Conceptualising Uyghur Separatism in Chinese Nationalism

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Abstract

The origins of Chinese nationalism are traceable to the post-Cold War era which saw the gradual erosion of Communist ideology and the Chinese government's use of nationalism to shore up party legitimacy. Yet, the Chinese nationalism which has emerged is representative of Han nationalism and ignores ethnic minority nationalism in the larger cause of China's unity and integrity. Therefore, the strains in Chinese nationalism are visible today, in the separatist movements in Tibet and Xinjiang. This paper is about Uyghur separatism as it developed in the context of the Chinese idea of nationalism.The paper discusses how the Uyghur identity emerged and became crystallised around the concept of ethnicity. It concludes that in the context of Han nationalism, minority identities are hard to sustain and are increasingly submerged.

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It is a paradox that nationalism is gaining ascendancy despite the hype about the spread of globalisation and the weakening of the state. From the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the fragmentation of Yugoslavia, and the independence of Eritrea to the persistence of the Irish question, nationalism seems to have resurfaced with new vigour as a worldwide phenomenon. In this context, the growth of Uyghur nationalism in Xinjiang assumes importance. Xinjiang today is one of the five minority autonomous regions of China, occupying one-sixth of China's landmass, bordering eight countries (Russia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Mongolia, India, Kazakhstan, Kyrghizstan and Tajikistan) and an arena for an ethno-national conflict of the Uyghurs who constitute 47 per cent of the Xinjiang population. This nationalism of the Uyghurs is shaped not only out of its own Turkic ethnic identity, but has been reinforced in its contest with the Chinese state whose state policy itself is

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determined by growing nationalism. Xinjiang, like Tibet, presents an ethnic minority movement striving for identity and self-determination. But unlike Tibet, Xinjiang presents also a more complicated minority issue for its links with the wider issues of Islamic identity in Central and West Asia. This Islamic factor plus ethnic consciousness have been fused together to produce an ethno-religious conflict in Xinjiang. This problem is further exacerbated in the post-9/11 phase, where the war against international terrorism has influenced the region, and effectively allowed the Chinese government to blur the distinction between separatism and terrorism. Xinjiang represents a case of contest between an ethnic minority and majority Han Chinese nationalism, a contest that is perceived by Beijing as a distinct security threat to the Chinese state. The Chinese state, in its avowed goal of national unity and security, is attempting to dilute the Uyghur identity in comparison to greater Chinese nationality.

This paper first explores what Xinjiang ethnicity is all about; the focus particularly will be on how this ethnic problem got defined in its encounters with the Chinese state policy. Secondly, the paper highlights how the Chinese state perceives the movement in the light of its own definition of nationalism and national interest. Third, the paper argues that the Uyghur movement faces a severe challenge of survival in the context of Chinese unitary Han nationalist state ideology, where minority identities are hard to sustain and are increasingly submerged. Yet, China's increasing opening to the outside world, the growing awareness about religion, democracy and sub-nationalist identities, and the emergence of independent states in Central Asia have created an environment where the Uyghur identity politics can thrive. These two contradictory trends increasingly shape the politics in Xinjiang and Han-Uyghur relations.

Shaping of the Uyghur Identity

A great deal of confusion persists among the scholars on how ethnic identity is shaped. There are basically two approaches on this subject: the primordialist and the constructivist.[1] The primordialist school views ethnic identity as a 'given' or 'natural' phenomenon.[2] In this perspective, an ethnic group constitutes the kinship network in which human individuals are born and become members of it, thereby acquiring with other group members, the group territory and objective cultural attributes such as language, race, religion, custom, tradition, food, dress and music.[3] Along with these objective cultural markers, there are subjective markers which include the psychological aspect of self and group-related feelings of identity.[4] Therefore, blood ties explain

the strength of ethnic primordial attachments and the emotions tied to them. The second approach, that of the constructivist contends that ethnic identity is socially constructed and is the product of processes that are embedded in human actions or choices. To constructivists, what really matters is that people define themselves as culturally and physically distinct from others. Rather than shared descent, appropriate political actions mobilise ethnic factors into a group formation. Both primordial and constructivist schools have their own pitfalls. While the former ignores the fact that much of the tradition is invented, the latter neglects the emotional power of ethnicity. However, taking a balanced approach an ethnic group constitutes both objective and subjective cultural markers which may be inherent or derived and these ethnic identities crystallise into an ethnic group formation when it comes in opposition with other identities. This means, the ethnic group is developed only in contact with the 'other'.[5]

Secondly, ethnicity is not a static phenomenon. The boundaries of an ethnic group are shaped and negotiated in relation to changing social, political and economic contexts.[6] This understanding of ethnicity is useful when understanding the case of the Uyghurs of Xinjiang.

