Xinjiang: China's Fourth Frontier

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This year, as the People's Republic of China (PRC) turned sixty, the world's attention was focussed on the display on military might which was the highpoint of the celebrations in Tiananmen Square on October 1, 2009. The gloss was the best money could buy: a weather-modification package, goose-stepping soldiers and thousands of schoolchildren flipping over coloured cards forming slogans like "Loyalty to the Party" and "Harmonious Society". While the ominous DF-31 intercontinental missiles, J-10 fighter jets, new generation tanks and Long Sword cruise missiles may be a true reflection of the Chinese military modernisation, the 56 flowery floats that showcased different ethnicities emphasising ethnic unity among the country's 56 minority groups and the majority Han Chinese failed to hide the widening ethnic cracks in Tibet and Xinjiang. Meanwhile, the divisions in Xinjiang are deepening. Urumqi has distinct Han and Uighur districts, and throughout Xinjiang, there are separate Uighur, Kazakh and Han villages, making it a very segregated province. On the other hand, the bonds unifying the Western and Eastern Turkestanis appear stronger than the differences between them. The obvious conclusion does not bode well for an aspiring Beijing.

The media has often termed China's political sensitivities as "The Three Ts", i.e. Tiananmen, Tibet and Taiwan. But today, as the tension simmers under the surface in Xinjiang, the likelihood of a fourth frontier confronting Beijing seems inevitable. It has all the makings of China's Palestine. But unlike the Palestinians or Tibetans, the cause of the Uighurs is not well publicised. Nor is Xinjiang, unlike Tibet, a romanticised land of incarnate lamas and mystic monasteries, for which personalities like Richard Gere and Steven Seagal may campaign. The key Uighur leader in exile, Rebiya Kadeer, is an out-of-favour businesswoman and no match for the charismatic Dalai Lama to mobilise world attention on the plight of the

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Uighurs. But the dissimilarities end here. Deeper down, the basic issues are the same in Tibet and Xinjiang – forced demographic changes, religious suppression and demand for independence based on historical claims. The cocktail of these volatile issues is likely to increasingly involve China in a bitter duel in its own backyard.

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The Valuable Frontier

Xinjiang is the gateway between Central Asia and the East. Being situated along the fabled ancient Silk Route, it has been a prominent centre of commerce for more than 2,000 years. Since 1955, Xinjiang has been an autonomous region called Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region of the PRC, after briefly existing as an independent East Turkestan Republic with Soviet support. Therefore, it is also sometimes referred to as Chinese Turkestan, East Turkestan, or Uighuristan, all of which denote the various perceptions of the issue. The name "Xinjiang", which literally means "new frontier", was given during the Qing Dynasty. [1] After 1821, the Qing changed the names of the other regained regions (or other Xinjiangs), and Xinjiang became the name specifically of present-day Xinjiang. It is home to a number of Turkic ethnic groups, the largest of whom are the Uighurs. Historically, the term Uighur, meaning united or allied, was applied to a group of Turkic-speaking tribes who lived in the Altai Mountains.[2] Predominantly Sunni Muslim, they are one of China's 56 officially recognised ethnicities, numbering 8.68 million of the 20 million people in Xinjiang, according to the 2004 Chinese census.

Xinjiang is a large, sparsely populated area, consisting of Tarim and Dzungaria regions of northwest China and spanning over 1.6 million sq km which takes up about one-sixth of the country's territory, making it the largest political sub-division of China. It is, or rather was, dominated by the Uighurs who, today, form only 45 percent of the population. Xinjiang has always interested the West due to its strategic location in Inner Asia and for housing the huge Chinese nuclear testing site of Lop Nor. Closer home, the Karakoram and Xinjiang-Tibet Highways, and the Aksai Chin issue kept it in the Indian focus. The Chinese area of focus has been slightly more practical. Apart from being valuable real estate to accommodate the huge Han population, Xinjiang has large deposits of mineral and oil, with the oil and petrochemical sector now accounting for 60 percent of

Xinjiang's local economy. Mega projects like the East West Gas Pipeline from Aksu and Karamay connecting to Shanghai have been built under the China Western Development Policy.

