

Chinese Perspectives on Central Asia: Threat of Uighur Separatism

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In recent years, China has sought to make a strong presence in Central Asia to secure its strategic, economic and geopolitical Asian contiguous to three Central Asian countries namely Kazakhstan, Kurgyzstan and Tajikistan and its Turkic Muslim population in the north-western region shares common history, tradition and culture with all the five Central Asian Republics (CARs). For china, the implosion of the former Soviet Union and emergence of five new republics on ethno-national basis, seems to be posing great challenges of regional security and stability. The new CARs located on the north-west frontiers of China as smaller weak states right on its border have aroused the threats of Islamic fundamentalism, religious radicalism as serious challenges to national unity, secular identity and territorial integrity of China.

Broadly, China has pursued a pragmatic policy in its relations toward Central Asia which is exemplified by its diplomatic focus on reducing security tensions with its neighbours and good economic ties through commercial investment, techno-economic assistance and flourishing bilateral trade. Thus, it has been a two-way process with CARs gaining from the Chinese entrepreneurial skills, ethos of free market and industrial development. Likewise, China views the economic potential of Central Asia to be of considerable importance with its rich deposit of hydrocarbons like petroleum, natural gas, other minerals.

Strategic Significance of Central Asia

In the aftermath of the Coldwar and the decline of Russia, China has sought to project itself as a global power and it has considered Central Asia as an important region in its power projection. In this context, Beijing has best used its economic, political and military capabilities to reassert its traditional regional interests in this region. So, the idea of the revival of the old 'Silk Route' and the spirit of Shanghai Five have been vigorously pursued by Beijing's regional diplomacy in Central Asia.

Broadly, the dissolution of the Soviet Union was a mixed blessing for China. Because with the demise of the old Soviet Union, there was a marked decline in security threats from the north. But, the emergence of new countries of CARs presented an unstable external environment with threats of ethno-nationalism, religious fundamentalism and irredentism spilling over to the Muslim-dominated north-west province of Xinjiang. So China has sought to stabilize this region with its regional diplomacy through bilateral accords with the CARs and multilateral agreement with its neighbours and Russia.

Thus for China, securing stable borders with Russia and the Central Asian Republics (CARs) has been the key to its defence policy and diplomacy in view of the presence of restive minorities on its

western borders. The Chinese leadership's worst fears have been the rise of ethno-nationalism in combination with resurgent Islam which could destabilise its north-western provinces of Gansu and Qinghai and auto-nomous regions of Ningxia, Xinjiang and Tibet. Moreover, with the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the emergence of smaller independent CARs on ethnic basis, it provides strong encouragement to various minorities like Uighurs, Mongols and Kazakhs to demand the right of self-determination.

In this context, China has sought for more stability and tranquility on its border by promoting stronger economic and diplomatic ties with its three immediate neighbours in Central Asia. This is evident from the success of the signing of the Five-Nation Agreement on Confidence Building in the Military Forces in the Border Areas on 26th April, 1996 in Shanghai at a summit meeting among leaders from China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Since the disintegration of the Soviet Union the Chinese delegation and the joint delegation of Russia Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan had held many rounds of talks on disarmament and on confidence-building in the border areas. Commonly known as the "Shanghai Group of Five", it was a success of Chinese move for regional security and multilateral diplomacy. Under this agreement the military forces of both sides stationed along the border areas promise not to attack each other and there should not be any military exercise aimed against each other. It also specifies that limits will be imposed on the scale, scope and number of military exercises on both sides of the border areas. It further stipulates that the concerned sides should inform each other of major military activities taking place in any area within 100kms of the borderlines. It also makes it mandatory for both sides to prevent any dangerous military activities with friendly exchange of military forces and frontier guards.[1] At the Moscow summit in 1997, the five countries agreed on mutual arms reduction along their common borders. The Russian President, Boris Yeltsin said that the common goal of the association was to create a unique zone of peace along the 10,000km-long border shared by the five countries. All the leaders stressed that the grouping was not a political or a military block aimed at any state in particular. At the third summit in Almaty in 1998, China secured a vital pledge from its partners to reject all manifestations of national separatism and religious extremism and to ban on their territories activities harmful to sovereignty, security and public order of any of the five states. Later the "Shanghai Group of Five" in their fourth summit in Bishkek, capital of Kyrgyzstan on 24-25 August, 1999 came out strongly in favour of establishing a nuclear free zone in the region for durable peace and stability. It also focused on the importance of jointly fighting international terrorism, ethnic separatism and religious fundamentalism.[2] In the last two Shanghai Group of Five summits, all these issues have been taken up and certain declarations have been made with the entry of Uzbekistan as the sixth member in June, 2001.

