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# The Uyghur Tangle in China: Regional Implications

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## Introduction

The Post - Cold War period is marked by the rise of some Third World States in the international system. Among these states China is believed to be the fastest growing economy which now appears to be challenging US superpower stature. Some scholars argue that China has achieved a great power status in the contemporary international system. China is governed by a strong regime under a one-party communist system. However, there exists a perception whether China should be identified as a strong state where individual's political aspirations are adequately fulfilled with established institutions. One of the characteristics of the modern state is equal citizenship rights to each individual

and community. Suppression of any political dissent by violent methods by the state is considered as irrational. Although it is also a fact that conceptually monopoly over the means of violence is prerogative of the state in the Weberian perspective. In the Western history of the state-making, violence had been the central instrument by which the state consolidated its national boundaries geographically and also demographically. But in today's context violence does not appear as state's prerogative only, it is exercised by non-states actors as well.

It may be recognized that with the passage of time there have been tremendous developments in the political trajectory of the State. Several new forms of political institutions have evolved over a

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period of time. States are seen as the guarantor of individual's liberty and development and individual's rights and security are guarded by the political institutions. In the Third World most of the states are still struggling with state-building processes. These states are facing several challenges. The issue of territorial integrity and state sovereignty stems from the fact that the national boundaries of most of the Third World states were demarcated by their colonial masters arbitrarily which resulted in the creation of ethnic problems. These ethnic problems gradually developed into political movements in which state tended to ignore their grievances. The persistence of the problems for long time often turns them into separatist or secessionist movements. And that is where state's territorial integrity and state sovereignty is challenged. The issue has also become complex ever since the United Nation (UN) recognised the Right to Self-determination. Communities which tend to preserve their ethno-cultural identities and values claim right to self-determination. To accommodate such socio-political aspirations, the idea of democracy flourished around the world. It is believed that under the democratic system communities with different identities and cultural values face less challenges. But it is

also a fact that democracy to a major extent, has not yielded desired results in the Third World. The issues of ethnic separatist movements, intra-state wars, political violence still exist starkly. States with large economy either with democratic or communist system could not resolve dissenting voices amicably.

The Uyghur conflict in China is such an issue which exists for decades now. Uyghurs as a distinct community, in China's Xinjiang province, is for decades struggling to restore its political autonomy for safeguarding its socio-cultural identity. The demand for greater political autonomy is met with suppression by the People's Republic of China (PRC). The constraints over religious identity and cultural practices has fueled the problem further and strengthened their movement. The huge influx of Han community, China's majority community, into the Xinjiang province is deeply perceived by Uyghurs as an attempt to erode their cultural identity in the region. But the state refers this process as a way of assimilation which will strengthen the integration process. But ironically, this assimilation process has created deep divisions which has resulted in conflict between the two communities. Tremendous rise in the population of Han community in

Xinjiang province not only created cultural issues but also deepened the economic grievances among Uyghur people who often accuse Han community of snatching their means of livelihood. It has generated a strong sense of deprivation which often results in violence. To comprehend this issue one needs to look into the history of Uyghur nationalism and the process of state-building in China.

### **Rise of Uyghur Nationalism: A Brief History**

It is believed that the origin of the word *Uyghur* can be found in the Uyghur Empire, founded by the Turkic, nomadic, and shamanistic society which dates back to (744 - 840 A.D.). The term Uyghur was especially used to refer to a sedentary, primarily Buddhist, and highly civilised society centered in Turpan, an area in the east of today's Xinjiang. The term 'Uyghur' came back into use when nationalism grew in the former Soviet Union's Central Asia in the 1930s, and the now it refers to the Turkic-speaking ethnic group living northwest China, predominantly in Xinjiang.<sup>1</sup> The Uyghur movement which is believed as a secessionist movement among mainland Chinese people is not a recent phenomenon. It has its,

although very short lived, history of independence in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Uyghurs in the Xinjiang province had declared independence twice in the past. In October 1933 Islamic republic of East Turkestan was established by the Turkic rebels and it was also known as *First East Turkestan Republic*. But it was subsequently suppressed soon by the then Chinese authorities. Again in 1944 with the overt and covert support from the former USSR communist regime, the Second East Turkestan independence was proclaimed. But it was also very short lived as in 1949 the then Communist Party of China (CCP) reclaimed the territory from the Turkic rebels. In October 1955 the CCP classified Xinjiang as their autonomous region of the People's Republic of China.<sup>2</sup> After 1955 official act of declaring Xinjiang as the autonomous region by the communist regime, the early years witnessed a policy of tolerance and cooperation with dissenting groups in the Xinjiang province. There was less interference in the matters of cultural practices, religious activities and social reforms within the Uyghur community in the Xinjiang province.

