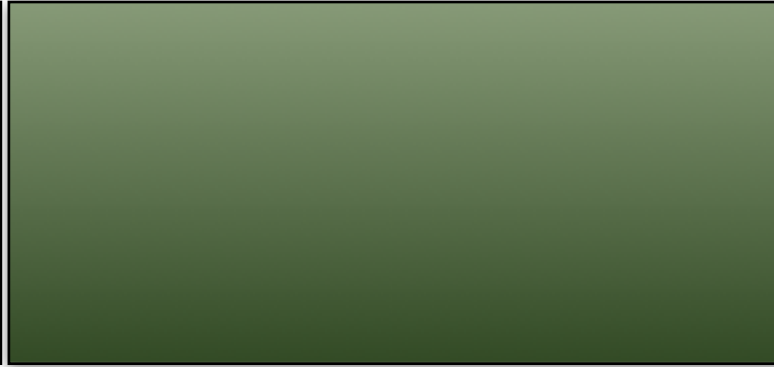




CHINA'S XINJIANG CONUNDRUM

A Security Dimension

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**CHINA'S XINJIANG CONUNDRUM:
A SECURITY DIMENSION**

Megha Shrivastava

Abstract

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in developments of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR); yet most of the discussions appear to be centered on the ethnic dimension of the issue. Focusing on the security dimension, within which the ethnic dimension is suggested to be dealt with, this paper tackles the question of why the Chinese government is investing heavily in the development of Xinjiang and how its domestic policy in Xinjiang is influenced by its security interests. It examines the vitality of Xinjiang in Chinese security policy especially in the vulnerable western neighborhood including the central Asian region and its recent developments like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Developing its argument around the concept of 'National security', it investigates the extent to which Xinjiang contributes to the National security of China. Consequently, it is argued that Beijing requires stability in Xinjiang for the political and security region. However, it reveals that China's problems in Xinjiang will continue to follow up and may even get worse shortly and will have significant repercussions in the domestic and international policies.

Introduction

The geopolitical position of Xinjiang which is at the crossroads of ethnocultural issues of Turkic Muslims, Eurasian geopolitical interests, and poor social-economic conditions in the region has always made China conscious about its national security and its geopolitical ambitions in the western neighborhood. Including its strategic economic interests in the Eurasian region at large, China has been following a policy of tight control in the general life of Xinjiang including the social, political, cultural as well as religious aspects of citizen's life. Beijing is committed to pursuing a muscular strategy to integrate Xinjiang with the Han Chinese way of life to overcome the anxiety and activism in the whole province. China's domestic policy in the province of Xinjiang has an important bearing on the geopolitical and security dimensions in its foreign policy, especially towards its western neighborhood.

Moving on to the geopolitics in the neighborhood, it is evident that the region of China-Central Asia is going through a rapid transformation, both economic as well as political. The ongoing economic developments will have significant implications in the province and internal politics will have an important impact on China's security policy in the region. This paper majorly deals with the emerging threats for China due to the Uyghur insurgency movements and the terrorism standing at the door and how China is reshaping its security policy concerning the threats rising from the Xinjiang.

In this paper, we shall first deal with the Chinese special security interests in the Xinjiang-Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) and the reasons why XUAR is a special case for Chinese strategic foreign policy as this will explain the significance of Xinjiang in China's security policy in the neighborhood with special regard to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Central Asian regions. The paper shall significantly argue the prospects of the Uyghur conundrum in the region, the internal as well as external repercussions on the security interests of Beijing and shall put forward what can be done by both Chinese and Uyghurs to mitigate the tensions. This paper is divided into three sections: The first section discusses the conundrum in Xinjiang and its international character concerning the national security policy of China. The second section talks about the geopolitical situation in the neighborhood and how it is projected by

vital security interests in Xinjiang. The third section deals with the challenges, prospects, and solutions of the Chinese Xinjiang conundrum.

