

Turmoil in Xinjiang

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Only recently, the Chinese Premier Li Peng confided to a group of American diplomats that, “China does have troubles in Xinjiang from time to time”, and added that Beijing hopes to resolve the problem “peacefully”. But the recent bomb explosion in Beijing reveals that the province’s ethnic Uighur separatists have reached across the breadth of China to strike Beijing itself. The trouble in Xinjiang is not new or sudden. Xinjiang has been a hot-bed of ethnic unrest for decades. The turmoil has escalated since the early nineties and has become worse over the past year and a half.

Geo-strategic significance

There is hardly any need to overstress the geo-strategic significance of Xinjiang (Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region, XUAR, formerly known as Eastern or Chinese Turkestan). Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, China’s position in Central Asia and the Middle East has been enhanced by its possession of Xinjiang. China regards Xinjiang as continental bridge which extends China’s reach to Central Asia and simultaneously serves as a security buffer to China proper. With five hundred and thirty thousand square kilometers, the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region represents one-sixth of the Peoples Republic of China. It is bordered by Mongolia to the north-east, Russia to the north, Tajikistan, Kyrghyzstan, Kazakhstan and Pakistan to the west, with a smaller border with Pak-occupied Kashmir. The province holds vast natural resources and large deposits of natural gas, iron and coal. It is an oil-bearing region and has 40% of the entire country’s oil deposits. It has immense agricultural potential. It also houses China’s principal nuclear testing and missile launching sites.

Ethno-Cultural Diversity

Xinjiang presents a unique case of geographical and ethno-cultural diversity. It is the only autonomous region where Muslims constitute a majority. It has a population of 15 million of whom over 60% are Muslims. Most of the Muslims are of Turkic stock. As controls over the Muslim majority relaxed in the 1980’s, unrest escalated in the 1980s with a series of violent demonstrations against Chinese authorities and the local Han population. Incidents in December 1986, June 1988, May 1989, and April 1990 resulted in Muslims death at the hands of authorities who were quick to suppress local nationalism. The ethnic unrest reached its peak recently when more than hundred people died in clash with the police.

Islamic Threat

China finds itself no longer bordered by a super power with a rival brand of Marxism but by a number of small unstable states open to influence by China's rivals and a new, competing ideology: Islam. The Chinese leadership fears that ethno-nationalism in combination with resurgent Islam could destabilise China. Islamic groups in Central Asia stirred Chinese apprehensions. In the early days of Central Asian independence, exiled Uighurs in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan pressed for the national liberation of the XUAR. However, Chinese anxiety over Central Asian collusion diminished as Beijing realised that leaders of the new republics did not support the separatist movements. Nevertheless, the threat of ethno-nationalism and Islamic resurgence remains the core element of Chinese policy in the region. The main hurdle in achieving China's economic political and strategic objectives in the region is the ethno-religious resurgence, which would fuel the Pan-Turkic/Islamic secessionist movement in Xinjiang. China's concern is that the Afghan based group, together with sponsors in neighbouring countries are training Muslims separatists and transporting literature. Pakistan acknowledged in mid-February that a group of religious preachers had visited Xinjiang. That China was incensed over the activities of the Pak-Islamic parties in Xinjiang and expressed its concern to Pakistan describing these as interference in its internal affairs, has been revealed by Pakistani press itself. It is worth noting that when Pakistan sought to hard-sell a proposal for Tashkent-Karachi super highway and the Baluch part of the Gwaddar for the landlocked Central Asian republics to conduct their trade from, China not only shut down the proposal but after 1994 Islamic uprising in Xinjiang, even closed the Karakoram highway, the main Sino-Pak trade link. The Chinese authorities and officially controlled media establishment in Xinjiang have openly denounced the 'infiltration, subversion and sabotage by hostile foreign Islamic elements' for fomenting the separatist movement in Xinjiang.

