



DECIPHERING UIGHUR UNREST IN CHINA



As China continues to become a dominant regional power in Asia, its domestic stability is crucial for regional stability. The ongoing unrest in its Western province of Xinjiang has created a multitude of problems for China. Xinjiang is important to China as it is China's largest province, gifted with significant oil and gas reserves and acts as a strategic buffer and gateway to Central Asia. Preservation of peace in Xinjiang has immense symbolic importance for Beijing as its stability will have an impact on other regions of China.

Geography and Importance

The Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region is located on the Northwestern border of China and stretches 2,000 km East to West and 1,650 km North to South. Xinjiang is the largest administrative unit in the PRC. It shares borders with Mongolia, Afghanistan, Pakistan and with three Central Asian states - Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. It is also close to Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. Its nearest neighbours within China are Gansu province and the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, both having substantial Muslim communities.

This geographically remote region has been crucial in transportation of culture and goods between East and West. Xinjiang is a remote province and sparsely populated. It is made up of vast deserts which contribute to a climate of very cold winters and very hot summers. It is an area of low humidity with more consistent patterns of rain as opposed to a concentrated rainy season. The province's lowest point is 155 meters below sea level and its highest is 8611 meters above sea level. Several of its borders are marked by mountain ranges contributing to the relative seclusion of the region, making it rather difficult to access by land. Geographically Xinjiang is a basin. The mountains, basins, steppes and oases that characterize the region's geography have exercised an important influence on its history. The vastness of this region is mitigated by the natural migratory routes dictated by extreme environmental variance, high-elevation mountain ranges with few trafficable passes and large lowland deserts, therefore focusing inter-regional movement and human inhabitation within its borders.

Due to its geography and climate, Xinjiang is well suited for producing fruits especially grapes and melons, and other commodities such as wheat, silk and cotton. However, none of these products have the power or value of the natural minerals and oil present in the region. According to CIA World Fact Book, the region holds 20.9 billion tons of petroleum reserves which is 30 percent of the petroleum on land in China. In 2008, Xinjiang ranked first in the production of natural gas and second in producing crude oil. Also, its volume of foreign trade was pegged at US \$ 22.21 billion in 2008, raising its ranking as 12th most important trading region in China and second among central and western municipalities, provinces and autonomous regions. The region also holds large reserves of coal, copper, iron, lead, platinum, silver, tin and uranium. The Chinese strategic interest in Xinjiang is due to its geographical location as the region makes up a potential gateway to its Central Asian

neighbours. Similar to Xinjiang, the Central Asian countries are rich in energy resources and raw materials. In addition to potential new markets for China's products, good relations with the Central Asian states means easy access to energy resources which China strongly needs. Xinjiang is also culturally related to Central Asia as a large number of Uighurs are citizens of Central Asian countries and in turn, a large number of people of Central Asian ethnicity live in Xinjiang.

Ethnic Groups

The largest ethnic group in Xinjiang is the Uighurs. Uighurs are people of Turkic origins. Turkic presence in the Xinjiang region has been traced back to around AD 540. Uighurs were nomadic people, believed to have roots in the Siberia-Mongolia area. The word Uighur means a follower or supporter. The early Uighurs were followers of Buddhist principles. With the arrival of Arab culture in the Central Asian region, Islam set itself within the Uighur culture. Xinjiang is divided between Muslims, most of who speak Turkic languages and the Persian speaking Tajiks and Han Chinese immigrants being the majority population of China. The Muslims are in the majority, but are also divided linguistically and culturally. The largest single group is the Uighurs, historically agriculturalists, craftsmen and traders, have a distinctive language and culture of their own. They are also related to other Turkic people in Xinjiang and the rest of Central Asia. The great majority of Uighurs live in Xinjiang which they see as their homeland, although there are communities living in Kazakhstan and other Central Asian states, Turkey and Western Europe. The other significant non-Han ethnic groups living in Xinjiang include the Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Uzbeks and Tajiks with relatives in the newly emerging Central Asian states. In addition there are the Hui or Dungans of the former Soviet Union whose language and culture is closer to that of the Han Chinese, although they are also Muslims.