Conundrum in the Xinjiang Province

Uighur Muslims comprise the largest ethnic minority of China. They are concentrated in the Xinjing province to the west of China. The grievances of Uyghurs are not new but a historical phenomenon. The province was incorporated within China in 1884 under the Qing rule. The Uighur Muslims are found to be fundamentally different from the original Han Chinese. The region occupies 56 percent of the land area and 22.8 percent of the total population of China. Today, 45.8 percent of the population of Xinjiang constitutes Uighur Muslims who have a troubled relationship with the state and the Han Chinese (Zanardi, 2019).

The country has seen many incidences of violent protests led by Uighur groups having varied demands but all to manifest the cultural and political aspirations of the community within or outside the Chinese system. Though, Uighur constitutes the largest ethnic group in China, however, the state does not allow any “Local Nationalism”. The province was fully consolidated only in 1950. Since the beginning, the state has been facing resistance to the rule by Uighur nationalist who demands greater cultural autonomy and religious freedom. In 1954, a Khotan uprising occurred under the leadership of Abudu Yimiti who demanded a Muslim state completely separate from China. Around the 1967 Cultural Revolution of China, the Eastern Turkistan People’s Revolution Party (ETPRP) was seen as the single largest resistance organization operating in Xinjiang since 1949 (Nodirbek, 2019).

During the 1990 Baren protests, East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) led a resistance of Uighur Muslims against the policies of CCP (Chinese Communist Party) by calling it a Jihad against the state. They demanded an independent Xinjiang. To suppress this uprising, Beijing started a stronghold campaign to target Uyghurs associated with separatism. Throughout this period, China saw a spur of sporadic events of conflict between Uyghurs and the state authorities. One of them is the famous Urumqi riots of 2009. Thus, Xinjiang is not only a politico-cultural but also a historical issue.

Another significant consideration is the apprehensions around the development of terrorist trends within the community and its insurgents. Though most of the time despotic regimes indeed suppress any local ethnic activism as “terrorist”, the case with Uyghurs might be a different one and apprehensions of China may have a real weight and not only self-designed rhetoric. The whole ethnic group have been involved in the fight associated with the ISIS and may inspire their brothers in Xinjiang (Zao, 2010). It is highly susceptible that the Uyghurs returning from West Asia may bring a hardened ideology of ISIS to fight their war against the Chinese state and to protect their religious interests in the region. The real cause of Uyghurs in the region which is sensitively related to their religious freedom might fuel Jihadist radicalization in the region.

The policy of the state is, therefore, to assimilate the Uyghurs in the Han Chinese culture and to target a “Go West” development plan to curtail the insurgent activities. However, China does not seem to adopt a solo economic development based plan to deal with Uyghur nationalism and state repression, since suppression has always been a major policy to bypass any political and cultural development of the Uyghurs (Wei and Cuifen, 2009).

Concerning the security of the state at large, China has taken the form of a police state and has been trying to take control of the region by deploying all means and measures including muscular as well as economic. The Chinese state has advanced a program of economic modernization and intensive security campaigns to eradicate what it terms the “three evils” of splitism, terrorism, and extremism with the aim to promote a common political identity for modern China (Davis, 2008).

Though Uyghurs of the region look at themselves as a transnational identity and not Chinese, China has brought forceful and economic measures for their assimilation in the state. China has deployed strict measures of state surveillance like checking their mobile phones, GPS tracked systems in their vehicles, banning the Islamic festivities and cultural practices of Uyghurs. The Policing system and the manpower thereof has increased by 57 percent in 2013 (Hao and Liu, 2012). China has also enforced an active surveillance system (including internet, audio, and video) in the form of a “grid-style management system”. The samples collected under the 2017 National Population Registration Program, Iris Scan, blood samples, DNA samples of residents were sent to security agencies which were even against the norms of International Human

Rights. For political and cultural indoctrination, many of the Uyghurs were sent to the re-education camps. This shows the increasing trends of “Sinophobia” in the lives of Uyghurs. The increasing migration of the Han Chinese in the region has already penetrated deep into the political, cultural, and economic aspects and further threaten their existence and rights (Zambilis, 2010).

Though the economic development is heavily focused in the region, however, most of the enterprises are under the Han Chinese and a vibrant gap has been noticed between the income levels of both Han Chinese and the Uyghurs.

