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Strangling Supply, Exploiting Labor:

Inside China's Five-Year Plan in Xinjiang

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Executive Summary

Strangling Supply, Exploiting Labor: Inside China's Five-Year Plan in Xinjiang

China's Five-Year Plans are a central instrument through which the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the central government govern the country. This March 13th, the Chinese government released the 15th Five-Year Plan, outlining its policy agenda for the next five years (2026–2030). **The Plan's overriding priority is to position China at the "forefront of global science and technology", by eliminating critical technological dependencies and ensuring that its development trajectory cannot be disrupted by external pressure or supply chain coercion.**

This self-reliance shift ultimately relies on material foundations. The success of these goals depends on securing reliable access to raw materials at scale. The Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (Xinjiang) is central: the region holds the majority of China's beryllium reserves, a material with limited substitutes in semiconductor manufacturing, and provides the cheap coal-based energy that makes energy-intensive mineral processing.

Xinjiang's advantage in minerals doesn't just come from what is in the ground: it comes from how cheaply those resources can be processed from systemic reliance on state-imposed forced labor programs and expansion of cheap, coal-fired power.

Our analysis concludes that the system of coercive labor allocation applied to minority communities in Xinjiang will continue under the 15th Five-Year Plan at greater scale, with deeper institutional foundations, and with more sophisticated technological enforcement — through a mechanism explicitly designed to be permanent and irreversible.

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Key findings include:

- China's goals in semiconductors, clean energy, and advanced manufacturing all depend on upstream raw materials, and Xinjiang is being deliberately positioned to supply them.

- Renewable on-grid prices in Xinjiang range from 2.1 to 3.6 cents per kWh — making all-in industrial power costs well below the U.S. average (~8.7 cents) and a fraction of EU levels (~20 cents). Given that power accounts for 40 to 60 % of processing costs for materials like titanium, magnesium, and lithium, this price disparity creates a significant competitive barrier for Western producers.

- Advanced technology systems, including U.S. military capabilities and AI, are heavily dependent on Chinese lithium-ion batteries, much of which rely on raw materials including lithium and graphite, sourcing from Xinjiang. With near-total control over key battery production and recent signals of potential export restrictions, China holds a strategic lever over these critical technologies.

- A stated priority for the 15th Five-Year Plan period is to concentrate industrial development and employment absorption in southern Xinjiang – the area with the highest Uyghur population density and the most extensively documented record of forced labor. Every policy applied to Xinjiang, such as employment, economic development, education, culture, becomes an instrument of social control and ideological re-engineering.

- At the technological level, traditional job matching has been replaced entirely by a data-driven system that continuously tracks and classifies the workforce. The 15th Five-Year Plan explicitly calls for a permanent mechanism to prevent any return to poverty, meaning that close monitoring, surveillance and re-intervention for those who refuse to participate will continue throughout the 2026 to 2030 period.

- The CCP also adopted the Law on Promoting Ethnic Unity and Progress, which pursues assimilation practices for ethnic minorities to strengthen the “cohesion” of Chinese culture and identity. When combined with the industrial ambitions of the Five-Year Plan, this Law facilitates the continued eradication of Uyghur identity and culture alongside the strategic resource exploitation of their homelands.

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Every March, Beijing hosts two of the country's most important meetings, known as the Two Sessions, where leaders discuss national policy, economic development, and social issues. This March 13th, the Chinese government released the 15th Five-Year Plan, outlining its policy agenda for the next five years (2026–2030).[1]

China's Five-Year Plans are a central instrument through which the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the central government govern the country. Within China's political system, these plans carry both legal weight and administrative force: they are not merely broad policy guidelines but serve as the basis for performance evaluations across all levels of government, from central ministries down to county authorities. Officials' promotions, the allocation of public funds, and the direction of industrial policy are all closely tied to how well these targets are met.

While the 15th Five-Year Plan emphasizes tighter control over key raw materials, including rare earths and critical minerals. These resources underpin advanced manufacturing and clean energy supply chains and remain one of China's clearest structural advantages in global competition. In the context of forced labor in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (Xinjiang) the 15th Five-Year plan also broadcasts China's plan for the continued repression of Uyghur people. The policy documents adopted at this year's meeting point in a clear and consistent direction: the system of coercive labor allocation applied to minority communities in Xinjiang is set to continue under the 15th Five-Year plan – at greater scale, with deeper institutional entrenchment, and with more sophisticated technological enforcement – through mechanisms designed to be permanent and difficult to reverse.

15th Five-Year Plan: Main Objectives

Self-Reliance and Sovereignty: Beijing's science and technology policy

In response to the shifting geopolitical landscape, the 15th Five-Year Plan's overriding priority is to position China at the "forefront of global science and technology", by eliminating critical technological dependencies and ensuring that its development trajectory cannot be disrupted by external pressure or supply chain coercion.[2]

