make clear the goal is cultural erasure. Throughout, the PRC has claimed an official policy of ethnic unity, but observers argue the effect is to systematically repress Uyghur identity (Human Rights Watch, 2021; Dwyer, 2005).

5.2. Impact on the Uyghur Community

The impact on Uyghurs has been severe and multifaceted. Culturally, the Uyghur language and religion have been marginalized: mosques have been demolished, Islamic practices banned outside state control (Human Rights Watch, 2021). Education in Mandarin is enforced, undermining Uyghur literacy and identity. Politically, Uyghurs have no meaningful local power: any expression of dissent is harshly punished. Socially, pervasive surveillance creates a climate of fear. Reports document family separations (parents detained, children sent to state boarding schools) and forced labor. Economically, while Xinjiang has benefited from infrastructure investment, many Uyghurs say they are excluded from decision-making and opportunities; a Western summary notes that **"**the Uyghur aim to be recognized as a distinct people remains unfulfilled**" (**U.S. Congress, 2019). Moreover, the re-education camps have had a chilling effect; activists and intellectuals fled abroad, human rights organizations say thousands have suffered torture and extrajudicial abuse (HRW). Internationally, the PRC's treatment of Uyghurs has triggered sanctions by Western governments (some label it "genocide"), though China strongly denies wrongdoing.

6. Turkey's Kurdish Policies

6.1. Key Policies and Strategies

Since 1991, Turkey's Kurdish policy has fluctuated between limited liberalization and hardline repression, largely depending on its political climate. The early 1990s marked a turning point: in April 1991, amid international pressure after the Gulf War, Türkiye repealed the law banning non-Turkish languages in broadcast and education (Human Rights Watch, 1999). Kurdish-language private broadcasting (satellite) and cultural associations became legal. However, constitutional constraints remained (education and formal broadcasting in Kurdish were still restricted (HRW). In 1993-1996, Turgut Özal's government offered limited reforms (broadcasts and private courses), but after his death, a resurgence of PKK violence led to a security-first approach. From 1996 to the early 2000s, tens of thousands of Kurds were forced from their villages, and the open use of Kurdish became prohibited (HRW). With the AKP government (from 2002), Turkey made cosmetic changes to improve EU accession prospects: a 2002 constitutional amendment recognized the existence of a "Kurdish problem," and by 2009, private Kurdish courses were permitted. In 2010, the AKP lifted bans on Kurdish names and broadcasts and allowed Kurdish language state TV and university lectures. Simultaneously, however, the AKP's anti-PKK campaign intensified in the southeast after 2007. By 2011-2015, a fragile ceasefire held, and Kurdish political parties (HDP/BDP) gained seats in parliament by framing their movement as democratic.

But from 2015 onward, a new crackdown took hold. Following the collapse of peace talks and the 2016 coup attempt, the government declared a state of emergency in Kurdish-majority provinces. Under emergency powers, it removed dozens of elected Kurdish mayors and replaced them with government trustees (HRW, 2017; O'Connor, 2017). Simultaneously, dozens of HDP leaders and MPs were arrested on terrorism charges for alleged PKK links. By early 2017, Human Rights Watch reported that **"**13 members of the pro-Kurdish democratic opposition" had been jailed and "the Turkish government has taken direct control of 82 municipalities in the Kurdish southeast**"**. In effect, the Turkish state dismantled much of the institutional Kurdish political movement. Security forces also cracked down on civilian resistance: pro-Kurdish newspaper offices were raided, and speaking about the Kurdish cause became risky even in the Turkish language (HRW, 1999; HRW, 2009). Thus, post-2015 Türkiye combined the suspension of Kurdish civil rights with an officially stated war on the PKK.

