The Xinjiang Problem

MANU SIDDHARTHA JHA

Xinjiang- The Province

Xinjiang is an autonomous region of the People's Republic of China. It is the largest Chinese administrative division and spans over 1.6 million km2, bordering countries such as Russia, Mongolia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan,

Afghanistan, Pakistan and India. The name "Xinjiang", which literally means "New Frontier" or "New Border", was given during the Qing Dynasty. It is home to a number of different ethnic groups including the Uyghur, Han, Kazakh, Hui, Kyrgyz and Mongol.

The decision to grant Xinjiang an autonomous status many years ago by Mao was rooted in the strange dialectics of Communism, specifically in Stalin's nationality policies. Stalin, and later Mao, viewed the creation of autonomous regions as the Communist Party's transitory recognition of local identities that would eventually become obsolete under socialism, and of independent cultural identities that would soon be assimilated in all but a folkloric sense. The creation of an autonomous region was therefore merely a tactic, as the idea of national autonomy would itself ultimately become a meaningless political concept under Communism.

The Xinjiang Problem

This province primarily consists of two ethnic groups, the Hans and the Uyghurs (Turkish and Muslim population) apart from the others such as Mongols, Huis etc. Xinjiang is home to more than 8 million people and much of the tension in the region is sourced in the claims of some Uighur separatist groups for greater political and religious autonomy, and also in resentment at the growing presence of Han Chinese domination— China's largest ethnic group —that they claim limits their economic opportunities.

For a millennium Xinjiang's large Muslim and Turkic population has viewed itself as religiously and ethnically distinct from the Han Chinese society. The Uyghurs themselves comprise just under half of Xinjiang's population, but with the addition of Kazaks and Kyrgyz the number of Turkic Muslims rises to over half of the total. The Uyghurs have not, until the past few generations, shared a strong sense of common destiny. Increasingly, however, they have come to adopt a consolidated identity as "Uyghurs." These Uyghurs today feel that Chinese policy has ignored them or, worse, consciously worked against them and feel deeply threatened.

This is all the more exaggerated since the new economic opportunities and growth taking place in the province present a different picture altogether form the Uyghur point of view. Where Han Chinese see recent developments there as uniformly positive, Uyghur Muslims discern a much darker side by focusing on what they see as the one-sidedness of the benefits those developments bestow. Every change that is brought about in the province, when viewed from their

perspective, only helps marginalise them as a group in their own homeland by making the Hans economically stronger and leading to a skewed growth. So ominous is this process of marginalisation to members of this minority population that they see it as posing an existential threat.

Uyghurs think that this unequal division of wealth favours Han Chinese at their expense. Those involved with the development of the province's energy wealth are mainly Han Chinese, rather than Uyghurs, and the profits go mainly to Beijing. That part of the province's wealth that does come back to Urumchi goes to support many projects that further threaten the homelands and environments where Xinjiang's indigenous peoples have lived through the centuries.

The growing discontent amongst this section of the province regarding the 'skewed' economic growth as viewed by them, and also the harmful implications this can potentially have on their existence as a distinct ethnic group is what the Xinjiang problem is all about.

Government's Response

The government of the People's Republic of China is firmly committed to holding onto Xinjiang and opposing all ideas and actions that might jeopardise the territorial integrity of the state as it has existed since 1949. In the official Chinese view, Xinjiang has been an integral part of China for nearly two millennia. The government of China appears willing to grant only minimal concessions, if any, in the direction of genuine Uyghur autonomy, since it aims to preserve the status of the province as it was at the time of independence. Over the past decade it has applied whatever degree of force is necessary to eliminate what it sees as the threat of separatism and the use of terrorism by those promoting it.

This is exactly what the "Xinjiang problem" is all about. It pits a small but increasingly self-conscious group of people anxious for its existential future against one of the world's most powerful states whose leaders are equally concerned to preserve the territory and administrative integrity of the whole. It arises primarily from economic, social, and cultural developments within the borders of the People's Republic of China.

However, it is also linked in complex ways with currents beyond China's borders. Because of this, if the "Xinjiang problem" is not resolved, it is bound to affect not only broader developments within the People's Republic of China but also the stability of Xinjiang's neighbors in Central and South Asia and, indeed, of the broader world order.

Perspectives

Over time, the key players that have emerged on the opposite sides of this issue are the Uyghurs- who want to strengthen their ethnic identity and the Chinese government that is trying very hard to suppress this movement.

Uyghurs

One of the major issues of this community is regarding the increasing migration of the Han Chinese into the region. This migration is slowly denying to Uyghurs the traditional centres of their civilisation. This has a chain reaction on areas such as employment and education. For example, a "glass ceiling" prevails for most Turkic citizens of Xinjiang when it comes to employment for high administrative posts. Closed out at the top, Uyghurs therefore either concentrate in certain professions within the Mandarin-speaking cities or revert to the management of their own communal affairs. This leads to a huge income gap between Han Chinese and Turkic citizens of Xinjiang.

The existing economy strongly favours Han Chinese, who fill approximately four fifths of all jobs in manufacturing, the oil and gas industries, transport, communications, and science and technology, and fully nine-tenths of jobs in the burgeoning field of construction. In terms of education, there are other problems that are coming up. In an effort to preserve their own language and cultural traditions, many Turkic families send their sons to Chinese schools and their daughters to Uyghur or Kazak schools, thus lowering the horizons for women and broadening the gender gap.