But with the rise of China's charismatic leader Mao Zedong to power, his vision of cultural revolution among China's diverse

and vast population led to political violence against various economic classes, factions and minority groups. The years of cultural revolution witnessed large scale bloodshed, harsh persecution of elite class, destruction of national economy and more importantly weakening of national integration process. Cultural revolution also had considerable impact on minority communities as it brought the demand for 'Cultural conformity to a new extreme'<sup>3</sup> and it exposed the darkest side of communist ideology where minorities might be subject to forced assimilatory policies. In the later days of the Cultural revolution, it came to a pass where differences were not tolerated, the activists destroyed mosques, Muslims were forced to shave their beards which frightened the Turkic people into shedding their religious clothing and rituals. This generated the intense feeling of social, political and religious insecurities among the Uyghurs community. They perceived it as an assault on their political rights and core religious identity. Such acts of social and political violence fuelled a separatist ideology among a faction of Uyghur political activists.

The tense years of cultural revolution paved the way for the dissenting forces to strengthen further the idea of creating separate land for Uyghur

Muslim community in China. In the similar vein the disintegration of the former Soviet Union in 1991 which led to emergence of several new states in Central Asia helped the Uyghur political activists to believe that their desire for attaining a separate state is not an impossible dream. The newly emerged Central Asian states happened to be Muslim majority states with their distinct cultural and linguistic traits.

As the Uyghurs of China were also composed of Kazakh, Uzbeks, Turkic, and Kyrgyz groups, they hoped to gain political support from both political elites as well the masses of these newly independent states. But the PRC was quick to realize this fact, and soon after the emergence of these states, China managed the bilateral and multilateral agreements in which it smartly blocked further ways of the political aspirations of Uyghurs. The strategically significant geographical location of the Xinjiang region which borders not only Central Asian states but also Pakistan and Afghanistan kept PRC at the alarm while dealing with Uyghur nationalism. Uyghur separatist movement in Xinjiang became vital for the PRC because of the strategic location of the Xinjiang which is said to be gateway for PRC to Central and South-West Asia.

## **Dynamics of Uyghur Conflict**

The Uyghur conflict in China seems multidimensional. It does not stem from one particular issue. Relating the conflict only to growing sense of nationalism among the Uyghur community and ignoring other important factors which generate a sense of insecurity among Uyghurs will not help the stakeholders to create peace in the region. China's problematic policy of forced cultural assimilation, rapid Han influx in the region and relative deprivation perpetuates the conflict. Xinjiang over a period of time has become a hub of economic activities. It explores multiple venues of opportunity for the local people. Several studies suggest that the benefits of rapid economic development in the region are not being distributed in the fair way. The Uyghurs as local inhabitant of the region feel left-out or discriminated. Their supposed economic development lags behind in comparison to Han community in the region. It fuels a sense of anger among the Uyghurs against both the state and the majority community which sometimes results into sporadic riots and violence here and there.

### ***Assimilation vs. Integration***

One of the important dynamics of the Uyghurs conflict in China is the

problematic assimilation policy under which state supports huge influx of Han community in the region. Historical accounts suggest that in the 1940s the Han Community only constituted about 6.7% of the total population of the region.<sup>4</sup> Ever since the Communist party took control over China as the ruling regime, it started the infamous policy of integration through assimilation. Consequently, in the Xinjiang 2010 census, Uyghur account for 45.84%, Han 40.48%, Kazakh 6.50%, Hui 4.51% and the rest account for 2.67%. In 2010 all ethnic minority groups amounted to 59.52%.<sup>5</sup> As the data shows the Han majority community out-numbered each community except Uyghurs. China's approach towards administering the Xinjiang autonomous region reflects an assimilationist approach. But the processes of assimilation generates many apprehensions among the local inhabitants with regard to their socio-cultural and religious identities which are being gradually threatened and suppressed most often. There have been reports and studies which indicates that Muslims in Xinjiang are subjected to surrender their religious practices and stop enjoying Uyghurs customs that are deemed to be Islamic.<sup>6</sup> The religious identities are further suppressed in terms of prohibiting wearing Muslim traditional clothing which includes

head scarves for women and skull caps for men in case they are state employees. Other prohibition includes banning of receiving religious education till the age of 18 years and tightly controlling pilgrimage to Mecca. A gradual process of de-culturalization of the young Uyghurs is perceived as a calculated assault from the State for the erosion of their religious as well as ethnic identity. Such policies have raised the levels of ethnic conflicts between Han and Uyghur communities. There has been everyday resistance with some Uyghurs galvanizing together to highlight their distinctiveness against the Hans, such as becoming more pious adherents of Islam or reviving customary practices unique to their ethnicity.<sup>7</sup> It is important to note that there has been growing interest to study the Uyghur disconnect and insurgency against the Han Chinese Government and importantly missing the growing antipathy of the Han community it has for Uyghurs. The intensifying antagonism felt between the two ethnic groups is most certainly exacerbating the Han-Uyghur conflict.

