

Xinjiang Unrest a Long-Term Concern for China

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Background

In recent weeks, ethnic unrest in China's Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region has left dozens of people either dead or wounded. Like Tibet, China's efforts to stabilise Xinjiang represent a serious long-term challenge, especially in securing its domestic and regional interests. This is especially relevant in terms of the Muslim world, given that Xinjiang shares a border with eight neighbouring countries – of which many are Muslim – and whose co-operation China is dependent upon in its perennial fights against cross-border activities of Uyghur militants.

Comment

As China's largest province, Xinjiang spans over 1.6 million square kilometres and



amounts to one-sixth of China's total land area. Indeed, the sheer size of the province makes it highly strategic, especially given that it shares a 5,600 km border with eight countries: Russia to the north, Mongolia to the northeast, Kazakhstan to the

northwest, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Afghanistan to the west, Pakistan and India's Leh District to the southwest. To its south, Xinjiang borders the fractious Tibet Autonomous Region while, to its east, it borders Qinghai and Gansu provinces.

In the sphere of natural resources, Xinjiang reportedly has large coal, oil and gas reserves, including deposits of copper, gold, iron, lead, mica, platinum, silver, sulphur, tin and uranium. It is this combination of strategic geography, natural resources and the quest for strategic depth and security that has made Xinjiang one of China's most strategically important provinces.

The demographics of Xinjiang's population, with the exception of Han Chinese, are primarily Turkic-speaking Muslims, which



encompass the Uyghur, Kazakh, Hui, Kyrgyz and Mongol ethnic groups, who have retained cultural and linguistic ties

to both Central Asia and Mongolia.

After the suppression of two insurrections in the early twentieth century, where Uyghurs and other allied ethnic groups declared an independent republic, known as "East Turkestan", the region was formally occupied and incorporated as a province of China in 1949 and re-named the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region.

While the majority of ethnic Uyghurs live in

Xinjiang there are also smaller Uyghur populations in neighbouring countries, such as 300,000 in Kazakhstan, another 200,000 spread across Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, some 3,000 resident in Afghanistan, over 3,000 in Pakistan, about 1,000 in Mongolia and around 500 in Turkey.

Since its annexation, China has followed a policy of state-endorsed settlement of Han Chinese. As a result, the Han Chinese population has increased from an estimated 300,000 before 1949, to over six million today. This influx appears to have become an escalating source of tension among many Uyghurs who resent their presence, which they see as a threat to their way of life.

Hence, the emergence of radical Uyghur Islamist secessionist groups such as the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), which is the most organised, have formed and dedicated themselves towards the creation of an Islamic state in Xinjiang, which they term “Uyghurstan”. ETIM, which both the Chinese and United States governments suspect of having links to al-Qaida and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), is believed to be responsible for over 200 terrorist acts, primarily against Chinese nationals and interests, which have killed over 160 people.



Accordingly, ETIM’s presence in Pakistan has been a major source of concern to China and has led to bilateral security co-operation against Uyghur militants active on Pakistani soil. For instance, in 1997 Pakistan deported 14 Uyghur students who organised protests in support of the Ghulja riots in Xinjiang. Similarly, from 2000 onwards, several Uyghur community reception centres were reportedly raided and shut down by Pakistani authorities.

In 2004, after attacks and kidnappings were orchestrated against Chinese nationals in Baluchistan and South Waziristan, Pakistani security forces launched operations against suspected Uyghur militant safe havens in the North-West Frontier Province and Federally Administered Tribal Areas, where dozens, if not hundreds, of Uyghur insurgents are reportedly active.

In 2006, in the lead up to the Olympic Games in Beijing, ETIM released a video proclaiming a new *jihad* against China vowing to oust the Chinese from their traditional homeland. As seen in 2009, however, China maintained steady pressure on Pakistan to crackdown on Uyghur activities, which led to the extradition of nine suspected Uyghur militants to China. Similarly, in 2010, the Omar Uyghur Trust, a cultural organisation set up by two Pakistani-based Uyghur expatriates, was raided and reportedly shut down by Pakistani authorities.

Yet, in the light of the recent Uyghur unrest in Xinjiang, which has now continued for

nearly a month, such measures by Pakistan appear not to have satisfied its steadfast ally. This was amply demonstrated by the reaction of the Xinjiang authorities, which issued an unprecedented online statement: ‘The heads of the group had learned skills of making explosives and firearms in overseas camps of the terrorist group East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) in Pakistan before entering Xinjiang.’ Although the statement was subsequently withdrawn, it sent a clear disapproving message to Pakistan, a major recipient of Chinese aid and investment, to lift its weight in dealing with subversive Uyghur activities.

Given Pakistan’s dependence on China, which is its most important ally, trading and development partner and investor, it is doubtful whether, at this stage, China-Pakistan relations will be seriously affected. But, since there are few indications to suggest the Uyghur grievances are likely to be resolved in the near or long-term, China may face the prospect of further communal unrest in Xinjiang fuelled by cross-border Uyghur militants operating in Central Asia and Pakistan.

As Pakistan remains precariously unstable, and the US hurriedly prepares to withdraw from Afghanistan, uncertainty about Central Asia’s future stability, especially with regard to the status of the Taliban, is a source of major concern for China, which is looking to consolidate security and stability in Xinjiang. Indeed, the advent of future regional instability has the potential to seriously complicate and strain China’s

relationship with Pakistan and the other Muslim countries of Central Asia, as it continues to move against Uyghur secessionists inside and outside its national borders.

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<http://www.futuredirections.org.au/>

Uyghur Autonomous Region in PRC map:

http://wiki.verbix.com/uploads/Languages/China_Xinjiang.gif (date accessed: 27/08/2011)

Uyghur Folk Dancing Image:

http://www.library.yale.edu/digitalcollections/yalesil_kroad/images/large/allsize4/SRN_0189.jpg (date accessed: 27/08/2011)

ETIM Flag image:

<http://www.newsreporter.in/wp-content/uploads/2011/08/East-Turkistan-Islamic-Movement-.png> (date accessed: 27/08/2011)