This Go West policy was introduced by China's State Council to boost economic development in western China. It has indeed changed the economic complexion of Xinjiang, increasing its nominal Gross Domestic Product (GDP) from approximately US $ 28 billion in 2004 to US $ 60 billion in 2008. Similarly, the GDP of the capital Urumqi grew by 15 percent in 2008, much of it due to infrastructure spending by the central and regional governments. But the economic development and the changed skyline of Urumqi had a price tag. The price tag has been in the form of 7.5 million Han settlers, a vast jump from only 200,000 Hans in 1949, which has changed the demographic complexion of the region, leading to social unrest and division of the society on ethnic lines. These faultlines have manifested in the form of violence and riots, the most recent being the July 2009 Urumqi riots.

The World View

Xinjiang has always been a potential trouble spot. In 1969, the *Time* magazine proclaimed Xinjiang as the likely flashpoint between the USSR and China in an article aptly titled "Sinkiang: Where It Could Begin." [3] Apart from a disputed Sino-Soviet border, the Soviet support for the Uighurs made the region the major showdown in their struggle for the leadership of the Communist world. The Russian involvement in Xinjiang dates to the Czars. Later, Stalin expanded Soviet influence in Xinjiang by using Soviet consulates and cultural centres for propaganda. In 1962, over 60,000 Uighur and Kazakh refugees fled northern Xinjiang into the Soviet Union to escape the famine and political purges of the Great Leap Forward. But to most of the world, Xinjiang was at best a conflict of interests between two Communist giants. For years, little news came out from this remote region of Inner Asia.

When riots broke out in Xinjiang, hurried comparisons with Tibet flowed. The riots have put Xinjiang on the world stage, but until now, the region has been less of a worry for China's diplomats than Tibet, because the Uighurs and their plight have a low profile in the West and the Muslim nations. Their overseas advocates are mostly exiled Uighurs, while the Tibetan exile community has spent years building up powerful popular support in Europe and the US. [4] Even the Palestinians have better media coverage than the Uighurs. Therefore, unlike the plight of the Palestinians—an issue that resonates deeply across the Middle East

and the greater Islamic world as well as in human rights circles—the Uighurs are generally ignored. The reasons are quite pragmatic. In spite of their close ties to the US, key regimes in the Middle East such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia, look toward China for diplomatic cover and to serve as a check on what they often see as Washington's overbearing influence in regional affairs.[5] Understandably, there has been an 'official silence' from major players in the Middle East and from the majority of the Muslim world, except Iran and Turkey.

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Only Turkey went far when Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, during a Press conference on July 10, 2009, labelled China's actions in Xinjiang a "near genocide". Ankara also threatened to raise the issue of Xinjiang at the United Nations. But beyond that, the rise of China as a global power has ensured a studied silence in most of the world capitals. Further, many predominantly Muslim countries in Central Asia, such as Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, with significant Uighur populations of their own and a history of ethnic and sectarian tensions, see the crisis in Xinjiang as a serious threat to their own domestic stability. Kazakhstan, for instance, is home to at least 300,000 ethnic Uighurs, representing the largest ethnic Uighur community outside China. Kyrgyzstan is home to another 60,000 ethnic Uighurs, while approximately 6,000 ethnic Uighurs live in Tajikistan.[6] None of them would possibly support the Chinese Uighurs.

The Chinaman versus Herdsman Contest

Central Asia was never short of conquerors and conquest-aspirants. Consequently, the area of present-day Xinjiang saw many rulers and sharply fluctuating relations with the Chinese dynasties. At the same time, it was at the crossroads of many Central Asian trade routes, including the famed Silk Route which carried Asia's luxuries to Europe. Marco Polo passed through Xinjiang on his way to China. Therefore, the current conflict and interest in Xinjiang cannot be viewed as a very recent event – the region has always been at the crossroads of conflict and commerce. Many historians like Owen Lattimore also view the contest between China and Xinjiang in terms of the relationship between the agricultural societies of China proper and the nomadic steppe societies of Inner Asia.

