



The Roots of China's Xinjiang Problem

Dr. Sanjeev Kumar

The release of a White Paper on Xinjiang by People's Republic of China (PRC) on September 21, 2009 signifies the magnitude of the problem that haunts country's ethnic policy. Renewed violence on September 4, following the "needle stabbings" incident, shook Xinjiang and is viewed as yet another manifestation of the ethnic conflict between the Muslim Uyghurs and Han Chinese. The violence indicates a lack of success of the government policies in relation to nation building and cementing ethnic relationships. As per official reports, five people died during the massive protest by Han Chinese after nearly 500 people were stabbed by needles in various cities of Xinjiang, for which the Uyghur separatists have been held responsible. Till now, it is not known who has been responsible for the protest turning violent.

The incident happened nearly two months after the July 5 riots in Urumqi that left 197 people dead and more than 1,700 wounded. Though the ethnic origin of the victims was not publicized by the government, it was stated that majority of the victims were Han Chinese. The immediate cause of the riot was a brawl between Han Chinese and Uyghurs that resulted in the killing of two Uyghurs in a toy factory located in the Guangdong province of China.

The conflict is part of the larger irredentist problem based on ethnic differences that began as a political movement for self determination by the Uyghurs minority in Xinjiang. It has now grown to be a violent separatist movement linked with political Islam. In this

context this paper seeks to analyse roots of China's Xinjiang problem which are influenced by domestic, regional and international factors. However, the paper attempts to limit the analyses of the issue primarily within domestic perspectives. The paper is broadly divided into four segments: importance of Xinjiang for China; history and sources of the problem; learning from the Indian experience; and India-China counter terrorism cooperation.

Importance of Xinjiang for China

There are 55 recognized minority nationalities in China that account for 8.4 percent of China's total population. The significance of China's minority goes beyond its population size. Though small in numbers, they occupy up to 64 percent of China's total land area. According to the 2000 Census the population of Xinjiang is only 21.30 million whereas Xinjiang is the largest administrative region of China and occupies approximately one sixth of China's land mass. Xinjiang is a multi-ethnic region and the population comprises of Uyghur, Han, Kazak and others.

Ethnic Groups in Xinjiang: Distribution of Population

Ethnic group	Uyghur	Han	Kazak	Hui	Kirgiz	Mongolian	Tajik	Xibe	Manchu, Russian, others
Percentage	45.30	38.92	6.96	4.42	0.85	0.83	0.21	0.19	3.17

Compiled from White Paper on Xinjiang, *Xinhua*, 21 September 2009

Unrest in Xinjiang is a subject of critical importance to China for political, economic and strategic reasons. Strategically, (a) Xinjiang borders Mongolia, Russia, Kazakastan, Krygystan, Tazikistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan occupied Kashmir. (b) It is also home to China's nuclear test site-Lop Nor. (c) There are cross border/ international linkages between the separatists and terrorist organization based outside China. Further, the resident Uyghurs have cultural linkages with their diaspora spreads across in Central Asia

(Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan), Turkey, Europe and Americas. The diaspora population is estimated to be about 6, 50,000.

Ethnically, there are cultural differences between the Uyghurs and the Han Chinese and the Uyghur separatist movement in Xinjiang is the biggest secessionist challenge by any minority group to the Chinese state.

Economically, (a) the region contains some of the largest oil deposits of China, and has vast natural/mineral resources. 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.

History and Sources of the Problem

Several factors have contributed to the ongoing conflict. It is useful to trace history to explain the current dynamics of the problem. Throughout history many empires have controlled some or parts of the area now known as Xinjiang. The region became part of Qing dynasty in mid 18th century who named the area Xinjiang (meaning New Frontier). The history has not been free of violence as Muslim uprisings were witnessed during the regime of Han provincial leaders. A short lived East Turkistan Republic was declared in Kashgar region in 1933 and later it came under rule of China's warlords. The second East Turkistan Republic, (1944 to 1949), was backed by the Soviets. Since 1949, Xinjiang has been part of PRC and the Chinese government claims that it was a peaceful liberation.

