

An immovable object and an unstoppable force: the Uyghurs and Beijing

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Author: Mubashar Hasan, Griffith University

China's Xinjiang Autonomous Region is experiencing, yet again, deep unrest and unease. News headlines have been dominated by violent clashes between Chinese police and some sections of the Uyghur population — recently a police building in Xinjiang province was bombed and 13 Uyghur activists shot dead in the aftermath. To comprehend the persistent tensions between the Chinese administration, managed by the dominant Han ethnic group, and Uyghur Muslims, one must consider historical tensions and both the strategic and economic significance of Xinjiang.

Of China's 20 million Muslims (spread across ten ethnic groups), the Turkic-speaking Uyghurs, in particular, have long been subjected to state-sponsored persecution in relation to their practice of Islam and the preservation of their culture. Constituting about [45 per cent of Xinjiang's population](#) ^[1], this ethnic group is seen as a threat to mainland China's political interests.



The Chinese government has reason to be wary of Uyghur independence movements. Twice last century, in 1933–1934 and 1944–1949, Uyghurs declared independence and established the short-lived Islamic Republic of East Turkestan. On both occasions China was able to re-establish its control, but it is understandable that the current Chinese administration is apprehensive about those in Xinjiang and elsewhere who hold nostalgia for past phases of independence and dreams of renewed liberation.

Following these independence movements, and during the Cultural Revolution, Muslims in

China found their religion stigmatised and outlawed. Uyghur religious leaders were persecuted, imprisoned and even killed. All Islamic worship and religious education was targeted by the communist regime. Daily religious utterances, including *Insha'Allah* (God willing) and *Alhamdulillah* (thanks given to God) resulted in persecution.

Presently, critics of the Chinese government argue that contemporary Beijing has not changed its position regarding the suppression of Muslims. Beijing's [recent decision to ban](#) ^[2] Ramadan fasting among government officials and students in Xinjiang province may provide further evidential support to Beijing's critics. But the government routinely denies any charges of [religious suppression in Xinjiang](#) ^[3] or anywhere else. At best, there is the perception among Muslims that official Chinese denials of persecution are hollow.

For example, during the US-led war on terror, [according to Amnesty International](#) ^[4], thousands of Uyghurs were jailed and sentenced without a fair public trial. They were accused of 'terrorism, separatism and religious extremism'. This was seen as a politically motivated move by the Chinese government to undermine Uyghur independence movements. In November 2001, the then UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Mary Robinson, [was quick to warn China](#) ^[5] not to capitalise on the American-led campaign against terrorism 'as a pretext to suppress ethnic minorities'.

Xinjiang bears immense strategic importance for China. It covers one-sixth of the total area of China's territory and constitutes a strategic border region for the country. Xinjiang constitutes economic borders with Pakistan, India, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Mongolia and Russia. And domestically Xinjiang holds a significant border with Tibet, another region troubled by ethnic unrest.

Xinjiang is also where the Chinese military develops, and has previously tested, nuclear weapons. Thus maintaining security in this region is a priority for Beijing. This significance manifested itself publicly in 2009 when, during the July riots, the then Chinese president, Hu Jintao, left the G8 summit in Italy and returned to China to address the issue.

Finally, resource endowments make Xinjiang a strategic region for Beijing's long-term economic interests. Presently, this [region contains](#) ^[6] China's biggest natural gas reserve and a 4000 km gas pipeline connecting Xinjiang to Shanghai. Xinjiang also hosts lucrative reserves of coal and oil. The oil fields at Karamay in Xinjiang are among [the largest in China](#) ^[7] and the region has extensive deposits of silver, copper, lead, nitrates, gold, and zinc. It is, in other words, one of the key arteries of the Chinese economy.

These factors collectively explain why the Chinese government has sought to maintain its control of the region. One policy has been to encourage mass Han migration to Xinjiang; a tactical move to see Han Chinese outnumber ethnic Uyghurs. In the early years of the PRC millions of Han Chinese were forcibly relocated to Xinjiang to work on state farms and in the mining and oil industries.

More recently, up until late-2000, millions of Han Chinese were [reportedly still being](#) ^[8] offered subsidies to relocate to Xinjiang. As a result, according to *The Guardian*, 'the proportion of Han

Chinese inhabitants rose from 6 per cent in 1949 to about 40 per cent by 2000 and migrants had begun to spread from cities into rural areas, where they found themselves in competition with Uyghur communities for water and land’.

One problem here is that the Han Chinese population are the primary beneficiaries of government funded projects. Such patterns of state discrimination fuel the frustration felt by the already marginalised Uyghurs, who believe that they are indigenous to Xinjiang and that Beijing is intentionally marginalising them.

The [recent clashes and riots](#) ^[9] are therefore evidence of an outburst of longstanding frustration by Uyghurs. Unless China is willing to pursue [a more nuanced, diplomatic and inclusive approach](#) ^[10] to integrate Uyghurs, and Uyghurs choose to deal with the Chinese administration through civil and political channels, we can expect to see further clashes in the Xinjiang province over the coming years.

Mubashar Hasan is a PhD Candidate at the School of Government and IR, Griffith University, Australia. He is also the founder of alochonaa.com ^[11], a politics, culture and IR blog.

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[1] 45 per cent of Xinjiang’s population: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-pacific-16860974>

[2] recent decision to ban: <http://time.com/2952833/china-bans-ramadan-fasting-for-officials-students-in-restive-northwest>

[3] religious suppression in Xinjiang: <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2014/02/26/beijing-redoubles-counter-terrorism-efforts-in-xinjiang/>

[4] according to Amnesty International: <http://www.amnesty.org.au/china/comments/17758/>

[5] was quick to warn China: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/1644662.stm>

[6] region contains: <http://blogs.ft.com/energy-source/2009/07/06/xinjiang-unrest-the-oil-and-gas-connection/#axzz36aSjOKdt>

[7] the largest in China: http://works.bepress.com/franziska_elmer/doctype.html

[8] reportedly still being:

<http://www.economist.com/news/china/21578433-region-plagued-ethnic-strife-growth-immigrant-dominated-settlements-adding>

[9] recent clashes and riots:

<http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2014/03/11/chinese-government-caught-flatfooted-by-separatist-attack/>

[10] a more nuanced, diplomatic and inclusive approach:

<http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2014/06/16/chinas-ethnic-policies-short-on-evidence/>

[11] *alochonaa.com*: <http://alochonaa.com/>