Political Identity

> "The record of the Chinese in Central Asia is by no means continuous; in fact, their effective control has been estimated at only about 425 out of about 2000 years, divided into a number of periods, of which the present Chinese rule in the province of Sinkiang is the fifth major period.[7]"

This line from the classic study of the Central Asian region of China by Owen Lattimore gives focus to the present-day Xinjiang problem. A rather intermittent rule by the Chinese accentuated the Uyghur identity that historically enjoyed a separate political identity. The Xinjiang region was the homeland of various branches of Turkic people such as the Uyghurs, Kazaks, Kyrgyz, Tatars and Uzbeks. The Uyghurs comprised the single most numerous ethnic group in Xinjiang based on common Turkic ancestry and rich Uyghur language. Located on the famous Silk Road, Uyghurs played an important role in cultural exchanges between the East and the West, and developed a unique culture and civilisation of their own.[8] Uyghurs, in fact, had their own empire in 744 AD in Mongolia. With the Kirkhiz invasion, the Uyghur kingdom however, disintegrated and thereafter, split into two branches. The eastern branch founded the Kingdom of Kanchow in the present-day Gansu region.

The western branch set up the kingdom of Karakhoja or Qocho in the present-day Turpan, Xinjiang. It is the latter branch that lasted for four centuries (850-1250 AD).[9] Qocho became an amalgam of an indigenous people and civilisation.[10] Later, these people came under the influence of the Mongols who swept Central Asia in 1220 AD and many of the Uyghurs were incorporated into the Mongol administration. Under the Mongol Chagatai rulers, the Central Asian region was divided into two khanates: Transoxiana or Western Turkestan in the West (the present-day Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan) and Eastern Turkestan in the East (the present-day Xinjiang). After the waning of Mongol influence, the Uyghurs existed as several small principalities. However, the Islamic Uyghur Kingdom of East Turkestan maintained its independence until 1876 when the Manchu Empire invaded East Turkestan and after eight years of war, formally annexed East Turkestan into its territory and renamed it 'Xinjiang' meaning 'New Territory' or 'New Frontier' on November 18, 1884. The very name Xinjiang implies that the region did not belong to China from historical times as the Chinese government claims. This brief introduction of Uyghur history suggests that the Uyghurs shared a political identity. Following Max Weber, even after the Uyghur kingdom disintegrated 'the belief in common ethnicity persisted'[11] implying that the pulls of political identity is deep.

Regional Identity

Xinjiang's topography is a mix of mountains, basins, deserts, oases, and rivers. The region is surrounded by mountains on three sides and is located some 4,000 km away from Beijing. Distance and topography promoted what Owen Lattimore called 'stubborn separatism'.[12] Further, Lattimore described Xinjiang in the ancient times as an oases-based society that supported only scattered agricultural settlements around the dispersed oases. This oases-based topography produced a pocket-like identity and, therefore, the Uyghurs were identified by the names of the oases where they settled. Thus, the Kashgarlik were from Kashgar, Khotanlik from Khotan and Turfanlik from Turfan.[13] Interestingly, however, before the 15th century the people in the Tarim basin area, who were essentially Buddhists, were referred to as Uyghurs. After this region came under Islam, the term Uyghur was dropped and instead local names came into vogue to describe these oases-dwelling people. Therefore, the 'Uyghur' label ceased to be used as an ethnic label for the Uyghurs for almost 500 years. It was only in 1931, the ethnonym Uyghur was revived by Chinese government officials under the influence of Soviet advisers. It may

be pointed out that the Uyghurs were identified on the basis of their language (Uyghur). Thus, the classification allowed the Uyghurs to rediscover themselves as an ethnic group.[13] It is around the revival of the term 'Uyghur' that the modern notion of Uyghur identity has been cemented.

Religious Identity

The most important marker of the Uyghur identity was their Islamic tradition. It was in the eight century AD that the Arab armies swept into Central Asia and spread the new faith of Islam. Islam provided a unifying consciousness and Xinjiang Muslims identified themselves as belonging to the *Umma* (World community of Islam) through regular prayers, reading the Quran, observing religious holidays, adopting Islamic food habits and Islamic symbols. Islam linked the specific identity of Xinjiang Muslims to the wider Muslim community and at the same time functioned as an 'ethnic marker' by drawing the boundaries of the community in opposition to other religious communities.[14] Dru Gladney in his case study on Hui Muslims in China argues that the ethnic identity of Muslims is inseparably identified with an Islamic tradition and so it is "more than an ethnic identity; it is ethno-religious." [15] Therefore, religion is not only a system of faith for the 7.2 million Uyghur Muslims but also the vehicle for preserving their historical traditions and culture.