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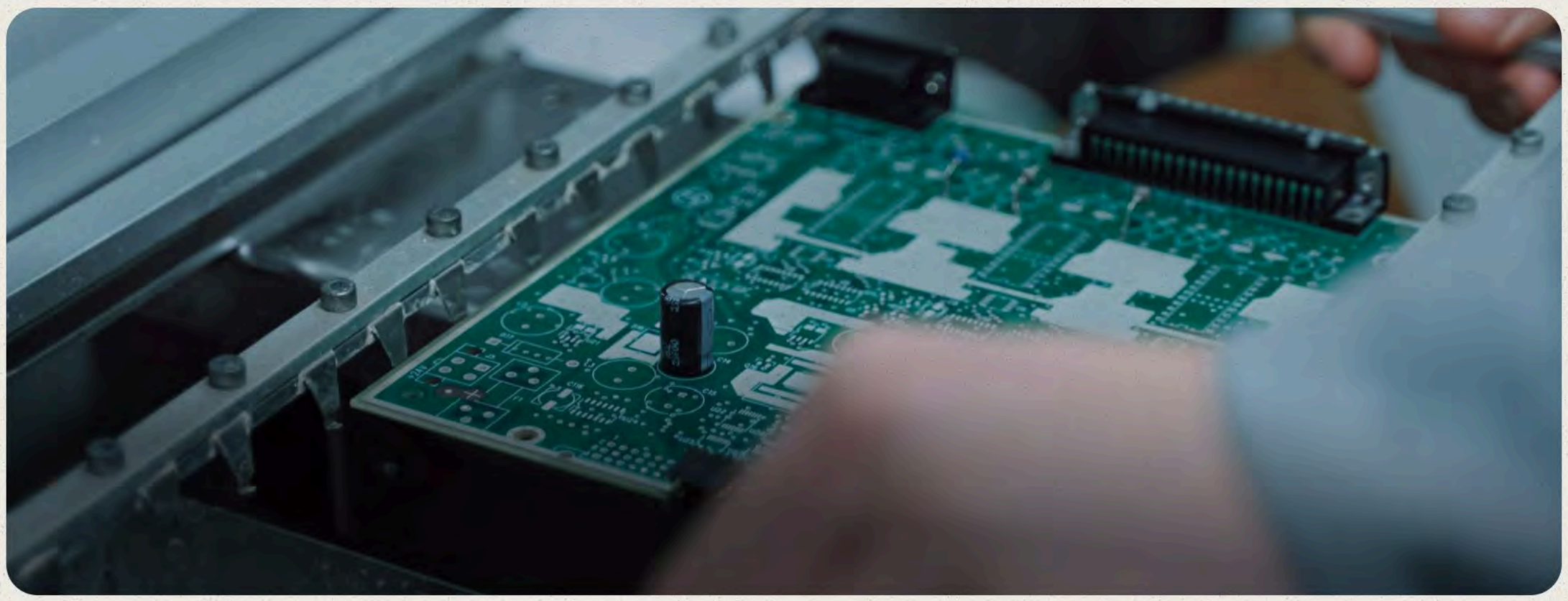
[1] Xinhua News Agency, "Outline of the 15th Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development of the People's Republic of China (2026–2030)" (中华人民共和国国民经济和社会发展第十五个五年规划纲要), March 13, 2026, Online.

[2] *ibid.*

To understand the 15th Five Year Plan and Beijing's priority for the coming years, it is necessary to consider the external pressures to which it responds. China is currently navigating intensified competition with Western nations, particularly the United States (US), in the fields of science, technology and supply chains. This is accompanied by a trend towards decoupling in certain key sectors. Against this backdrop, the 15th Five Year Plan places greater strategic emphasis on achieving self-reliance and achieving technological hegemony and supply chain resilience. It stresses the need to accelerate breakthroughs in **"key core technologies"** and prioritizes investments in integrated circuits, high-end machine tools, precision instruments, foundational software, advanced materials, and biomanufacturing.



The logic behind prioritizing these specific sectors is straightforward: China still depends on foreign inputs in each of them, and these dependencies now represent critical vulnerabilities for the broader economy.[3] In the field of integrated circuits, China remains reliant on advanced lithography equipment from foreign firms such as the Dutch firm ASML and Japanese firms like Nikon, as well as EDA chip design software controlled by US companies.[4] In high-end machine tools and precision instruments, over 90% of high-end scientific equipment is still imported. In foundational software, China's operating systems, industrial control software, and database systems remain functionally behind their US equivalents. In advanced materials, domestic substitution has been achieved in over twenty-one areas, such as battery separators and fuel cell materials, but high-end bearing steel and specialty alloys remain unresolved. In biomanufacturing, breakthroughs in key biopharmaceutical technologies remain elusive. Consequently, Beijing has categorized integrated circuits, machine tools, foundational software, advanced materials, and biomanufacturing as "chokepoint technologies" that the primary domains where it feels most exposed to external blockades.[5]

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[3] Special Eurasia, "Made in China 2025: A Decade of Industrial Policy and Its Geopolitical Effects," May 2, 2025, online.

[4] Andy Liao, "China's Semiconductor Investment Defies Economics—But Makes Perfect Strategic Sense," *Sino-Southeast Initiative*, July 26, 2025, online.

[5] Shashank Bhatt, "US vs China Tech Race 2025: Who Leads in AI, Semiconductors & Robotics," *Outlook Business*, December 31, 2025, online.

Without these foundational "building blocks," China faces significant hurdles in developing the high-end products that define modern power, from artificial intelligence (AI)-driven data centres and 5G smartphones to next-generation clean energy systems and life-saving biopharmaceuticals. Ultimately, these gaps represent the thin line between being a global consumer of technology and a truly self-sufficient creator of it.

This defensive posture is mirrored by an offensive strategic ambition. As Xi Jinping noted in 2020, China aims to "tighten international production chains" dependence on China," thereby creating "powerful countermeasures and deterrent capabilities" through the potential disruption of global supplies.[6] This dual-track approach has since become the organizing logic of Beijing's industrial and technology policy. While China has achieved meaningful breakthroughs or partial progress in approximately 60 to 70% of its 35 originally identified chokepoint technologies, the remaining gaps are concentrated in the most strategically sensitive and technically complex sectors.[7] As geopolitical tensions explode in the Middle East and elsewhere, the possibility of supply disruptions is no longer hypothetical, but something China' top leadership is actively preparing for.

To achieve this self-reliance, the 15th Five-Year Plan goes beyond funding. It is about changing how innovation happens from start to finish. It integrates basic research, manufacturing, funding, and talent into a unified ecosystem. In an environment of increasing restrictions on key technologies, isolated breakthroughs are not enough. What China's top leaders are aiming for instead is a more coordinated system that can sustain progress across entire sectors. This system-wide approach extends into computing power and digital infrastructure as well. **The 15th Five Year Plan elevates computing capacity to the level of a national strategic utility, positioning it alongside electricity and transportation.** It calls for a significant expansion of data centres and AI computing capacity and sets the widespread adoption of digital technologies across industry, agriculture, and public services as a policy goal.

The logic is clear: if the main arena of technological competition is shifting toward AI and big data, then computing power is no longer just a technical issue. It becomes a matter of strategic control. Yet this self-reliance shift does not exist in a vacuum and ultimately relies on material foundations. For example, integrated circuits require high-purity silicon, fluorite (used to produce hydrogen fluoride for semiconductor etching), and beryllium; while advanced materials require resources such as titanium, vanadium, magnesium, and lithium. **The success of these goals therefore depends on securing reliable access to raw materials at scale. Xinjiang is central to this: the region holds the majority of China's beryllium reserves, a material with limited substitutes in semiconductor manufacturing and provides the cheap coal-based energy that makes energy-intensive mineral processing. Advanced technology is currently built on a foundational dependency on Chinese lithium-ion batteries.**

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[6] David Pierson, This Is the Trade Conflict Xi Jinping Has Been Waiting For, *The New York Times*, May 10, 2025, online.

