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About the Author



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China's western border province of Xinjiang, has long been in the news for reasons of ethnic unrest and perceptions of instability. Xi Jinping has been pushing the agenda of peace and stability in Xinjiang, ever since he came to power. In 2014, Xi had asserted that "the stability of Xinjiang is strategically vital to China's reform and development as well as national security"¹ while hoping for "walls made of copper and steel" and "nets spread from the earth to the sky" in order to prevent terrorism.²

Xinjiang is home to the Uighurs, one of China's 55 ethnic minorities. While the Uighurs are not the largest ethnic Muslim population in China, conflicts in Xinjiang are amongst the biggest challenges to the notion of China's peaceful and harmonious development. Hui Muslims, China's largest Muslim ethnic group, speak mandarin and look *Chinese* unlike their Uighur counterparts. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) does not quite know how to handle the difference, since many of its policies in the region have been aimed at, or have looked like they are pushing for assimilation of Uighurs. Thus, many of these have boomeranged. Secondly, the drive for stability has led to the influx of Han migrants who have been the biggest beneficiaries of the region's development, giving rise to a sense of alienation. From just six per cent in 1949, the total Han population in the region went up to around 40 per cent in 2013³ and this has been promoted by the CCP by providing incentives and better wages for Han migrants. The situation in Xinjiang appears to be a litmus test for the CCP.⁴ The problems also arise because the government's policies have made the Uighurs feel like outsiders in their own province, which makes them resentful towards the CCP.

Background

Xinjiang is strategically and economically very important for China. It was made into an Autonomous Region of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1955. Xinjiang shares borders with eight different countries, namely India, Pakistan, Mongolia, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Afghanistan, making it strategically crucial. Xinjiang is also an important factor in the China-Pakistan relationship. According to some reports, "a number of extremist outfits allegedly linked to ethnic Uighur separatists within Xinjiang have training camps in Pakistan's borderlands with Afghanistan".⁵ The most important group, which became highly active in the 1990s, is the East Turkmenistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) which is a recognised terrorist organisation. The Chinese government has always blamed outside forces for the instability in Xinjiang. As per a 2003 White Paper on, *History and Development in Xinjiang*, "In order to get out of their predicament, the 'East Turkistan' forces once again have raised the banner of 'human rights,' 'freedom of religion' and 'interests of ethnic minorities,' and fabricated claims that 'the Chinese government is using every opportunity to oppress ethnic minorities,' to mislead the public and deceive world opinion in order to escape blows dealt by the international struggle against terrorism".⁶ The statement reinforces the CCP stance.

However, the Chinese government's approach towards Xinjiang has always been flawed. The situation is neatly summed up by Gardner Bovington, Professor of East Asian and Eurasian studies at Indiana University. He argues that "The party doctrine is founded on notion that religion is a mystification. It requires its members to be atheist; any party member or teacher in Xinjiang must renounce Islam".⁷ This harsh religious intolerance has created serious mistrust between the CCP and the Uighurs. Thus, it was no surprise when in July 2009 the region witnessed one of the most violent riots, between the Uighurs and the Hans, in which 200 were killed. This incident was a major wakeup call for the CCP, as to how its ethnic policies had failed to assimilate Xinjiang. What followed was increased top down control and more promises of economic growth. After the riots, according to Rebiya Kadeer, the Uighur exiled leader, around 10,000 Uighurs who had participated in the protests went missing.⁸ Since then the region has witnessed yearly violent clashes between the local people, the government officials and Han migrants. The CCP has failed to accept that its policy of command and control has failed and it blames outside forces that have been demanding an independent state of East Turkmenistan, for the problems in Xinjiang

After the riots, Hu Jintao, the then President and the Party General Secretary, rather than acknowledging that the problems which had risen due to ongoing Han influx and discriminatory policies announced that "In the future, Xinjiang's development will be better and faster".⁹ The statement underpins the idea that the Chinese government hopes that economic growth will appease the Uighurs. However, discriminatory policies have made it difficult for the Uighurs to enjoy the benefits of development. With the focus on Han migration and the changing demography over the past six decades, the Uighurs have been reduced to second-class citizens in their own region, which is a major catalyst in their resentment towards the CCP and its policies. The instability in Xinjiang coupled with its strategic location, has made it a very tricky region for the CCP to control. The chosen method is to clampdown on every possible sector of the society. The CCP attempted to address the economic and developmental differences between its under developed western region and developed coastal regions by pushing programmes like 'develop the west'. However, the pumping of money in the region, has not had the desired results.