Growth of Uyghur Nationalism

Expressions of nationalism and national identity can be found in the literature and writings of nationalists and native intellectuals of the 1920s, 1930s and the 1940s, attesting to the existence of Uyghur nationalism. Most writings were strongly attached with the terms 'Turkistan' (Sharqiv Turkistan or Eastern Turkistan), Turkistanli (Turkistani) or simply 'Turk'.[16] Though the terms 'Uzbek' or 'Uyghur' were not used in the sense of ethnic identity or national consciousness, but the writers did employ the terms 'Turk' or 'Turkistani' for their historical group awareness and the term 'Turki' for their native language. In the 19th century under the influence of Pan-Turkism, the Xinjiang region adopted the Pan-Turkic ideal to unite all the people of Turkish origin. Uyghur was regarded as one of the branches of the Turkic tree. Thus, the words Turkic and Uyghur were used inter-changeably. According to contemporary Uyghur intellectuals, the idea of Uyghur nationalism or Turk nationalism was born soon after the Manchu conquest of East Turkistan in 1759. Uyghur poets such as Shair Akhun, Khislat Kashgari, Turdy Garibi and

Abduraim Nizari rose to prominence, and Uyghur writers, in protest of the years of Manchu and Chinese oppression, developed a literature of social protest.[17] The Uyghur ideology of ending the Chinese colonial rule and establishing an independent country of East Turkistan defined the concept of Uyghur nationalism. The region's first demand for independence can be traced to an uprising by a local chieftain named Yakub Beg in 1865. Though he was finally defeated in 1877, his 12-year reign set the precedent of Uyghur independence movement based on appeals to religion and ethnicity.[18] Also, Uyghurs twice achieved brief statehood; one from 1931 to 1934 with the establishment of "Turkish-Islamic Republic of Eastern Turkestan" and another from 1944 to 1949 with the creation of the "East Turkestan Republic". This brief experience of statehood in fact, produced a kind of protonational identity.[19] Proto-national identities can be explained as the political and cultural expression of populations who claim to form their own nation-states but are instead absorbed into other nation-state systems.

Thus, common Islamic heritage, Uyghur language and strong attachment to land helped to solidify the Uyghur identity and Uyghur nationalism. However, contemporary Uyghur identity is submerged in the greater Chinese state's drive for assimilation and integrative nationalist policy. Though the CPC recognises distinct culture-based minorities, Han culturalism dominates in practice and attempts to overwhelm minority identity and minority culture. This has caused resentment among the Uyghurs. Therefore, instead of submergence of Uyghur identity, there is a resurgence of it in modern times. It now calls for a more vigorous demand and assertion for independence. In this context, Dru Gladney wrote that modern resurgence of Uyghur identity is very much the result of Uyghur interaction with the Chinese state. Further, ethnicity cannot be reduced to a purely primordial action but must involve dialectic interaction of the two main aspects of ethnicity: culturally defined notions of descent and socio-political circumstance.[20] In this context, the role of the Chinese state is significant. This brings us to explore the role of the Chinese state in contemporary times when Uyghur nationalism is on the upsurge and terrorism has emerged as a primary threat to the existence of the nation-states.

Role of the Chinese State: Reassertion of the Uyghurs

The Chinese state in its drive for national unity and political integration has sought to uphold assimilative policies that not only sought to submerge the local identities into Chinese identity but also in the process threatened the

local identities to extinction.

This policy of assimilation, the central tenet of Chinese state policy on minorities, reflected the continuation of Chinese imperial policy. Chinese imperial policy was based on its conceptualisation of the Chinese state as a civilization and not as a nation. The Chinese civilisation developed from the Wei river valley and later expanded to encompass a wide area and as Tu Wei-ming argues, the idea of a cultural core area, thus, remained potent and continuous in Chinese consciousness.[21] The cultural notion of the state determined the imaginary boundary of the Chinese state. Within this cultural boundary resided the Chinese people or Han *ren* or *huaxia*. In fact, the word *hua* or *huaxia* meant Chinese and the term connoted culture and civilisation.[22] These terms were coined in opposition to the term *Yi* meaning barbarian. This distinction between the Han and non-Han was based on their stage of economic development.[23] The Han represented the agriculture-based society leading a sedentary life while the *Yi* were largely nomadic herders. It was when the non-Han accepted the Chinese notion of development that they came to be incorporated into the Chinese civilisation and were regarded as Chinese or *Zhongguo ren* or *huaxia.* For a non-Han to become Chinese essentially meant accepting Chinese culture. In effect, all those people who accepted Chinese culture was regarded part of the Chinese civilisation and were, therefore, called Chinese.[24] Therefore, the notion of *huaxia* or *Zhongguo ren* was essentially a cultural concept not a racial one. This conceptualisation of the state based on cultural identity imparted the notion of civilisational state to China than a concept of political nation-state. This notion of civilisational state influenced upon the modern Chinese concept of nationality.