Geo-economics of Central Asia

As noted earlier, China has sought closer economic ties with most of the CARs the basis of mutual interests and economic and political stability Beijing believes that increased trade and investment will enhance stability within the potentially volatile countries of the CARs which are in need of techno-economic assistance.

Moreover, for most of the leaders of the CARs with their long communist experience, China's market-economy and rapid development have been of great appeal. In this context, China has

vigorously pursued its economic agenda by heavy investments in oil and gas pipeline project and by offering cheaper consumer goods to the Central Asian markets.

It all started with Li Peng's April, 1994 visit to the CARs (except Tajikistan) which highlighted the prominent role of 'trade' in China's policy towards the region. This was the first-ever-major Chinese leader's visit to the newly independent CARs. It was more noteworthy in the sense that for the first time representatives of Chinese commercial interests officially accompanied a leader on a formal state visit. On a speech to the parliament of Uzbekistan, Li stated that improved economic co-operation is a primary goal in China's policy toward the CARs.

On their part, the Central Asian leaders share many of Beijing's concerns about the dangers that transnational ethnic or religious groups pose to the regional stability. Their secular policies and sensitivity to Chinese concerns over ethnic separatism of Kazhaks, Uighurs, Kyrghyzs have made it easier for China to pursue more open economic policies. It is evident from the joint statement issued by the Kazakhstan President Nazarbayev and the Chinese President Jiang Zemin in September, 1995 emphasising that China and Kazakhstan 'oppose national separatism in any form and will allow no organisations or forces to engage in such separatist activities against the other side.[3] China's expansion of links with the CARs occurred with the opening of the Urugmqi-Almaty rail-line in 1992. this rail-line not only gives the various states of Central Asia access to China's domestic market and eastern parts but also opens a potentially important overland route between China and Europe and the Middle East. In addition to the rail-link, 14 other ports of entry were opened in Xinjiang in April 1993 for trade and commerce. Subsequently in 1998, China, Uzbekistan and Kurguzstan agreed to open a new highway from Kashgar through Kyrgyzstan to Tashkent in Uzbekistan. According to Xinhua, the road is intended to stimulate increased trade among the three countries and lay the foundation for the eventual construction of a new railway along the same route.

The Central Asian republics because of their landlocked situation and economic inter-dependence need a strong and vibrant economy like China to escape the ills of the old Soviet-style economy. So, CARs like Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have sought massive Chinese investment in oil, gas and metals and carried out the bilateral trade in big volumes with China. These two countries have enjoyed barter trade with China from Soviet times. The scarcity of foreign exchange in countries concerned, as well as the complementary nature of their production, accounted for the importance of such cross-border trade relations. Just after independence, in 1991-92 there was a severe shortage of manufactured consumer goods in the Central Asian nations while China needed a market outlet for their surplus goods and raw material to fuel her constantly increasing production. This resulted in China's booming trade relation with its Central Asian neighbours.

After the initial boom in Sino-Kazhak trade in 1992, the share of Chinese trade declined in the consecutive years p to 1994. This decline is generally attributed to the anti-Chinese feeling in Kazakh and Kyrgyz populations as a reaction to the flooding of their markets by low quality Chinese products.[4] This is more due to the greater involvement of Russia and commonwealth of independent states (CIS) and other strong players like Germany, the European Union, US and Turkey in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Apart from these two close neighbours China has sought economic co-operation with other CARs with its policy of 'revival of the Silk Road'. At the May 1992 Ashkhabad Summit, agreements were signed to revive the Silk Road by building a highway

from Turkey to Western China and completing rail link between the Persian Gulf and Xinjiang. This idea of the 'Silk Route' as a continental bridge between Asia and the West originating from north-western China is shared by Turkey, Iran and other CARs.

