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# Separatism in Xinjiang

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Between Local Problems and International Jihad?

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## About "Inside China" Series

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*The China Research Program (CRP) within the Institute, as a part of its activities, undertake research and organise events under "Inside China," aimed at exploring issues and challenges in contemporary China covering economic aspects of China's growth, political development and emerging social tensions and fault lines. This essay was a part of the first annual conference in 2011.*

# Separatism in Xinjiang

## Between Local Problems and International Jihad?

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The incidents at Urumqi in 2009 and in Hotan and Kashgar in 2011, within a short span of two years, have questioned the assumption by Chinese authorities on maintaining strict vigil over separatists and terrorist elements in the Xinjiang region. While the former were sparked by a demand for enquiry into a brawl between workers of a toy factory in Urumqi and the rumours of alleged rape of an ethnic-minority woman by men folk of Han majority, the latter were sparked by reports of misbehaviour wherein attackers wielding knives and home-made explosives rampaged through streets lined with food stalls and a restaurant, slashing and stabbing bystanders (Andrew Jacobs: 2011). The reporting in the media from both the miscreants and the sufferers was substantially different and remains highly controversial. However what is more confusing is the lack of precise definitions by the Chinese government on its understanding of the terms - separatist, terrorist or extremist acts.

### I SEPARATISM OR TERRORISM?

Violent incidents have been dubbed interchangeably as 'separatist' and 'terrorist' acts orchestrated by Uyghur elements based abroad (for instance, organizations like the ETIM) (Uyghur American Association: 2011), or by prominent Uyghurs like Rebiya Kadeer (People's Daily: 2011). The concern is that despite attempts made by China at assimilating minorities and to establish a harmonious society, political unrest remains high. Analysis of the larger geopolitical situation reveals that

while separatist tendencies have been bolstered by religious repression and lack of economic benefits, there are several external factors charting the blueprint of China's national and regional polities.

Most notably, Soviet influence in Xinjiang hindered initial assimilation with the People's Republic of China (PRC) during early twentieth century, while the Islamic extremist linkages with the Central Asian region have been responsible for undercutting the state's authority in the late twentieth century. Consequently, China has been continuously engaged in an endeavour to eliminate the Islamic threat through confidence building measures with its neighbouring countries. The problem also emanates from the fact that the official discourse of the Chinese state remains highly publicized and garners extensive international attention while the narrative from the locals has a filtered audience.

The international recognition to violence in Xinjiang is accrued more in terms of safeguarding human rights and struggle of the local minorities against the policies of the state than to support the separatist goals of Uyghurs in Xinjiang. Given the recurrent nature of Xinjiang's separatist struggle it has established a legitimate concern for the authorities in Beijing. In view of the ideological linkages with Turkic or Uyghur nationalism and alleged connections with international jihadist organisations, this paper delineates the trajectory of the separatist struggle as well as analyzes the response of the Chinese state and

its future momentum.

## II QUEST FOR A SEPARATE STATE: THE BACKDROP

The growth of a separatist movement in Xinjiang has witnessed several phases from the acquisition of Xinjiang by the Qing-empire in mid-eighteenth century to its consolidation as a part of the PRC in 1949. Owen Lattimore while describing the historical origins of Uyghur people surmised that due to the distance and topography of the region a 'stubborn separatism' was innate (Abanti Bhattacharya: 2003). The early Rebellions in 1930 were highly influenced by 'Uyghur enlightenment' and drew their legitimacy from religious repression. The establishment of the East Turkistan Republic (November 1933-1934) under the auspices of leaders who were a product of their phenomenon set a precedent for reform and assertion of group identity against the Chinese state.

In 1931 the ethnonym Uyghur was revived by the Chinese government officials to identify the people in this region under pressure from the Soviet Union (Ibid). It was in fact again the Soviet Pressure in 1945 which resulted in a cease-fire between the second East Turkestan Republic and the GMD (Guomindang) Chinese forces in Urumqi, as the Soviet Union contracted the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship and Alliance with China. The Soviet influence remained quite strong until China's conscious decision to assimilate the region through various strategies. The first phase was characterized by the 'United Front' strategy which aimed at gradually reforming the existing political, economic and cultural order via cooptation of ethnic elites, especially led by the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps/ bingtuan (Michael Dillon: 1996). The second phase corresponded with the political and economic disruptions of the Great Leap Forward (1959-61). The third phase coincided with the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), but these attempts did not yield many results.