The idea of modern notion of nation in China emerged with its encounters with the West. Precisely, in order to defeat the Manchu and the foreigners threatening China during the unstable period following the unequal treaties, the idea of all the people of China as a united force germinated. Therefore, the task of identifying the 'people' emerged. With this emerged the new word *minzu* (race or people*)* which was an import from the Japanese term. This modern notion of *minzu* for people was imposed upon the traditional Chinese word *Han ren* meaning person. This implied that all those people who resided within the Chinese imperial state were Chinese people.

China equated nationality with the ethnic group that historically was a part of the Chinese state.[25] Thus, while in Europe the term nationality was equated with citizenship, in China it implied a historical-cultural concept.[25]

Therefore, the term minority in Chinese does not imply a separate political identity, but a cultural identity.

This notion of civilisational state, thus, underscores the notion that all the nationalities can be accommodated without raising the question of self-determination. This explains why the Uyghurs are considered a part of Chinese civilisation and are therefore, integral to the Chinese nationhood. Rooted in the Chinese notions of nation and nationality is China's present policy towards the minority groups. Simply put, present PRC's official policy with regard to nationalities has three aspects: the ethnic classification project, limited autonomy and repressive policies. These three aspects have influenced the Uyghurs and have reinforced their ethnic identity in the post-1949 era.

Ethnic Classification Project

The first step toward the Chinese state policy of assimilation paradoxically was identification and recognition of minority nationalities in China. Chinese Sociologist, Fei Xiaotong studied the process of ethnic identification and enumerated some 400 minority-groups which had applied for recognition by 1955.[26] The government carried out detailed studies and field research in 1953 to ascertain these groups. Thus, Han minzu (nationality) was recognised as the majority nationality (91.96 per cent at present) and the rest 55 were called minority nationality (shaoshu minzu, 8.04 per cent at present). In identifying a nationality in China, the PRC government partly adopted the Stalinist four-fold definition of a 'nation'. According to Stalin, a nation must have four essential elements: a common language, a common geographic living area, a common economic life, and a common psyche, based on the common culture. However, these criteria could not be totally applied in classifying a nationality because of diverse identities in China. In fact, the Chinese leadership deviated from the Stalinist model by emphasising on the self-consciousness of the group.[27] So, people's statements about their identities, their desired identifications and their actual ones were taken into account and considered together with other factors such as economic development, language and religious affiliation.[28]

This idea of recognising nationality in China however, goes back to Sun Yat Sen's proposition of 5 peoples of China (wuzu gong he): the Han, Manchu (Man), Mongolia (Meng), Tibetan (Zang) and Hui (all Muslims). The idea behind this recognition was that China needed the support of its entire people to create a National Revolution and overthrow the Qing dynasty and, thus, create a modern nation.[29] While Yat Sen recognised 5 peoples of China, his

ultimate goal was to assimilate all the nationalities and unify China into one race, the Chinese race. This was reflected in his discussion of nationalism (Minzu Zhuyi) in his *Three Principles* of the people (Sanmin Zhuyi).[30] This assimilation policy was further promoted in 1939 by Chiang Kai-Shek (Jiang Jieshe) when he presided over the first National Congress of the Chinese Hui People's National Salvation Association in Chongqing.[31] Chiang Kai-Shek's *China's Destiny* clearly points out, "There are five peoples designated in China …is not due to difference in race or blood, but to religion and geographic environment. In short, the differentiation among China's five peoples is due to regional and religious factors, and not race or blood."[32]

The Communists too in order to fight imperialistic forces (Japanese) and the domestic forces (Guomindang) followed the same principle of assimilation of all groups under the term *Minzu* which meant nationality. In fact, only a technical difference was maintained by prefixing 'small' to the word nationality to indicate minority population. Han was identified as one of the nationalities along with the other national minorities. But since the Han represented the majority, the will of the Han would automatically dominate the minority will. Dawa Norbu, thus, noted that the CCP was able to justify the denial of right to self-determination to the national minorities, as the will of the majority nationalities' prevailed and opposed the recognition of such a right.[33]

