

# Ethnicity, Separatism and Terrorism in Xinjiang

China's Triple Conundrum

96

AUGUST 2010



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# ETHNICITY, SEPARATISM AND TERRORISM IN XINJIANG

## CHINA'S TRIPLE CONUNDRUM

BHAVNA SINGH

Massive investments, continuous political harangues and high propaganda have all failed to deliver the much espoused 'harmonious', 'stable' and 'integrative' development in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR). The achievement of such a vision, outlined in the Chinese government's White Papers (2003 and 2009), seems far from being realized. The Urumqi crisis of 2009 lays bare the inefficacy of the Chinese official policy in dealing with the ethnic and separatist movement destabilizing Xinjiang.

The schism highlights the continuing importance of the nationalities question (*minzu wenti*) in the People's Republic of China (PRC). Meanwhile the ETIM (East Turkestan Islamic Movement) which has been identified as the 'gravest terrorist threat' to national sovereignty continues to stir anti-government and separatist predilections within the region. The reasons for this deadlock between the Chinese government and the Uyghur population are manifold and remain at the core of exploratory studies by scholars and analysts alike.

With the 2009 White Paper on Xinjiang making tall claims about economic development in the region, it is imperative to contextualize the seething discontent which has continued unabated and become more violent of late. It is necessary to reflect at this juncture on what is causing this ethnic minority to be violent and non-cooperative instead of adopting peaceful means of articulation.

This paper looks at the nature of ethnic, religious and militant influences on the Uyghur-Chinese state relationship. It further delves into the policies adopted by China to overcome the menace of 'the three evils' – extremism, terrorism and separatism – and the importance of the Xinjiang question in its foreign policy in reference to China's immediate neighbourhood. It also examines the problems that have remained persistent and outlines possible solutions for the purpose of establishing peace in the region.

### I ETHNICITY AS LINCHPIN

As a multi-ethnic state, China grapples with the question of balancing indigenous cultural development with foreign influences. Any discrepancy in its handling leads to an immense clash of perceptions between the majority Han and other minority groups. While Hans are the majority community in China, in Xinjiang Uyghurs constitute the larger ethnic group. Uyghur-Han clashes in Xinjiang remain a major source of instability and apprehension for the central government. Historically speaking, the identity of the Turkic-speaking Uyghurs has been profoundly shaped by the memory of "East Turkestan." And so are the Chinese state's perceptions of and responses to ethnic minority's demands for autonomy and religious revivalism.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Michael Clarke, "China's "war on terror" in Xinjiang: Human security and the causes of

Due to this Uyghurs believe that they have never been a part of the Chinese state. The 'peaceful liberation' of Xinjiang in October 1949 is seen as a sham by Uyghurs in retrospect. They tender affective associations with 'pan-Turkic' and 'pan-Islamist' ideologies of the neighbouring countries. The main factor thus, leading to antithetical perceptions amongst the Uyghur and Han communities is the *abandonment* of the assurance of religious and cultural autonomy, which was promised by the PRC in the early 1950s but given up for making Xinjiang an "inseparable" part of China.

In the present scenario, the rapid pace with which China is allowing Han population to settle in the region has become a significant cause of discontent among the Uyghurs. There is a constant struggle for resources and opportunities between Uyghurs and Hans due to the ethnic-based discrimination policies of the government. Uyghurs vehemently resent these policies as they believe that they are heavily biased in favour of Hans and work at the cost of the indigenes. Ethnic discrimination by the state is palpable even at mundane levels of health amenities which fuels a discourse of deprivation amongst Uyghurs.<sup>2</sup>

Their perceptions are substantiated by the fact that Hans hold most of the upper echelon jobs in government institutions. Though they number relatively few, decision-making capacities fall within Han jurisdictions. There is an increasing concern amongst Uyghurs about how far

they will be able to preserve their minority culture in face of an onslaught from Beijing. They are afraid that their identities would become completely submerged in the greater Chinese state's drive for assimilation and integration through nationalist policies.