In June 2001, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) was established. Its prime agenda today is fighting terrorism and intelligence sharing. The member countries include China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. For the past few years China has been conducting joint military drills and exercises in the Xinjiang region, with the aim of achieving preparedness to combat terrorism. China has used the SCO platform to exert pressure on Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, to close down Uighur newspapers and ban political parties,¹⁰ and has signed agreements with Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan for extradition of Uighurs who flee to Central Asian countries.¹¹ In the past few years China has also put pressure on Malaysia and Turkey to send Uighurs back to China. In 2015 Thailand gave in to pressure from China and sent around 100 Uighurs back.¹²

Post 9/11, the CCP has used the agenda of the global war on terror to further extend its control on the region and the people, but this has not worked the way the CCP hoped. As

stated by Joanne Smith Finley, a lecturer in Chinese studies at Britain's Newcastle University: "It's only since the state has been repressing religious practices in Xinjiang so hard, that ironically it has caused Uighur Muslims to re-traditionalise, to re-Islamise at a very rapid rate now".¹³

The policy of economic growth has resulted in the One Belt One Road (OBOR) project under the leadership of Xi Jinping and Xinjiang is a prominent region in this initiative. With the new focus on the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), Xinjiang will come to play an even bigger role in guiding China-Pakistan relations. In addition to this, it has one of the largest reserves of natural gases and oil along with deposits of uranium, gold and other important minerals.¹⁴ Xinjiang is also an important link in the overall OBOR link with Central Asia, Russia and Europe.

Xinjiang under Xi Jinping

No surprise then, that since coming to power, Xi Jinping has been focused on bringing Xinjiang under the complete control of the Chinese government and the region has turned quite volatile. The policies of siege, suspicion and suppression have gained increased momentum under Xi. The region has been at its most volatile since Xi took over as the president of the PRC and the general trend of increased control and command was extended to Xinjiang. The Chinese government has been pushing for the promotion of Xi Jinping's thought in Xinjiang. As per *Global Times*, "Chinese experts said that Marxism and the Xi Jinping thought are especially valuable for Xinjiang, as they can best direct the local people and Party officials to uphold ethnic equality".¹⁵ The CCP has continued to invest heavily in Xinjiang since 2010. In 2017, 19 important and developed provinces and important cities like Beijing, Shanghai etc. invested around \$2.3 billion in the region.¹⁶

The following section discusses some of the major policies adopted by the CCP towards Xinjiang in the last five years of Xi's rule. It has been organised on a year to year annual basis to highlight the rising intensity of the government control year after year.

2014

The year 2014 was one of the most violent years for Xinjiang. The Chinese government arrested Ilham Tohti, the most vocal critic of the CCP policies in Xinjiang and doubled the counter terrorism budget.¹⁷ Xi Jinping visited Xinjiang in April 2014, and urged the people to learn both Chinese and Uighur language. He stressed that, "the region's security forces were on the front line of combating terrorism and needed the tools and the support to do the job".¹⁸

According to some reports, around 700 people died in 2013-14,¹⁹ of which 200 people were killed only in the month of September 2014.²⁰ In a shocking incident, an Imam who was perceived to be pro-CCP, was stabbed to death outside a mosque in Kashgar.²¹ The government publicly announced 50 executions and death sentences between June and December 2014, while 27000 people were arrested.²² In response to the ongoing violence, Abdullah Mansour, the Turkmenistan Islamic Party leader, called for a 'holy war against China' and argued that China was the enemy of all Muslims.²³