The 1980-90s specifically witnessed a resurgence of the demand from Uyghur associations. This came about as a consequence of the government's liberalization of economic and cultural life without conceding to any demands of greater political autonomy. Also, the period under Deng Xiaoping saw relatively stable governance which provided enough opportunities for people to organize debates, both religious and secular, and deliberate peacefully without fears of being arrested. This period also saw extensive mobilization of non-violent forces in the region. In the 10 years from 1990 to 2001, there were 41 major incidents of Uyghur separatism or alternatively terrorist acts resulting in a total of 58 deaths and 179 injuries (Marika Vicziany: 2003).

Some of the prominent incidents were: the Talip Incident in Yarkand on 5 January 1990, which was instigated by shut down of privately run religious schools leading to protests by students, the Baren Incident in Akto Township on 5 April 1990 which was an armed uprising

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over migration and family planning issues, the Urumqi Bus bombings on 5 February 1992 wherein two bus explosions were seen in Urumqi, the February 1992–September 1993 bombings wherein several explosions took place in Yining, Urumqi, Kashgar targeting stores, markets, hotels and centres of “cultural activity” in southern Xinjiang, the Khotan demonstration on 7 July 1995 where there was a dispute over the legitimacy of government appointed religious heads vis-à-vis locally appointed religious chiefs.

In April-June 1996 these protests, assassinations, bombings and crackdown led to three major political developments (James Millward: 2004):

- (a) The release by the Standing Committee of the CCP politburo on March 19 of a secret directive warning of illegal religious activities and foreign influence in Xinjiang,
- (b) Signing of a mutual tension reducing and security treaty by China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, later known as the SCO,
- (c) Announcement of the Strike Hard Campaign.

The Yining Incident on 5-8 February 1997 sparked by state prohibition of Uyghur social organizations also rattled the Chinese authorities. Besides, a series of bombings in 1997 and 1998 rattled the administration in Urumqi and other parts of Xinjiang. In early 1997, the police in Xinjiang arrested two Uyghur religious students (talips) which led to clashes with the locals in the area. The Chinese government redeployed several measures to curtail the separatist threat and strengthen its links with Central Asian countries so that it can pressurize these countries to cooperate in counter-terrorism efforts and endorse China’s stand on anti-separatist struggle.

This was also done to revive the Central Asian support which had been lost in 1992, due to the huge exodus of refugees fleeing from inter-ethnic violence in Central Asia to China, which

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had led to straining of relations between them. China realized that without establishing formal networks on common issues of concern, it will be difficult to manage the Uyghur problem (Clifton W. Pannell & Laurence C. Ma: 1997). Thus, massive dialogues were initiated for cooperation on jointly handling the terrorist threats in the region. Besides, the state also ushered in certain domestic policies to manage the growing unrest in the region. Most recently, it has inaugurated the Great Western Development Strategy (xibu da kaifa) in 2000, to counter the threat emanating from separatist activities.

### III CHINA’S STRIKE HARD CAMPAIGNS: CURBING SEPARATISM?

In 1996, the Chinese government initiated the strike hard campaigns as one of the principal tools of weeding out alleged impertinent elements. It increased the pressure on the mashrap (a social gathering of young Uyghur men often involving musical performance) which was governed by strictly Islamic rules of conduct. This became a matter of huge

controversy between Muslim groups in Xinjiang and the authorities in Beijing. The state failed to realize that these gatherings were primarily aimed at discussing and resolving local problems, mostly drug addiction and alcohol abuse amongst the Uyghur youth, and were not typically involved in “illegal religious activities.”( James Millward, Op Cit)

Thus the strike hard campaigns manifested as acts of suppression of religious and individual rights in the Xinjiang province. The period also witnessed a gradual removal of Uyghur minority incumbents from higher posts of local governance structures by Han migrants, which is one of the major reasons for discontent even today. More stringent measures were introduced to eradicate ‘illegal’ mosques and religious schools, to increase political training amongst clergy as well as to combat religious practices among party members (Edmund Waite: 2006). The repercussions of economic policies followed by the Chinese state, hitherto, also became evident in the lopsided development of the region. While the northern region flourished economically, the southern Tarim Basin remained overwhelmingly rural. This region has become the hotbed for most of ethnic minority protests in the current times.