6.2. Impact on the Kurdish Community

The Kurdish community in Türkiye has felt the full force of these policies. Cultural life was both bolstered and then repressed: the lifting of some bans around 2010 allowed a brief renaissance of Kurdish music, media, and festivals, but after 2015, new restrictions reappeared. Politically, many Kurds are discouraged from peaceful dissent; those who do face criminal charges or police violence (O'Connor, 2017; HRW, 2017). The removal of local Kurdish leaders eroded community governance and fueled grievances. On the other hand, the years 2013–

2015 saw unprecedented Kurdish electoral success (the HDP won 13% in 2015), suggesting grassroots empowerment during the peace period. Economically, the southeast remained poorer than the national average, and military operations destroyed infrastructure and displaced civilians (especially in the 2016 siege of towns like Cizre). Socially, decades of conflict have left scars: thousands of Kurdish villages were depopulated in the 1990s, and Kurdish citizens have faced discrimination (e.g., in school curricula and media). In diaspora, Kurdish Turks have created vibrant communities across Europe, although these face pressure from Türkiye (e.g. lobbying for anti-PKK measures).

7. Theoretical Framework

Our comparative analysis is guided by theories of nationalism, securitization, and structural/cultural violence. We explicitly bring up these frameworks to explain why Türkiye and China adopted similar policies toward their Kurdish and Uyghur minorities. In particular, we draw on Copenhagen School securitization theory, which shows how political leaders frame minority claims as existential threats, and on Johan Galtung's theory of violence, which treats assimilation policies as forms of cultural violence or racism. We also note general theories of post-1991 ethnic nationalism. These theories were chosen because they capture the key processes in both cases: how a post–Cold War revival of identity triggered state fear, how elites converted that fear into security policy, and how underlying cultural bias enabled minority marginalization (Kanat, 2016).

7.1. Post–Soviet Nationalism and Identity Revival

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 unleashed a new wave of ethno-nationalist movements. Independent Turkic republics in Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, etc.) inspired suppressed groups, and Kurdish separatism gained ground after the 1991 Gulf War. For example, China's leadership feared that the independence of its Turkic neighbors would embolden Uyghur separatists, and the growing Uyghur diaspora cultural activity in new Central Asian states was seen as separatist (Kanat, 2016). Likewise, Türkiye grew uneasy after the United States helped Iraqi Kurds establish a semi-autonomous region in 1992. These developments sparked a revival of national consciousness among Kurds and Uyghurs. In short, a new nationalist context (the domino effect of post-1991 statehoods) set the stage, and Ankara and Beijing perceived a shared threat that their own Kurds and Uyghurs might seek similar autonomy. This context explains why both governments began viewing these minorities not merely as cultural groups, but as security challenges (Kanat, 2016).

7.2. Securitization of Minority Identities

We apply securitization theory from the Copenhagen School to show how Türkiye and China framed Kurdish and Uyghur identity as existential threats. Securitization theory holds that a state actor labels an issue as a security problem through a speech act. By declaring a minority's demands or existence as a danger, leaders can justify extraordinary measures beyond ordinary politics. In our cases, political elites in both countries did just that. In Türkiye, hardline voices during EU-accession debates openly securitized Kurds: for instance, advisor Erol Manisalı warned that EU-driven reforms (which would legitimize Kurdish rights) could "in 15 years, not even the Turkish Armed Forces would be able to lift a finger," implying a fatal weakening of state security. This demonstrates how Kurds were portrayed as a destabilizing force. In China, officials likewise adopted a war on terror frame in Xinjiang. After a 2013 attack in Beijing, the government launched a "people's war against terrorism" and explicitly linked it to Uyghur separatism (Grieger, 2014). Beijing's new policies aimed at "better assimilating Uyghurs into mainstream Chinese society" were justified by security rhetoric (Grieger). Both states thus moved minority affairs outside normal politics into the security domain, treating Kurds and Uyghurs as de facto enemies. This is precisely the Copenhagen School logic: an issue becomes a security issue only when elites label it as such. In sum, Türkiye and China used securitizing language (terrorism, separatism, threats to territorial integrity) to validate crackdowns on Kurds and Uyghurs, consistent with the literature.

7.3. Galtung's Framework: Cultural Violence and Assimilation

We interpret each state's assimilation policies through Johan Galtung's conflict theory, focusing on his concept of cultural violence. Galtung defines cultural violence as those cultural norms or ideologies that legitimize the other forms of violence (direct or structural) (Galtung, 1990). In his words, any aspect of culture (religion, language, education, ideology, etc.) that justifies oppression is "cultural violence. Put another way, when a dominant ideology is embedded in society's culture, it becomes a system of oppression or 'cultural violence'.