Even social divisions amongst the two communities have been further accentuated by the complexities of the education system being institutionalized in Xinjiang. Ethnic minority students face a choice between an education in Chinese (*minkao han*) and one in their own language (*minkao min*). This leads to widely differing career prospects for them as those opting for education in Chinese have greater benefits.<sup>3</sup> It also leads to an increasing divide between Uyghurs and the Chinese state, as not only is the modern education more costly than the traditional modes of education but also manifests itself as a propaganda mechanism of Han culture. Still further, the use of Chinese language as a medium of instruction in the local schools is seen as an attempt at forceful Sinicization and hence, is opposed by the Uyghurs.

The state for its part fails to realize the extent of damage that its policies are causing with respect to Uyghur cultural beliefs. The scheme of sending Uyghur students to boarding senior high schools in inland (*neidi*) regions of China aimed at integrating the 'minority' students into the 'mainstream' society has backfired to a large extent. The integrative goals have been subverted by the concerns of school authorities and local officials to minimize the chances of conflict erupting between the 'minority' students and their local Han contemporaries (which has been characterized as the '*safety first and study*

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violent Uyghur separatism," *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 20 (2008) :271-301.

<sup>2</sup>Brenda L. Schuster, "Gaps in the Silk Road: An analysis of the Population Health disparities in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous region of China," *The China Quarterly*, 198, (June 2009): 423.

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<sup>3</sup> Michael Dillon, *Xinjiang- China's Muslim Far Northwest* (London: Routledge Curzon,2004) .p.21.

*second'* approach by several scholars).<sup>4</sup>

Contrary to these perceptions held by the Uyghur population, many scholars believe that the tensions based on ethnicity are nebulous and these identity constructs are largely artificial. But these arguments do not necessarily give the right picture. A pragmatic analysis reveals that there is discrepancy at the levels of analysis between matters of policy and perception. Most ethnically discriminative policies are constructed to work in favour of Uyghurs. They not only provide reservation in educational institutions and government jobs, but the state also allows several exemptions in the area of one-child policy, tax benefits and educational opportunities which are not adequately appreciated by the Uyghurs.

It is to be kept in mind that the ethnic dimension of the Xinjiang quandary has been greatly politicized by different stakeholders. There is a considerable amount of reverse migration that occurs from Xinjiang to the other prosperous provinces of China which provides several benefits to Uyghurs and increases the scope of their integration into the mainstream.<sup>5</sup> Thus, even though ethnic prejudice constitutes a major barrier in improvement of mutual understanding between Uyghurs and Hans, it is not the sole determinant of the exigencies of current-day Xinjiang. It would rather be more appropriate to look at the resentment amongst Uyghurs as stemming not from the policies per se but the perception of these strategies as an attempt to debase their identity.

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<sup>4</sup> Yangbin Chen, "Muslim Uyghur students in a Chinese boarding school: Social recapitalization as a response to ethnic integration," 2008, New York: Rowman and Littlefield.

<sup>5</sup> Timothy B. Weston, "Growing up Han: Reflections on a Xinjiang Childhood," *China Annals*, China Beat 2008, <http://www.thechinabeat.org/?p=94>.

## II

### RELIGIOUS MOORINGS & SEPARATISM

Along with ethnicity, religious oppression provides a prism into Xinjiang's current plight. On the one hand, the aim of the government remains the preservation of national unity through a homogenizing intermingling of various religious communities. On the other, the presence of centrifugal forces in terms of Kazak, Kyrgyz, Uzbek and Tajik and the Muslim Hui influences, hinders such a possibility and bolsters a larger Islamic spirit among the Uyghurs.

The historic, demographic and geographical conditions explain the religious leanings of two communities – the Uyghurs and the Tibetans. Both communities have experienced a sense of a distinctive and an exclusive 'homeland' at several different times in their history. The people of Xinjiang enjoyed de facto independence in 1933-34 and then again in 1944-1949. This led Uyghurs to espouse far greater autonomy than what is being allowed under the current Chinese canopy.

To avoid religious friction, the state originally facilitated the development of religious institutions and allowed blossoming of religious institutions (construed as a soft stance by most people at that time) for appeasing the minority communities to join mainland endeavors. However later, this policy was given up in face of the withering effect that religious freedom had on CPC's political agendas in the region.<sup>6</sup>

The fallout of the approach was also evident in the Baren uprisings in 1990 and the Ili uprisings in 1997, which elicited the first recognition by the

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<sup>6</sup> Remi Castets, "The Uyghur in Xinjiang: The Malaise grows," *China Perspectives*, No.49, September- October, 2003, p.38.

government of a religion-based separatist incident.<sup>7</sup> The 'strike-hard anti-separatist' campaigns of the 1990s gave the lie to the appeal for harmonious development of the region. This in turn instigated a tide of religious revivalism that encompassed both ethnic nationalism and international religious politics.