However China's claim on Xinjiang is a subject of debate and discussion among scholars. Dru C. Gladney, a well known expert on China's ethnic minorities notes that Xinjiang has been under Chinese political control since the defeat of Zungars (1754), however, it was loosely incorporated into China till mid 20th century. He describes the incorporation of Xinjiang region with China in relation to Han migration, expansion of transport and

communication networks and education especially training in Chinese language and sciences since the 1940s.

As for China's minority policies, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) adopted the framework and definition of *minzu* (nation/nationality) in 1949 based on Stalinist theory of national minorities. In the 1950s, the Chinese government launched a campaign for nationality identification and recognized 56 nationalities based on Stalin's definitional criterion i.e., common territory, language, economic structure and psychological nature manifested in common culture. 155 autonomous ethnic areas were established at various places where various nationalities were concentrated.

Professor Rong Ma of the Sociology Department at the Beijing University argues that the minority policy followed by China has resulted in a two tier structure of nation building in China— an upper level composed of Chinese nation and local level of 56 nationalities. Professor Ma notes that since the break-up of Soviet Union, it was natural that nationalism and demand for independence emerged among the minority in China, especially for those with large populations and distinct languages and territories such as Tibetans and Uyghurs (Rong Ma, 2009: 20). He further argues that by following Soviet model and politicizing the minority issue, the danger of nationalist separation was created by China itself during the process of its nation building. While Rong Ma describes basic policy and dilemma of Chinese state in relation to minority nationalities, a brief survey of government political and economic policies can explain the reason for Uyghur's discontent.

During 1950s and 1960s, Han Chinese settled in Xinjiang as part of an assimilation policy. This policy, together with the infamous famine caused a migration of 60,000 Uyghurs, Kazaks and other minority nationalities to Soviet Union in 1962. During the Cultural Revolution (1966-77), minorities were a popular target, and the repressive policies became evident in relation to the culture and religion of minorities in Xinjiang. The emergence of Deng Xiaoping in late 1970s led to reforms in nationality policies with

particular reference to Tibet and Xinjiang. The policies relaxed the assimilationist aspect and brought back many non-Han Cadres in to CCP and the government.

The chief characteristics of the Xinjiang political movement in the 1980s was led by Muslim students who sought civil and political rights. At one level, the movements were for freedom, democracy and equality of minority nationalities, and at another level, there were movements for East Turkistan independence. Besides, there have been demands for regional autonomy for a long time including by the governor of the region in 1980s. The movements in 1980s were largely peaceful and did not pose any challenge to the Chinese state. Chinese sources suggest considerable disenchantment by the Uyghurs with the State which was reflected in some resistance organizations and occasional clashes with the police and the Han Chinese (Millward: 8-10).

Indeed, 1989-90 was a turning point in the history of Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. First, in the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square protest (1989), the CCP started imposing harsh policies in the region. Second, the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the emergence of independent Central Asian states provided fresh momentum to the Uyghur's separatist movement in Xinjiang. The changed geo-political situation in Central Asia was seen as a threat to China's integrity and political stability by the Chinese authorities. Third, Han migration to Xinjiang gathered momentum in 1990s. Fourth, the decade of 1990s witnessed the beginning of China's "strike hard" policy to deal with Uyghur separatists.

The decade of the 1990s witnessed a series of violent terrorist activities and an upsurge in secessionist movements by the Uyghurs, starting from Baren incident of 1990 when hundreds of armed men allegedly led by Islamic Party of Turkistan clashed with police, against the Han influx to Xinjiang. There were also reports to suggest that government might extend one child policy in minority areas (Millward: 14-15). In the aftermath of 9/11, China projected itself as a victim of international terrorism. Chinese government claims that East Turkistan terrorist forces were responsible for over 200 terrorist incidents in Xinjiang from 1990 to 2001 that resulted in death of 162 people. Some unofficial

reports in 2008 suggested that there had been more than one thousand instances of unrest in the region.