By this measure, state policies that impose the majority's culture on a minority, often called "cultural racism," are forms of cultural violence. For example, Türkiye long pursued assimilation of Kurds, from the 1920s until the end of the Cold War, Ankara even denied the existence of Kurds or their language. Public education and media enforced a singular Turkish identity. Similarly, in Xinjiang, Beijing has enforced assimilationist measures; for decades, it incentivized Han migration into Xinjiang and introduced Mandarin-only schooling at the expense of the Uyghur language. As one EU report notes, Xinjiang's education system has shifted to an increasingly monolingual, Mandarin-dominated model that gradually erodes Uyghur linguistic distinctiveness (Grieger, 2014). Under Galtung's lens, these policies are not benign; they constitute cultural violence because they normalize the majority's culture and justify suppressing minority identity. Indeed, critics warn that lasting stability cannot be achieved "through forcible assimilation or cultural destruction" of the Uyghurs (Grieger). Thus, according to Galtung, Türkiye's and China's practices of forced homogenization amount to structural/cultural violence, a "cultural racism" that legitimizes the marginalization of Kurds and Uyghurs.

In summary, our theoretical framework explicitly names and applies the chosen theories. We show that:

1- We chose to focus on the post-1991 era because the nationalist upsurge motivated both minorities' revival while the international system was unbalanced.
2- Each state securitized the minorities via Copenhagen School logic.
3- Each state's assimilation policies can be interpreted as Galtungian cultural violence or racism.
These lenses together provide a coherent basis for comparing Türkiye's and China's management of Kurds and Uyghurs as minorities.

7.4. Key Theoretical Lenses

Our analysis rests on

- securitization theory: the idea that states label Kurds/Uyghurs as existential threats (drawing on Buzan/Wæver).
- *Galtung's violence theory*: the idea that forced assimilation is "cultural violence" legitimized by the dominant ideology.
These frameworks, chosen for their relevance, underlie each step of our comparative reasoning.