The Communists, after 1949, expanded the enumeration of nationalities from 5 to 56. Interestingly, the idea of nationality, instead of blurring the distinctive identity got reinforced in the process of classification. Rather, as Gladney pointed out, by defining and representing the 'minority' as exotic, colourful, and primitive, it homogenised the majority as united, mono-ethnic and modern. So what actually took place was construction of the majority at the expense of the exoticisation of the minority.[34]

Limited Autonomy

The second aspect of the Chinese policy was granting of limited autonomy to the areas dominated by minority people. Five such areas came under autonomous rule at the provincial level: Xinjiang, Xizang, Ningxia, Guangzi and Inner Mongolia. Besides these, there are 31 autonomous prefectures, 105 autonomous counties and about 3,000 nationality townships at the lower level. The 1954 Constitution clearly made the right to secession illegal and instead introduced 'regional autonomy'. The Chinese Constitutions of 1954, 1975, 1978 and 1982 show how the principle of regional autonomy got consolidated.[35]

While the 1975 Constitution devoted only one Article (Art.24) discussing "Organs of Self-government of National Autonomous Areas", the 1982 Constitution devoted 11 Articles to the regional autonomy areas.[36] The Preamble to the 1982 Constitution stipulates that:

> Regional autonomy is practiced in areas where people of minority nationalities live in compact communities; in these areas organs of self-government are established for the exercise of the right of autonomy. All the national autonomous areas are *inalienable parts* of the People's Republic of China.[36]

Subsequently, in 1984, the law on regional national autonomy was passed which, though intended to redistribute some powers of autonomy to the national autonomous areas, was actually meant to curb any potential excesses in the exercise of autonomy.[37] Thus, all illusions of separatism are quashed under the rubric of 'national unity'. Autonomous regions are essentially seen as integral parts of China. The autonomy system emphasised superficially on language and folklore rather than on the "deeper springs of ethnic identity like religions and historical traditions".[37] China in fact, adopted only a limited autonomy principle and maintains strong control over the region with enormous PLA forces and military bases.

Further, the PRC's policy of Han migration to Xinjiang is aimed at turning the majority Uyghur population into a minority group in Xinjiang itself. This policy has eroded the very basis of autonomy extended to a minority province. The Chinese continue to exhibit all real political power in the region. Thus, there is no meaningful autonomy in China. This is dealt in further detail later in the paper. Binh G. Phan calls this autonomy in China as 'paper autonomy'.[38] The Uyghur discontent is therefore ingrained in the Chinese principle of autonomy. Further, in order to keep Xinjiang divided along ethnic lines and prevent the minorities ganging up against the Han, the Chinese state established ethnic prefectures and autonomous counties within XUAR itself comprising different ethnic groups such as Ili Kazakh Prefecture, Kizilsu Kirgiz Prefecture, Bayingholin Mongol Prefecture and Xihanzi Hui Prefecture. Thus, the ten minority groups in Xinjiang, rather than presenting a united resistance against the Han are divided among themselves.

Repressive Policies

The Chinese government policies have to a large extent created widespread resentment and reinforced Uyghur identity to demand secession. Viva Ona Bartkhus in her study on "The Dynamic of Secession" uses 'costs and benefits'

framework to study secession.[39] She identifies two kinds of threats confronted by the ethnic group that propel them to secede from the state: mortal threat and cultural threat. Mortal threat constitutes threats to the community's safety and cultural threat constitutes threats to its unique cultural inheritance. Bartkhus points out that the costs of membership rise when a community regards the state as a threat and therefore there is the decision to secede. Applying this framework to the Uyghur movement, the Uyghurs confronted both moral and cultural threats from the Chinese state and they intensified their ethnic consciousness and strengthened the voice of secessionism.

Mortal threats: Mortal threats generally constitute threat to community's safety. The Uyghurs confronted such a threat with the establishment of *Bingtuan* or Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps, an institution meant for control of the ethnic minority in Xinjiang that became operative from 1954.[40] It is basically a quasi-military organisation that maintained constant vigil on the minority population.[41] The recent Chinese White Paper on Xinjiang May 2003 states, "As an important force for stability in Xinjiang and for consolidating frontier defense, the XPCC adheres to the principle of attaching equal importance to production and militia duties. It has set up in frontier areas a 'four-in-one' system of joint defense that links the PLA, the Armed Police, the XPCC and the ordinary people, playing an irreplaceable special role in the past five decades in smashing and resisting internal and external separatists' attempts at sabotage and infiltration, and in maintaining the stability and safety of the borders of the motherland."[42] The XPCC was dissolved in 1975, but in December 1981, the central government decided to revive it with the perceived need to project China's influence into the area and as protection against ethnic unrest.[43] During the 1990s the *Bingtuan* has been placed directly under the authority of the central government in Beijing and has been granted privileges giving it the same status as the XUAR regional government. Thus, in ordinary circumstances the *Bigtuan* serves to control the economy, but in times of unrest it serves as an effective arm of the PLA in suppressing unrest in Xinjaing and it played a key role in ending the 1990 Baren uprising.

