Xinjiang:
China's Restive Northwest

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Decades after the last flickers of Tibetan armed resistance died down, another separatist movement is taking shape in the northwestern part of China. Xinjiang, sometimes called Sinkiang, a supposedly autonomous province of China, populated by 22 million people of whom the Uighurs (or Uyghurs) make up more than 40 percent of the population, is turning towards insurgency in a desperate attempt to retain its unique identity. This simmering insurgency is partly fuelled by extremist Islamic ideologies but mainly by the deep alienation arising from large gaps in income and education between the Uighurs and the Han Chinese within Xinjiang. While the Uighur hardliners call for an independent East Turkestan, the Chinese call them terrorists and are increasingly adopting harsher measures to contain the rising incidences of violence which are scarring not only Xinjiang but also the other parts of China. These repressive policies in Xinjiang have provoked further unrest, while fears of another Islamic insurgency in Central Asia have prevented the Uighurs from obtaining international support or sympathies.

Xinjiang Flares Up

Four years after the ethnic rioting and clashes in Xinjiang reached a peak in 2009, leading to over 200 deaths, the conflict is again escalating. In June 2013, an attack on a police station and government offices in Turpan prefecture left 26 people dead. In March 2014, knife-wielding assailants struck at a train station in Kunming, which left 29 dead and 143 injured. In late April 2014, a bomb went

off outside a train station in the capital Urumqi, killing three people. May 2014 witnessed another attack in a vegetable market in Urumqi which killed 43 people and injured more than 90. The Chinese state machinery has struck back. On June 16, 2014, the government executed 13 Uighurs who had been found guilty of organising and leading terrorist groups. On the same day, another court in Xinjiang sentenced three more people to death, in connection with an audacious attack in October 2013 near the entrance to the Forbidden City in Beijing that left six people dead and 39 injured.[1] But these strong Chinese measures have been counter-productive. Many of them are perceived as disrespectful to the Muslim population, e.g. banning regular religious activities, forbidding full-face veil, forcibile recruitment to the Communist Party, and abusive coercive power.[2]

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Cross-Roads of Central Asia

Xinjiang lies at the cultural cross-roads between the Islamic world, the Middle East and the Han Chinese heartland. It is traditionally home to various Turkic-speaking and Persian-speaking Muslim oasis dwellers, as well as Turkic-speaking and Mongolian-speaking nomads who roam the grasslands in the north. Named Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region by the Chinese, it accounts for one-sixth of China's land with a total area of 1,664,900 sq km and is home to about twenty million people from thirteen major ethnic groups, the largest of which (over eight million) comprises Turkic-speaking Uighurs. It is the largest Chinese administrative region which shares borders with five Muslim countries: Afghanistan and Pakistan in South Asia, and the Central Asian states of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. For centuries, the region's economy has revolved around agriculture and trade, with towns such as Kashgar thriving as hubs along the famous Silk Road. But Xinjiang lies in a troubled neighbourhood. Afghanistan is perpetually in conflict, the Ferghana Valley has tensions between the various ethnic groups and Tajikistan itself was torn by a civil war until 1996 and is the most politically unstable Central Asian state.

Xinjiang is energy-rich and strategically located on the borders of Central Asia, sharing 5,500 km of international borders. It provides China with a unique potential to assert its influence in Central Asia and the Middle East. China's regional authority is greatly enhanced by its position as a Central Asian power and China sees the break-up of the Soviet Union as an opportunity to expand

its Central Asian leadership. Xinjiang's ethnic, family and religious ties with the surrounding states are all regarded as means to this end.[3] The traditional agricultural practices of the Uighurs have been ignored and a maze of existing and planned pipelines and highways, all vital to China's growing energy needs, has been planned for this province. According to scholars like Ziad Haider, the Chinese Communist Party's consolidation of its rule in Xinjiang has been "an attempt to turn the region into an internal colony for three reasons: to reduce the historic vulnerability of its borderlands, to avert emboldening the separatist movements in Tibet and Taiwan by agreeing to Uighur demands for greater autonomy, and to monopolize Xinjiang's rich natural resources." [4]

Casus Belli

Trouble is indeed brewing in Xinjiang but the situation did not deteriorate overnight. Apart from conflicting historical claims, the Uighurs resent the influx of Hans in their traditional homeland: there exists stark economic inequality between the migrant Han Chinese and Uighurs, and the Chinese are often accused of economic exploitation and employment discrimination. However, the most provocative reason leading to escalation in violence is the curb on religious freedom which the Uighurs feel is diluting their culture and religion. Indeed, according to scholars like Lixiong Wang, the author of *My Far West, Your East Turkestan*, Xinjiang is heading toward *'Palestinisation,'* and in imminent danger of devolving into a protracted ethnic conflict and communal violence.