However, the critical assessment of China's integration process also informs a disconnect between minority apprehensions and state

policies. The issue of national language in terms of Mandarin which is aimed at creating a cultural standardization has generated much fury among the Uyghur community. Mandarin has been imposed as a medium of instruction in the institutions of higher learning ignoring the significance of both English and regional language. Not only this, since 2002 the Xinjiang University has been restricted to offering any courses meant to be taught in Uyghur language.<sup>8</sup> However, at the primary and secondary level the Uyghur language is used in schools. The mandarin language is believed to be as the language of economic upward mobility. It is also propagated that selection of Mandarin language by the minority communities enhances their scope of employability and it also paves the way for a process of acculturation at the same time.<sup>9</sup> People in the Xinjiang regions show both positive and negative attitude towards such development. On the one side, some feel optimistic about the benefits of learning and using Mandarin language in terms of better education and fair employment exposure in the mainland China. The pessimists show some deep seated concerns and insecurities behind the imposition of Mandarin language. They believe that by doing so the State is working on the policy of

diluting their cultural heritage and putting their language in decay.<sup>10</sup>

The nation-building process in China seems to be based on certain fault lines where the religious minorities with their ethnic identities and cultural values are being undermined. The Chinese version of nationalism is often equated with the Han chauvinism.<sup>11</sup> It observed that the Chinese nationalism is largely based on populist consciousness where the State is found playing an important role. Idea of introducing patriotic education and promotion of Chinese culture and civilizational achievements are some of the instruments that the State seems to be employing for achieving the goals of assimilation and integration. The problem which is faced by the Uyghurs in China is the loss of their internal autonomy. They are in the constant search for internal autonomy where the State is supposed to create grounds for the protection and the preservation of their ethnic and cultural identities.

### ***Internal Autonomy: A Search for Security***

Another major dynamics of the Uyghurs conflict in China is the issue of internal autonomy. Xinjiang enjoys a significant geographical location which borders with several Central

Asian states and offer untapped economic dividends. The majority community of the region, Uyghurs feel deeply discriminated and left-out in the process of rapid economic development. It is interesting to note that the official name of the region which PRC refers to Xinjiang, is the *Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR)*. It seems that the region has been provided freedom to govern their internal affairs. But in reality it does not exhibit the same. In practice the Xinjiang province is largely governed by the norms of CCP which side lines the Uyghur political aspirations which they are supposed to enjoy ever since the region is called XUAR. However, conceptually as one can see that autonomy arrangements around the world have been enacted to protect both states' territorial integrity and the fragile rights of minorities. But all autonomy regimes uphold territorial integrity over absolute responsiveness to the demands of the autonomous group: they are a compromise between (a) states, which want unabridged sovereignty and homogeneous populations; and (b) peoples that want self-determination, generally meaning independence.<sup>12</sup>

Ever since the CCP took control over China as the ruling regime, the idea of regional autonomy became

ambiguous and there has been significant policy swing in providing autonomy to the regions where political dissent is found to be high. Relatively tolerant policies in the early 1950s were replaced by strongly repressive and assimilationist ones as the country embarked on the Great Leap Forward in 1958. A return to moderation in the early 1960s was then reversed again with the advent of the Cultural Revolution in 1966.<sup>13</sup> By the end of that movement in 1976, pressures to assimilate linguistically and culturally, the persecution of religious practices and personnel, and attacks on respected authorities profoundly alienated most Uyghurs.<sup>14</sup> Deng Xiaoping's announcement of economic reforms in China in 1978 was soon followed by somewhat more tolerant cultural and economic policies in Xinjiang, though signally without relaxation of political controls. After public demonstrations in Xinjiang in 1988 and 1989 and a violent uprising in 1990, Deng ordered a crackdown in that province. The political clampdown in Xinjiang was accompanied by new restrictions on culture and religion that have remained in place up to the present.