In this process, China hosted an international conference on the "New Silk Road" in 1996 at which Prime Minister Li Peng emphasised the key role of Central Asia in the future Eurasian rail links promoting economic co-operation and development between China and Europe.[5] Towards this end, the Chinese have already viewed the Lianyungang – Almaty – Rotterdam rail link as economically cost-effective for transporting goods and materials to Europe. The proponents of this land route between China and Europe point out that the "rail line is 8000 km shorter than corresponding sea routes between Asia and Europe via the Suez Canal and considerably faster".[6] In such a scenario, the Central Asian region may emerge as an area of transit and transportation of goods with consequent economic benefits to the region. For China with its vulnerability to American naval power, this rail link to Europe through Central Asia would serve its economic and strategic interests by developing continental channels through which it can interact with other economic and political centres in Eurasia.

Broadly, the Chinese leadership in Beijing considers that economy development and trade with CARs will enhance stability within the region. So, economic stability is the key to the Chinese policy of 'engagement' in Central Asia. The CARs offer China the nearest international market to supply its excess consumer goods and also are potential economies for Chinese foreign investment and industrial development. So, China has heavily invested in oil and natural gas industries to meet its growing energy needs. For instance, on Jun 4, 1997 China's National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) outbid its American and Russian competitors to operate the Uzen oil field in Western Kazakhstan over the next 20 years. This agreement worth 4 billion dollars provides the CNPC with 690 percent ownership in Kazakh share company Aktobemunaygaz. Later during the Chinese Deputy Prime Minister Li Lanqing's September 1997 visit to Kazakhstan, China and Kazakhstan signed a larger basket of agreements worth 9.6 billion dollars which included an agreement to construct a pipeline from Western Kazakhstan to Western China. Under the terms of agreement, the CNPC also agreed to construct a pipeline from Kazakhstan to Turkmenistan.

Thus, China's economic policies in Central Asia are broadly linked to its larger strategic and geopolitical interests in changing circumstances after the gradual Russian withdrawal from the region. It is also largely based on its energy security needs and search for markets for finished goods. But also, there is a fear among the Chinese policy-makers with regard to the policy of 'opening up' of its north-western frontiers towards the Muslim republics of Central Asia as it invites the risk of Islamic fundamentalism and cross-border ethnic separatism which are grave threats to Chinese national security.

Xinjiang and Central Asia

As noted earlier, the Central Asian region is vital to strategic, economic and political interests of China for its contiguity and cultural commonalities with the north-western region of China which includes the Muslim-majority province of Xinjiang. Historically this region has been dominated by Turkic-Muslims who are ethno-culturally different and distinct from the majority Hans of China. In this context, the histories of past centuries show that it was tenuous on the part of Beijing's leadership to maintain its hold on the region. Hence, with the independence of smaller

Central Asian Republics (CARs) on ethno-territorial basis China has been threatened by the emergence of separatist movements by the Uighurs, Kazakhs and Kyrgyzs in their quest for self-determination.

Historically, the Uighurs had largely migrated from the Mongolian steppes in the south-western direction and settled down in oases regions of the north-western China. It was in the 9th century they started living a sedentary life-style and created a genuine cultural hybrid by enriching their Manichean religion with Buddhist elements and by letting the Iranian language permeate their Turkic tongue.[7]

The province of Xinjiang (meaning New Dominion in English) came under Chinese rule after centuries of Turkic rule which established strong Sunni Islamic tradition and fiercely maintained their independence. This is evident from their periodic uprisings against the Chinese rule to establish a Republic of East Turkestan in 1933, 1944 and 1955 the Chinese authorities declared it as an autonomous region granting it certain concessions in terms of religious and cultural rights. But during the late 1980 a host of socio-political factors and government policies have generated growing ethnic unrest among the Uighurs in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR). The continuing influx of Han Chinese migrants from other parts of China and their settlement in the Uighur-dominated regions have been largely encouraged by the Central government in Beijing. This is evident from the latest influx of the Han population, which has been displaced by the massive project of Three Gorges Dam in South China.