China's Strategy

China attributes the problem to "splittism" a peculiar communist jargon for separatism and follows a two-pronged policy towards all minority ethnic groups. Theoretically, they are the privileged people. For instance, Xinjiang itself is formally an autonomous region. But in practice, the policy is one of encouraging migration of Han Chinese into this ethnic minority dominated region. It is worth pointing out that in 1949, Han Chinese constituted just 4% of the entire province but today the figure is believed to be over 40%. In fact, China has been following the time-tested policy of large scale Han settlement in Xinjiang as a means to work towards regional stability. Over the past one year, another dimension has been added to it. With the authorities keen to clamp down on any dissent political or religious, they began to strike hard against any split. In June last year, officials pledged to build a "great wall of steel" against the Muslims separatists and in less than a month, police in Xinjiang seized 2723 kilograms of explosives, 4100 kilograms of dynamite, 604 illegal firearms and 31,000 rounds of ammunition according to the state controlled press.

China's Dilemma

Cracking down on Xinjiang Muslims will not win China any friends in the Muslim world, where Beijing has spent decades carefully building better ties. Significantly, as soon as news of the Yuinting riots spread, newspapers in countries like Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Pakistan condemned Beijing for its handling of the ethnic unrest. Secondly, oil from the Middle East is vital to China's development plans especially since the country became a net petroleum importer two year ago.

Last but not the least, China's aspirations to diplomatic superpower status depend heavily on its Arab allies.

Growing Resentment

The rise of Islamic fundamentalism and Pan-Turkic consciousness in Xinjiang is compounded by the recurrent clashes between Han Chinese and local Muslims since the 1980s. The native Uighurs have never been fully assimilated into Chinese society. To Uighurs the problem essentially smacks of the overlordism of the minority Han Chinese to form 90% of China's populations. They resent their Han neighbours as arrogant trespassers. Migration is one thing Uighurs are very angry about. Race relations between the Hans and Uighurs in Xinjiang have been marked by mutual distrust and hatred. This is clearly reflected in the isolation of Hans and the Uighurs as they live in separate settlements in their respective areas of concentration. The resentment has grown increasingly violent since 1990s. With the independence of Central Asian states, the silk route connection has created a new awareness among Muslims of Xinjiang about their Islamic and Pan-Turkic identity. The developing cross-border trade of Xinjiang with its neighbouring Muslims countries has resulted in great mobilisation and assertion by the Muslims of Xinjiang on ethno-religious basis.

Linkage with Central Asia

How China manages its relations with Central Asia will have profound significance for security within China as well as its future relations with regional rivals. China's policy in Central Asia is designed to maintain political stability through economic development. China hopes to use Central Asian markets as catalysts to fuel a new prosperity zone in Xinjiang for foreign investment and revive the silk route. China has swiftly moved to establish ties with the new republics. Beijing expects economic growth in Xinjiang and Central Asia to strengthen the secular model governments of Central Asia against the groups, which favour Islamic rule. To accomplish this, China has enacted a series of reforms to boost Xinjiang's, and consequently, Central Asia's economic take off. Chinese concerns about Central Asian domestic stability are matched by similar Central Asian concern about China. As Graham Fuller has rightly noted, "There is no reason to believe that China will remain immune to the forces of break up that has affected nearly all past communist empires and multi-ethnic groups. Few Muslims minorities ever remain happily contained within another state and culture, especially a communist one. The model of political independence lies just over the border in former Soviet Central Asia."

To sum up, Xinjiang happens to be the most problematic region due to its ethno-religious composition and its links with China's western neighbours. Xinjiang, unlike Tibet, matters to China in ways that go far beyond mere historic symbolism. Any hint of vacillation in Xinjiang could only encourage unrest among other dissatisfied minorities in China, especially the people of Tibet. With the focus on a post-Deng China, Xinjiang will be closely watched because it is closely linked to the question of how weak or strong the communist Party becomes. China has to acknowledge the reality and begin to search for a fresh approach to cater to the needs of the people in this region.