At the beginning of the Han Dynasty, the region was subservient to the Xiongnu, a powerful nomadic people based in modern Mongolia, but by the beginning of the 2nd century BC, the Han managed to establish a protectorate over the region. The first Han foray in Xinjiang was an economic rather than political necessity. Xinjiang had become a strategic area but the small fertile oases of Inner Asia, widely scattered among deserts, steppes, and mountains, could support flourishing cities, not strong states. They were so far from China that transportation in bulk was expensive, and, therefore, they could not be incorporated economically within the Chinese state. At the same time, the area was a dangerous source of strength to the Xiongnu (Hsiungnu) nomads. Of necessity, therefore, it became the Chinese policy to occupy as many of the oases as possible as garrison points and to treat other oases as protected states in order to keep them from falling under Xiongnu control; and to keep their trade oriented toward China, rather than toward the Xiongnu.[7] Therefore, the Chinese today claim that the East Asian migrants (Hans) arrived in the eastern portions of the Tarim Basin about 3,000 years ago, while the Uighurs arrived after the collapse of the Orkon Uighur Kingdom, based in modern-day Mongolia, around the year 842 AD.

By the 4th century, the western Jin Dynasty, which succeeded the Han Dynasty, had succumbed to the successive waves of invasions by nomads from the north. Later, Xinjiang was placed under the Anxi Protectorate by the Tang Dynasty. As the Tang power declined, the Arab influence increased and Islam gained many converts. The Turkic language came to be spoken in the oases, while Mongolian remained the language of the steppes. The control of Xinjiang then passed into the hands of the Uighur Khaganate (Uighur Empire) and later to the Kara-Khanid Khanate (Great Khans Dynasty). The Mongols arrived under Genghis Khan, and by the 17th century, the Mongolian Dzungars established an empire over much of the region. The Qing Dynasty, established by the Manchus in China, managed to gain control over eastern Xinjiang as a result of a long struggle with the Dzungars. But by then, in the mid-19th century, the Russian Empire was encroaching upon Qing China along its entire northern frontier while China focussed on the coastal ports. The Opium Wars and Taiping rebellion in China had severely restricted the dynasty's ability to maintain its garrisons in distant Xinjiang. In 1864, both the Hui Chinese Muslims and Uighurs rebelled in Xinjiang cities. The Qing control of the region was swept away and a warlord named Yaqub Beg took over.

The Great Game and the two ETRs

The recent emergence of the Xinjiang issue is an indicator of gradual but steady Islamic reassertion in Central Asia.

In the Great Game, this independent Kashgaria Kingdom under Yakub Beg was recognised by the Ottoman Empire, Tsarist Russia and Great Britain. Yaqub Beg's rule lasted until General Zuo Zongtang again conquered the region in 1877 for the Qing China. These were the heydays of the Great Game and, therefore, the fear of Tsarist Russia's expansion into Xinjiang prompted Great Britain to support the Manchu court to conquer Xinjiang (then East Turkestan). Incredibly, the money for the Manchu invasion forces was granted by the British banks. In 1884, Qing China established Xinjiang as a province, formally applying onto it the political system of China proper and dropping the old name of *Huijiang* or Muslimland. This too did not last very long. In 1912, the Qing Dynasty was replaced by the Republic of China (ROC) and the last Qing governor fled. But the nominal control remained at Peking as one of the governor's subordinates named Yang Zengxin took control of the province and acceded in March 1912 to the ROC.

On November 12, 1933, after a rebellion against the Chinese rule, the shortlived East Turkistan Republic (ETR) was proclaimed in the Kashgar region with Soviet support. The ETR claimed authority over territory stretching from Aksu along the northern rim of the Tarim Basin to Khotan in the south. The fledgling republic did not last very long and in 1934, Xinjiang came under the control of the northeast Chinese warlord Sheng Shicai who ruled for the next decade, again with close support from the Soviet Union. Sheng Shicai later became anti-Soviet when he learnt of Moscow's intent to control his government. Therefore, Joseph Stalin ordered the Soviet troops to help the rebellion at Ili during the Chinese Civil War and the Second East Turkistan Republic came into existence from 1944 to 1949. The Second ETR was also known as the Three Districts Revolution as it was limited to Ili, Tarbaghatai and Altai districts of Xinjiang. It came to an end when the People's Liberation Army (PLA) entered Xinjiang in 1949, but not the hopes of the Uighurs who continue to view the ETR as an effort to establish an independent state, and the subsequent PLA entry as an invasion.