Secondly, the Chinese policy of transferring the Han population to the region constituted yet another assault on the Uyghur community. The following Table indicates the changing demographic situation in Xinjaing and the rising number of Han migrants in the region.

Table-1: Changing Ethnic Composition in Xinjiang 1949, 1995 and 2002

Ethnic groups	1949	1995	2002
Han	7%	38%	40.61%
Uyghurs	75%	48%	47%
Kazak	10%	7%	5%
Kirgiz	2%	1%	1%
Hui	3%	4%	4%
Mongolian	1%	1%	1%
Others	2%	1%	1%

Source: Yunhui, Jin *Ed.* A general Survey of Economic and Social Developemnt in Xinjiang, Beijing: Minzu Chubanshe, 1998, quoted in Yuan Kang Wang, "Toward a Synthesis of the Theories of Peripheral Nationalism", Asian Ethnicity, 2:2, Sep.2001. Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region Statistics Bureau, April 12, 2001, at http://www. uyghuramerican.org/ET/nopus2001.html

The Han, constituting only 7 per cent in 1949 now comprise 40.61 per cent. This threatens the Uyghur group identity. This influx of Han population, according to David Wang, created a dual structure of ethnic composition.[44] The majority of Han people, concentrated in the North around Urumqi, are much better off economically, while most of the minority nationalists in the South of Xinjiang around Kashghar are living in comparatively backward conditions. This disparity between the north and the south created enormous discontent among the Uyghurs. The Table-2 shows that Kashgar (Kashi), a Uyghur-dominated city, has triple the population as compared to Urumqi, a Han- dominated city, but has a considerably low GDP rate and little industrial development.

Table-2: Economic Indicators of Major Cities of Xinjiang (1999)

Cities	Population (Million)	GDP (RMB bln)	Industrial Output (RMB bln)	Retail Sales (RMB bln)
Urumqi	1.589	24.9	22	11.1
Kashgar	3.342	6.9	1.38	1.7

Source: Xinjiang Statistical Yearbook
Accessed at http://www.ice.it/estero2/pechino/profxinjiang.pdf on 24-02-03

Further, the Han Chinese by virtue of their language and training, control the major industries in Xinjiang and its economic production is mainly geared to the requirements of the centre. For instance, the oil industry is almost completely run by the Hans. The China National Petroleum Company brought most of its workers in Xinjiang from other parts of China, bypassing Xinjiang Petroleum Bureau in carrying out exploration.[45] Thus, economically, Xinjiang faced the dual assault: while the Han population marginalised the local Uyghur population from participating in the region's economy, the government siphoned off the region's rich resources for the purpose of development of the China's East. The Chinese government's 'Western Big Development Project' (*Xibu Da Kaifa*), announced in June 1999, in Xinjiang, seems to be concentrating for the present in developing the region's infrastructure. The project includes construction of roads, airports, railroads and a US$ 14 billion pipeline linking Xinjiang's natural gas fields to Shanghai, 2,500 miles towards the southeast.[45] While infra-structure development would create job opportunities for the Uyghurs, a major chunk of the profit however, would go into the pockets of the Han Chinese since the terms of development are clearly set by the dominant Han group. The Western Development Project in fact, may lead to a situation of the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer.[46] The socio-economic development of the region is quite low compared to the national standards. A look at Table-3 shows the lower level of educational development of Xinjiang as compared to other regions. Provinces from each of the five regions have been shown to indicate Xinjiang's comparative position in education.

Table-3: Comparison of Xinjiang's Educational Level with that of Other Provinces

Regions	Provinces	No. of Universities /colleges	No. of Middle Schools	No. of Primary Schools	Illiteracy Rate
North China	Hebei	46	5,076	46,243	14.30%
Northeast China	Liaoning	62	3,517	14,386	12.13%
East China	Zhejiang	35	3,444	19,700	17.61%
Central South China	Guangdong	42	4,795	24,700	6.86%
Northwest China	Xinjiang	18	2,090	6,962	24.68%

Source: Compiled from various Internet websites

In the region's administration too, though the Uyghurs hold some of the top positions, but they have no real power. The region's Party First Secretary is always a Han. These economic and political deprivations have fuelled enormous dissent among the Uyghurs contributing to crystallise the Uyghur identity in an 'us and them' dichotomy when confronted with the Han Chinese.[47] Besides, the Uyghurs are also exposed to environmental hazards. China's nuclear weapon tests are conducted in Xinjiang's Taklamakan desert. Starting from 1964, the Chinese conducted about 45 nuclear test explosions. This has caused environmental devastation, atmospheric pollution and ground water contamination.