[7] Amber Zhang, "China's Self-Sufficiency in 35 Critical 'Stranglehold' Technologies," *Baiguan News*, May 29, 2025, online.

This is exemplified by the US, where both the military and private tech sector rely heavily on Chinese lithium-ion batteries for critical applications ranging from powering drones and laser weapons to sustaining AI data centres.[8] This shows a strategic bottleneck: because China controls 99% of global lithium iron phosphate battery production, much of it anchored in the mineral wealth of Xinjiang. Beijing knows exactly what it holds: in October 2024, China moved to threaten export restrictions on its most advanced lithium technologies, quietly turning this supply chain into a strategic lever it can pull at will. Years of intensive infrastructure investment have made the region logistically and industrially indispensable to these supply chains.

Yet this strategic integration comes at a widely documented cost: the region's development has been inextricably linked to the systemic use of forced labor, a reality that sits uncomfortably alongside China's ambitions to lead in clean energy and advanced technology. Perhaps this can explain why the 15th Five Year Plan makes parallel arrangements at the level of raw materials, calling for stronger control over key resources such as rare earths and critical minerals. These materials sit at the base of advanced manufacturing and clean energy supply chains, and they are also one of the few areas where China holds a clear structural advantage in global competition.

Upgrading manufacturing toward smart tech, sustainability, and high-end production

For decades, China's manufacturing strengths have been hard to match. It co-located suppliers, integrated supply chains, and efficient logistics give it an edge beyond just low labor costs.[9] This makes China a preferred hub for end-to-end production. However, the 15th Five Year Plan also acknowledged a problem that has undermined Chinese industry for years: too many companies making the same things, undercutting each other on price until nobody profits. Solar panels, steel, and electric vehicles have been caught in this dead-end race, producing far more than the market can absorb and triggering the price wars that have drawn complaints from trading partners, such as in Europe and the US.

The 15th Five Year Plan calls this "involution-style" competition in manufacturing, a Chinese term for a 'dead-end race'. To break this cycle, the 15th Five Year Plan sets long-term goals for upgrading manufacturing toward smart tech, sustainability, and high-end production. In short, the policy pushes companies to stop fighting over who can be the cheapest and instead compete on innovation and quality to lift the entire industry to a higher level.

[8] Hiroko Tabuchi, Brad Plumer, Harry Stevens, The Pentagon and A.I. Giants Have a Weakness. Both Need China's Batteries, Badly, Dec 24, 2025, online.

[9] Euro-American Worldwide Logistics, "China's Strategic Role in Global Trade and Supply Chains: 2025 Outlook," November 28, 2025, online.

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Shifting labor-intensive industries to the centre and west

The 15th Five-Year Plan calls for shifting labor-intensive industries away from China's prosperous coastal cities towards the less developed provinces of the Centre and West of the country. **This serves a dual purpose: reducing regional imbalances, while also moving lower-end production out of high-cost coastal areas to free up space for more advanced, higher-value manufacturing.** As noted earlier, this rebalancing strategy has tangible implications for regions like Xinjiang, where labor-intensive industries such as cotton processing are already deeply embedded and where questions about coercive labor conditions against Uyghurs and other ethnic minorities continue to raise international condemnation.

In the energy sector, the 15th Five Year Plan anchors policy around the long-term goals of carbon peaking and carbon neutrality, while still preserving a role for coal and oil in the name of energy security. This tension reflects a more cautious balancing

Xinjiang's critical minerals are powering the technology ambitions of China's 15th Five Year Plan

China's ambitions in technology cannot be separated from the physical resources that make them possible — and Xinjiang sits at the centre of that supply. Beijing began laying the groundwork early: in 2021, it designated Xinjiang as a priority zone for securing strategic minerals under its National Mineral Resources Plan.[10] In 2023, the Central Committee and State Council went further, formally defining one of Xinjiang's strategic positions as "national base for energy and resource security".[11] By January 2026, Xinjiang had been assigned an even broader set of responsibilities, covering mineral processing, energy supply, and computing infrastructure.[12] The numbers make the case even more clear:

- Xinjiang holds 83.5% of China's proven beryllium reserves, a metal with limited substitutes in aerospace, semiconductors, and nuclear technology, and produces more than half of the country's total beryllium output;
- Xinjiang's Sponge titanium production supplies 15 Chinese-based companies and 68 Western-based companies, feeding directly into aerospace, automotive, and medical device manufacturing; and