Therefore, the Uighurs and other smaller Turkic-speaking ethnic groups have been swamped by the Han Chinese and discriminated in matters of education employment, culture and religion. For instance, in 1949, when PRC came into being, the local Turkic population in majority Uighur accounted for at least 93% of the region's population while ethnic Chinese in the region amounted to about 6 or 7% of the total population. But by 1977, according to the official statistics the population of the XUAR was over 17 millions divided into 47% Uighurs, 42% ethnic Chinese (38% Han and 4% Hui) 7% Kazaks and the rest divided between other groups. Historically seen, the majority native Uighur population in Xinjiang has thoroughly resisted the Chinese domination and agitates even now for greater autonomy and independence from Beijing. For instance, lately in February 1997, there was a series of bombings in Urumqi and other towns in Xinjiang and also a major riot in Yining directed against the Han Chinese settlers in Xinjiang.

Politically, the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR) has been granted certain degree of nominal autonomy on the basis of its majority non-Han Chinese population and its ethno-cultural diversities distinct from other provinces and the regions of China. This region was subject to long years of Turkic rule but it came under the Qing dynasty of China which annexed the region in 1759. But China "never directly controlled its new province because of the dearth of Han Chinese available to government"[8]. So, the Qing largely allowed the Uighurs to govern themselves under the Chinese rule. However, the native Uighur aspirations for complete independence was realized in 1864 when they successfully overthrew Qing rulers and established Eastern Turkestan. Although it was crushed later by the Chinese army, the native population continued to maintain a good measure to autonomy because of the diversities and distance from the rest of China... On the other hand, China has followed a policy of 'divide and rule' in its north-west borders in order to consolidate its hold over the Muslims communities. It is evident from the massive settlement of

Han-Chinese in Xinjiang, and other minority-dominated areas contiguous to Mongolia. The migration process has resulted in the domination of Han population over local nationalities in northern and eastern parts of XUAR[9]. It is linked to the practice of replacement of the labour resources by bringing in surplus labour from inner region of China in order to exploit the natural resources of cotton, oil, chemicals and metals.

In administrative terms, the officially recognised national minorities are granted some formal representation in the organs of regional government and the autonomy conferred to these region by the PRC constitution and law on regional autonomy has remained largely symbolic. Because, in the XUAR as in the rest of the PRC, all major policy decisions are taken by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and almost all senior posts in the regional and local CCP committees are held by ethnic Chinese (or Han) community.

Religious Discrimination of Uighurs

In religious matters, the Chinese government ought to blame itself for its 'Open Door' policy launched in the later 1970s and the subsequent economic reforms which brought with it an upsurge of religious revivalism in the XUAR, as in the rest of the PRC. During this period, the authorities allowed the reopening of mosques and the use of funds contributed from Islamic countries to build new mosques, found Koranic schools and import of religious materials. But gradually, during the late 1980s, this liberalisation stopped and government reverted to restrictive policies amidst fears that Islam might provide a rallying point for ethnic nationalism and that Islamist movements abroad might inspire young Uighurs who had gone to study in foreign Islamic schools. These fears were apparently reinforced by an accident in Baren near Kashgar in April, 1990 when protests and rioting reportedly led by members of an Islamic nationalist group resulted in many deaths.

Gradually, the Chinese government intensified its campaigns against the Islamisation process in Xinjiang by promoting in-depth atheist education. Thus, many mosques and Koranic schools were closed down and the use of Arabic script was stopped with tight controls on Islamic clergy and religious leaders. Many of these religious leaders who were deemed to be too 'independent' and 'subversive' were dismissed and arrested. Also, Muslims working in government offices and other official institutions were prohibited from practising their religion failing which they lost their jobs.[10]

Moreover, much of the Uighur resentment centres around the Chinese educational system, which forbids the use of Uighur Turkish language at higher levels. So, the denial of access to higher education has resulted in their relative economic deprivation and unemployment. On the other hand, Beijing has maintained a strong control over Uighur publishing and printing activities and it has seriously neglected the Uighur monuments and architecture. With limitations imposed on building of mosques, restrictions on child bearing and denial of certain cultural freedoms, the Chinese communist rule today "not only prevents Uighurs from developing their culture and civilisation but tries to assimilate and sinicize the Uighurs".[11]