Rise of Uighur Nationalism

The recent emergence of the Xinjiang issue is an indicator of gradual but steady Islamic reassertion in Central Asia. Authors like Andrew Forbes have also

analysed the rise of Pan-Turkism, the theory that all of the Turkish speaking societies, from Turkey, through Central Asia to Xinjiang were likely to emerge in a political alliance, and concluded that this Islamic reassertion is part of this Pan-Turkism. However, prior to the 20th century, the cities of East Turkestan, hosting Turkic ethnicities such as Uighurs, Kyrgyz, Uzbeks, Kazakhs and Tajiks, held little unified nationalistic identity. The identity in the region was essentially "oasis-based", and it focussed on the city, town and village levels. Cross-border contact from Russia, Central Asia, India and China was significant in shaping each individual oasis' identity and cultural practices.[8]

Under Qing and later ROC rule, a largely Uighur-based identity began to form. The shortlived East Turkestan Republics further fuelled the Uighur hopes and nationalist aspirations. It is commonly believed that during China's Civil War, the Communists had promised Tibet and Xinjiang a federation of republics. Mao later reneged on this and instead introduced his notion of "autonomous" regions, provinces and districts.[9] This poor substitution obviously did not satisfy the Tibetans and the Uighurs, and the Communists had a difficult time in controlling both these "autonomous" lands. In 1959, the *Time* magazine summed up the Chinese difficulties when it reported that half a million Chinese in Xinjiang have been outnumbered by 4,500,000 hard-riding Muslim herdsmen—the Uighurs and Kazakhs—who pledge friendship by daubing their foreheads with lamb's blood. It also added, perhaps for effect, that the literal meaning of Kazakh is "man without a master". But in spite of such grave predictions, the Communists persisted and soon the Chinese Youth Brigades were moving into Xinjiang.

The Communists quickly reinterpreted the Second ETR as Xinjiang's revolution and a "positive part of the Communist revolution in China". They claimed to the world that the Second ETR acceded to, and welcomed, the PLA when it entered Xinjiang—a process they term as the "Peaceful Liberation of Xinjiang". It was uncannily similar to the "Peaceful Liberation of Tibet" by the PLA in 1951 in method and intent. Therefore, there are not many takers for this innovative theory. In actuality, by 1959, there were only 65,000 Uighurs and Kazakh Communist Party members and, thus, the Chinese Communists, from the beginning, relied not on persuasion but on the PLA to lead Xinjiang through what the Party called its "difficult period of rehabilitation." In that difficult period, landowners were dispossessed and shot, tight food rationing imposed and 12,000 "incorrigibles" shunted into six big forced-labour camps near Kuldja, Nilki and Kunes.[10] When Beijing proclaimed its Great Leap Forward, Xinjiang, normally a pastoral land was marked out for a big coal and steel centre at Kuldja.

While grain rotted in the fields and neglected herds died, the farmers were dragooned into factories, construction sites and 451 communes. However, after the Cultural Revolution, political and economic policies were moderated in Xinjiang.

Xinjiang was thereafter relatively quiet till the Berlin Wall fell. Essentially, Xinjiang was subject to the policies of China in the same way that the Turkic-speaking Muslim regions on the other side of the border in the Soviet Union were subject to the dictates of Moscow. It remained out of the news for many years, till Mikhail Gorbachev began to change the USSR, and, in turn, the boundaries in Central Asia. After the declarations of independence in the erstwhile Soviet republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan from the Soviet Union in 1991 (these republics ethnically are often called West Turkestan or Russian Turkestan), the calls for the liberation of East Turkestan from China began to surface again in the Turkic population. Meanwhile, it had not helped that the percentage of ethnic Han Chinese in Xinjiang had grown from about 6 percent in 1949 at the time of the Communist takeover, to an official tally of over 40 percent at present. This figure does not include military personnel or their families, or the many unregistered migrant workers. Initially, the Hans were forcibly relocated to Xinjiang during the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, but the later migrations were mainly due to the economic incentives provided by the Chinese government and the activities of the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (XPCC), a semi-military organisation of settlers that has built farms, towns, and cities over scattered parts of Xinjiang.