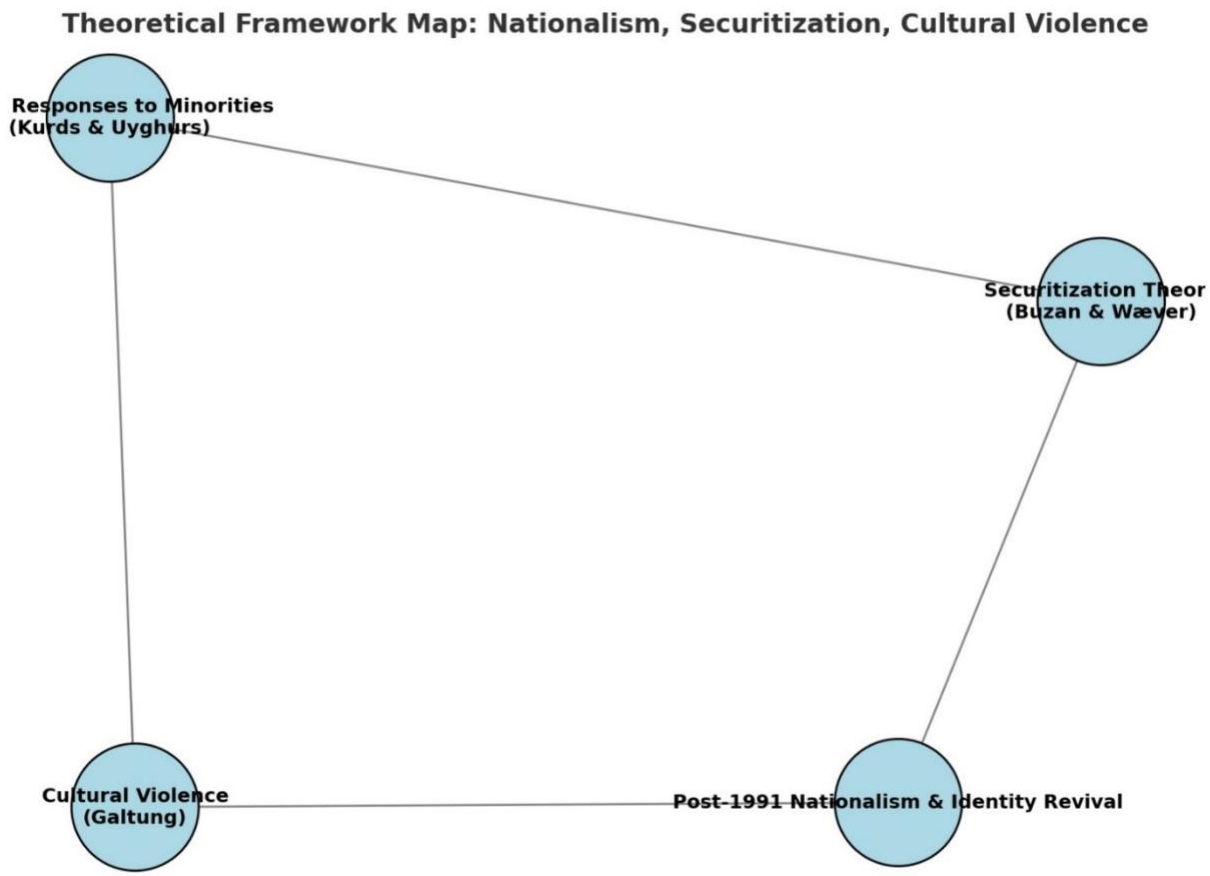

Figure 1: Theoretical Framework Map

This figure shows the analytical framework used in the study. The post-1991 revival of nationalism and minority identity provided the context for state responses in Türkiye and China. Through **securitization theory** (Buzan & Wæver), governments framed minority identities as existential threats, legitimizing extraordinary security measures. Through **Galtung's concept of cultural violence**, assimilation policies are interpreted as structural racism that normalizes majority dominance. Together, these lenses explain how Kurds and Uyghurs were reframed from cultural communities into perceived security challenges.

7.5. The Logic of Oneness: From Empire to Nation-State

Understanding the striking similarities in how China and Türkiye manage their ethnic minorities requires moving beyond the descriptive "what" of securitization to examine the deeper "why." Both states' approaches are rooted in their historical transitions from multiethnic empires to modern nation-states, a process that produced enduring anxieties about sovereignty, territorial integrity, and internal unity. These anxieties crystallized into political doctrines of oneness: the One China principle in China and the Turkish motto of "one nation, one flag, and one language." Although geographically distant and politically distinct, China and the Republic of Türkiye share a structural legacy; each emerged from imperial collapse with an urgent need to forge homogeneity out of diversity. This shared historical condition explains why both states continue to securitize their largest ethnic minorities. The Uyghurs and the Kurds, through discourses of national unity, territorial preservation, and anti-terrorism.

7.6. From Empire to Nation-State

The Qing and Ottoman Empires were both multiethnic, multi-religious political systems that governed diverse populations through flexible, hierarchical arrangements. The Qing's rule over Turkic Muslims in Xinjiang relied on indirect administration and cultural autonomy, while the Ottoman millet system permitted religious

communities to manage their own affairs under imperial oversight. However, the collapse of these empires under the pressure of nationalism and modern statehood transformed plural imperial structures into exclusionary national ones.

In China, the fall of the Qing in 1911 and the subsequent Republican and Communist revolutions replaced imperial pluralism with a new model of the nation as (*minzu*) a single people unified under the Chinese state (Leibold, 2013). Ethnic diversity was reframed not as a natural component of empire but as a potential threat to national unity. Similarly, the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire and the birth of the Turkish Republic in 1923 marked the replacement of imperial cosmopolitanism with a national identity centered on Turkishness (*Türklük*). Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's reforms sought to create a modern, secular, and linguistically unified citizenry, effectively marginalizing non-Turkish identities (Zürcher, 2017).

Both transformations produced a state ethos defined by defensive nationalism, a belief that internal pluralism could endanger the survival of the nation. The trauma of imperial disintegration fostered a persistent fear of territorial fragmentation, which continues to inform both states' policies toward minority regions. Xinjiang and southeastern Türkiye, where Uyghurs and Kurds constitute significant populations, are viewed not merely as homes of cultural minorities but as frontiers of national integrity.