Cultural Threats: The recent publication of the White Paper on Xinjiang clearly indicates the Chinese government's efforts to distort Xinjiang's history and interpret it in accordance with the CCP's nationalist narrative. One of the Uyghur diaspora websites mentions that the Chinese government in May 1991 launched an attack on three books published in Xinjiang entitled, *The Uyghur People: A Brief History of the Hans;* and *Ancient Uyghur Literature*.[48] The writer of *The Uyghur People*, Turgun Almas, was put under house arrest and his book was banned. Most works on Uyghurs are written by the Chinese who effectively manipulate Xinjiang's history to prove the Chinese control over the region from times immemorial.[48]

The Chinese government's efforts at institutionalising Chinese language and curbing religious freedom, have caused dilution of Uyghur culture and threaten their identity. Over the past half-century, the Chinese language has been institutionalised in the spheres of education, work and regional administration. Joanne N. Smith argued that the Uyghurs in the mid-to-late-1990s are activating and exaggerating religio-cultural differences between themselves and the Hans as a means of demarcating a unified ethnic identity in relation to increased competition from Han immigrants in the spheres of education and work and growing perceptions of socio-economic inequalities.[49] The Han-dominated work units and companies prefer to hire employees fluent in the Chinese language. This has led to a higher unemployment rate among Uyghurs and has led to their effective marginalisation in the new urban society of Xinjiang and the consequent affecting of Han-Uyghur relations.

The greatest assault on Uyghur identity is on their Islamic religion itself. Following the attacks of September 11 on the US, the Chinese government has restricted the religious rights of the Muslim population of Xinjiang, banning some religious practices during the holy month of Ramadan, closure of

mosques, increasing official controls over the Islamic clergy in the region.[50] However, this time unlike the Cultural Revolution era, the Chinese government's steps were less brutal and not geared to total ban on religious practices. Further, while the policy of destroying non-Chinese cultures has been pursued during the Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution era in Xinjiang, in recent times, the more effective weapon of education has been used by Beijing to spread Chinese values, thus, obliterating local cultures.

Though the above-mentioned mortal and cultural threats were present for a fairly long time, Uyghur movement took off only in the early 1990s. Viva Ona Bartkhus, explaining the causal factors behind the demand for secession, points out that the "discontented community is more likely to attempt secession when the perceived likelihood of success has been enhanced, in other words, at an 'opportune moment.'[51] In the Uyghurs case, the situation was created with the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the independence of the Central Asian states that had a demonstrative effect on the Uyghurs. Already, in the late 1980s the border trade between Xinjiang and the USSR, that was sealed in the aftermath of Sino-Soviet dispute in 1960 and in particular after the Kazakh exodus from China in 1962, was reopened. This created free flow of ideas and goods between the Uyghurs of Xinjiang and the neighbouring Turkic people of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Afghanistan. With the 'open door' policy launched in the late 1970s and the subsequent economic reforms, there was a religious revival in the XUAR as in the rest of the PRC. The authorities allowed the reopening of mosques and the use of funds contributed from some Islamic countries to build new mosques, found Quranic schools and import religious materials. Many Muslims were allowed again to travel to Islamic countries, and contacts with Muslims abroad were encouraged.[52]

Chinese Perception of the Uyghurs

Based on the concept of nationalism, the Chinese State, thus, does not recognise the ethnic character of the Uyghur movement. Since the concept of ethnicity carries no political connotation, the question of separation or secession does not exist in Chinese perception of the Uyghur issue. Moreover, the Chinese concept of nationhood is inextricably linked up with strategic concerns. The present-day Chinese nationalism is based on the idea of building a strong nation and attain a great power status. China regards Xinjiang as an integral part of itself. It determinedly makes all efforts to avoid national disintegration and regards all separatist acts as 'splittism', an idea that is rooted in China's fear of the 'century of humiliation' inflicted upon by the West. This

fear has fuelled China's notion of nationalism today and in this scheme, Xinjiang's separatism has no place. Xinjiang is an important strategic region both in its location and its resource potential. Economically, the fabled silk route passes through the resource-rich region of Xinjiang. Xinjiang contains approximately two-fifths of China's oil, 40 per cent of its wool and is a rich source of gold and copper. The oil reserves in Xinjiang are believed to be thrice as much as those in Saudi Arabia and exploiting them could make China independent of imports from the Middle-East. Xinhua news reports that forty oil and gas fields have been discovered in the region with proven reserves of two billion tons of oil and 160 billion cubic metres of natural gas.[53]