Communism versus Religion

China is changing due to fast modernisation. While this modernisation is causing tensions across the country, the ethnic minorities like the Uighurs find it more difficult to cope up due to lack of government support and their deep religious roots. The Uighurs regard themselves as culturally and ethnically close to the Central Asian nations. Post 1949, the Mao era was particularly hard for all religious groups in China and Muslims were no exception. Before the Communists came into power in 1949, there were more than 20,000 mosques in Xinjiang. The number plummeted to less than 500 during the Cultural Revolution. However, in the recent years, there has been a sharp increase in the building of mosques. In fact, post 2006, more than 10,000 mosques were built within five years[5] which illustrates the increased religious inclination among the Uighurs.

The Uighur men who want government jobs have been forced to shave their beards while the few Uighur women who are eligible for jobs are forbidden to wear head scarves on duty. Last year, *The Economist* reported that in Turpan prefecture, the authorities have been waging a campaign to persuade Uighur men not to grow long beards and women not to wear the veil. Even the sale and manufacture of the *jilbab*, a full-length outer garment worn by Muslim women, has been banned.[6] The Muslim Uighurs must only use a state-approved Quran while the mosques are managed by the government. However, in spite of these restrictions, underground Islamic schools are flourishing and the state authority can no longer effectively control all of the religious groups in terms of organisational networks and religious teaching.

Exploitation and Living Space

Xinjiang is a resource-rich province which is the home of numerous state controlled industries, the profits of which flow to Beijing. There has been discovery of large oil deposits in its Tarim Basin, further enhancing its energy significance. Xinjiang has coal reserves which are about 38 percent of the national total, and it already produces 13 percent of China's crude oil output and 30 percent of the country's natural gas. However, these natural resources are controlled by the Han Chinese and the related employment has been cornered by migrant Han workers from the vast Chinese countryside. In oil and gas investment, led by the China National Petroleum Corporation, many job opportunities remain closed to the Uighurs.[7]

The Chinese believe that quantity has a quality of its own. It is evident in the capital city of Urumqi where the Han Chinese now comprise 73 percent of the total population, while the Uighurs are only 12 percent. Xinjiang is of importance to China for population resettlement. In 1949, about 0.29 million Han Chinese lived in Xinjiang, constituting 6 percent of the total population while the Uighurs made up over 80 percent. But since then, over six million have immigrated to the province and today the Han population constitutes roughly 50 percent. The Chinese government does not count the number of workers who travel to Xinjiang, but reports say[8] the Han population has risen dramatically, from 6.7 percent (220,000) in 1949 to 40 percent (8.4 million) in 2008 and is nearly 50 percent now. The major spurt took place after China's economic liberalisation as millions of Han migrants, freed from the socialist-era household registration system that pinned them to a single geographic location, came to the region in droves, seeking better economic prospects.[9]

Consequently, from a high of 80 percent in 1949, the Uighur population dwindled to 75 percent in 1953 to a drastic drop to 45 percent in 2000.[10] These days, Han migrant workers have started to penetrate small towns and rural areas that were traditionally Uighur strongholds.

Employment Discrimination

The influx of the Han Chinese has fuelled resentment among the Uighurs as abundant natural resources have led to high wages for workers. Xinjiang enjoys the fourth highest minimum wage among the country's provinces, regions and municipalities at Yuan 1,520 (US$ 240) per month, on a par with eastern industrial hubs such as Shandong and Guangdong provinces. But most of these jobs are cornered by the Han Chinese as most Uighurs are peasants and have very limited education and, thus, very few job opportunities are offered to them. Most of the construction workers in the suburbs like Toutunhe of Urumqi are Han Chinese while the Uighurs remain confined to Erdaoqiao, one of the city's remaining predominantly Uighur neighbourhoods. It is these hordes of migrant Han workers who were targeted by Uighur separatists in a bomb and knife attack at Urumqi railway station in April 2014.

The job discrimination is manifest in advertisements which clearly indicate that applicants must speak Mandarin and no *halal* food will be served at work sites. Incidentally, pork, which is forbidden in the *halal* diet, is a staple food of the Han Chinese. These differences further accentuate the cultural divide. The Uighurs are also under pressure to conform linguistically as the urban job market is dominated by Mandarin. China denies these allegations and labels all dissidents as separatists. The officials instead highlight government plans to address underdevelopment and lack of jobs in predominately Uighur areas.