2015

The year 2015 followed the trend of increased and more stringent control. The region witnessed more casualties due to ethnic clashes. China's National People's Congress passed the Draft Security Law in July 2015. The law provides the government with every means and options to control and monitor dissent and discontent. The law is another measure by which the Xi government is attempting to strengthen control. In addition, the law leaves a lot open to interpretation and thus provides the Party with enough 'excuses' to clamp down on any incident or event which it may regard as a threat to the overall safety and security of the Party.²⁴

In September 2015, the Chinese government released a White Paper on *Historical Witness to Ethnic Equality, Unity and Development in Xinjiang*.²⁵ The paper argued that the Chinese state is using legitimate means to control religious extremism, as per the law, in order to safeguard the interests of the state and the people including Muslims.²⁶ The control extends to the Chinese government officials as well who are not permitted to pray in the mosques.²⁷

The year 2015 marked the 60th anniversary of the establishment of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR). Yu Zhengsheng, the chairman of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference and a member of the Politburo Standing Committee during his visit to Xinjiang said, "The three forces (separatism, terrorism and extremism) are the biggest threats for Xinjiang and the common enemies for people of all ethnic groups. We must clench our fists tight and take the initiative to crack down on violence and terror activities strictly and lawfully and fight the three forces."²⁸ To show that the people liked the CCP, the Chinese government ordered taxi drivers to fly Chinese flags and a number of banners with slogans such as: 'The Party's great policy is the root of our great life' and 'Hold high the great banner of national unity' were hung across the region.²⁹ In December 2015 the new anti-terror law was adopted.

2016

The new anti-terror law came into effect in January 2016 giving the Chinese government unprecedented powers. With respect to Xinjiang the *Global Times* quoted Li Wei, who is an expert on counter-terrorism at the Chinese Institute of Contemporary International Relations, as saying: "The Anti-Terrorism Law is more of a general guideline. As the main battleground of China's anti-terrorism campaign, Xinjiang is in urgent need of a more detailed set of regulations that target the specific form of terrorism the region is facing".³⁰

In 2016, Xinjiang had fewer violent incidents. However, reports suggested increased control and monitoring, as the government declared certain names to be 'too Muslim' and it made registration of children at schools tougher and the government had the right to check mobiles and ID of people, whenever deemed necessary.³¹ In November the government ordered all the citizens of the region to deposit their passports at the respective local police stations for verification.³² In December the regional government reported: "Attackers drove a car into a government building in China's restive far western region of Xinjiang on

Wednesday and set off explosives, killing one person while all four of the assailants were shot dead”.³³ In the same month, the Chinese government announced stricter internet policies for the region, as per which any information deemed false and unverified would attract major fines. There are 11 topics that are considered punishable. Some of these are, “advocating religious fanaticism or undermining religious harmony,” “advocating terrorism or radicalism” and “advocating ethnic hatred or ethnic discrimination”.³⁴

2017

The year 2017 proved to be much the same for the Xinjiang region. The Chinese government organised a massive ‘anti-terror rally’ in Xinjiang in February 2017 with around 10,000 troops and tanks and other armoured vehicles.³⁵ The Xinjiang region passed a law in March to curtail religious extremism. As per this new law people in Xinjiang were discouraged from wearing veils and having ‘abnormal’ beards. It also made it illegal for people to not tune into state radio and television programmes.³⁶ In September 2017, the Chinese government called for the erection of a ‘wall of steel’ around the violence hit areas of Xinjiang and Xi also asserted that, “maintaining stability in Xinjiang is a political responsibility”.³⁷ In October, the Chinese government ordered families in the Xinjiang region to display a portrait of President Xi Jinping in their houses.³⁸ The Chinese government has come up with a very novel idea of rewarding people who provide the government with information regarding any violent developments, as well as non-acceptable behaviour.³⁹