The crackdown by the state intensified during this period and a large number of cases were registered against the Uyghurs and subsequently executed. Amnesty’s China Death Penalty Log in its study made an interesting observation that in 1997 and 1999, Uyghurs who represented less than one per cent of the population of China, accounted for nearly 3 to 4 per cent of the executions for separatist activities (Marika Vicziany, Op Cit). These figures have however been questioned by scholars who believe that the numbers of Uyghurs executed each year was much higher in reality than the available official figures since the organs of state security insisted that political crimes were not to be reported or made public. Inaccurate reporting on Uyghurs executed for separatism also stemmed from the fact that some of these people might have

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been officially executed for drug smuggling or fund raising for Uyghur terrorism while not registering it as separatism or spilttism (fenliezhuyizhe). Moreover the death toll among Uyghurs as a result of state responses to separatist incidents was far higher than by execution or imprisonment.

The state also tried to rein in the unrest in the region by maintaining control of the majority industries and making the provincial government increasingly dependent upon the central government for financial support (Nicholas Becquelin: 2000). The government’s efforts in Xinjiang hereafter were based on its policy of Han in-migration, exploitation of Xinjiang’s potential energy resources and greater political and economic links with Central Asia (Michael Clarke, Op Cit). The incidents began to decline only after 1997-98 possibly, because of Chinese efforts at interdiction but this could not be sustained for long as evident in recent incidents. The strike hard campaigns fomented more distrust between the locals and the state and consequently came to be abhorred by the indigenous minorities. The inefficacy of these repressive measures to yield expected results

has again forced the Chinese authorities to adopt new methods like developing certain regions as Special Economic Zones and ascertaining special privileges to the residents of this region in employment schemes and education.

#### IV THE GLOBAL WAR ON 'TERROR' AND SEPARATISM

While China pursued the agenda of lessening the Soviet role in Xinjiang, its dependence on the Central Asian nations became more and more severe. Through the establishment of the Shanghai-Five, now known as the SCO, China managed to focus on the perceived threat of the Taliban in Afghanistan, the related Islamic movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) insurgency and economic problems. It has become increasingly alarmed by the reports that Uyghurs were fighting with the Taliban in Afghanistan in 2000, as well as them being actively recruited by the IMU (Ahmed Rashid and Susan V. Lawrence: 2000). Such reports have been

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furthered by the Pentagon which acknowledged the capture of several Uyghurs in its operations in Afghanistan.

As the separatist threat evolved, China has begun to link it explicitly with the 'global war on terror' and stepped up efforts to combat both separatism and unlicensed religious activities (Amnesty International 2002). First, it wants to cooperate further with its Central Asian neighbours since they agreed on sealing the porous borders along China's western regions resulting in decreased contacts between the Uyghurs and Muslim elements. Second, it is seeking recognition of alleged terrorist organizations from international bodies and is documenting the organizations and groups deemed threatening to its stability. Third, it has declared its struggle against separatism in Xinjiang as a part of its larger struggle against terror.

Its official delineation of measures against separatist and terrorist threat began with the 2002 document on East Turkestan Terrorism- "East Turkestan forces Cannot Get Away with Impunity" which alleged that most of the terrorist incidents were related to organizations like the East Turkistan Liberation Organization and the East Turkistan Islamic Movement. The Eastern Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) is deemed to have some possible ideological as well as operational linkages with the Hizb-e-Tahrir or the "Party of Liberation" and it projects itself as the largest and most popular Islamic movement having followers in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan fighting to establish a caliphate in the historical region known to them as Turkestan. But how far this organization is popular amongst local Uyghurs is highly debatable (Ibid).

Similarly other organizations identified are the Eastern Turkestan Islamic Party (ETIP), the Eastern Turkestan Revolutionary Party (ETRP), the Eastern Turkestan Grey Wolf Party and the Islamic Holy warriors but these organizations are highly limited in their reach and support base. The Uyghurs based abroad are rather more active participants to the separatist

cause. Through a network of cyber-separatism they are involved in spread of information on human rights violation and orchestrating Uyghur propaganda. These groups include: the East Turkestan Information Centre, the World Uyghur Congress, and the Uyghur American Association.

On 15 December 2003, the PRC Ministry of Public security also issued a most wanted list mentioning 11 names belonging to the ETIM (Davide Giglio). A major accomplishment in this regard for China was when the US accepted its demand for including the ETIM in its list of recognized terrorist organization in wake of the 9-11 developments. The US further offered assistance by detaining some two dozen Uyghur prisoners in its irregular prison camps in Guantanamo. In 2003, China expelled 700 Pakistani traders from Xinjiang when reports got public that the separatist groups were getting aid and training from Pakistani groups. However, a major problem of assessment by the Chinese government is on whom to be included and who not be included in these lists. There is a constant overlap between the alleged separatists and alleged terrorists leading to misconstruing of the separatist struggle.