7.7. The Ethos of Oneness

The modern Chinese and Turkish states sacralize unity through political doctrines that equate national survival with cultural and linguistic uniformity. The One China policy, officially codified in the 1950s, insists that all citizens belong to a single Chinese nation (*Zhonghua Minzu*), encompassing fifty-six recognized ethnic groups but subsuming their distinctiveness under Han cultural dominance (Hechter, 1975; Bulag, 2010). Similarly, the Turkish slogan "one nation, one flag, one language" encapsulates the Kemalist vision of indivisibility. Both states, though rhetorically inclusive, operate under what Michael Hechter (1975) termed "internal colonialism," where peripheral ethnic groups are incorporated into the nation-state on unequal terms, their autonomy curtailed in the name of modernization and unity.

This ethos of oneness frames diversity as a potential source of instability. In China, the Party-state portrays ethnic distinctiveness as a challenge to socialist harmony, while in Türkiye, ethnic particularism is often equated with separatism. Consequently, state legitimacy is tied to the maintenance of territorial and cultural homogeneity. This ideological structure explains why both states engage in assimilationist and securitizing policies toward minorities who assert distinct collective identities.

7.8. Why Securitization? The Role of Terrorism and Delegitimization

The securitization of Uyghurs and Kurds cannot be understood solely as a pragmatic response to security threats; it functions as a political instrument to delegitimize identity-based claims. Both states have formally classified minority political movements as terrorist organizations: the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Türkiye and the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) in China. These designations, whether or not empirically justified, serve a discursive purpose to transform political grievances into existential threats. As Buzan and Wæver's securitization theory suggests, once an issue is framed as a matter of security, extraordinary measures become legitimate (Buzan, Wæver, & de Wilde, 1998).

Labeling these movements as terrorist enables both governments to deny the existence of legitimate causes, demands, or rights of self-determination. The Kurdish movement's struggle for autonomy and the Uyghurs' calls for cultural or religious rights are recast as violence for its own sake. In this way, the discourse of terrorism delegitimizes political participation and justifies repressive state practices. For example, China's "Strike Hard Campaign Against Violent Terrorism" and Türkiye's post-2016 counterterrorism laws both blur the distinction between peaceful dissent and violent extremism, producing what scholars have called "security citizenship" (Hasmath & Ho, 2020), a conditional belonging based on political loyalty.

7.9. The Territorial Imperative

Beyond ideology, both states' minority policies are motivated by territorial imperatives. Xinjiang and southeastern Türkiye occupy geostrategic positions and possess significant natural and economic resources. Xinjiang is central to China's Belt and Road Initiative, serving as a gateway to Central Asia, while Türkiye's southeast borders volatile regions of Syria, Iraq, and Iran. Maintaining firm control over these territories is thus perceived as essential to national security and regional influence.

This material dimension reinforces the logic of oneness: territorial possession demands political assimilation. When the state's legitimacy depends on the unity of the homeland, ethnic pluralism becomes synonymous with vulnerability. Consequently, China's forced assimilation of Uyghurs through re-education programs and Türkiye's suppression of Kurdish political expression both emerge as means to secure not only loyalty but land. When a state "needs" territory, it faces three choices: assimilation, denial, or removal of the population that challenges its claim.

8. Comparative Analysis

8.1. Similarities and Differences in Minority Management

China and Türkiye exhibit both convergences and divergences in minority policy. Both states treat their Kurdish and Uyghur populations as national-security issues rather than ethnic groups with legitimate rights. Nationalist ideology in each country underpins this approach: the Chinese Communist Party stresses Han cultural unity, while Türkiye's secular-nationalist tradition emphasizes an indivisible Turkish identity. In practice, both governments have used militarized counterinsurgency as a key tool: China's Xinjiang Public Security Bureau resembles a police-state apparatus; Turkey's army and gendarmerie long dominated the Kurdish southeast (HRW, 1999). Both governments have also engaged in selective concessions. For example, in both Xinjiang and southeast Türkiye, authorities have established autonomous administrative structures (Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, Turkey's OHAL emergency region (Olağanüstü Hâl Bölge Valiliği, lit), albeit with limited real autonomy.