One major extreme step taken by the local government of Hotan is that of changing some of the significant lines in the Muslim prayer. As per reports, the call to prayer has been changed to “We are the children of the motherland. The motherland is great” while the line, “Allah is great” has been altered to, “We give thanks to China. We give thanks to Chairman Xi”.⁴⁰ Such steps will only create more resentment amongst the people of the region. However, one of the most repressive measures introduced in 2017 was the establishment of around 1000 new police stations and the appointment of around 30,000 new officers, which virtually transforms the region into a police state.⁴¹ This step has been undertaken by Chen Quanguo, who moved to Xinjiang from Tibet. Since his arrival the spending on security has risen to \$6 billion, which amounts to more than half of Xinjiang’s earnings.⁴² The Chinese government is also working towards collecting DNA samples, iris scans and finger prints of the Uighur population in Xinjiang to help better monitor the region and the people’s whereabouts.⁴³ The government has also pushed for installation of tracking devices in cars linked to the Chinese Beidou Navigation System.⁴⁴

There are constant displays of banners declaring the supremacy of the Party and praising stability.⁴⁵ In 2017 the Chinese government also focused on the region’s textbooks in order to change false ideas. As per the *Global Times*: “We should strengthen research about Marxism concerning the view of country, history, ethnicity and culture. We should have a correct understanding of the history and reality of Xinjiang, adhere to ideology of China as an inseparable unity, set up the right national identity of Xinjiang people, resist

against all kinds of risks of ideological corrosion and build up a strong national ideological security.”⁴⁶

There were directives from the central government instructing local government officials in Xinjiang to spend a week with Uighur families and treat them as ‘relatives’. This was expected to help the Uighurs to understand the policies of the CCP better. While discussing this programme the *Global Times* reported, “Grassroots people from different ethnic groups felt the warmth of the Party and governments through ethnic unity activities”.⁴⁷

2018

The year 2018 has witnessed increasing pressure from the government for controlling Xinjiang’s population. In January 2018 around 100,000 Uighurs were detained in re-education camps that are held for changing the detainees political and religious outlook.⁴⁸ There are reports that Muslims are being forced to eat pork and drink alcohol in these re-education camps, with the aim of curbing their religious beliefs.⁴⁹ The Chinese authorities are even collecting data under the ‘Integrated Joint Operations Platform’ about individuals in Xinjiang and using it to monitor their movements.⁵⁰ In addition to this Party officials are also asserting that “Marxism and Xi Jinping thought are valuable for Xinjiang, an essentially multi-ethnic region, for they can best direct the local people and Party officials to uphold ethnic equality, to eventually achieve the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation under the guideline of these thoughts”.⁵¹ There is also a top down push for promoting bilingual education in Xinjiang which gives priority to mandarin.⁵² However, the CCP mouthpiece *Global Times* supported the Chinese government’s policies in Xinjiang arguing:⁵³ “Therefore, China has taken steps to curb religious extremism, including a ban of religious veils or ‘abnormal’ beards. Not surprisingly, a number of Western media outlets condemned the move as a violation of human rights and religious freedom. They also ranted and raved about Beijing’s initiative that all mosques in the country should raise the national flag: “However, the development of any religion must be in line with the values, society and culture of its home country. In religious venues, people are believers, but when they step out of their respective places of worship, they are employees, students or CEOs, all of whom must abide by the rules of the society in which they reside. Efforts need to be made to maintain the current inclusive atmosphere while watching out for religious politicisation”.

The agenda of monitoring the Uighurs has been pushed beyond the geographical borders as well. In March 2018, the Chinese government asked Uighurs living in France, to provide their photos and various identity documents, while intimidating the relatives of those who did not conform to the demands.⁵⁴ The Uighurs in China who wish to use the new metro line built in Urumqi have to show their identity cards in order to buy the tickets,⁵⁵ underscoring the argument, that the development of the region is not facilitating the assimilation of the Uighurs into the CCP.