Presently, there is a strong resentment amongst Uyghurs against the cooption of religious institutions under the guise of providing religious freedom to minority communities. The state is yet again following a policy of massive religious restrictions. It has termed the religious revivalism as an ethno-nationalist and splittist (*fenlie zhuyizhe*) threat to the state.<sup>8</sup> The theoretical and ritualistic manifestations of religion have been targeted by the government. It has, for example, restricted the celebration of regional holidays, study of religious texts and free expression of religious preferences through personal appearances. Any violation of the strictures is met by severe reprisal in terms of fines and administrative punishments or detentions in China's notorious and discredited Reeducation Through Labour (RTL) program.

All religious leaders based in the region have been made to obtain license from the China Islamic organization, which has involved a surreptitious element of periodic instruction and insertion of political messages in support of the government. China has also closed down several mosques and increased official controls over the Islamic clergy. This has in turn, led to a rejuvenation of fanatic

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<sup>7</sup>Canadian Security Intelligence Service, Commentary No.73, Islamic Unrest in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, Spring 1998, <http://www.csis-scrc.gc.ca/pblctns/cmmntr/cm73-eng.asp>.

<sup>8</sup>Human Rights Watch Report, 2005, "Devastating blows- religious repression of Uighurs in Xinjiang," Volume 17, No. 2(C), p.3.

religiosity amongst the Uyghurs. Joanne N. Smith observes that the heavy repression of Uyghur authors and the state's insistence on allowing only mainland Chinese authors to deliberate on the situation has infuriated the locals, who have resorted to exaggeration of their religio-cultural differences to show their disappointment.<sup>9</sup>

These policies have also invited severe condemnation by international organizations like Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International.<sup>10</sup> Their reports attribute 'religious repression and denial of cultural autonomy' as the chief reasons for demands of secession by the people in this region. Responding to such accusations, the Chinese government has defended itself by denouncing these as 'foreign intervention in its internal affairs' and has asked the foreign media to keep out of the region.<sup>11</sup>

The *Annual Report on China's Religions* (2010) published by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), attributes the religious disorientations to the "dramatic social transformation" taking place throughout China. It states that Muslims in China feel perplexed by the difference between history and modern reality. The survey further suggests that all its statistics should be viewed as estimates only as many people

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<sup>9</sup> Joanne N. Smith, "Making Culture matter: Symbolic spatial and social boundaries between Uyghurs and Han Chinese," *Asian Ethnicity*, September, 2002, 3 (2) 155.

<sup>10</sup> Amnesty International Report, 2002, "People's Republic of China: China's anti-terrorism Legislation and Repression In the Xinjiang Uyghur autonomous Region," <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/ENGASA170102002>.

<sup>11</sup> Chien-peng Chung, "China's 'war on terror': September 11 and Uyghur separatism," *Foreign Affairs*, 2002. [http://www.cfr.org/publication/4765/chinas\\_war\\_on\\_terror.html](http://www.cfr.org/publication/4765/chinas_war_on_terror.html).

are reluctant to divulge too much about their faith due to China's political sensitivities.

Thus, the ongoing dynamics can be understood in light of the 'confusion that stems from the vacillating stance' of the government between its 'soft and the 'hard' policies. While the soft approach delineated a tolerance and even encouragement of institutionalization of Islam<sup>12</sup> (like before the 1990s), the hard policies in contrast, campaign against religious education outside of state-sanctioned institutions. From the perspective of the indigenous people, the repressive stance of the government is reciprocated by the withdrawal of all support to any kind of government schemes. The repression on ethnic and religious fronts then leads to a larger phenomenon of the deepening of violent activities in this region.