It has been observed that one of the pioneering reasons for the deterioration of the situation in Xinjiang has been increasing Han migration in the region. The percentage of Han Chinese in Xinjiang increased from 6.7 in 1949 to 38.9 in 2000. A study by J. N. Smith suggests that Uyghurs are not opposed to the old settlers who settled in Xinjiang in early decades after 1949, but were against the new Han immigrants, primarily because the original settlers respected the Uyghur culture and tradition, while the new migrants follow Han chauvinist attitudes.

At the same time, there are visible signs of political marginalization of the Uyghurs in Xinjiang. Though top positions in local administration are occupied by the members of minority community, the Uyghurs are underrepresented at all levels in CCP, which is the centre of real power in China. For instance, the post of party secretary of Xinjiang is held by Han Chinese. Uyghur leaders do not hold any place in the top central leadership position of the CCP. Moreover, according to analysts, the Xinjiang's political system has exacerbated the political problem and deepened the Uyghur discontent. Constraints on religious freedom have also played its role in fermenting discontent. The attempted secularization of Islam included closure of mosques, supervision and dismissal of clerics, restrictive policies for the registration of religious organizations, and ban on Uyghur social organizations.

Though the central government policies towards minorities include some preferential policies in favour of minorities which include relaxation in one child policy, educational benefits in the form of a quota for university education and subsidies in welfare programme, the proper implementation of these policies is disputed by many scholars. These policies have been debated within China and it has been argued that they have often politicized group identities and created tensions, as the Han majority population felt discriminated.

Historically, Xinjiang has been one of the least developed regions of China. In the last 30 years (especially since 1990) massive investment has been channeled into the region converting it to one of the fastest growing regions of China. In fact, the reform policies have created wealth in Xinjiang but the benefits have not been proportionate. Apparently, the Han Chinese have benefited far more than the minority population. Urban population in Xinjiang is predominantly Han, which is better placed in terms of economic standing, while the rural population consists predominantly of the ethnic minorities. According to government sources, the disposable income of urban households was 3.9 times higher (2001) than rural households, which was much higher than the national average. The minorities also face several disadvantages in the job market due to lower educational standards, poor linguistic abilities and cultural differences.

The average per capita GDP of Xinjiang was 8382 yuan in 2002. An analysis of the prefecture level data provides a clear picture. Average per capita income of three prefectures that have largest minority population (more than 90 percent) (Khotam, Kashgar and Kizilsu Kyrgyz) was 2365 Yuan in 2002 while the average for three prefectures which have highest Han population (more than 70 percent) (Urumqi, Shihezi and Karamay) was 24596 Yuan (*Xinjiang Tongji Nianjian* 2003, cited in D Chaudhuri: 2005). This data clearly shows that the difference in per capita GDP is more than ten times.

From the perspective of conflict theory, the high level of inequality, coupled with with ethnic and religious segregation, explains the grounds for conflict. Some minorities are culturally close to the Han Chinese, and some like Manchus have been nearly assimilated. The Uyghurs are cited as big threat to the integration of China (Colin Mackerras, 2004)

Minority nationality studies in China has also examined ethnic changes in terms of Han cultural assimilation or Sinicization as it has been termed. Sinicization index for selected ethnic groups has been prepared (Zhongwei Zhao et.al, 2007: 253). The concept of Russification may have been the root idea for preparing such an index. The index has provided points (on 100 point scale) to following ethnic groups, Han-100, Hui- 62,

Mongols- 29, Tibetan- 10, Uyghur- 6. There is also a literature about "Sinicized" and "less Sinicized" minority.

The Uyghurs uphold strong cultural identity largely through preservation of their language, identity and traditions. They follow Sunni Islam, speak Turkic language, and boast of rich cultural traditions with countries of Central Asia. They argue that have little in common with the Hans. These are the reasons for Uyghurs getting 6 point out of 100.