Economic Disparities

There is a sharp difference in economic prosperity in Han inhabited versus Uighur inhabited areas. There are 20 prefecture-level administrative units in Xinjiang. The overall Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita of China in 2013 was US$ 6,091. Eighty percent of the Uighur population lives in southern Xinjiang. These southern areas suffer from extreme underdevelopment with Hotan, Kizilsu Kirghiz, and Kashgar having a GDP per capita of US$ 1,111, US$ 1,725 and US$ 2,030 respectively. This is much lower than the average Chinese GDP per capita as well as average Xinjiang GDP per capita of US$ 5,372. On the

other hand, the Han inhabited Karamay in northern Xinjiang enjoys a GDP per capita of US$ 21,389.

The regional inequality is evident in the fact that northern Xinjiang has only 1/3 of land area and 54 percent population but its fixed asset investment accounts to 74.8 percent, GDP accounts to 76 percent, and industrial production accounts to 78.8 percent.[11] This explains why most of the recent attacks were concentrated in southern Xinjiang, particularly in Kashgar and Hotan. Michael Dillon, author of *Xinjiang: China's Muslim Far Northwest*, has stated that it is the general colonial attitude of Han Chinese officials towards the Uighurs that generates huge resentment.[12] Meanwhile, inequalities in Xinjiang are widening. The Han-dominated areas are sporting high-rises, Kentucky Fried Chicken restaurants and Adidas shops while the old Muslim neighbourhoods have Uighurs selling melons and raisins and the countryside is dotted with oases surrounding earth-coloured mosques, virtually unchanged since centuries.

There was a surge in nationalist sentiment among the Uighurs following the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Terrorists or Anguished

During the 1990s, there was a surge in nationalist sentiment among the Uighurs after several Central Asian countries gained independence following the collapse of the Soviet Union. While the Western media tends to associate violence in Xinjiang with Muslim extremism, the Chinese authorities tend to blame Xinjiang separatists based outside China for the unrest, most prominent being the exiled leader Rebiya Kadeer. The Chinese authorities have also singled out the Eastern Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) as the main group responsible for orchestrating the attacks, for which no evidence exists. In fact, ETIM, earlier classified as a terrorist organisation during the Bush Administration, is not listed as a foreign terrorist organisation any more in the list updated from January 2012 onwards.

China has played up the threat in order to justify its heavy-headed security policies. While the violence in Xinjiang may be cast in the language of religious extremism and ethno-separatism, the facts often suggest that the violence is ignited by practical grievances. The Urumqi riots were triggered by the belief that the police didn't intervene to stop the Chinese from killing Uighurs in an inter-ethnic dispute in a toy factory in Guangdong. Post 9/11, China portrayed the Uighur separatists as auxiliaries of Al Qaeda, and claimed that they have

received training in Afghanistan. No evidence exists in support of these claims except religious broad brushing by Beijing. Similarly, a Beijing newspaper, *Global Times* recently quoted that since last year, nearly 100 Uighurs had gone to Syria to fight alongside the rebels to hone their "terrorist skills". There is, however, no evidence of these alleged links. Some Chinese micro blogging sites even suspected the involvement of Uighurs in the recent disappearance of Malaysian Airlines flight MH 370.

Conclusion

Historically, whenever the Centre has become weak in China, the ethnic minorities on the fringes, like the Mongols, Uighurs and Tibetans have tried to assert their independence. However, today, the Chinese state is strong and the economy is on an unprecedented boom. Therefore, this unrest cannot be viewed in the weak Centre context. *Au contraire*, most likely it is the ethno-cultural expression of Uighur identity which is reacting to repression, economic disadvantages and the incessant Han migration. In addition, Beijing's new hardline stance, which restricts even language and culture, has alienated the many moderate Uighurs who had earlier grudgingly accepted Chinese restrictions as the price of economic development.

China needs to convert Xinjiang into a genuinely autonomous region with greater respect for the Uighur culture, language and religion, and to provide more space for cultural expressions. Essentially, Xinjiang needs a truly pluralistic cultural policy that emphasises support for the Uighur and other minority languages, and eases other cultural restrictions, particularly on religion. The key to resolving the conflict depends on how significantly Beijing improves the living standard of the Uighurs and finds ways to accommodate the rise of Islamic identity. The Uighurs are not terrorists. But if the repression, incessant Han migration, religious and cultural discrimination and job inequalities continue, while China surges ahead on energy resources sourced from Xinjiang, the movement may turn very violent. The choice is with Beijing.

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Notes

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