The Uighur nationalists on their part, have mobilised strong support from Kazakhstan and certain Islamic countries in West Asia, particularly Egypt, Turkey, Afghanistan and Pakistan to carry forward their separatist movement. So, the demand for an independent Uighurstan has been voiced

by many self-exiled Uighurs in Turkey, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Afghanistan. In response to Chinese government's excessive repression of Uighurs in the XUAR in recent times, the separatist Uighurs have carried out bombings, bank robberies and attacks on the Han Chinese. In this context, the war in Afghanistan has its serious impact as "a younger more aggressive generation of better educated youth drawing inspiration from the international Islamic reassertion and a culture of jihad has merged to displace the older generation of nationalist secular-minded exiles[12]. Thus the war in Afghanistan has encouraged the forces of Islamic extremism and separatism among the Uighurs in Xinjiang.

The Chinese government on its part, believes that many Uighurs militants are trained in Afghanistan and Pakistan and they have been for long, students in the madrassas of Pakistan. So, in view of the Uighur presence in Pakistan, China has closed the Karakoram Highway very often and maintained strict vigil on its border with Pakistan in order to stop the flow of arms and drugs to Xinjiang.

Moreover, for China, the Xinjiang region is strategically important constituting one-sixth of the landmass of China which has nuclear testing sites and vast areas for military manoeuvres. In geo-political context, Xinjiang extends China's reach to the borders of Middle East with the new CARs lying in between. Historically, the region has served as buffer against external invasion and ideological influence on Inner China. So, it is found that "instability in the buffer zone itself has often drained China's resources or threatened China with contagion or conquest." [13]

The Chinese authorities are well aware that the north-western borders are porous and there are cross-border ethno-religious ties among its minorities. Through the past centuries, China has felt threatened with separatist unrest among the Manchus, Mongols, Uighurs, Kazhaks, Kyrgyzs and Tibetans. As long as the Soviet Union was there, these cross-border ethnic ties did not seem to constitute a major threat. But later the independence of CARs on ethno-territorial basis right on the Chinese borders has posed serious challenges to the multi-ethnic set-up of the communist state.

Central Asia in a Multipolar World

For China, the break-up of the former Soviet Union and the end of the cold war have presented new realities in the changing world order. The concept of a 'unipolar world' as propagated by the US and its western allies have not been endorsed by the Chinese and the Russians alike. In this changing order, the CARs find themselves susceptible to outside influences in conducting their international relations. So, there is strong American involvement in the region in terms of foreign investment, military partnership and bilateral ties. On this score, the Russian and Chinese leadership have come together to lessen the western involvement in the region. China has also cautiously viewed the role of other players like Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and India in Central Asia.

In recent global politics, the Central Asian region has been of great strategic and economic interest to the United States in its national security consideration.[14] It is evident from the extension of the US Central command (Centcom) operations to Central Asia by holding joint military exercises in the region. Similarly, the joining of the four CARs except Tajikistan in the NATO-affiliated North American Cooperation Council (NACC) has been viewed seriously by China. In response,

China has vigorously pursued the success of 'Shanghai Group of Five' initiative in Central Asia which is evident from the joining of Uzbekistan into the group as the sixth member recently.

So, the present Chinese policy in Central Asia is governed by strategic and economic considerations, which have strong linkage with the geopolitics of Xinjiang. The rising threat of ethno-nationalism in the neighbouring CARs will concern China in various ways. So, it wants the present status quo to continue in Central Asia because it ensures tranquility on its border and good relations with its neighbours. So, it has sought for a co-operative security framework with Russia for peace and stability in Central Asia. But the rise of Islamic forces in its neighbourhood may be a cause for grave concern to China as is evident from the events in Tajikistan and Afghanistan. So, it has sought for a constructive role in Central Asia with emphasis on mutual cooperation and peace with its neighbours.

Notes

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