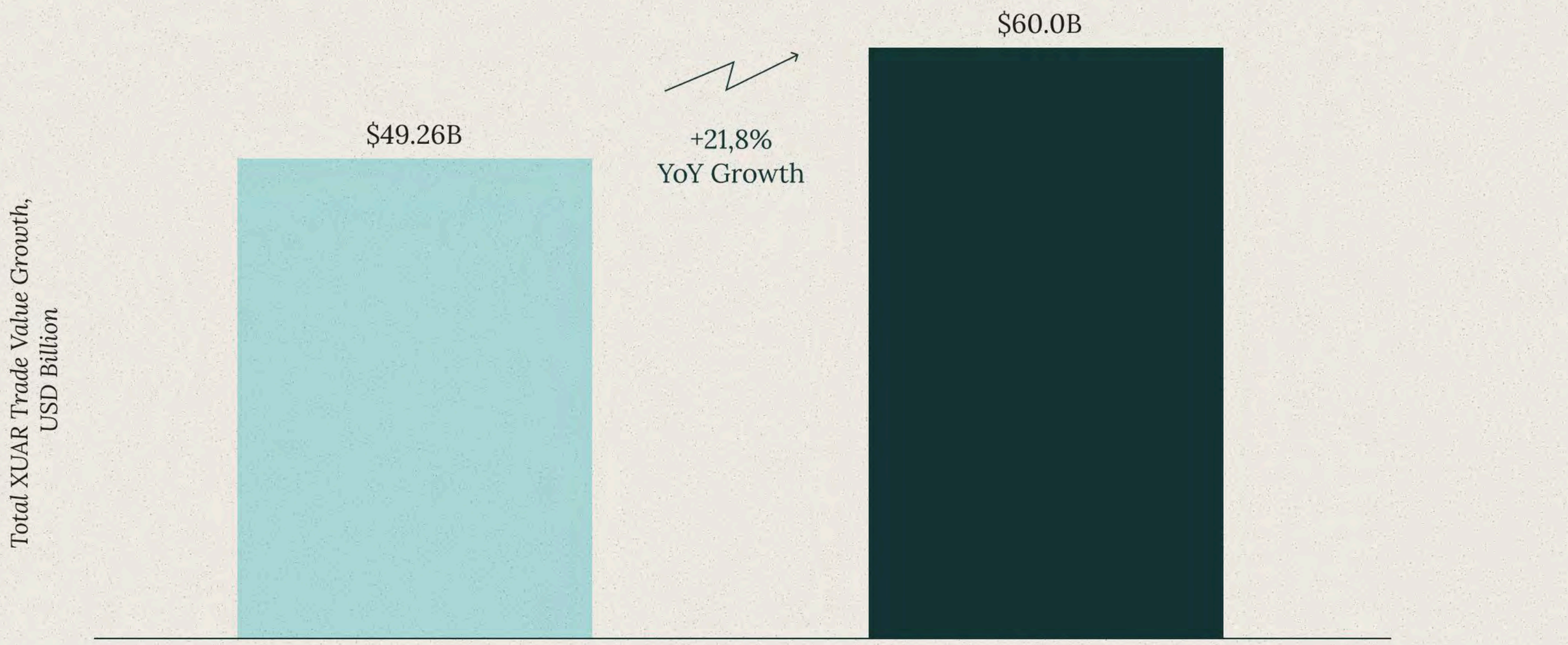
[10] Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region People's Government, "Overall Plan for Mineral Resources in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (2021–2025)" (新疆维吾尔自治区矿产资源总体规划〔2021—2025年〕), August 2022, online.

[11] Standing Committee of the People's Congress of Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, "In-depth Analysis of Xinjiang's 'Five Strategic Positions' in the National Framework," 深度解析新疆在国家全局中的'五大战略定位'," March 12, 2025, online.

[12] 2026 Xinjiang 'Two Sessions' Third Press Conference Interprets the Government Work Report, Anchoring the 'Five Strategic Positionings'" (2026新疆两会第3场发布会解读政府工作报告 锚定"五大定位"绘就发展蓝图), Shiliuyun–Xinjiang Daily, February 25, 2026, online.

- Xinjiang is one of China's five main magnesium production bases and has scaled its lithium battery output to hundreds of millions of units per year.

In 2024, Xinjiang's total trade value reached approximately $60 billion, up 21.8% year-on-year — growth driven in part by surging exports of electric vehicles, lithium batteries, and other high-tech products.[13]



The 15th Five Year Plan makes Xinjiang's critical role explicit. Of the 109 major engineering projects announced under the 15th Five Year Plan[14], two relate directly to the region's mineral wealth: a new national mineral exploration programme — for which Xinjiang, as a major source of lithium and beryllium, is a primary target area; and, a high-end materials programme that draws on the region's rare earths and rare metals as key industrial inputs. Work is already underway on the ground for these projects. The most advanced example is the Dahongliutan lithium-beryllium deposit in Hotan, where the first phase of lithium carbonate production came online in 2024, with plans to develop it into the world's largest integrated lithium mining and processing operation.[15]

The underlying logic is straightforward: **China's goals in semiconductors, clean energy, and advanced manufacturing all depend on upstream raw materials, and Xinjiang is being deliberately positioned to supply them.**

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[13] Xinhua News Agency. “新疆外贸进出口总值同比增长21.8% / Xinjiang’s Foreign Trade Surges by 21.8% Year-on-Year in 2024.” Xinhua (Xinjiang Channel), 1 February 2025, online.

[14] National Data Administration of China, ““十五五”规划109项重大工程项目” (“109 Major Projects of the 15th Five-Year Plan”), March 7, 2026, online.

[15] Simultaneous sound from the Two Sessions | Representative Zhang Guohua: The Dahongliutan million-ton-level rare metal mine will go into production this year 两会同期声丨张国华代表：大红柳滩百万吨级稀有金属矿今年投产, Feb 2, 2024, online; Yang Rui, World's Largest Integrated Lithium Mining, Processing and Smelting Project Launched in Hotan, Xinjiang, 全球规模最大锂资源采选冶一体化项目在新疆和田启动, People's Daily Online - Xinjiang, March 1, 2023, online.