Early History

Original inhabitants of Xinjiang were part of the great migration of Turkic speakers from what is now Mongolia in the 9th century and the present day Uighurs claim descent from them. The Chinese influence in the region goes back to at least the tenth century, but Chinese power was only consolidated in the eighteenth century and the name Xinjiang or the New Frontier was used first in 1768. The Qing dynasty's military administration encountered constant nationalist and religious resistance, allied to Islamic forces. In 1831, the first Han immigrants from China were allowed to move into Southern Xinjiang to cultivate the reclaimable land. A Muslim insurrection under a local leader Yakub Beg led to an independent khanate based on Kashghar until it was overthrown by Qing forces in 1878. Xinjiang was formally incorporated into the Chinese empire as a province in 1884. Since the collapse of the Qing Dynasty in 1912, Xinjiang has enjoyed varying degrees of autonomy. Turkic rebels in Xinjiang declared independence in October 1933 and created the Islamic Republic of East Turkistan. In 1934 the region was reabsorbed in the Republic of China. In 1944, factions within Xinjiang again declared independence, this time under the auspices of the Soviet Union and created the Second East Turkistan Republic. In 1949, the Chinese Communist Party took over the territory and declared it a Chinese province. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) took control of Xinjiang and a Han immigration programme was announced in 1950. The PLA launched campaigns against counter-revolutionaries and for land reform including confiscation and redistribution of land owned by mosques or other religious foundations. These measures were used to break down the traditional social structure, political and religious authority. In October 1955, Xinjiang was made an autonomous region of China and steps were taken to encourage Han Chinese to settle in new industrial towns and farming villages run by the quasi-military Xinjiang Production and Development

Corps. China also set up its nuclear testing facility at Lop Nur in the Tarim Basin and conducted its first test in 1964.

After the 1958 'Great Leap Forward', radical policies, which were less sensitive to local feelings, replaced the cautious approach of the early 1950s. Local nationalism, Han and Muslim leaders sympathetic to the USSR were systematically removed from the political scene and traditional bazaars and Islamic organisations were closed down. The area came under direct Chinese military control in 1971. In 1980 a reform programme was initiated but was abandoned in 1987. Due to the government encouraged migration of Han Chinese, the region has witnessed a demographic change. As per a census held in 1953, the area consisted of 74 percent of Uighur population. In a census held in 2000, the Uighurs accounted for about 45 percent while the Han Chinese constituted 40 per cent of the population of Xinjiang, excluding large numbers of troops stationed in the region and unknown numbers of unregistered migrants. Forced demographic changes, denial of political rights, economic exploitation, unemployment and restrictions on religious and cultural freedom all have contributed to emergence of separatist movement in Xinjiang.

Birth of Uighur Separatism

The evolution of Uighur separatism and particularly Islamist-based separatism has been shaped by both domestic and foreign developments. In 1940, Hizbul Islam Li-Turkistan also known as Islamic Party of Turkistan or Turkistan Islamic Movement emerged in Xinjiang, spearheading a series of unsuccessful uprisings from the 1940s to 1952. This uprising was initially against the local warlords and later against the Communist Chinese government. In 1956 the focus was changed from Turkistan to East Turkistan or Xinjiang. After another failed attempt of uprising, the Islamist Uighur movement faded away for several decades with minor incidents during the Cultural Revolution. In 1979 one of

the original founders of Hizbul Islam Li-Turkistan, Abdul Hakeem, was released from prison and set up underground religious schools. Among his pupils in the 1980s was a Hasan Mahsum, who would later create the ETIM.