### **III UYGHUR TERRORISM AND THE STATE'S RESPONSE**

The most significant manifestation of the resentment against religious and ethnic repression has been in the form of Uyghur terrorism. Many Uyghurs inspired by the victory of the Afghan mujahedeen over the Red Army, break-up of the Soviet Union, and the independence of the Central Asian Republics have galvanized efforts for the independence of their 'homeland'.<sup>13</sup> The demise of Eastern

Turkistan People's Party (ETPP) founded in 1949, which had spearheaded the growth of the militant movement in Xinjiang, was followed by the growth of East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) reorganized along religious lines.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s the ETIM tried to mobilize local support through various slogans like 'Down with socialism', 'In the past Marxism suppressed religion and now it is the turn of religion to suppress Marxism', 'Take Barin, establish Eastern Turkestan', and so on.<sup>14</sup> However, it was not until the heavy repression of Uyghurs at the hands of the Chinese government in the 1990s that the organization saw rapid growth and it continues to struggle for the establishment of an independent Uyghur state.<sup>15</sup>

Beijing, on the other hand, rejects this struggle for autonomy and maintains that it faces a concerted and violent Uyghur "terrorist" threat to its security in Xinjiang. It avers that these groups have links with the Salafist jihadist networks based in the region and thus, repressions are a part of China's strategy on 'War on Terror'. Ever since the 9/11 attacks in the US, Beijing has made consistent efforts to gather international support to declare all kinds of dissent and Uyghur activities as terrorist.<sup>16</sup>

The government views these activities as externally-funded movements, mostly blaming the World Uyghur Congress

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<sup>12</sup> Colin Mackerras, "Why terrorism bypasses China's far west," <http://www.atimes.com/atimes/China/FD23Ad03.html>, The Chinese government adopted measures like state-funding for mosque construction and the activities of the state-controlled Chinese Islamic Association during the early phase of its maneuvering in Xinjiang.

<sup>13</sup> Andreas Lorenz, "Ethnic unrest in Xinjiang: Uyghurs lament their lost Homeland," 2009, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/0,1518,635792,00.html>.

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<sup>14</sup> Castets, Op. Cit.

<sup>15</sup> Carried forward as the TIP (Turkistan Islamic Party) in the aftermath of the Urumqi crisis.

<sup>16</sup> US State Department Report 2001, "The annual report on the 'Patterns of Global Terrorism in 2001' of the Counter Terrorism Division of the US State Department on China's contribution to the war of the international coalition against terrorism," <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/31912.pdf>.

based at Munich and Rebiya Kadeer, a US-based exiled businesswoman, for working against the unity of the Chinese Republic. China has also conducted several searches within Chinese banks for evidence to attack terrorist financing mechanisms. Several press reports in the Chinese media<sup>17</sup> claim that Uyghurs train and fight with Islamic groups in the former Soviet Union, including Chechnya. However, the credibility of these reports is in doubt.

Most media in China reiterates the government's point of view and hence, provides a biased perspective. At the same time, they do provide testimony for China's intentions of using the terrorism discourse for furthering its other political goals. Maya Catsanis argues that the inclusion of ETIM in the terrorist list by the UN Security Council has provided China the needed international support to weed out these elements.<sup>18</sup>

The desire for safe transport of energy resources by a land route through Central Asia and into Xinjiang in order to sidestep the volatile Middle Eastern region and US-controlled seaways is also leading China to seek absolute stability in the region. Therefore, Beijing might be fabricating facts regarding terrorist plots to further strengthen its authority in Xinjiang and spread its influence beyond into the small Central Asian states.

For the Uyghur people, this has meant a loss of sympathy for their independence movement which has almost reached a level of decrepitude. The violent incidents

in the recent past have then, been more of a reflection of their angst with the present status quo in the realm of economic and cultural self-determination. The Chinese authorities have tried to set in place certain developmental goals to avoid this friction. How far it has succeeded in doing so is however, yet to be established.

#### **IV DEVELOPMENT: ANTIDOTE OR FUEL FOR DISSENT?**

In the beginning, China's policies on its minorities reflected a cognizance of their distinct culture and geographical aloofness. The most important and invariable element of China's minority policies was the phenomenon of *da zaju xiao juju* (big dispersion and small concentration) which recognized that certain minorities were concentrated in the peripheral regions of the state.<sup>19</sup> Its special institutional arrangements known as *minzu quyu zizhi* (minority nationality autonomous governments) tried to accommodate the needs of diversified nationalities as well as made stringent efforts to maintain national unity. Its long tradition of *duoyuan yiti* (multi-section but one-core) provided a framework for amalgamation of various nationalities.

