



ASPI doubles down on Xinjiang ‘detention centre’ fakery

By Richard Bardon

29 Sept.—The McCarthyites at the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) and their US State Department paymasters must be running out of ideas for fresh horrors to attribute to China, and have instead revived the long since debunked accusations of a “cultural genocide” against the predominantly Muslim Uighur¹ people in the province of Xinjiang. Even more so than usual, however, their purported evidence is so comically flimsy and easily refuted that anyone who examines it objectively would only be led to doubt both the story it has been concocted to support, and the credibility of ASPI itself.

As regular readers of the *Australian Alert Service* will recall, ASPI styles itself an “independent, non-partisan think tank”, but in fact it is anything but.² Funded partly by an annual grant from the Department of Defence, it is otherwise sponsored by a Who’s Who of multinational weapons makers, including those involved in all of Australia’s current major defence procurement programs—which are themselves predicated upon the supposed need to be able to support a US-led war on China.³ ASPI also does research funded by specific grants from the UK, US and other allied governments. Its latest attack on China, dubbed the “Xinjiang Data Project” (XJDP), is an example of the latter, thus illustrating the blatant hypocrisy with which ASPI screams “foreign interference” at any person or institution remotely connected to China, while itself advancing imported geopolitical agendas inimical to Australia’s national interest.

Launched 24 September on its own dedicated website, ASPI’s XJDP—which it acknowledges was funded by China basher-in-chief Mike Pompeo’s US State Department—claims to “[fill] an important information gap by bringing together *rigorously vetted and empirical* policy-relevant research on the human rights situation facing Uyghurs and other [minorities] ... in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) in western China. It focuses on a core set of topics including mass internment camps, ... forced labour and supply chains, the ‘re-education’ campaign, deliberate cultural destruction and other human rights issues.” (Emphasis added.) Its main feature is an interactive map on which, it claims, “ASPI researchers have *identified and mapped over 380 sites in the detention network* across Xinjiang, counting only re-education camps, detention centres and prisons that were newly built or significantly expanded since 2017.” (Emphasis added.) Quite the definitive statement; yet in the accompanying report by project lead researcher Nathan Ruser, titled “Documenting Xinjiang’s detention system”, all certitude disappears in the very first sentence. What he and his colleagues have identified are in fact only “suspected” detention facilities, Ruser equivocates, in which “available evidence suggests that many extrajudicial detainees ... [have been] locked up”. And ASPI’s “*rigorously vetted and empirical*” evidence is nothing of the sort. Much of it consists of unverifiable “eyewitness accounts” and media reports sourced to US-based pseudo-NGOs like the pro-regime-change

Human Rights Watch, and to Adrian Zenz of the Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation—an evangelical Christian fanatic who has publicly stated he has a “mission from God” to overthrow the Chinese government. Zenz apparently originated the claim in 2018 that China had incarcerated one million Uighurs in concentration camps; but diplomats from many Muslim countries rejected his claims after visiting Xinjiang in 2019.⁴ Otherwise, ASPI has identified its suspected detention facilities mainly via analysis of satellite imagery, based on ludicrously broad criteria.

‘Assumption’ begins with an ass

Under the sub-heading “What were we looking for?”, Ruser states that “At their simplest, detention facilities are large, residential and highly securitised [*sic*] areas from which free movement is prevented by a combination of walls, watchtowers and barbedwire fencing”, while “Lower security facilities can look superficially similar to public facilities such as schools or hospitals.” And sure enough, it turns out that is exactly what Ruser et al. had actually found—along with shopping centres, factories, various government offices, and the odd housing complex.

For example, two supposed detention facilities in the city of Turpan “turn out to be Gaochang District Bureau for Veterans Affairs and Gaochang District Bureau for Business & Industry Informationisation [*sic*] respectively”, Chengxin Pan, a professor of international relations at Melbourne’s Deakin University, wrote 27 September on Twitter. “The smoking gun is that they both have external walls!” And so, he noted, do most Chinese government compounds and work units, schools, universities and gated communities. He also noted that another supposed detention facility in Kashgar is clearly marked on both Google Maps and its Chinese counterpart, Baidu Maps, as a conjoined high school and technical college. “I know anything lining up in a row (plus external walls) in China is suspect”, he continued dryly. “So it’s fair game to speculate, but speculation has to have some factual foundations and be aware that anyone with relevant language skill, curiosity and time can fact-check.” Many Chinese Twitter users were quick to point out a multitude of similar instances, and even that some locations marked on the XJDP map have no buildings at all.

Wrote Pan, “Maybe all the other facilities in the report are real ... but the easily identified misinformation from the small samples [I looked at] doesn’t inspire confidence in the rigour of the APSI report. Yet, it has [been] and will get widely covered, cited as credible sources and blended into scholarly texts. New theses, papers and books on the topic will be written, a process of knowledge production, dare I say, not dissimilar to money-laundering: disinformation, via the power of mass media, turns into information, and via scholarly interest and publications, becomes scientific knowledge and objective truth.” And those who dare challenge it, he added, will be labelled “deniers, apologists, shills” and so on—a very apt description of just the climate of McCarthyite hysteria ASPI has worked for years to generate, but which the idiocy of its latest effort might well undermine.

4. “Muslim countries reject claims of ‘cultural genocide’ against Xinjiang Uighurs”, AAS, 24 July 2019.

1. Also spelled “Uyghur”.

2. “A tale of two think tanks: Canberra escalates McCarthyism, de-funds diplomacy”, AAS, 17 June 2020.

3. “Morrison’s indefensible Defence plan re-commits to Cold War with China”, AAS, 8 July 2020.