The 1980s witnessed a chaotic period in Xinjiang, with ethnic and religious revivalism, a growing student movement and public opposition to China's nuclear testing at Lop Nur. Efforts were made to promote literacy and refocus on religious and ethnic heritage. This revival led to birth of several Uighur separatist or Islamist militant movements. Another factor which added a religious colour to the movement was the exposure of young Uighurs to radical forms of Islam during their visits to Pakistan. As a result small-scale, localized underground religious organizations started to emerge. As per open sources, there are approximately 23,000 mosques in the region, some financed by Saudi Arabia and Pakistan.

In April 1990, an offshoot of the Uighur Islamist militant movement was discovered plotting an uprising in Xinjiang. This prompted the Chinese government to launch operations in the region, arresting known, suspected or potential trouble makers. This pattern would be repeated through the "Strike Hard" campaigns of the 1990s. Many of the Uighurs caught up in these security campaigns, including Mahsum, began to share, refine and shape their ideology in prisons, taking on more radical tendencies and creating networks of sleeper cells that could be called upon later. Also, in early 1990s, restrictions on minorities and religions began to loosen in China. Mosques were rebuilt or reopened and greater interaction between China's Muslims and the wider Islamic community was permitted. Chinese Muslim participation in the annual Haj pilgrimage grew steadily, exposing locals to international Islamic thought and political developments. Similarly, foreign Muslims were allowed to visit Islamic sites in China, creating a

greater awareness of the wider Muslim community. This opening resulted in more minorities speaking out against what were seen as discriminatory economic, religious, and political practices. Very quickly, these openings generated renewed affinity with Islam in Xinjiang and created an intellectual climate conducive to thoughts of separatism and autonomy. Sensing a threat to its power, the Chinese government responded by restricting contacts between its Turkic Muslims and visitors from the Middle East. By the early 1990s, mosque construction and renovation was severely curtailed, public broad casting of sermons outside mosques was banned, religious education was forbidden and Haj pilgrimages were tightly controlled and limited to participants over 50 years of age. The first serious outbreaks of violence directed at the Chinese authorities occurred in response to the imposition of these restrictive measures and reflected the local community's anger at Beijing's about-turn on greater religious freedom. China feared that instability in Xinjiang could bring instability to Tibet, Inner Mongolia and Taiwan.

From 1995 to 1997, the struggle in Xinjiang reached its peak, with increasingly frequent attacks by militants in Xinjiang and equally intensified security countermeasures by Beijing. During this time, China formed the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), enlisting Central Asian assistance in cracking down on Uighur militants, many of whom had fled China to the neighbouring countries. As a result of this, a common platform was created between the Uighurs and Central Asian militants and forced some Uighur Islamist militants to venture further West to Pakistan and Afghanistan, where they would link up with the Taliban, Al Qaeda and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan.

Mahsum at this time left China and headed to Central Asia and ultimately Afghanistan, where he established ETIM as a direct successor to Hizbul Islam Li-Turkistan. By 1998, Kabul-based ETIM began recruiting and training Uighur militants while expanding ties with the emerging

jihadist movement in the region, dropping the word "East" from its name to reflect these deepening ties. Till the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, ETIM focused on recruiting and training Uighur militants at a camp run by Mahsum. During the U.S. attack on Afghanistan in 2001 ETIM fled to Central Asia and Pakistan. In January 2002, Mahsum tried to distance ETIM from Al Qaeda in an attempt to avoid having the Uighur movement come under U.S. scanner. However, it did not work. In September 2002, the USA declared ETIM a terrorist organization at the behest of China. In October 2003 Hasan Mahsum was killed in South Waziristan in a joint operation launched by U.S and Pakistan.