### ***Sense of Relative Deprivation***

The developmental strategy of the PRC in the Xinjiang, as accused by

the local political activists, is the extraction of natural resources in terms of petroleum, oil, coal, minerals and non-ferrous metals.<sup>15</sup> Xinjiang represents part of China's solution to its ever-growing need for oil, natural gas and raw materials. State investment in the region targeted by the Great Western Development (GWD or Xibu da Kaifa) for large infrastructure developments amounted to 1.3 trillion yuan (\$US 190 billion) in 2007 and Beijing has allocated a further 438 billion yuan (\$US 64 billion) for 2008/09.<sup>16</sup> It is often stated that China has attempted to counter the minority dissatisfaction with the economic development. Huge investment and large scale development in the region could not overcome the issue of Uyghurs. Beijing believes that creating economic opportunity in the rural areas where poverty is rampant would somehow down play the political aspirations of the Uyghur separatists who constantly look for independence. The region has witnessed a large scale of investment in terms of building infrastructure since 1990s. Parts of Xinjiang, especially the administrative capital of Urumqi, have been modernised and characterised by new buildings, expressways and heavy traffic.<sup>17</sup> While standard of living has risen, Xinjiang has remained generally poor, with rising Han-Uyghur

inequalities. A common Uyghur complaint is that the Han Chinese monopolize the most well-paying jobs in Xinjiang and that there are employment disparities between Hans and Uyghurs in their oil industry and private sector.<sup>18</sup>

Several studies carried out in the Xinjiang province in order to understand economic disparities among various groups indicate the relative deprivation of Uyghur community. Han migrants surprisingly earned higher income than Han locals, whereas Uyghur earned much less than Han locals. In the non-agricultural sector, as has been observed elsewhere in China, Han migrants reported earnings higher than the Uyghur locals on average, though they were the least educated among the three groups: 11.8 percent of them graduated from colleges, in contrast to 33.4 percent of the Han locals and 26.9 percent of the Uyghurs.<sup>19</sup> The Uyghur-Han earnings disparity was larger within sectors that saw declining state protections of minorities. Other things being equal, Uyghur earn 3.5 percent less in government/public institutions, 12 percent less in public enterprises, 28.7 percent less in private enterprises, and 34.2 percent less in self-employment than Han locals.<sup>20</sup> Uyghurs were even more

disadvantaged in the agricultural sector than in the non-agricultural sector.

It is discernible that there is a role of market forces also which tend to reflect a discriminatory employment policy towards minorities due to which the income inequality among ethnic groups persist in the region. The socialist state has long played a visible and direct role in promoting ethnic egalitarianism, but after three decades of market reform, state preferential policies seem to remain effective only in government/public institutions. Ethnic earnings, inequality tends to be larger in economic sectors more exposed to market competition. There, discrimination against Uyghur may be due to other individual characteristics, such as Chinese language skills and weak social networks among Uyghurs<sup>21</sup> or it may stem from Han employers' prejudice about their work ethics, culture, or religion.<sup>22</sup> For example, employees in the public sector (government, public institution, or public enterprise) are not allowed to display their religious markers, which may discourage Uyghurs from entering this sector. Future empirical research might address more directly the factors driving "market discrimination" against ethnic minorities.<sup>23</sup>

### **Regional Implications of Uyghur Unrest**

The unrest in the Xinjiang province which stems from the tension and the deep rooted conflict between majority Han and minority Muslim community of Uyghurs is a serious socio-political as well as economic issue for PRC to deal with. The Xinjiang province due to its strategically significant location needs special attention from the Beijing as it serves a gateway not only to Central Asia but also South and West Asia. For rapid economic growth or development in the region it is important that socio-political stability is ensured at any cost. Aggrieved communities' grievances should not be prolonged. Noted scholars, such as Jonathan Fox, who have worked extensively on the ethno-religious conflicts opines that religious discrimination leads to religious grievances which can bring about mobilization for conflict.<sup>24</sup> In the context of Uyghur issue in Xinjiang, it is further compounded by the fact that Uyghur community also seriously lag behind in the socio-economic sphere. Their economic grievances due to income inequality and rising economic disparity in relation to migrant and local Han population fuels the feeling of anger which results in violence at times. The infamous Urumqi riots of 2009

can be studied through the lense of socio-economic grievances. Any prolonged violence in Xinjiang seems counter-productive for Beijing and its global ambition. Xinjiang, for its very close proximity with Central Asian and South Asian states offers both positive and negative dividends. On the one hand, it connects China with peaceful and resourceful Central Asian states from whom Beijing can gain a lot if the region is internally peaceful and stable. On the other hand, if the unrest continues which would help separatist forces to gain ground not only within the Xinjiang but also help the rouge forces in Afghanistan and Pakistan as the Xinjiang province shares borders with both the South Asian states.

