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# High Stakes for China in Xinjiang

China's Xinjiang province continues to experience outbursts of violence by Uighur separatists, but to no avail. As Ting Xu points out, the region's importance to Chinese economic development and energy security virtually guarantee that Beijing will maintain control over it at all costs.

By Ting Xu for ISN

China's autonomous province of Xinjiang is a predominantly Uighur (Turkic Muslim) region that has experienced decades of ethnic conflict led by an independence movement against Chinese government forces. The scale and frequency of ethnic unrest and conflict in Xinjiang has risen in recent years. In July 2009, for example, an estimated 200 people were killed and 1,700 wounded during the worst ethnic violence in decades. If the independence movement was to finally achieve its long-term objective, an independent Xinjiang would have significant implications for China's development, stability, and long-term energy sustainability.

## Precious Commodities

First, an independent Xinjiang would mean a loss of one sixth of China's land area, equivalent to the size of Iran and at least twice the size of most European countries. This area is highly rich in resources: over 40 percent of it is suitable for the development of agriculture, forestry and animal husbandry. It is among the top five grazing areas of China, and has 250 million cubic meters of timber reserves. It is rich with diverse wildlife and minerals, some of which are the largest reserves of the nation. The area also has large reserves of water and energy. Xinjiang alone is estimated to have over 2,580 billion cubic meters of water locked in glaciers, 38 percent of the national total coal reserves, and more than 25 percent of the national total petroleum and natural gas reserves. The region is set to become China's largest oil and gas production and storage base by 2015 and China cannot afford to lose it.

The second direct impact on China lies in the demographic composition of the region. Xinjiang is no longer predominantly a Uighur province. The Uighur population, once over 80 percent of the province's total, is now reduced to around 40-45 percent. In the event of severe instability or independence, the region may experience serious and prolonged ethnic conflict involving 9 million Uighurs and an almost equal amount of Han Chinese. This could create a refugee crisis in which Han Chinese would flee to China's heartland. For perspective, the potential North Korean refugee crisis has been a major concern for China for a long time and Xinjiang represents a similar population with more complex ethnic relationships.

Moreover, China borders more countries than almost any other nation, and 8 of its 14 land neighbors border Xinjiang. Most of them have more similar ethnic and religious backgrounds to Xinjiang than to central China. Some of these neighbors are internally unstable and, in the case of Afghanistan and Pakistan, play host to terrorists and Islamic extremists. Indeed, some attacks in the past inside

Xinjiang are believed to have been sponsored by Al Qaeda in Pakistan. Accordingly, some attempts to foment destabilization in Xinjiang can not only be attributed to these groups, it may also increase their influence in areas closer to central China. Ultimately, if Xinjiang were to become independent, it may inspire separatists in the other predominantly minority regions of China. In all likelihood, it would destabilize Tibet and Qinghai, which also share long histories of violent ethnic conflict with Xinjiang.

### **Critical Infrastructures**

Xinjiang also connects the vast Chinese heartland with the rest of Central Asia, where China has increasingly strengthened its economic and political relationships with the Central Asian states. Beijing has, for example, fostered close ties with resource-rich states such as Kazakhstan. And through regional organizations like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), China looks to Central Asia to help diversify its energy supplies. As a result, Xinjiang is becoming one of the most important passages for road transportation and the transportation of oil and gas for the country.

China inaugurated its first transnational oil pipeline in 2006, when it began receiving Kazakh and Russian oil from a Kazakhstan pipeline. It is gradually becoming the bridge to a wide resource supply network all over Central Asia, potentially including the Middle East and Caspian Sea. The Central Asia Gas Pipeline became the first gas-importing pipeline for China in 2009 and is linked to the web of domestic pipelines through multiple west-to-east pipelines. This reduces the transportation load in the busy Strait of Malacca and delivers Central Asian gas resources directly to China. Beijing's state owned PetroChina has also built two west-to-east pipelines that bring in gas imports from western neighbors and deliver its own large production to the rest of China.

More pipelines have been planned in the near future and the existing capacity is expected to double over the next few years. A China-Pakistan pipeline is also under consideration, which would enable Pakistan to become the "energy corridor" for China, delivering crude oil from the Persian Gulf and Africa through Xinjiang. If China were to ever lose control over the Xinjiang region, its energy security could be severely compromised. With its economy highly dependent on energy-intensive industries, losing energy supplies coming from and passing through Xinjiang would have a devastating effect on the nation's economic growth.

### **Too Important to Break Away**

An independent Xinjiang state would also have a profound impact upon Beijing's domestic policies and international relations. For instance, China plans to develop clean energy that will help the country deal with its notorious problems with pollution in the next decade. One of the largest sources of solar and wind power is Xinjiang, which is at the national forefront of many clean energy projects. Xinjiang's enormous potential to provide China cleaner energy would be lost if Beijing no longer administers the region. The path to greening the country would thus encounter serious setbacks.

Finally, some of the most vocal calls for an independent Xinjiang come from the World Uyghur Congress. Many leading figures within the Congress currently reside in the United States, Germany and Turkey. Should the independence movement and the newly-installed Xinjiang government continue to receive support and funding originating from these states, it could significantly complicate China's relations with the West.

Accordingly, the stakes for China in Xinjiang will remain extremely high for the foreseeable future. Beijing's vested interests extend way beyond the scope of ethnic conflicts, human rights, sovereignty or the principles of governance. Instead, Xinjiang is pivotal to China's development, stability and long-term energy sustainability. It is important to understand what a destabilized or independent Xinjiang region would mean to China in order to better understand why the country will do all it can to

prevent this from ever happening.

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