However, differences are stark as well. China has invested heavily in economic development in Xinjiang (e.g., High-Speed Rail, factories) as part of its strategy, whereas Türkiye's investments in the Kurdish southeast have been relatively meager, seeing the region primarily through a security lens until recently. Culturally, Turkey eventually permitted some Kurdish expression (private media, celebrations) as EU pressure mounted, whereas China has increasingly suppressed Uyghur language and culture despite initial constitutional promises. Another key difference is that Turkey is a democracy (with varying levels of freedom) and subject to some external pressure (EU, NATO allies), whereas China is an authoritarian state with fewer external constraints. This means Türkiye's Kurdish policy has oscillated with political cycles (liberalization under Özal, AKP reforms, then backsliding), while China's approach has become progressively more uniform and repressive since the 1990s (Maurer-Fazio & Hasmath, 2015).

8.2. Influence of Nationalism and Identity

Nationalist identity plays a central role in both cases. In Türkiye, the official ideology for much of the 20th century was Turkification; the state defined "Turkishness" in narrow ethnolinguistic terms. Any Kurdish assertion of being a distinct people was deemed illegal (HRW, 1999). Even today, the Turkish state often downplays Kurdish identity, favoring assimilation or forced integration. For instance, in 2012, the Turkish government famously defined Kurds as "one of the Turkish people" in its educational reforms. In China, national identity is constructed on civic-territorial lines (all citizens are Chinese), but with an assumption that minorities will adopt Han norms. Uyghur identity is often securitized as a potential separatist threat. Scholars note that China's ethnicity policy emphasizes loyalty to the socialist fatherland over ethnic distinctiveness (Dwyer, 2005). Both states thus exhibit forms of ethnonationalism, defining the nation in terms that privilege the majority culture. However, Türkiye's nationalism also has a civic component (at least historically in theory), whereas China's is tightly linked to

Communist Party control (with loyalty to the CCP being paramount). In short, nationalist ideology in both countries has justified limits on minority rights, but the content of that ideology (Atatürk's secular Turkishness vs. CCP-led pluralistic nationalism) differs.

8.3. Human Rights Considerations

From a human rights perspective, both countries' policies have raised concerns. International human rights organizations report widespread abuses of Uyghurs (arbitrary detention, torture, cultural erasure) that violate China's commitments under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights ICCPR and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women CEDAW. Similarly, Türkiye's long Kurdish conflict saw documented cases of extrajudicial killings, torture, enforced disappearances (HRW, 1999), and, more recently, politically motivated prosecutions of Kurds and journalists (HRW, 2017). Both governments justify their policies as anti-terrorism measures, a trend noted in comparative studies: dissent by an ethnic minority is labeled "terrorist," thus justifying otherwise repressive laws. Human rights frameworks (e.g., freedom of speech, assembly, and cultural rights) have been persistently curtailed. An important difference is that Türkiye, as a member of the Council of Europe, has at times been pressured by the European Court of Human Rights; China, not a party to such bodies, is less exposed to multilateral legal scrutiny. Nevertheless, NGOs and foreign governments continue to raise Uyghur and Kurdish rights as international issues. The comparative view highlights a pattern, even as some legal reforms might signal progress (like Turkey's 2009 Kurdish broadcasting law), the overriding securitized narrative leads to recurring human rights setbacks (Freedom House, 2022).

9. China's Influence on Türkiye's Ethnic Policy

9.1. Diplomatic and Economic Interactions

Over the past two decades, China and Türkiye have deepened diplomatic and economic ties. Türkiye joined China's Belt and Road Initiative in 2015 and received tens of billions in Chinese loans for infrastructure projects (e.g., the 3.6 $ billion Shanghai loan in 2019). High-level exchanges increased, Presidents Erdoğan and Xi have met frequently, and cooperation expanded to energy, technology, and defense (e.g., joint military exercises). This closer relationship has come amid Türkiye's frictions with the West, making China an attractive partner (Sandal, 2023). Diplomatically, Turkey has gradually aligned with China on sensitive issues: Ankara now opposes Western criticisms of Xinjiang and has even blocked some Uyghur-related motions at the UN Human Rights Council. In return, Türkiye secured Chinese support on its own issues (Beijing has been less outspoken on Kurdish demands when compared to Turkish requests). This evolving partnership creates a context for China to exert influence on Türkiye's handling of its Uyghur diaspora.