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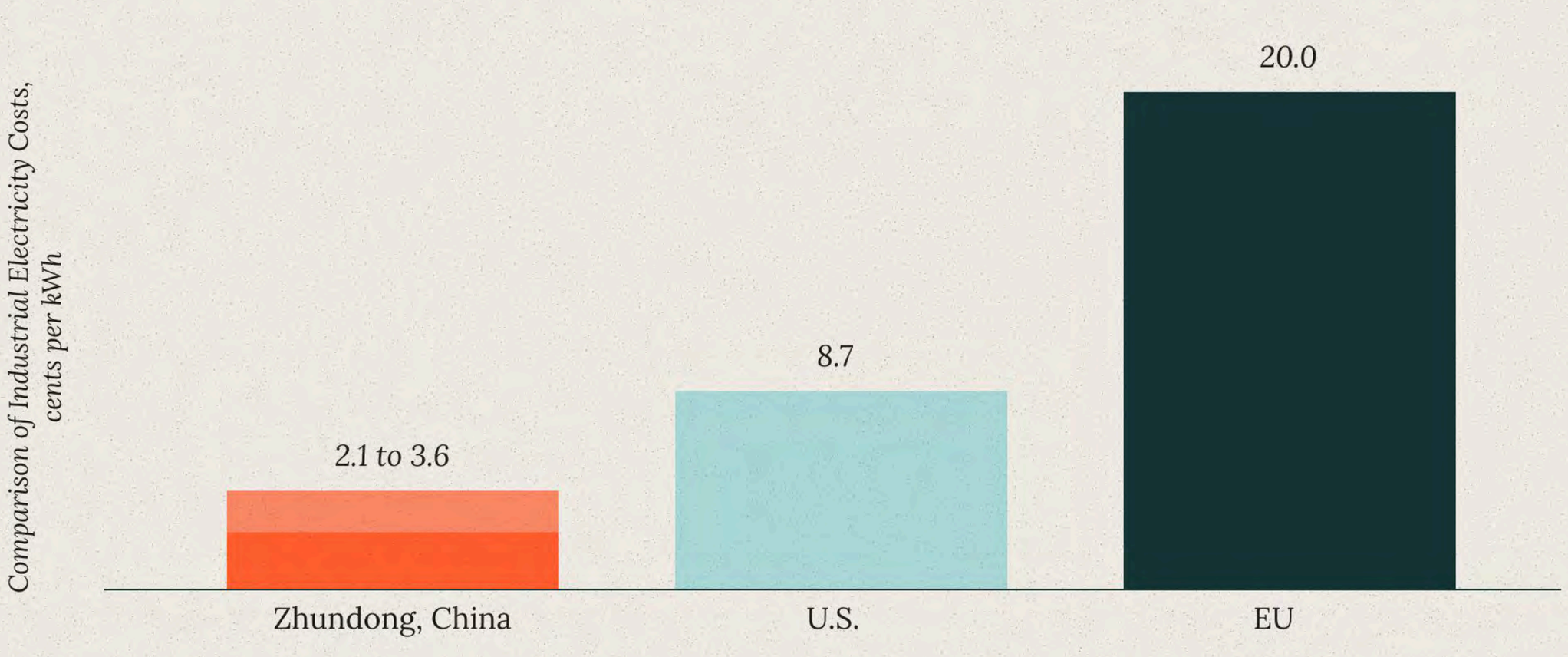
Energy Subsidies as a Hidden Mechanism of Forced Labor

Xinjiang's advantage in minerals doesn't just come from what is in the ground: it comes from how cheaply those resources can be processed from its systemic reliance on state-imposed forced labor programs and its expansion of cheap, coal-fired power.

To illustrate the scale of this advantage, Xinjiang leverages a multi-tiered industrial electricity pricing system. While standard municipal rates in Urumqi are approximately 6.7 to 7.2 cents per kWh[16] strategic industrial users in energy-rich hubs — such as Zhundong — benefit from integrated energy pricing structures where energy-intensive factories are co-located with both coal mines and massive renewable arrays to minimize transmission costs and capitalize on low-cost power generation. According to the autonomous region's 2025 pricing framework, the on-grid price for renewable generation ranges from 2.1 to 3.6 cents per kWh (0.15–0.26 RMB)[17]. Combined with reduced grid fees for high-voltage direct supply and access to co-located coal-fired generation, the all-in effective cost for energy-intensive industrial users in these zones remains among the lowest globally — well below the U.S. industrial average (approximately 8.7 cents[18]) a fraction of the roughly 20 cents seen in the EU.[19]



Given that power accounts for 40 to 60 % of processing costs for materials like titanium, magnesium, and lithium, this price disparity creates a significant competitive barrier for Western producers. By the time these minerals reach the global market, their prices already carry a built-in subsidy: cheap coal power paired with forced labor. Producers who don't rely on state backing or coercive labor simply can't compete on price alone.

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[16] Urumqi industrial electricity price (35 kV and above): 0.480 RMB/kWh (January 2026), 0.520 RMB/kWh (February 2026). Source: China NDRC Price Monitoring Center (国家发展改革委价格监测中心), as published in CEIC China Premium Database, Table CN.PH: Electricity Price: 36 City, online, Converted at 1 USD = 7.2 RMB.

[17] Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region Development and Reform Commission, "Implementation Plan (Trial) for Deepening the Market-Oriented Reform of New Energy On-Grid Electricity Prices in the Autonomous Region" (自治区贯彻落实深化新能源上网电价市场化改革实施方案（试行）), June 22, 2025, online.

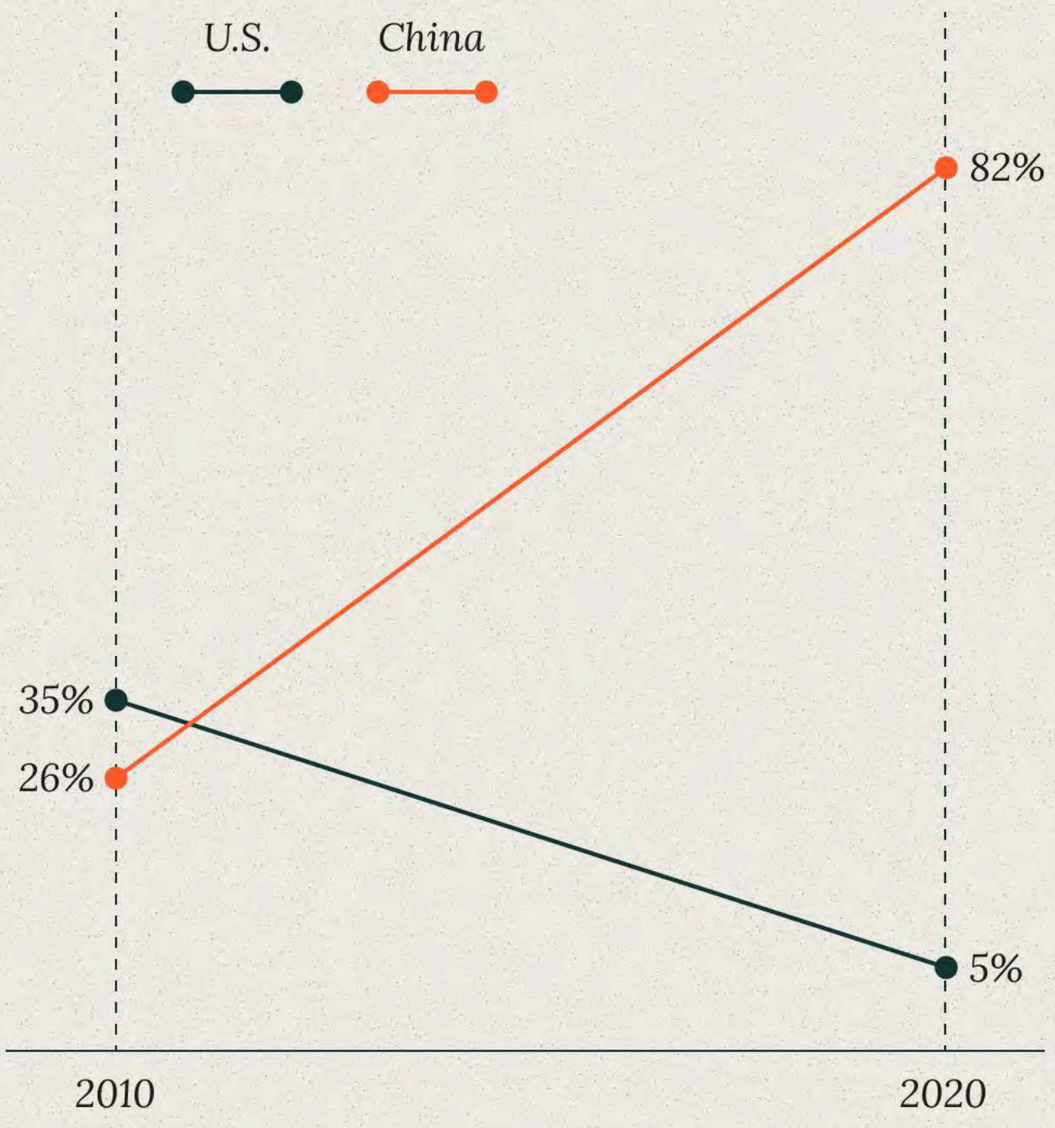
[18] U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA), Short-Term Energy Outlook, March 2026, Table 7c: U.S. Regional Electricity Prices to Ultimate Customers. The figure (~8.6 cents/kWh) reflects the U.S. industrial sector average forecast for 2025 (8.61 cents) and 2026 (8.80 cents), online.