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The all-weather friendship with Pakistan has also not prevented China from taking action against the possible spread of Islamic fundamentalism at the hands of Pakistanis in Xinjiang. Beijing has restricted visas for Pakistanis wanting to travel to Xinjiang along the Karakorum Highway and vice versa for either religious purposes or to attend Islamic madrassas (religious schools). It has made tremendous progress in curbing the separatist menace through its Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure (RATS) mechanism under the SCO, which helped to consolidate its gains in the Central Asian region. Given all these efforts, the Chinese government till recently believed that the situation was likely to come under control. But the terrorist incidents in 2009 followed by July 2011 incidents have proven otherwise, which further begs inquiry into the reasons for continued dissent.

## V A CRITICAL APPRAISAL

The strengthening of the separatist struggle in the last 20 years is attributed by the Uyghurs to Wang Lequan's high-handed posture on assertion of ethnic identities as well as his over emphasis on the anti-separatist issue. While the Chinese authorities blame the foreign hand or the terrorist proliferation from other regions for the upsurge in such incidents, most of the retaliations are driven by religious and cultural repression rather than an Islamic threat. The local police was also a target of attack which implies a deliberate attempt by the locals to target government apparatus to show their anger.

The resident Uyghurs believe the incidents in Kashgar and Hotan to be more dangerous since they were random and unpreventable. These events have led to the resumption of strike-hard campaigns and a resolution of by the authorities that these incidents will not be allowed to drag down Xinjiang's economic status. Public Security Minister Meng Jianzhu during an anti-terrorism meeting in Urumqi



declared that “those criminals who dare to test the law and commit violent terrorist acts will be shown no leniency, no appeasement and no soft heart.” (People’s Daily: August 2011)

Unfortunately, these drastic measures reflect the limitations of the government in dealing with the populist assertions arising from the space provided by the relaxation of norms in the media. The Urumqi crisis had forced the government to introduce massive educational programmes for the region stating an emphasis on Marxist concepts of ‘country, nation, religion, history, culture, patriotism...and opposing national separatism’. Major internet curbs were seen for almost 10 months after the Urumqi debacle to restrain the spread of panic. (People’s Daily: March 2011)

Though several leaders had been insisting on crackdown on separatist activities in Xinjiang, the 2011 incidents have elicited a more harsh repression by the state (People’s Daily: March 2011). Four suspects were shot dead by the police in Kashgar on 1 August 2011 while four others were caught. This is a pointer that the state has failed to learn from previous incidents and is still pursuing policies which are likely to deepen the ethnic divide. Also, the attack on the police station might be an indicative of the blatant resort of the locals in attacking government structures to indicate their displeasure against the government. In addition, the government has planned on a massive education revamp in the province by educating ethnic minority teachers. It plans to dispatch a total of 500 ethnic minority teachers for a one-year training program designed to train more bilingual teachers and boost educational quality in the region (China Daily: September 2011). This indicates an effort by the government to mould the thinking of local inhabitants at the primary education levels itself, so as to alter the discourse on repression of minority communities.

An interesting fact to note here is that the Uyghur stance on a separatist movement is also not a coherent monologue. The demand

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for a new state argued under the banner of ‘East Turkestan’ is a highly debated even among the Uyghurs (People’s Daily: March 2011). The main contention is that “East Turkestan’ signifies a Turkish association while the Muslims in Xinjiang have historically called it the ‘Land of the Uyghurs’ and do not want the name to be thrust upon them by the Turks. Meanwhile they also object to the term ‘Xinjiang’ or ‘new frontiers’ as it means acceptance of the Chinese government’s absolute sovereignty.

The Chinese state nonetheless, continues to be determined to assimilate this region in its larger polity. Another significant aspect of these uprisings is that nature of these incidents is by and large local. The reporting of these incidents should also be read with some caution. The intensity of the revival has not drastically altered in comparison to the previous decades; rather it is the increasing media attention to the Xinjiang issue that has brought these violent episodes under the scanner of international groups. The fact that it is the local Uyghur population which is most adversely effected from all these violent incidents is rarely taken into consideration by the state.

Though the separatist threat is indeed severe but the reasons are not ethno-nationalist alone

as generally perceived. The Xinjiang problem is more and more becoming a problem of governance or more appropriately the lack of governance. There is a continuous thread of cause and effect relationship which can be observed amongst these incidents over the previous century. First, limited economic opportunities and confiscation of huge chunks of land have led to extreme desperation among the local people. The influx of Han migrants have led to siphoning off of job opportunities from the indigenous minority groups. The level of education and skills have not improved despite measures being taken for amelioration of poverty and expanding the economic base. Second, the lack of effective forums within Xinjiang has led to the appropriation of the separatist movement by organizations based abroad and manifestation of violence instead of dialogue.