However, with a view to introducing a more balanced policy for economic growth, China initiated the Great Western Development Strategy (*xibu da kaifa*) in 2000 to assimilate the region into the larger national economic system. Many industries were set up in this region to bring the standard of living at par with the rest of the country. Several policies were initiated at the levels of education, tourism and agriculture as also a propaganda campaign through the media.

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<sup>17</sup>“East Turkistan terrorists exposed,” *China Daily*, 2002,  
[http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/en/doc/2002-01/21/content\\_103075.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/en/doc/2002-01/21/content_103075.htm).

<sup>18</sup> Public policy and legislation, East Asia, “Uyghur group added to U.S list of terrorist organizations,” *Governance Asia- Pacific Watch*, September 2002, Issue No. 10,  
<http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/apcity/unpan014294.htm#1ea001>.

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<sup>19</sup> Yuchao Zhu and Dongyan Blachford, “China's fate as a Multinational state: a preliminary assessment,” *Journal of Contemporary China*, 15(47), May 2006, p.329.



Xinjiang has emerged as a key strategic location facilitating the oil and gas trade. The region has abundant oil resources like the Tahe oilfield and Dushanzi refinery and boasts of the largest natural gas-producing capabilities in China. The benefits from such reserves could prove a boon for the energy-thirst of the rapidly growing national economy.<sup>20</sup> This has caused the government to lay down policies which extract resources from the region without necessarily compensating the Uyghurs adequately.

This is the reason that though these policies were delineated under good intentions, they have failed to help the Chinese government in curbing discontent. The widening rural-urban income divide due to inequitable regional development acts as the main source of rising social differentiation. The share of per capita living expenditure and food expenditure in the urban households has decreased consistently, though lesser in case of the rural residents when compared against the national average. The pastoral economy has not received due attention which has further exacerbated the rural-urban divide since most Hans are concentrated in the urban areas.<sup>21</sup>

The stationing of Xinjiang Production and Construction corps (XPCC), which is the main organ of the state in the defense realm is also one of the reasons for the intensification of the Uyghur- Chinese state rift. There is a divergence in the perceptions of the two groups with

regard to the organization: the government looks at it as an important tool of its strategy and apparatus for law and order maintenance, while the locals find it as the major perpetrator of violence.<sup>22</sup> Militant Uyghurs often target it as the main force behind the abuse of local human rights.

The fast pace of modernization has led to environmental disasters which the local population finds hard to adjust with. Alongside, it has opened avenues for further expression of dissent through the establishment of state-of-art technological apparatus. The expansion of technology in media operations has led to access of information for the so-called terrorist organizations and furthered their reach as compared to its benefits for ordinary citizens.<sup>23</sup>

Gael Raballand and Agnes Andresy observe that it is not only the government-initiated efforts which are responsible for the skirmishes in the region but also the pressure from the traders of the Zhejiang province operating in Xinjiang who press for more secured routes for their exports. The interests of the Uyghur community are thus, subverted to those of influential Han entrepreneurs. These latent disadvantages in the economic development model fuel continued resentment as the government often fails to take note of these discrepancies while framing its policies.

In case of violent expression of this resentment the government resorts to complete blockade of information

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<sup>20</sup> Gaye Christoffersen, "China's intentions for Russian and Central Asian Oil and Gas," *National Bureau of Asian Research*, 1998, 9-10, Reports by Xinjiang Daily, Xinhua News Agency.

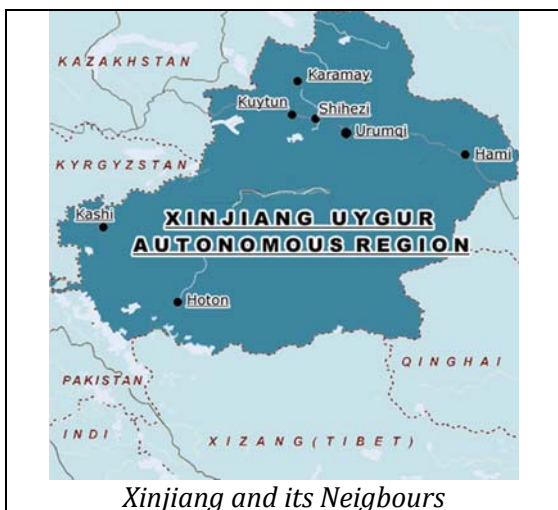
<sup>21</sup> Debasish Chaudhuri, "A Survey of the Economic Situation in Xinjiang and its Role in the Twenty-first Century," *China Report*, 41:1. Sage Publications, New Delhi. p.8.