The significance of Xinjiang in Beijing's ambitious project *Belt and Road Initiative* (BRI) or previously known *One Belt, One Road* is quite notable. The historical account suggests that from the early nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth century Xinjiang experienced a significant number of rebellion/independence movements of the Turkic-Muslim peoples, often with the significant external influence from the Central Asia/ or the Soviet Union.<sup>25</sup> Perceiving the centrality of the minority unrest in the region due to faulty and discriminatory development policies

being executed by China, one of the Chinese official sheds light on certain apprehensions. In an article in 2000 written by the then head of the State Ethnic Affairs Commission 'Li Dezhu' argues that the process of accelerated economic development and the integration entailed by the GWD could not only contribute to inter-ethnic tension but also provide an opportunity for external hostile forces to meddle in China. Thus, he stressed that China must be highly vigilant on this and take effective measures to safeguard the national unity and social stability in order to execute ambitious developmental strategy such as GWD and BRI.<sup>26</sup>

Apart from this, the growing population of the Uyghurs in the neighbouring Central Asian states and their organizational support base within these countries might complicate the situation for China if it continues ignoring the core issues of Uyghurs in Xinjiang. Although it is also true that Beijing to a large extent is successful in convincing its Central Asian counterparts that Uyghurs need to be viewed only as extremists and separatists. In the recent past the Uyghur people in the Central Asian states have been very critical of the Kazakh and Kyrgyz governments for colluding with China in extraditing alleged Uyghur terrorists. This is also interesting to

see that July unrest in the Xinjiang has also prompted a wave of Uyghur protest in these states, while both the governments have remained circumspect in their responses to the Urumqi violence of 2009.<sup>27</sup>

Thus, the regional ramifications of the Uyghur issue are multiple and deep in its reach. If the issues are not addressed adequately then the spill over effects can destabilise the growth story of the China or may derail its great western development plan. Therefore, the success of the GWD or BRI largely depends on peace within the region and peace outside the region.

## **Conclusion**

China's handling of Uyghur issue in Xinjiang has so far not yielded desired results. Ever since CCP took control over the country as the ruling regime in last few decades the issue has become more complex. Huge influx of Han migrants, constraints on the religious freedom, suppression of ethnic identity and the increasing volume of violence against the Uyghurs have weakened the country's national integration process. It seems that the PRC would need to revisit its past approach where it had agreed to accommodate the socio-political aspirations of the minority communities. In the

beginning when the PRC was being established the CCP committed to five specific provisions as guiding principles for handling ethnic minority issue. It affirms that; (1) No region would be permitted to secede from PRC; (2) both 'Han chauvinism – assertion of Han cultural superiority- and 'Local nationalism'- separatism- would be opposed; (3) autonomous organs of the government would be established in regions predominantly populated by minority people; (4) equalities between nationalities, freedom of religion, and the preservation and development of minority languages and customs would be guaranteed; (5) the central government pledged to aid in the development of ethnic minority regions.<sup>28</sup> These principles clearly remove any ambiguity about the religious identity and communist ideology. A lot of literature tend to see Uyghur issue in China as stemming from religious extremism or Islamic revivalism in the Central or West Asia but fewer scholars pay attention to the notion of religious freedom and cultural autonomy from the ethnic group's point of view. Similarly, China's tight crack down on such ethnic movements is generally a response of a state to ensure its territorial integrity and state sovereignty. There is hardly anything like religion vs. communist ideology. Had this been the case the CCP would not have adopted those

specific principles in which it guarantees the religious freedom and cultural autonomy. Even one can also see the case of Hui Muslims in China who are well integrated into the Chinese society and political system. They are hardly found leading any movement against the communist regime.

Thus, the question of Uyghurs in Xinjiang has to do with regional autonomy through which they wish to ensure their over-all development with their socio-religious and cultural identity. The Uyghurs of Xinjiang wish to secure their economic future against the huge influx of Han migrants which pose several contentious challenges before them. There is also need to look for a cohesive federalism between centre and periphery for the upward mobility of the minorities. China has become a growth engine for many of the developing nations. Massive investment from the China to newly independent states seems creating history in the Western centric world order. The desire to achieve its global political aspirations, it is important for Beijing that it well ensures its socio-political order within the national boundaries and particularly regions like Xinjiang which serves as a gateway for its future political status in the global affairs. ■

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