After the death of Mahsum, ETIM continued to cooperate with the Taliban and other Central Asian militant organisations, particularly Uzbeks, and slowly reformed itself into a more coherent core in the frontier regions of Pakistan and Afghanistan. In 2005 a new Uighur Islamist militant group, the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) emerged which established its presence on the Internet by posting histories of the Uighur/Turkistan people in China and Central Asia and inspirational videos featuring Mahsum. In 2006 there were reports that remnants of ETIM had begun re-forming and moving back into far western Xinjiang to wage a so called jihad. 2007 saw a spate of militant activities and counter actions by Chinese security forces. However these activities were shadowed by the uprising in Tibet. Mahsum was not the only high-profile Uighur militant to have contacts with Al Qaeda and other jihadist groups. Abdul Haq al-Turkistani, the leader of the Turkistan Islamic Party, was also a member of Al Qaeda's executive leadership council. He was designated as an international terrorist by the U.S and U N and was killed in a drone strike in North Waziristan in February 2010. Similarly, another leader, Abdul Shakoor al-Turkistani, was killed in a drone strike in August 2012. As per reports, Shakoor was also closely associated with Al Qaeda and reportedly commanded its forces in Pakistan's FATA

region. As evident, the movement has gathered a transnational jihadist identity with increase in its activities. High profile attacks in Kunming, Beijing and Urumqi indicate the newly acquired sophistication. Such attacks have the potential of far-reaching consequences for China and the world. Also, withdrawal of NATO forces from Afghanistan China will have a multitude of problems. Analysts feel that experienced terrorists are likely to turn their attention to China and India. Despite its all-weather friendship with Pakistan, China has been forced to take action against the spread of Islamic fundamentalism in Xinjiang. Beijing has restricted visas for Pakistanis wanting to travel to Xinjiang along the Karakorum Highway and vice versa for either religious purposes or to attend Islamic madrassas.

Implications for China

The ongoing unrest in Xinjiang will have a strong impact on China's domestic security, as well as on its regional and global interests. Xinjiang lies at the cultural crossroads between the Islamic world, the Middle East and the Han Chinese heartland. As far as domestic security implications are concerned, unrest in Xinjiang could encourage similar unrest in Tibet and elsewhere in China. This will be unacceptable to China and it will use all means to ensure that this not happen. Xinjiang's importance has also been reinforced by the discovery of large oil deposits indicating that it will become a major supplier for China's ever-growing energy needs. More importantly, since the collapse of Soviet Union, the vast energy supplies of the former Soviet Central Asian republics are becoming a focus of geopolitical attention as regional and extra-regional actors seek to secure access to these new sources of oil. Securing energy and natural resources is the bedrock of China's strategy in Central Asia and Xinjiang provides a gateway to Central Asian energy sources. Xinjiang also provides China with a unique potential to assert its influence in Central Asia and the Middle East. From a regional perspective, the

internationalization of the Uighur issue is likely to impact China's relations with its neighborhood on a diplomatic level, as well as putting its interests under the attention of radical Islamist groups. Xinjiang borders Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan. These countries have a Muslim predominant population. Any crackdown against radical Uighurs in Xinjiang could easily spill over across the Muslim community in Central Asia as well as worldwide. This could be particularly important considering the fact that China may play an increasing role in Afghanistan following the US withdrawal this year by heavily investing in oil, gas and minerals in the country. Experts also feel that in view of increased assistance by the radicals in Pakistan to fuel tensions in the Uighur region, China's relations with Pakistan may see a downward trend.

Implications for India

India has suffered from terrorism for a very long time. In order to gain sympathies for its fight against Islamic fundamentalism, China may look towards India for support. India must utilise this opportunity to highlight Pakistan's role in fostering terrorism. Furthermore, like China, India has high hopes for energy investments in the region and would not like to see an increase of militancy in the area.

Conclusion

Civil unrest and militancy, whether political or religious in orientation, have been constant throughout Xinjiang's recent history, but the nature of the risk posed by unrest in the autonomous region is changing. Today the threat has the capability to spill over in the neighbouring countries thereby affecting the stability of the region. China needs to make efforts to ensure peace and stability remains in the area.

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