Conclusion

Since 2014, the trend in China as a whole, has been towards increasing government control. In Xinjiang, large numbers of Uighurs have been killed in the last five years. The

paranoia of the central government is obvious from the fact that women who had their heads covered were not allowed in hospitals for treatment and the government has been discouraging men from growing beards.⁵⁶ However, it is evident that the tough approach of the Chinese government has not worked and the region is becoming increasingly restive and volatile. Even though the Chinese government is investing extra money for development and growth, the benefits are not reaching the local population. There is a general tendency to not employ Uighurs as it entails extra monitoring and regular reporting to the local government.⁵⁷ Such actions are further widening the income gap between the local population and the Han migrants, which adds to the discontent and disillusionment with the CCP. The strict top down approach and the push for extreme control in the name of peace and stability, is further pushing the people of Xinjiang away from the CCP. The more the CCP pushes for assimilation, the more they assert their uniqueness. In the words of Elizabeth Economy, the problems in Xinjiang emerge from social, cultural and economic roots.⁵⁸

The Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (XPCC) which was established in 1954, is a paramilitary unit with its own economic interests and organisation. It was established when Sino-Soviet tensions were on the rise, but has acquired a more benign face since the end of the Cold War. While it was primarily concentrated in the north, mainly to watch out for the Soviet threat, it also became a cause of imbalanced regional development within Xinjiang, as southern Xinjiang remained relatively underdeveloped. It is only that its mandate seems to have changed with a focus on Southern Xinjiang, as quoted in the *Global Times*: “The XPCC.... is tasked with the goal of building more cities and townships in southern Xinjiang as a means to maintain social stability and boost local development”⁵⁹. During his 2014 visit to Xinjiang, Xi Jinping praised the work undertaken by the XPCC. He further added that, “More efforts are needed to build the corps into a stabiliser of the country's border areas, a melting pot that integrates various ethnic groups as well as a model region that showcases advanced productivity and culture”.⁶⁰ Even though it is one of the largest employment providers, it is heavily inclined towards hiring Han migrants.

The increasing favouritism towards the Han population alienates the ethnic Uighur and creates anger towards the CCP. The passing of new laws coupled with the new education policies are further alienating the people of Xinjiang, as they do not have the basic rights that the other Chinese nationals enjoy. If the region gets more restive it may pose a major problem for the CCP, as it could directly impact the overall push for peace and stability in the country. The top down push for reform and assimilation has not achieved the results which the CCP hoped for, rather it is further creating fault-lines in the region. The CCP needs to understand that economic growth alone will not help the region. There is a need to accept the diversity and acknowledge the differences. The fear of anything different clearly pushes the CCP to take even tougher measures. Even after six decades of control the CCP has not been successful in assimilating the region. Such harsh policies also stem from the general fear of diversity. The CCP has been pushing policies to change the basic religious and cultural fabric of Xinjiang as it wants a more ‘tailor made’ Uighur population, which will be closer the idea of CCP. However, the trend in the region so far has been of

retaliation and push back. It is therefore difficult to judge the extent to which the CCP will be successful in maintaining its central control, while its policies are leading to more anger and resentment.

The portrayal of the Uighurs in the Chinese media is negative. The government-controlled media in China has been praising the CCP's policies and has been arguing that the Uighurs are ungrateful for the economic benefits extended by the CCP. The foreign media outlets are heavily monitored and discouraged from reporting about Xinjiang. Relatives of journalists working in Xinjiang were apprehended in March 2018 by the Chinese government⁶¹ and the government has not been extending the visas of foreign journalists who have reported about Xinjiang.⁶² Media control is a crucial part of Chinese government's idea of controlling the flow of information about Xinjiang to the outside world. It also stems from its fear of the spread of western and other liberal ideas of democracy and human rights.

The CCP has adopted harsh repressive measures towards Xinjiang since the very beginning. However, the changing economic and political dynamic of the country and the region has further complicated the situation for China. The breakup of the USSR and the increasing instability within its borders has pushed the CCP to become almost paranoid about its unity. To add to this, the critical geographical position of the region poses a major challenge for the Chinese government for maintaining peace and stability since the region is essential for the success of the OBOR and thus the increased attention from Xi Jinping. It is also a major threat to the domestic stability of the country and the Party under Xi Jinping.

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