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However, *Sinification* is not the only *casus belli* of Uighur resentment. The restrictions on religious freedom imposed by the Chinese government have equally angered many Uighurs. Uighurs who choose to practise their faith can only use a state-approved version of the Koran. The Uighur men who work in the state sector cannot wear beards and the women cannot wear headscarves.[11] The Chinese state controls the management of all mosques, which stifles religious traditions that have formed a crucial part of the Uighur identity for centuries. Children under the age of 18 are not allowed to attend the mosque.[12] Two of Islam's five pillars—the sacred fasting month of Ramadan and the pilgrimage

to Mecca (*Haj*)—are carefully controlled. Students and government workers are compelled to eat during Ramadan, and the passports of Uighurs have been confiscated across Xinjiang to force them to join Chinese government-run *Haj* tours rather than travel illegally to Mecca on their own.[13] Imams cannot teach the Koran in private, and the study of Arabic is allowed only at special government schools. Further, the school instruction is in Mandarin and very little literature is published in the Uighur language. In a speech in June 2009 on the introduction of bilingual education in Xinjiang, Governor Nur Bekri, the highest-ranked Uighur official in China, raised eyebrows when he claimed that teaching Mandarin Chinese to Uighur children could "help fight terrorism." He asserted that "terrorists from neighboring countries mainly target Uighurs who are relatively isolated from mainstream society as they cannot speak Mandarin."[14]

The Uighur leaders also point out that little of the investment in energy-rich Xinjiang flows to the Uighurs. The widening inequalities have stoked ethnic enmities. While Xinjiang boasts of one of China's largest oil and gas reserves, exploration and related businesses are controlled by the country's national petroleum monopolies such as Sinopec and China National Petroleum Corporation. The average income last year for a rural family in Xinjiang—most Uighurs live in the countryside—was Yuan 3,503 (US $ 513), compared with the national average of Yuan 4,761, and an impressive Yuan 11,440 in the booming financial hub of Shanghai.[15] The impoverished Uighurs of the countryside do not have to look as far as Shanghai but only till the gleaming Han quarters of the capital Urumqi whose Han residents' average annual disposable income reached a record Yuan 12,328 (US $ 1,813) in 2008. Meanwhile, lack of employment opportunities in the Uighur countryside has compelled thousands of inhabitants of western and southern Xinjiang to work in distant coastal factories like the Shaoguan Toy Factory, from where the violence originated in July 2009.

The Deepening Divide

The trouble has indeed been simmering for decades now. In 1959, according to refugees from Xinjiang who made it to Hong Kong, Muslim resistance flickered across Xinjiang wherein the tribesmen fought the Red troops for two months in the Altai Mountains. In the 1980s, there was a smattering of student demonstrations and riots against police action that took on an ethnic aspect. An abortive uprising in April 1990, called the Baren Township riot, had resulted in more than 50 deaths. In February 1997, a police roundup of suspected separatists during Ramadan resulted in large demonstrations that turned violent in an episode known as the

Ghulja incident. Retaliation for this incident came soon in form of the Urumqi bus bombs on February 25, 1997. Thereafter, there were no major incidents of violence for some years. On January 5, 2007, the Chinese Public Security Bureau raided a suspected terrorist training camp in the mountains near the Pamir Plateau in southern Xinjiang, killing 18 'terrorists' and capturing another 17. In 2008, the Chinese government announced that several terrorist plots by Uighur separatists to disrupt the 2008 Olympic Games involving kidnapping athletes, journalists and tourists had been foiled. Four days before the Beijing Olympics, 16 Chinese police officers were killed and 16 injured in an attack in Kashgar.

In July 2009, the spark for the riots came from hundreds of kilometres away in Guangdong Province, when two Uighur workers died in clashes between Han Chinese and Uighurs in the Early Light Toy Factory in Shaoguan city. The sequence of events is contested but it is believed that the numbers were inflated and soon Uighur students were demanding justice on the streets of Urumqi for their compatriots killed in Guangdong Province.[16] The riots spiralled out of control and left 197 people dead and the situation was serious enough for President Hu Jintao to drop out of a G-8 meeting in Italy to return to China to handle the crisis.

The tenuous inter-racial fabric that has enabled the two ethnic groups to coexist, albeit under stressful conditions, for more than five decades, is now close to being undone.[17] It has not helped that a large proportion of the Uighur diaspora supports Pan-Turkic groups and they have formed several organisations such as the East Turkestan Party, apart from overseas Uighur organisations like the World Uighur Congress (WUC) and Uighur American Association. Though most Uighur separatists support peaceful Uighur nationalism, there are some radical Islamic militant groups such as the East Turkestan Islamic Movement and East Turkestan Liberation Organisation for independence as well. These radical elements received support from predictable quarters after the riots. In an October 2009 video message, Abu Yayha al-Libi, a senior Al Qaeda leader in Afghanistan, urged Muslims to launch a holy war against the Chinese "invaders" in response to the "massacre" of Uighurs in western China.