[19] Eurostat, "Electricity price statistics," Statistics Explained, data extracted April 2025, last updated April 2026 (covering H1 2025 data). The EU non-household average electricity price in the first half of 2025 was €0.1902 per kWh (USD 0.22, converted at 1 EUR = 1.18 USD), online.

This isn't a hypothetical risk, it is already happening. Titanium dioxide, the main downstream product of titanium, is widely used in paints, plastics, and paper. China now controls over 55% of global titanium dioxide capacity, with Xinjiang as a key production base.[20] Backed by cheap power and scale, Chinese producers have systematically pushed down global prices, prompting the EU, India, and Saudi Arabia to launch anti-dumping investigations and impose tariffs.[21] The EU's 2025 duties — reaching nearly 40% — are essentially a late response to a market structure that has already taken shape.[22]

The history of solar-grade polysilicon shows where this could end. Between 2010 and 2020, the same dynamics drove China's share of global production from 26% to 82%,[23] while the US fell from 35% to 5%.[24]

Shift in Share of Global Production (2010-2020), %



By the time Western governments recognized the problem, more than 45% of the global supply chain already depended on Xinjiang, making decoupling extremely costly.[25] The risks around critical minerals are even more severe: these materials are directly tied to defense industries, they have no real substitutes, and once dependence sets in, the strategic consequences go far beyond solar.

Current regulatory frameworks still miss the core of the problem. **Once electricity generated through forced labor enters the national grid, it's effectively stripped of its origin. This allows products manufactured outside Xinjiang to benefit from the hidden subsidy of forced labor, while still appearing compliant and moving freely into global markets.**

[20] The Oregon Group, "China's titanium dominance: vertical supply chain, cost edge, and global ripple effects" December 2, 2025, online; Titanium Dioxide Market Price Update. 钛白粉市场价格动态 Iron Alloy Online – Market News & Price Trends, online.

[21] The Oregon Group, "China's titanium dominance: vertical supply chain, cost edge, and global ripple effects" December 2, 2025, online.

[22] European Commission. "EU acts to counter dumping of titanium dioxide from China." Directorate-General for Trade and Economic Security, 9 January 2025, online.

[23] International Energy Agency (IEA). "Solar PV Global Supply Chains." *IEA Special Report*, 07 July 2022. online.

[24] U.S. Department of Energy (DOE), Solar Energy Technologies Office. "Solar Photovoltaics Supply Chain Review Report." Published 24 February 2022, online.

[25] Laura T. Murphy and Nyrola Elimä, In Broad Daylight: Uyghur Forced Labour and Global Solar Supply Chains, Sheffield Hallam University, 2021, online.

Xinjiang's Other Resource: Uyghur State-Imposed Forced Labor

The minerals and energy subsidies are only part of the story. Beneath the resource strategy lies a labor system. That system is rooted in the fact that Beijing treats the Xinjiang region differently from every other province in China.

From 2015 onwards, Beijing enacted a series of counterterrorism and de-extremification laws that classified ordinary religious and cultural practices common among Uyghurs, Kazakhs, and other Turkic Muslim minorities, such as wearing a veil, growing a beard, or refusing to watch state propaganda television, as indicators of extremism.[26] This created a legal framework in which entire minority communities are treated as a latent security threat.

Within this framework, every policy applied to Xinjiang, such as employment, economic development, education, culture, ceases to be a straightforward welfare measure and becomes an instrument of social control and ideological re-engineering. Refusing to participate in any state-led programme, whether vocational training, labor transfer, or poverty alleviation, can be treated by authorities as evidence of sympathy with separatist or extremist causes, with detention as a potential consequence.[27]

The Party Secretary of Xinjiang, Chen Xiaojiang, made this logic explicit in his March 2026 address.[28] He stated that maintaining social stability remains the overriding objective of all work in Xinjiang, and that a core task for the opening year of the 15th Five-Year Plan is to sustain counter-terrorism operations and keep maximum pressure on forces deemed separatist, extremist, or terrorist. He further emphasised that economic development in Xinjiang serves not only to improve living standards, but to "unite hearts and strengthen cohesion", in other words, economic policy is itself a tool of political stabilisation.