Chinese Security Interests in the Region

Xinjiang province of China, owing to its location, has strategic importance in influencing the geopolitics in the region. China’s problems in Xinjiang are compounded by its proximity to one of the most vulnerable regions of the world. General John Nicholson pointed out that the Afghanistan-Pakistan region is one area which hosts the maximum number of terrorist in the world. China’s greatest fear is a threat from radicalization. The terror group based in this region have influenced the Jihadist trends among the Uighur insurgent groups. Since the attack of 9/11, the volatility in the region has increased due to the flow of radicalized Muslims in Islamic states and militant organizations. This has posed a serious security threat to China and especially in Xinjiang. This is the region where most of the invasions have occurred in history and remains equally vulnerable even today. Hence, Xinjiang is not only a western border province of China but it is central to Chinese Eurasian policy and Central Asia strategy (Swanstrom, 2005). For these reasons, CCP has always tried to consolidate its rule in the Xinjiang against the demands of the Uyghurs to keep its border secure.

China sees the strategy of economic development as the most suitable to ensure stability in the province. Central Asia plays a crucial role in this strategy as trade links between Central Asia and Xinjiang will keep them dependent on China and they would be less inclined to extremism and Uighur cause of separatism. Therefore, China gives utmost salience to Central Asia owing to its role in countering the security threats and militancy in its western front (Clarke, 2011).

Chinese scholar Xing Guangcheng has described the role of external powers in securing Chinese interests in the province by stating that, “To a larger extent the stability and prosperity of northwest China are closely bound up with stability and prosperity in Central Asia. Central Asia offers a wide range of opportunities for Xinjiang which are less hostile due to socio-cultural and historical ties with them” (Guangcheng).

China has envisioned Xinjiang to serve as an economic hub to assist developments and to boost trade with republics of Central Asia. Earlier, the former premier, Li Peng declared Xinjiang as the “Eurasian Continental Bridge” which works as an effective link between China and Central Asia for trade and commerce. Xinjiang will also play a prominent role in building a Eurasian transit corridor and trans-Caspian connectivity. In 2013, Central Asia accounted for 83 percent of Xinjiang’s total exports (Clarke, 2011). Thus, Xinjiang serves as a ‘Eurasian crossroad’ for China.

BRI is one of the major priorities of the CPC. This transnational infrastructure project is directly related to a stable Xinjiang. Beijing has no reason to compromise with the security of the region. Xinjiang considering its strategic location and the ethnic rift is one of the most vital pillars of the Chinese National Security Plan. The insurgency and militancy in the area are a vital threat to the prospects of BRI. This is the reason China is more cautious about the security policy in Xinjiang. A key focus of BRI is to stabilize Xinjiang which is crucial for the success of BRI. Its policies in the region are directly linked to its policies within the infrastructure projects like BRI and the strategic interests lie in the region around Central Asia. The BRI project is congruent with the “Go West” development strategy. Xinjiang is a crucial link in enhancing strategic and economic ties with the central region considering the geographical proximity and cultural convergence with both the regions. Hence, the security of the Xinjiang has a direct link with security in the transnational region which faces continuous threats including roots of terrorism, radicalization, and insurgency (Clarke, 2017). Thus, we can say that the issue adds a cultural dimension to the BRI.

However, there is also a point of convergences, between the Uyghur and the Central Asians in terms of their grievances. The western neighbors of Uyghurs (the Kazaks, Uzbeks, Turks, Tajiks, and the Krygzs) are aware of their weaknesses and political identity. The independence of these people from the

communist's rule (Soviets) triggers the feeling of “suppressed identities”, lack of independence, and a sense of victim-hood. The September 2011 attack changed the perception about insurgencies especially when they involved the Muslim community (Doyon, 2019). It brought a major change in the identity of Muslim minority groups around the world and their political struggles. The separatist movement led by Muslims is branded as terrorist groups. It made the region even more unstable as it added security threats of radicalization and terrorism entering the state boundaries.