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<sup>22</sup> Gael Raballand and Agnes Andresy, "Why should trade between Central Asia and China continue to expand?" *AEJ*, 2007, 5:235-252.

<sup>23</sup> "China to send more computers to rural west to promote Internet use," Xinhua News Agency, 17/06/2010, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/china/2010-06/17/c\\_13355787.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/china/2010-06/17/c_13355787.htm).

through media and other sources, as it lacks effective tools to control the availability of information in times of turmoil thus, giving an impression of complete opposition of interests with the masses. Economic development in the region has thus, brought along unintended consequences which the state did not anticipate earlier; only recently have the shortcomings in the reform process been acknowledged.



*Xinjiang and its Neighbours*

Given the demerits of reform several policymakers, advisors and Sinologists have called attention to the lacunae in policy implementation processes. In an article in the *Nanfeng Chuang* magazine reported in the *China Daily*, the implications of the current policy targets and need for ethnic integration through cultural means rather than economic impositions or political propaganda have been dwelt upon. An official observed, “the economy’s development, although important, cannot create ethnic unity without the support of other policies, in effect it may actually lead to social polarization and ethnic tensions. People of different ethnic backgrounds differ in their capability of adapting to the market and this creates a divide between the

easily adaptable and the non-adapters.”<sup>24</sup> Thus, the most serious concern for the government should be the absence of an integrative policy which could strike a balance between the needs of the local people and its own nationalist agenda.

## V STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS

China’s foreign policy behavior with regards to its Xinjiang quandary reflects three major concerns. First, the increasing demand for transparent governments in Central Asia could have a threatening spillover effect in Xinjiang as it could lead to further radicalization of Uyghur separatists.<sup>25</sup> Second, due to the large Uyghur presence in neighbouring countries like Kyrgyzstan, there could be a potential terrorist risk to the vast network of expansive infrastructure (e.g. road, railway, pipeline), which could endanger China’s comprehensive economic development program extending from Central Asia to Xinjiang.<sup>26</sup> Third, the ties with the neighbouring countries in terms of Islam could promote further secessionist tendencies.

China’s strategy to reduce the risk from the above-cited factors, involves an increasing pursuit of the strengthening of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) as a regional entity as it believes that the organization can provide a safety valve against Muslim fundamentalism in the member states. It has also resorted to

<sup>24</sup> China Daily, “Ethnic integration top goal in Xinjiang: Expert,” 04-06-2010, [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/imqq/china/2010-06/04/content\\_9937369.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/imqq/china/2010-06/04/content_9937369.htm)

<sup>25</sup> Martin Andrews, “Beijing’s growing security dilemma in Xinjiang,” *China Brief*, Volume: 5, Issue: 13, December 2009.

<sup>26</sup> China Digital Times, “Implications of Kyrgyzstan Revolt on China’s Xinjiang Policy,” <http://chinadigitaltimes.net/2010/04/implications-of-kyrgyzstan-revolt-on-chinas-xinjiang-policy/>

a string of anti-terrorist exercises with its neighbours to reduce threats from Uyghur terrorism. It has emphatically focused on the 'go-out' strategy in the Central Asian Region and the SCO is also seen as the key organization for reviving the old 'silk route'.

Nonetheless, the SCO is not devoid of its own set of problems and socio-political developments in the region are a source of grave concern to Chinese authorities. Though China has managed to get the Uyghur refugees in the SCO countries to be driven back to Xinjiang, the larger implications of Xinjiang in Central Asian politics have forced China to increase its presence in form of CPC leaders visiting in the region and looking out for support elsewhere.