Same Policy, Two Very Different Outcomes

In Han-majority inland provinces such as Guangdong, Zhejiang, and Hunan, the state acts as a coordinator. Two national policies illustrate this clearly. The first is "preventing a return to poverty" — a programme designed to stop those who have escaped poverty from falling back. The second is the relaxation of restrictions on where citizens can live and work, which historically tied people to their registered home region and limited their ability to move freely.

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[26] Local authorities in Xinjiang are organizing residents to identify 75 types of religious extremist activities, 新疆局地组织民众 识别75种宗教极端活动, online.

[27] Laura T. Murphy and Nyrola Elimä, In Broad Daylight: Uyghur Forced Labour and Global Solar Supply Chains, Sheffield Hallam University, 2021, online.

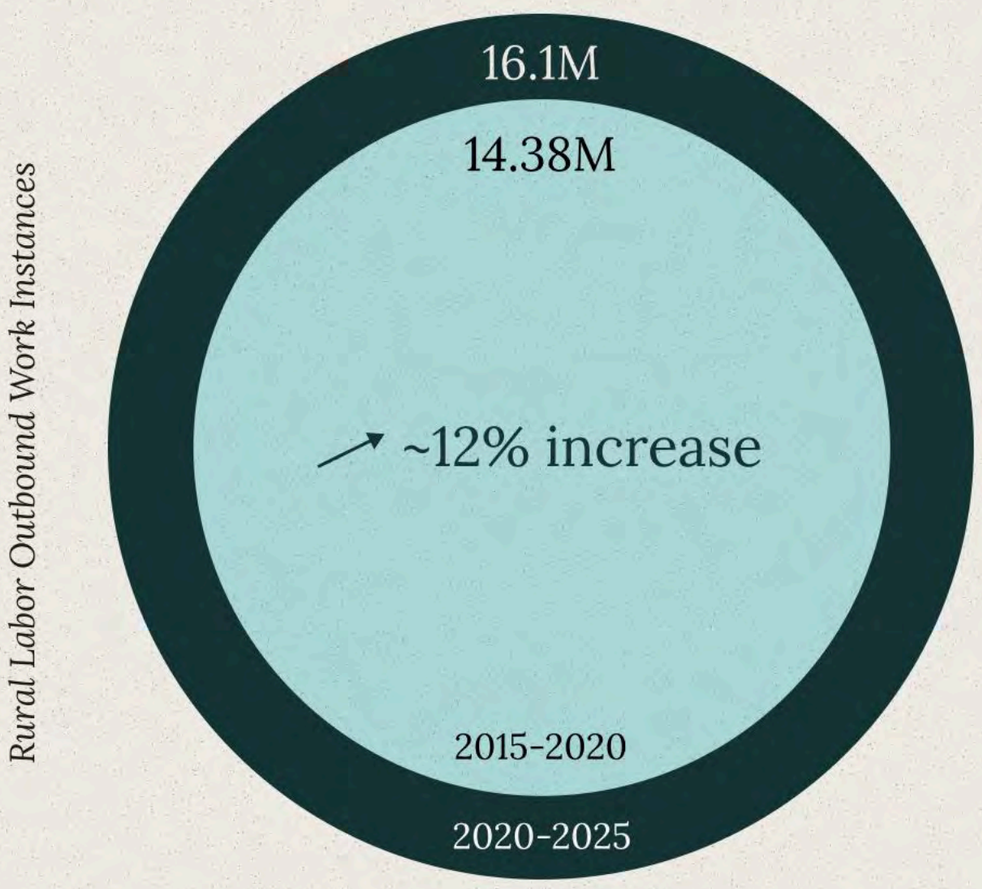
[28] Chen Xiaojiang, “Building a Strong Sense of the Chinese National Community and Constructing a Modern Socialist Xinjiang” (铸牢中华民族共同体意识 建设社会主义现代化新疆), Xinhua Daily Telegraph, March 9, 2026, online.

In these provinces, both policies translate in practice into support for voluntary labor mobility: rural workers gain better access to urban job markets, social security, and healthcare. Workers retain the freedom to choose where they go and whether they participate. In Xinjiang, particularly in the southern prefectures of Kashgar, Hotan, and Aksu, where the Uyghur population is most concentrated, the same policy language operates in an entirely different way. Official documents classify Uyghur, Kazakh, and other indigenous people as "poor," "lacking development motivation," or "low in educational attainment," and enroll them in state-imposed labor transfers, both within Xinjiang and across China, and vocational training programmes, bundled with political education and Mandarin language instruction aimed at reshaping their employment attitudes, ways of life, and cultural identity.

Here, “preventing a return to poverty” becomes a mandatory employment quota, directly tied to the performance evaluations of local officials — who must ensure that no household in their jurisdiction remains without a placed worker, or otherwise face consequences for their own careers. The relaxation of residency restrictions, meanwhile, becomes the institutional basis for transferring Uyghur workers to factories in other provinces. **The state thus operates with a dual identity: a market facilitator in Han-majority provinces, and a coercive mobiliser in the Uyghur region — one that systematically strips minority communities of the ability to determine their own livelihoods.**

State-Imposed Forced Labor Is Growing

Xinjiang's January 2026 government work report recorded 16.1 million rural labor outbound work instances between 2020 and 2025 — a nearly 12% increase on the previous five-year period.[29]



The report does not treat this as a figure requiring scrutiny. It frames it as a proven success and explicitly states that shortfalls in employment mobilisation must still be addressed – signalling that the current scale is considered insufficient and will be pushed further. The Party Secretary of Xinjiang, Chen, address reinforced this direction: a stated priority for the 15th Five-Year Plan period is to concentrate industrial development and employment absorption in southern Xinjiang – the area with the highest Uyghur population density and the most extensively documented record of forced labor.

[29] Department of Human Resources and Social Security of the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, Highlights from the 2026 Xinjiang ‘Two Sessions’ Government Work Report. 2026新疆两会丨政府工作报告摘登, Jan 27, 2026, online.

At the institutional level, in December 2025, five government departments including Xinjiang's Human Resources and Social Security Bureau jointly issued a directive requiring the establishment of a five-tier employment service network spanning the autonomous region, prefecture, county, township, and village levels, with a mandatory target of aggregating no fewer than one million job postings annually. This converts what was previously a locally executed mobilisation effort into a permanent and systematic administrative infrastructure reaching down to every village.