Islam, which is an ideological tool for anti-state resistance in Central Asian and neighboring regions, has become one of the major security threats to an atheist state like China. The Uighur issue will affect and will be affected by the Central Asian religious, ethnic, and inter-state conflict. Therefore, the security policy of China is directly influenced by the increasing Uighur militancy. China is afraid that the ever ongoing conflicts in the western neighborhood will have a spillover effect on the Uighur issue and hence affects Chinese security in the long run. The recent withdrawal of American troops from the region triggers a threat from the influence of the Islamic State in the region. The decreased involvement of the US in the region may give a free hand to militants to influence developments in the region including the BRI. It can drastically impact regional stability in the region and could make it more unstable.

The disintegration of the USSR in 1992 freed China from some traditional security threats from its western neighborhood, however, bringing some new vulnerabilities in the form of non-traditional threats. However, threats cannot be assumed to be over as Russia still maintains defense stakes in Central Asia like military bases and controls command, intelligence, and testing. The U.S also maintains airbases in Kyrgyzstan (Manas Airbase) and Uzbekistan (Termez Airbase). Since the beginning of the ‘War on Terror’, the region has become militarized to counter the influence of the Taliban and the infiltration of an Islamic state. Also, China has no military presence in the Central Asian region like the USA and Russia. It is not even a major military supplier to Central Asian nations. Military purchases from China are insignificant in CAR (Central Asian Region) as Russia is the largest as well as largely an exclusive military supplier to these nations. Also, border issues of China with Central Asia have not been resolved permanently which could diminish the trade volume in the event of any skirmishes (Austin, 2012). In this view, China's long-term security

concern is the Russian overwhelming intrusion in Central Asian affairs and short-term concern is the economics and trade.

China's road to Central Asia passes through irredentist Uighur territories in Xinjiang. China's efforts to gain greater control in the region have led to local discontent and resentment. As we have seen, Xinjiang on its western front acts as a crossroad to Central Asia and Europe, it is vital to trade practice and services of China. This adds a spatial vulnerability to China's engagements with Central Asia and the western world at large (Moeller, 2006). Chinese muscular and high hand in the region is claiming to be detrimental to Chinese image in the rest of the world and especially for its relationship with the Muslim nations including Pakistan. Pakistan has got to shun at the United Nations for bearing the atrocities on Uyghurs in Xinjiang while objecting to the conditions of Muslims in India's Kashmir region. The security policy of China in the region may consequently make a shift in the attitude of the foreign policy of other nations against China. It may render China's efforts fruitless to increase its influence in the West Asian Nations which are largely Islamic. It may also cause spillover effects of friendly but Muslim majority nations like Indonesia (which has the largest Muslim population of the world) to take anti-Chinese stands.

Challenges and Prospects

The Chinese policy on National Minorities preaches a generous treatment with minorities but China instead has failed to meet any demands of the Uyghurs. CPC fears that any appeasement of the Uyghurs will have a spill-over effect on the other groups like Tibetans and Mongols. China's Xinjiang problem and associated security issues are apprehended to rise in the future due to several reasons.

China's strategy to deal with the Xinjiang issue is the 'Go West' development strategy which is primarily focused on the economic development of the region. However, the core reasons behind the insurgency are social-cultural issues which have remained misaddressed (Swaine and Ashley, 2000). Therefore, until the paradox of development is not resolved, there is no evidence to say that the state can provide any long term solution to the problems in Xinjiang. Also, it is difficult to say that the Chinese strategy anyway seeks to resolve the fundamental crisis of the Uyghurs.

Secondly, if China decides to partition the province in northern and southern parts, it will bring the northern Uyghurs under the control of Han Chinese rather than giving any autonomy to the region. It might irritate the minority sentiments among the Uyghurs even more. It would leave the larger issues unaddressed like unemployment among the group and them leading to insurgent activities.

One of the emerging issues is the demographic encirclement by the Han Chinese owing to the large scale migration of Han people into the Xinjiang province. The state has provided a wide range of investments to the Hans which might make the Uyghurs more marginalized both culturally and economically (Blank, 2003).