China's interactions with its southern neighbours, India and Pakistan, are also arranged within the ambit of containing terrorism in this region. The joint exercise with Pakistan in 2003 in Xinjiang was an effort in the direction of pruning radical elements in the two countries. It was also in October 2003 that the Pakistan military killed ETIM leader Hasan Mahsum in an army operation, there has since been a rise in cooperation between the two countries given their physical proximity and similar nature of problems encountered by them. Asif Ali Zardari's visit to Beijing in July 2010 has furthered an understanding on weeding out terrorism from their adjoining territories. However, China has had and continues to have difficulties with Pakistan on the issue of the latter's ability to crack down on terrorism aimed at China.<sup>27</sup>

In this context, Xinjiang's ties with India are important. The visit by the Xinjiang

governor in 2004 was indicative of the huge potential for the two regions to work together on areas like agriculture and food processing, traditional medicine and herbs, energy and oil production as well as tourism and the more significant aspect of the border links with India's Ladakh region. In the security realm, the eastern part of Ladakh which is the disputed Aksai Chin area that China occupied in the 1962 war and through which it had built a road in the early 1950s to logistically connect Tibet<sup>28</sup> needs to be taken into account. China's vulnerability and need for stability in the region could help India find an opening in improving relations with China.

It should be recognized that the manner in which China deals with Xinjiang's ethnic and terrorist threats would affect the larger context of Asian security environment. On the one hand, China's strategy in Xinjiang and Central Asia could place within its grasp an unprecedented opportunity to extend its power and influence into the Central Asian region. On the other hand, it holds the potential to destabilize the entire Chinese state.

There is some speculation that any mishandling of the Xinjiang question could lead to break up of China in a manner similar to that of the USSR. And since most of the infrastructure and energy projects are grounded in this region any disturbance in the area could create potential havoc for the Chinese economy.<sup>29</sup> This region is also extremely important with regard to China's greater periphery concept and its grand strategy

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<sup>27</sup> Ziad Haider, "Clearing clouds over Karakoram," *Daily Times*, 4 April 2004, [http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=story\\_4-4-2004\\_pg3\\_3](http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=story_4-4-2004_pg3_3)

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<sup>28</sup> Abanti Bhattacharya, "Xinjiang's governor's visit to India: Significance for China-India Relations," <http://www.ipcs.org/article/china/xinjiangs-governors-visit-to-india-significance-for-india-china-relations-1546.html>

<sup>29</sup> Zhu and Blachford, Op Cit.

of 'peaceful rise' since the way it operates in Xinjiang leads to international responses of either questioning its approach or supporting its larger agendas in the region.

## **VI FUTURE DILEMMAS**

Given the larger geostrategic importance of the region, it is imperative that China finds a lasting solution to its Uyghur problem. The Urumqi crisis of 2009 is only one such violent manifestation of the resentment caused by the misinterpretation of local cultural and political desires. Though the massive derailment of its peace initiative in the region should have led to a reassessment of its policies, post-Urumqi developments do not reflect a serious appraisal by the Chinese government. In continuing with its repressive policies, the government is yet again perpetrating a legitimacy crisis for itself and adding fuel to the disgruntlement of the Uyghurs.

Prioritizing one facet over the other will not provide any lasting solutions to the current situation in Xinjiang; development based singularly on an economic agenda or only in tune with the ethnic aspirations would only intensify the cleavage between the haves and have-nots. The larger goal should not just be the 'catching up of Xinjiang' with industrialized China but also an upliftment of the Uyghur people to an extent where violence becomes unnecessary as a means of expression.

Uyghur cultural rights have to be recognized in a more accommodative manner and institutional frameworks need to be set up for fair articulation of their interests. There is a pressing need for shifting the discourse from that of 'controlling Xinjiang' to that of 'accommodating Xinjiang'. It also requires a metamorphosis in the overall minority

policy of the Chinese government. Similarly, on the international front, China needs a systematic streamlining of its policies for the purpose of benefitting from incremental engagement for containing terrorism and achieving development targets.

China's relations with other Muslim countries would not only depend on but also be a causative factor in the rise of the radical Islamist wing of Uyghur separatism. Hence, it needs to collectively with the Central Asian countries devise a strategy to overcome these security threats. The urgency of solving its extremist and terrorist threats also provides new opportunities for it to engage with its southern neighbours like India and Pakistan. If effectively utilised, the cooperative endeavours on Xinjiang could lay down framework for future cooperation in other arenas as well.