Learning from the Indian Experience

On issues related to development, it has largely been recognized that China's experience is relevant to Indian conditions and vice versa. Of late India is emerging as a model for China's ethnic question in intellectual discourse. A Chinese scholar Baogang He (from the National University of Singapore) endorses Atul Kohli's argument that democracy can accommodate ethnic nationalism. Further, Prof. Rong Ma suggests rethinking the strategy of nation building in China, practiced since the 1950s. He notes that "culturalisation strategy towards minority groups in the US and India might be better alternative for China in the future". Although Prof. Ma has introduced an idea, he has not enlarged it into a full fledged argument. There might be some similarities in the issues involved, however the structure of the political system defines resolution to a large extent.

What is important is to understand that the Indian system provides space for protest and dissent, allows civil society organisations/movements to play an active role, and creates national/political consensus largely through dialogue and debate involving concerned groups. China considers the Uyghur issue as a threat to national integrity and political stability and any form of dissent is broadly understood as being anti-national. It is for the Chinese government to adjust its political and economic policies in Xinjiang and create effective channels of communication between citizens and the state.

India-China Counter Terrorism Cooperation

China's Xinjiang problem is increasingly being connected with the network of cross border and trans-national terrorism as cited in the White Paper released recently by the Chinese government. In sum, Xinjiang is a case in point where the challenge for China is to balance state security with human security. Besides, there is potential for future conflict too. The extent of violence in the July 5 riots indicates the magnitude of the ethno-religious separatist problem in the Xinjiang region. However, the 'strike hard' policy of the Chinese government may not offer a durable solution. The Chinese government could work towards finding a more effective political solution to the problem. India has also been a victim of terrorism and both countries have common grounds against terrorism. Counter-terrorism cooperation could be adopted as an important tool of diplomacy by India and China at bilateral and multilateral level. India and China have completed two rounds of joint anti terrorism exercise in 2007 and 2008. Although the symbolic importance of these exercises is immense, both countries could explore cooperation in preventive measures particularly intelligence sharing; and hotline for critical situations to tackle the menace of terrorism. The two sides could consider maximizing their cooperation in the field of counter-terrorism and further consolidating strategic partnership between the two.

References:

Baogang He, 'China's National Identity: A Source of Conflict between Democracy and State Nationalism' in L.H. Liew and S. Wang eds, *Nationalism, Democracy and National Integration in China* (London, 2004).

Rong Ma, 'The Key to Understanding and Interpreting Ethnic Relations in Contemporary China', *Development Issues*, May 2009.

Colin Mackerras, 'China's Minority and National Integration' in L.H. Liew and S. Wang eds, *Nationalism, Democracy and National Integration in China* (London, 2004).

Dru C. Gladney, *Dislocating China: Reflections on Muslims, Minorities and other Subaltern Subjects* (London, 2004).

D Chaudhuri, 'A Survey of Economic Situation in Xinjiang and its Role in the Twenty-first Century' *China Report*, January-March 2005

James Millward 'Violent Separatism in Xinjiang: A Critical Assessment' accessed on 10 July 2009 available at www.eastwestcenter.org/fileadmin/stored/pdfs/PS006.pdf

J. N. Smith, 'Making Culture Matter: Symbolic, Spatial and Social Boundaries between Uyghurs and Han Chinese' *Asian Ethnicity*, September 2002

State Statistical Yearbook 2008, (Beijing: State Statistical Press, 2008)

White Paper on Development and Progress in Xinjiang released on September 21, 2009,
<http://english.people.com.cn/90001/90776/90785/6763714.html>

Zhongwei Zhao et al. *Transition and Challenge: China's Population at the Beginning of 21st Century* (2007), accessed on 12 July 2009, available at books.google.co.in/books?isbn=0199299293...

Dr. Sanjeev Kumar is a Research Fellow at Indian Council of World Affairs, Sapru House, New Delhi-110001

23 October, 2009