The analysis reveals that the Bantustan policy which may leave the autonomous rule for the Uyghurs in a Han controlled territory might prove to be counterproductive as it may trigger the sentiments of some extremist groups and may not resolve the crisis for a long term.

China's plans of dividing the province of Xinjiang which is, autonomously controlled by different minorities like Kazaks and Mongols may not be as fruitful as it perceives. The divide and rule policy may diminish the insurgency of some groups and also may lead to enhanced vigor for "All Xinjiang for Uyghurs" sentiments. It may also increase the inter-cultural rivalries within different insurgent groups and may increase the violence and resentment in the region.

Xinjiang lies in the oasis basin which is currently facing an ecological crisis due to the Chinese strategy of rapid economic development and extraction of oil resources. This problem is going to rise in the future as excessive focus on the exploitation of natural resources coupled with the rising immigrant population of the Han Chinese populace in the province. As it is going to increase in the future, this will become another reason for discontent among the Uighur insurgents. The struggle for use and control of natural resources including water will become central to the political struggle in Xinjiang. The nationalist and religious sentiments are more likely to merge in the future as has happened in other parts of the world like Palestine and Kashmir, which will enhance the complexities between the government and Xinjiang.

All the above apprehensions not only continue the stimulus to the struggle also ensure a tighter security policy led by the state since it is difficult to expect from China to follow a softer regime in Xinjiang. China's commitments in the transnational region of Central Asia including the much talked BRI will ensure a stricter hand of China if the above apprehensions fall in place.

What Needs to be Done?

To ensure the utmost stability and security in the region of China, instead of putting a hard hand at home, it should actively collaborate with the United Nations to tackle militant activities in the region. China should clearly distinguish the distinction between violent acts of terrorism and non-violent political radicalism. CPC should limit the mobility of labor as well as the excessive incentives provided to the Han Chinese like high subsidies on housing and industries. China needs to reconsider the consequences of the in-migration of Han Chinese which could otherwise result in a major social conflict between Han Chinese and the Uighur Muslims. A mutually agreed conciliation policy, as well as a limitation on Han migration to Xinjiang, can deter the issue to an extent.

A decentralized autonomy to Uighur populated areas can serve as a long term solution which is practically not the policy of CPC's monopolized regime. The "Go West" strategy should take into consideration the local demands and aspirations of minorities. Neighbors should try to influence China by fostering the involvement of the Uyghur Crisis within the agenda of forums like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).

Powers like the United States and Russia should have no reason to shun away from responsibilities in ensuring Human Rights by actively internationalizing the issue. Washington and Beijing should collectively address the unstable ecosystem of the region and seriously counter the militancy in the transnational region. This will address the overarching security threats which drive the policy towards the Uyghurs. An agenda for greater Central Asian cooperation should emerge among all the stakeholder states to ensure long term stabilization in the region. However, Beijing's approach is likely to remain "typically Chinese" in terms of its security consciousness in the Xinjiang region.

Conclusion

Asian system is not in Westphalian order. And this non-Westphalian order is a continuous feature of Asian security narratives. The continent has hardly a country left that does not have territorial, ethnic, or sovereign disputes. The case of China's Uighur is a classic example that has its roots in history and culture.

The paper concludes that China's security concerns in the XUAR region are not likely to go away until the time existential threats and cultural suppression is not addressed by the state. An economic solution may bring prosperity to the region but the threat may exist until the fundamental crisis is not resolved. To put simply, the core issues which lie in the minority status of the Uyghurs cannot be traded with the agenda of economic development to address the insurgencies in the region. There is no movement of Chinese government strategy including the security policy in the region towards addressing the true grievances of the people. In fact, the crisis, instead of shedding off, is getting worse with time. The internationalization of the issue, though has put pressure on the Chinese government to take affirmative action, however, there have few expectations from China to change its stronghold policy in the region.

A domestic outrage like the Xinjiang has proved to be an important determinant of the evolving dynamism in Chinese foreign policy. And in this segment, Xinjiang's proximity with the transnational Central Asian region and its projects like BRI are crucial segments.

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