The View from Beijing

The Chinese nationalism arose only in the 20th century, as China was overcoming civil wars and foreign influences. It rose first under the influence of Sun Yat-sen and his brother-in-law Chiang Kaishek, and later under the charismatic Mao Zedong and his admiring successors like Deng Xiaoping. As a long-term

strategy to retain the newly acquired territories, the imperial and Maoist China attempted Sinification in Manchuria and Inner Mongolia and later in Tibet and Xinjiang. They succeeded in Manchuria and Inner Mongolia but the policy has apparently backfired in Tibet and Xinjiang. Therefore, intense nationalism and ethnic Han chauvinism has been now officially encouraged as an alternate policy to gain legitimacy by the Chinese state. Since 1996, the Chinese authorities have carried out a harsh crackdown on the nascent East Turkestan independence movement, which it labels as "separatists" and "religious extremists". The Chinese have concluded that the insurgent groups in Xinjiang pose one of the biggest security threats to China, and the government says the "three forces" of separatism, terrorism and religious extremism threaten to destabilise the region.

The media is a barometer of these chauvinist Han policies. As a result of the official media's largely emotive if not biased portrayal of "indiscriminate Uighur violence" against the Han Chinese, popular Internet chat rooms in China have been choc-a-bloc with hate messages about the imperative of "punishing the ungrateful and unpatriotic Uighurs."[18] The Chinese leadership has alleged that the Xinjiang disturbances are being orchestrated by outside forces, and swamped the media, domestic and international, with its own television images designed to suggest Uighur violence against the Hans. Thus, in a changed strategy, China is using the authoritarian power of the state to lead and dominate the media, rather than try to black it out.[19]

The Communist Party has for decades swung between hardline policies that aim to crush dissent and weaken ethnic identity, and softer approaches to make the minorities feel they can have a dual identity, both Chinese and Tibetan or Uighur. The conservatives have been in the ascendant in recent years, presiding over a tightening of controls on religion and language, and pushing for a harsh response to the Tibetan violence that flared up before the 2008 Beijing Olympics. Finally, the Chinese seem to be abandoning the carrot for the stick. A "Strike Hard" (*Yan Da*) movement was launched in early January 2009 against dissidents, separatists and other underground groupings in Xinjiang. This is a continuation of the crackdown by the police and People's Armed Police (PAP) officers since the spring of 2008 in which some 1,300 suspects had been arrested by December 2008 for alleged acts of terrorism and violations of state-security laws.

Post the July riots, the strength of the PAP—a sister unit of the PLA that is responsible for upholding domestic stability—and ordinary police in Xinjiang has been bolstered considerably. Estimates of PAP and police reinforcements have

run into more than 50,000. The Beijing authorities have admitted that 31 special public-security squads had newly arrived in Xinjiang "to render support to the work of safeguarding stability."[20] Reports in the Hong Kong media say crack PAP squads are swooping down on underground groups, particularly in thinly populated towns and villages in western and southern Xinjiang. Wang Lequan, the Communist Party chief in Xinjiang, is a known hardliner who once opined that the Turkic-like Uighur language was "out of step with the 21st century" and since being posted to Xinjiang in 1991, has relentlessly promoted a Sinicisation policy aimed at making Uighurs "more like ordinary Chinese."

Intense nationalism and ethnic Han chauvinism has been now officially encouraged as an alternate policy to gain legitimacy by the Chinese state.

The Terror Angle

In 2005, a joint report by Human Rights Watch and Human Rights in China, two US-based human rights groups, accused China of conducting a "crushing campaign of religious repression" against Muslim Uighurs in the name of anti-separatism and counter-terrorism. The report accuses China of opportunistically using the post-11 September environment to make the outrageous claim that individuals disseminating peaceful religious and cultural messages in Xinjiang are terrorists who have simply changed tactics. The report also revealed that almost half the detainees in Xinjiang's "re-education camps" are there for engaging in illegal religious activities.[21]

But the world has been a changed place since 9/11, much beyond such trifling human rights concerns. Taking the cue, the Chinese have managed to convince the world that all Uighur activists are 9/11-style terrorists. This has kept the Uighurs on the wrong side of the US in the war on terror in Afghanistan, and elsewhere. China has played on the Western fears of starting another radical Islamic movement or *jihad* in Asia. The US responded predictably as they solicited Chinese support in their war against Al Qaeda and the Taliban. The US and UN consequently labelled the East Turkestan Islamic Movement a terrorist group and President Bush froze their financial assets in 2002. The Chinese also claim that Al Qaeda had trained over 1,000 Uighur fighters before 2001 in Afghanistan, and many of these Al Qaeda trained fighters were responsible for the 197 deaths in the July 2009 riots.