9.2. Evidence of China's Influence on Turkish Policies

There is compelling evidence that China has pressured Türkiye to rein in support for Uyghurs. Shichor (2009) chronicles how, by 1995, China used economic and military leverage to get Ankara to "eliminate any media reports targeting China" and curb Uyghur activism. Chinese state media openly warned Türkiye against "fueling the Xinjiang question" or helping Uyghur radicals. Subsequently, Türkiye indeed began to view Uyghur issues through a bilateral lens. In recent years, China's influence has become more pronounced. For example, Ankara signed an extradition treaty with Beijing in 2017 (ratified by China in 2020) that critics say could be used to hand over Uyghur refugees (Türkiye has not ratified it yet, amid concerns). Turkish officials have made statements assuring respect for China's security concerns. In 2017, Foreign Minister Çavuşoğlu declared Türkiye would consider "China's security as our own" and would stop media "targeting China". Domestic Turkish media, especially pro-government outlets, have run narratives labeling Uyghur human rights campaigns as foreign plots (e.g., claims of CIA involvement). Reports also indicate that Chinese intelligence even surveils Uyghurs in Turkey with tacit Turkish tolerance. In sum, China's economic carrots and political enticements have led Türkiye's government to moderate its previously vocal stance on Uyghurs (Akyol, 2022).

9.3. Turkey's Position on the Uyghur Issue

Türkiye's official position on the Uyghurs has shifted markedly over time. As Sandal (2023) notes, Erdoğan once thundered against China in 2009، he even called China's actions in Xinjiang "genocide" after unrest in Ürümqi. He welcomed Uyghur leaders in Ankara and aggressively condemned Beijing during that period. However, by the 2010s, Erdoğan toned down such rhetoric. During a 2019 visit to China, Turkish media reported Erdoğan praising Xinjiang's development, though the Turkish government later said his words were mistranslated. Currently, Türkiye's leadership treads carefully; it has made only cautious public statements about Uyghur human rights (e.g., a 2019 foreign ministry "expression of concern" and summoning the Chinese ambassador in 2021 when opposition politicians raised the Uyghur issue). These gestures occur amid growing domestic awareness and activism, partly driven by nationalist and Islamist opposition parties, but the ruling AKP remains committed to not alienating Beijing (Akyol, 2022; Freedom House, 2022). In effect, Turkey's official stance is now a careful balancing act that acknowledges Uyghur sensitivities enough to placate domestic opinion, but siding with China enough to preserve bilateral ties. As Akyol observes, today's Türkiye is reluctant to criticize China publicly on this matter, effectively "abandoning the Uyghurs" to avoid upsetting its powerful partner.

10. Effects on Ethnic Minority Populations

10.1. Social, Cultural, and Political Impacts on Uyghurs and Kurds

The long-term social and cultural impacts of these policies are profound for both groups. In Xinjiang, Uyghur culture is under existential threat, traditional religious education has been curtailed, and a new generation of Uyghur children often grow up in state-run boarding schools and orphanages with no family contact. Ethnoreligious markers (long beards, headscarves) have been stigmatized. According to Human Rights Watch, **"**as many as a million people**"** have been detained in camps, and millions more are subject to extreme surveillance. This pervasive repression has broken community ties and spread trauma. Conversely, Beijing touts poverty reduction among minorities, lifting rural Turkic families out of poverty, yet critics argue this comes at the price of erasing Uyghur identity (HRW, 2021).