At the technological level, traditional job matching has been replaced entirely by a data driven system that continuously tracks and classifies the workforce. In Aksu prefecture alone, a platform monitors more than 1.3 million workers, categorising them by employment status and personal attributes, including language proficiency, with each classification triggering predefined intervention measures.[30] Official documents describe this as the "big data plus iron feet" model.[31] "Iron feet" refers to ground-level cadres and police officers who go door to door to register, pressure, and place workers into employment. "Big data" refers to a region-wide, real-name worker management database that uses AI to build detailed profiles of every individual identified as having labor capacity but not yet employed, tracking them throughout the process. The system is designed to be proactive: it automatically identifies anyone not yet enrolled in a transfer programme and triggers intervention — rather than waiting for voluntary participation.

Within this system, a worker who refuses a placement or falls outside the system becomes a data point flagged for follow-up intervention. In the broader political framework, refusing to participate in state-imposed poverty alleviation measures, training, or labor transfer programmes can be treated by authorities as alignment with separatist or extremist positions. **The 15th Five-Year Plan explicitly calls for a permanent mechanism to prevent any return to poverty, meaning that close monitoring, surveillance and re-intervention for those who refuse to participate will continue throughout the 2026 to 2030 period without abatement.**

This is not a continuation of existing policy but a comprehensive escalation. Read alongside the mineral development plans outlined earlier, the picture that emerges is one of mutual reinforcement: the expansion of Xinjiang's extractive industries enlarges the industrial base that requires labor, while the coercive labor allocation system ensures that base has a continuous supply of workers — regardless of whether those workers have chosen to be there.

[30] Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region People's Government, "雨露润'疆'田 幸福满天山——新疆维吾尔自治区成立70周年人社事 业高质量发展综述" ("Overview of High-Quality Development in Human Resources and Social Security in Xinjiang on the 70th Anniversary of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region"), September 25, 2025, online.

[31] hao Chunhua, "Deep Reading: Improving and Expanding Local Public Employment Services—Interpretation of the 'Opinions on Further Improving the Employment Public Service System'" (天山深读丨让家门口的就业服务提质扩容——《关于进一步健全就 业公共服务体系的实施意见》解读), Tianshan Net–Xinjiang Daily, December 16, 2025, online.

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Codifying Control

As noted earlier, **China's economic roadmap is directly coupled with an embedded coercion that treats cultural diversity as a threat to national security, unity — and, most importantly, reconfigures diversity into a tool for national productivity.**

While this analysis focuses on China's recently released 15th Five-Year Plan, it is worth highlighting a law passed during this year's Two Sessions which supports the rationale for a more restrictive and tightly controlled domestic environment. Of particular importance is the Law on Promoting Ethnic Unity and Progress (the Law) which in practice adopts assimilation practices for ethnic minorities to strengthen the "cohesion" of Chinese culture and identity.

Drawing parallels to the Anti-Foreign Sanctions Law enforced since 2021, the Law also takes a hard line against foreign criticism. At the same time, it promotes government-led education campaigns that teach what it calls the "correct" views on history, culture, and religion, and encourages minority groups to align more closely with these state-defined norms.

The Law establishes, among other things, the following:

- A Mandarin-first policy that prioritizes Mandarin in all official, educational and public sectors, effectively limiting bilingual education;
- A unified framework of teaching materials for all educational levels;
- An instruction to national broadcasters to disseminate a single, unified Chinese identify;
- A call on provincial governments to use housing and employment policies to drive "unity and integration of all ethnicities";
- "Cross-region employment" and training on "laws, regulations, and policies, the national common language and script, and vocational skills, [...] vocational guidance, and job placement"; and
- "Counterpart assistance and east-west collaboration", state programs often associated with forced labor practices;
- Private life monitoring – including of weddings and funerals – by requiring them to follow state-defined "citizen ethics" and "new trends" and abide by "public order and good customs";
- A unified database to track "population migration" both within and outside of ethnic minority regions;
- Network operators as both propaganda tools and monitoring agents.[32]

[32] National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China, 两会受权发布丨中华人民共和国民族团结进步促进法 "Law of the People's Republic of China on Promoting Ethnic Unity and Progress," March 12, 2026, online, arts 34, 40, 24.

To enforce these objectives under the Law, it instructs every level of society, from government organs to labor unions and private enterprises, to fulfil the objective of ethnic unity.[33] Including the deployment of cadres, police officers previously referred to as "iron feet", to act as the state's eyes and ears within Uyghur and other ethnic communities and households, to ensure and oversee adherence to the Law in "ethnic minority areas".[34]

Ultimately, this Law transforms ethnic unity, or forced assimilation, from a social objective into a mandatory legal obligation for every level of society and effectively reclassifying any perceived undermining of unity as a direct national security and terrorism punishable threat. By silencing dissent and filtering information through an increasingly restrictive state-approved lens, these tools are leveraged to enhance surveillance and tighten social control. **When combined with the industrial ambitions of the 15th Five Year Plan, this Law facilitates the continued eradication of Uyghur identity and culture alongside the strategic resource exploitation of their homelands.**[35]

Final Observations

The 2026 Two Sessions and the 15th Five-Year Plan mark a decisive shift in China's pursuit of technological and resource self-reliance. In response to growing trade restrictions and geopolitical pressure, Beijing is doubling down on a protectionist model — strengthening domestic production while consolidating control over critical minerals and industrial inputs. This approach is designed to insulate key sectors, including semiconductors, clean energy, and aerospace, from external disruption and reinforce China's position in global supply chains.

At the same time, the Plan embeds a model of control that extends beyond economics. Through laws and policies that prioritize "social stability" and "ethnic unity," the state is institutionalizing coercive labor practices and assimilation measures targeting Uyghur and other minority communities. Xinjiang, rich in resources, supported by state investment, and sustained by systems of forced labor, sits at the center of this strategy. Taken together, these developments point to a deliberate effort by the Chinese Communist Party to build a vertically integrated monopoly over the technologies of the future — anchored in control over both resources and people.

[33] ibid, art 44.

[34] ibid, art 49.

[35] ibid, art 12, 13.

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