The Uighurs have shared the misfortunes of the notorious Guantanamo Bay. Omar Khadr, a Canada born Guantanamo detainee was only 16 when he was picked up and has spent a quarter of his life there. The US, after detaining them for many years, is now the trying to find homes for the Uighur residents of Guantanamo Bay because they have come to the conclusion that they pose no terrorist threat. But thanks to intense Chinese lobbying, it took the US considerable time, four court rulings and the arrival of Barack Obama to the White House to reach this logical conclusion. In June 2009, two Chinese Uighurs were relocated to Bermuda after seven years of detention in Guantanamo Bay. Five have already been resettled in Albania, and the government of the tiny Pacific island country of Palau, which has no diplomatic relations with China, has offered to take the remaining 13 Gitmo Uighurs. In any case, China is sure to execute them if they are ever deported back to Xinjiang.

The Chinese "terror connection" theory has been rebutted by Alim Seytoff, the vice president of the Uighur American Association. He states that over the years, many young Uighur men, fearing political persecution or in need of jobs, have tried to go overland from Xinjiang to other countries. Turkey, whose language the Uighurs can understand, has naturally been a highly desired destination. Many of them, unable to get visas to Turkey, ended up in Afghanistan, which shares a strip of border with Xinjiang. Once the US troops round them up, they land up in Guantanamo Bay.[22]

Looking Ahead

The unrest in Xinjiang has seen the greatest political loss of life in China since the Tiananmen massacre in 1989. It demonstrates the failure of the Chinese development model for both Xinjiang and Tibet. The widespread comparisons of the crisis in Xinjiang with Tiananmen Square in 1989 and the uprisings in Tibet in 2008 in media and activist circles are not sitting well in Beijing. In addition, because of the political sensitivities surrounding China's treatment of its Muslim community, China is also worried that the recent crisis will tarnish its reputation in the Middle East and the greater Islamic world, and perhaps endanger its energy security prospects. However, the solution lies within. China, and the Uighur leaders should acknowledge that it is a historical fact that the relationship between Xinjiang and China Proper is complicated and Xinjiang has had long periods of *de facto* independence as well as periods under Chinese control. China also needs to reconsider its internal policies and halt the Sinification drive to address the Uighur and international concerns.

The majority of Uighurs are still moderates as radicalisation is only in its nascent stages and the influence of terror groups still on the remote fringes.

Most of them will settle for genuine autonomy rather than an independent East Turkestan. As early as 1950, the great specialist on China and Central Asia, Owen Lattimore, in his book *Pivot of Asia,* wrote that it has been apparent that the nationalist movement among the Uighurs has never gone as far as the militant revolutionary stage reached by the Viet Minh and other radical groups in the Far East. The Uighurs seek primarily a modicum of liberties such as will permit them to continue to survive as one people under a government of their own choosing.[23] Little would have changed today. However, thanks to Beijing's harsh policies, radicalisation of the Uighurs is clearly discernable, even if it is only the beginning.

If the Chinese leadership continues to opt for the iron fist, the majority of Uighurs who clearly favour non-violent means to attain a higher degree of autonomy and not independence, might be turned into implacable foes of what they will see as chauvinistic Han-Chinese colonisers. But such a pragmatic analysis seems unlikely in Beijing in the near future as the Communists are buoyed by the success of Sinification in Inner Mongolia and Manchuria, and will push the immigration-driven Sinification in Xinjiang beyond the half-way home point. It cannot but fuel a million mutinies. As all oppressed people find solace and strength in religion, China will be soon facing the transformation of Islam from a religion to a political force. The *clash of civilisations* theorists will sadly colour it as another *jihad*. The Communists will term them splittists or separatists while trying to remove the remaining traces of non-Han Chinese culture from China, which will accentuate the resentment and widen the gap to unbridgeable dimensions. The fourth frontier then may only be a matter of time.

Notes

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