Among Türkiye's Kurds, the cumulative impact of decades of conflict is equally significant. In rural areas, the village-guard system and forced displacements decimated traditional village life (HRW, 1999). In urban areas, cultural expression flourished somewhat during the lull of the peace process, Kurdish language media appeared, and local festivals revived. But since 2015, fears of arrests and stigmatization have mounted. Politically, many Kurds feel disenfranchised after witnessing their elected representatives arrested or deposed. Yet Kurdish political engagement remains high, as evidenced by strong electoral showings (HDP) and vibrant civil society organizations, albeit under pressure (O'Connor, 2017).

In both contexts, ethnic minority communities experience a tension between survival and resistance. Scholars note that the state's policies generate a strong sense of minority grievance, which can fuel further dissent. For example, Human Rights Watch observed in Türkiye that repressive measures "only serve to boost" support for insurgents. In China, numerous experts warn that heavy-handed assimilation could provoke backlash or deepen Uyghur alienation in the long run (Clarke, 2017). The political dimension is clear that neither group can freely advocate for its rights domestically, and both rely on diaspora networks to amplify their plight.

10.2. Diaspora and International Activism

Given domestic constraints, both Uyghurs and Kurds have turned to diaspora communities for support. Türkiye itself hosts one of the largest Uyghur diasporas, estimated at tens of thousands, second only to Kazakhstan among foreign Uyghur populations. For a time, Türkiye was a base for Uyghur exile groups (World Uyghur Congress affiliates) and human rights advocacy. Likewise, millions of Kurds live abroad (notably in Germany, France, and

the Netherlands), where they have established political organizations, media outlets, and cultural associations. These diasporas play a key role in lobbying foreign governments, raising awareness, and sustaining ethnic identity. For instance, the 2019 insurgent campaign by Turkish opposition parties (IYI and Saadet) on behalf of Uyghurs in China highlights how diaspora concerns can influence domestic politics (Akyol, 2022). Kurds in Europe have similarly lobbied the EU on EU-Türkiye relations and Kurdish rights.

However, recent trends show these diasporas are also subject to transnational pressures. As Freedom House documents, Türkiye has increasingly treated Uyghur expatriates as potential threats, warning them away from protests or even detaining some. Many Uyghur refugees in Türkiye report difficulties in obtaining permits and fear that China's extradition treaty could endanger them. Kurdish activists abroad face Turkish espionage or legal challenges as well. Despite these risks, diaspora activism continues. Diaspora networks have kept Uyghur and Kurdish issues on the international agenda. Western parliaments routinely debate Uyghur abuses, and Kurdish lobbying influenced EU-Turkey relations and US policy (e.g., US support for Syrian Kurds). In sum, while state policies constrain them, the Uyghur and Kurdish diasporas remain vital conduits for ethnic solidarity and international advocacy (Clarke, 2017).

11. Conclusion

This comparative study has examined how China and Türkiye manage the Uyghur and Kurdish minorities, respectively, and how China's rise has influenced Türkiye's posture on the Uyghur issue. We find that both countries have adopted assimilationist, securitized policies that prioritize state unity over minority rights. China's approach in Xinjiang has evolved from Soviet-style accommodation to harsh counterterrorism and cultural assimilation, culminating in mass detention of Uyghurs (HRW, 2021). Türkiye's Kurdish policy has oscillated from outright bans and armed conflict (1990s) to partial liberalization (2000s) and back to repression (post-2015). Both governments frame ethnic dissent as a threat and use legal and military tools to suppress it. We also find that Turkish nationalism and Chinese national security concerns play parallel roles in shaping policy; both leaders warn against "separatism, illustrating common dynamics of nation-building under stress.

Crucially, our analysis shows that China's growing leverage has led Türkiye to moderate its defense of Uyghurs. Economic ties and diplomatic alignment have produced tangible shifts. Türkiye signed an extradition treaty, stifled Uyghur activists, and now rarely criticizes Beijing (Akyol, 2022; Sandal, 2023). Türkiye's selective stance – voicing concern only when domestic pressures demand it- underscores China's influence. On the human side, the policies have inflicted pain on both minorities. Uyghurs face cultural destruction and surveillance; Kurds endure political disenfranchisement and the trauma of prolonged conflict (HRW, 2017). Both diasporas continue to fight for recognition, even as state repression follows them abroad (Freedom House, 2022).

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