Third, Chinese attempts to link Uyghur Separatism to international Jihadist groups also need to be dealt with carefully. The state has also failed in making a distinction between the adherence of religious practices by a particular group and its propensity to seek a larger goal of alignment. Thus while, the Uyghurs have been fighting for religious accommodation they have not necessarily voiced a willingness to join the Pan-Islamic movement against China. Moreover, the popular Islamic culture has developed in a moderate and liberal fashion when compared to Islamic practices in other parts of the world. Contrary to general perceptions, the Uyghur religious leaders have offered a voice of moderation in the Xinjiang province. The Uyghur middle class is composed mainly of professional people who have secular disposition, adhering to their religious leaning in their private space and not as a part of political propaganda.

The linking of the separatist groups to international jihad or terrorism not only helps China to escape accountability regarding human rights in international forums, but also helps in managing its domestic politics and retaining administrative legitimacy. On the one

hand, Uyghur nationalism posits a growing challenge for the authorities in Beijing. On the other hand, the surge in Han nationalism is overpowering domestic issues. Thus, by focussing on the separatist and terrorist dimension rather than the issues at the core of dissent in its minority regions, China tries to hold its political fabric together. Fourth, a mobster mentality pervaded by an extreme sense of fear and humiliation is palpable amongst those Uyghurs who participate in these incidents.

While these incidents make for succulent information for coverage by the international media, the Chinese authorities' insistence on not meddling with China's internal affairs rules out any international intervention. The international community continues to watch these episodes with a sense of suspended sympathy. The lack of media transparency in reporting and providing details hinders an objective analysis of the turn of events. No foreign journalists are allowed to engage in investigating ground realities and audacious attempts made by certain organizations like the Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch call for retributive action on part of Beijing.

Another aspect of the separatist struggle which requires further probing is the inability of the government to distinguish between "mass incidents" which occur all over the Chinese territory and those of a separatist nature. The classification of violent incidents is more or less arbitrary some being designated as separatist incidents, some as terrorist incidents while others as mass incidents. Arbitrary detention which is often a corollary to these incidents and whereby the Uyghur or other minority citizens are subjected to torture leads to further disenchantment with the Chinese government.

A major player which has received even less attention in the overall analysis of separatist discourse is the police. As the prime operator of state policies in the field it represents the

attitude of the state towards these minority groups. Most often such violent incidents are sparked by police heavy-handedness leading to rioting and shouting of anti-Chinese and Islamic slogans on the one hand and student marches on the other. Thus, they constitute a major determinant of the cyclic tenure of these incidents. They are responsible for sensibly dispersing the mob in the immediate aftermath of any incident but since most of the police cadres are constituted by Han officials they harbour no sympathy with the Uyghur citizens.

They also closely observe the fissures and faultlines within the Uyghur communities and are able to gather information from locals who do not associate with their fellow Uyghurs. Thus, a closer analysis of their pattern of operation would reveal the vested interests of the mid-rung strata in preserving a disturbed polity, possibly even to the surprise of the Chinese authorities in Beijing. The police modernization budgets have increased over the years and with China's growing emphasis on a 'Just war against Global Terrorism' it is using police and surveillance networks to deal with criminals will help eradicate support for terrorism on a sustainable basis (China Daily: September 2011).

The conventional dictum of the Chinese state that the three evils of 'separatism, terrorism, extremism' are rendering the polity of Xinjiang weak and unmanageable also need to be revised in terms of demarcating what these three idioms stand for and how they are differentiated from one another. A fortunate step in this regard has been the decision to define terrorism by the Chinese government taken in October 2011.

In the final analysis, the separatist discourse is over-valued both domestically in China as well as internationally, though for opposite reasons. As an internal security threat China responds obsessively to even a minor interruption from its ethnic minorities and at the same time tries to exploit it for maximizing its gains at the international level. Any objection from the

international community draws an unsolicited response from the protagonists in Zhongnanhai who believe that any state experiencing an internal situation like that of China would respond similarly. This should not however transpire as a valid alibi, for any state operating under the constraints of multi-ethnic polity needs to accommodate the demands of its minority population and address the core issues to thwart the progress of a sustained movement. The international community on the other hand should not castigate China's endeavours to maintain internal stability.

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