As their Uyghur grievance deepens, many turn to Islam. Here, too, they encounter severe restrictions by the state, which, after a period of greater tolerance and even support during the 1980s, has since the mid-1990s reverted to the strictest controls and outright repression. Even though they live in a "Uyghur Autonomous Region," Uyghurs and other Turkic people have little voice in, or control over, public decisions affecting their destiny.

To these Xinjiang Turks, the issue of 'assimilation' by the government is starkly different from that perceived by the westerners. They deeply mistrust Chinese talk of a multi-ethnic society and fear their fate is to be absorbed into a specifically Han Chinese world. Hence, they see themselves as fighting to preserve their unique historical homeland, language, culture, and traditions from forces they believe would obliterate them.

Government

China's grievances against Uyghur activism are the mirror image of Uyghur charges against China. According to this argument, the Turkic peoples of Xinjiang are different, which is why Mao granted them one of five autonomous regions within the People's Republic. But China is a multi-ethnic state whose citizens are free to move as they wish. Since Uyghurs themselves claim this right when they set up trading operations as far afield as Shanghai and the coastal cities, they should not complain when Han Chinese do the same in Xinjiang.

Besides, Beijing argues that China has pulled Xinjiang from abject poverty and rolled back near-universal illiteracy there. The culture of modern China and the Chinese language are "progressive," and the windows through which an isolated Xinjiang can interact with the larger world.

Against this background, it is obvious in Beijing's eyes that Uyghur activists, by resisting a legitimate developmental program designed to pull the region into the twenty-first century and integrate it economically both with the rest of China and with lands to the west, are working against the true interests of Xinjiang. Uyghurs may complain of a "glass ceiling" in the local administration but the government would argue that careers there, as elsewhere in China, are "open to talent."

In such a scenario, when certain Uyghur groups resort to violent methods of resistance, the government is bound to feel threatened and therefore, adopt harsh methods in order to suppress it. The goal behind it is basically to achieve the objective of 'assimilation' which would not only cease the existence of distinct ethnic identities with the potential to resist politically, but at the same time remove any threat to Chinese sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Terrorism

There are international dimensions to the Uyghur issue that considerably complicate China's control of Xinjiang. In each case they serve to stimulate both nationalism and Islamism within Xinjiang and strengthen their role as vehicles for Uyghur aspirations, whether for autonomy or independence.

For example, Xinjiang currently has more cases of HIV per capita than any other region in China, thanks to the widespread intravenous use of heroin imported from Burma and Afghanistan. While the Chinese government blames this epidemic on international criminal forces, Uyghurs tend to blame its spread on Beijing's indifference to the Uyghurs' fate. The bloody 1997 conflict in Gulcha is an obvious manifestation of this trend.

All this is amplifying the Xinjiang problem, and leading to instances of terrorism:

- The demise of Eastern Turkistan People's Party (ETPP) founded in 1949, which had spearheaded the growth of the militant movement in Xinjiang, was followed by the growth of East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) reorganized along religious lines. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s the ETIM tried to mobilise local support through various slogans like 'Down with socialism'.
- The terror threats and attacks have increased recently post the Beijing Olympics. There have been various instances of attacks by some violent Uyghur groups on the local police stations, attacks on passenger planes etc.
- Bomb attacks in areas such as Kashgar city that have led many people injured and dead.

Such instances of terrorism have led the Chinese government to only recently enforce a two-month "strike hard" in its far-western Xinjiang region, putting in place 24-hour patrols, street searches and identity checks on citizens to crack down on violent terrorism and "extreme religious thought". This "strike hard" campaign, which would last till 15 October 2011, is aimed at "curbing the momentum of frequent terrorist activities". In Tianshan district, which was at the centre of rioting during the July 2009 ethnic unrest that left at least 197 people dead, a patrol team of 7,300 community members, led by 300 police officers had been recently put in place.

The government views these activities as externally-funded movements, mostly blaming the World Uyghur Congress based at Munich for working against the unity of the Chinese Republic. China has also conducted several searches within Chinese banks for evidence to attack terrorist financing mechanisms. Several press reports in the Chinese Media claim that Uyghurs train and fight with Islamic groups in the former Soviet Union, including Chechnya. However, the credibility of these reports is in doubt. However, the view that government's response to such attacks is political cannot be ignored.

Conclusion

One of the salient features of Chinese communism is that, unlike the former Soviet Union, it is basically nationalistic in character. The Soviet Union followed communism in the ideological sense. With the disintegration of the USSR, the world witnessed old ethnic identities emerging unscathed from 70 years of communist rule. On the other hand, the strong underpinnings of Chinese

ethnicity in the identity of the Chinese state, other ethnic minorities feel their own identities in jeopardy. Hence, sporadic eruptions of ethnic discontent among the Uyghurs and some indigenous groups such as Tibetans and Mongols are witnessed.

In order to eliminate the scourge of violence and terrorism in Xinjiang, China needs to complement its efforts to develop the region economically with the political and social empowerment of Uyghurs and other indigenous ethnic groups in the territory.

Manu Siddhartha Jha is a student of Political Science at Delhi University. He has recently completed an internship with CLAWS.