Geographically, Xinjiang, bordering eight nations, constitutes security problem for China. Particularly, Xinjiang's 9 to 10 million Muslims deeply influenced by nine hundred years of Islamic culture, pose a threat to its integration with China. This threat is exacerbated with the demise of the former USSR and the establishment of Central Asian states which has triggered off an awakening among the Muslims of Xinjiang about their Islamic and Pan-Turkic identity. Further, increased trans-border trade and traffic between Xinjiang and Kazakhstan, Kyrghystan, Afghanistan and Pakistan has resulted in greater interaction among the Xinjiang people and their counterparts in Central Asia, Turkey, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia.

Given this strategic and economic significance of Xinjiang, Beijing's control over the region is all the more vital to its security. Therefore, any kind of discontent in the region and demand for secession is a matter of great concern for China. Moreover, China is aware that acquiescing to Uyghur demands will only embolden separatists in Tibet and Taiwan. Therefore, the secession of Xinjiang would tantamount to a fracture of the Chinese nation and loss of its identity. So, Xinjiang is regarded as an integral part of China.

In this context, the upsurge of the Uyghur movement from the early 1990s posed a serious threat to the Chinese security. In the Chinese perception, therefore, the Uyghur movement has three characteristics. First, it is separatist; second, it is Islamic fundamentalist and third, it is terrorist. The decade of 1990s witnessed a series of unrests and disturbances through out Xinjiang, the most significant of them were the 1990 Baren uprising and the 1996 Yining uprising.

These unrests signified three things. First, although separatist tendencies in Xinjiang are part of the region's history, the element of violence in the

movement does not predate 1986 when Uyghurs from the southern Kashgar area of the province first joined the anti-Communist jihad in Afghanistan.[54] Though it is said that the Chinese government's hand was behind the bolstering of Afghan mujahideen to fight against the Soviet-backed Najibullah regime, the Chinese authorities completely deny such moves. In fact, the Chinese believe that, "Western hostile forces have stepped up infiltration, separation and subversive activities in Xinjiang." In 1989, limited quantities of weapons were first smuggled into Western Xinjiang.[55] This showed foreign involvement in the region, aiding bringing guns, money and ideas to the hitherto silent protest of the Uyghurs. With this, the "activities of ethnic separatism within the country's boundary have entered a new active stage."[56] Therefore, to the Chinese authorities, "ethnic separatism is a reactionary political stand, a reactionary social trend of thinking, and an actual reactionary behaviour aimed at creating ethnic separation and undermining the motherland's unity."[56]

Second, the growing discontent pointed to the geographical reach of the movement; particularly, the bomb explosions in Beijing signified the extent of the threat into the Chinese interiors.

Third, some groups were inspired by the concept of Jihad that the Afghan Mujahideen were practising.[57] For instance, the Baren uprising was organised under a local Islamic organisation—the East Turkistan Islamic Party under the leadership of Zahiden Yusuf. Therefore, the Chinese authorities linked all these agitations with Islamic fundamentalism. A conference held in Xinjiang from May 3-6, 1996 reported that the "main danger affecting Xinjiang's stability is national separatism and illegal religious activities"[58] The press reports of May 23, 1996 pointed out that the "Chinese authorities have vehemently denounced the promotion of Islam for political ends."[59] The rise of Taliban in Afghanistan has further cautioned the Chinese on the influence of Islamic fundamentalism on the Uyghur movement.

Added to these, the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the US added the new dimension of terrorism to the Uyghur movement. The Chinese government sought to link the crack-down on the Uyghur movement as part of the global war on terrorism. The Chinese State Council in January 2002 issued a detailed report "East Turkistan" Terrorist Forces Cannot Get Away With Impunity" which detailed the extent of terrorist activities since 1990. The report listed more than 200 incidents that resulted in 162 deaths and 440 injuries, and included bombings, assassinations, armed assaults on government organisations, establishing training bases and plotting riots."[60] The report also

mentions the names of some international terrorist organisations operating in Xinjiang:

- Hazret's ETLO (East Turkistan Liberation Organisation).
- The East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM)
- The Islamic Reformist party 'Shock Brigade'
- The East Turkistan Islamic Party
- The East Turkistan Opposition Party
- The East Turkistan Islamic Party of Allah
- The Uyghur Liberation Organisation
- The Islamic Holy Warriors
- The East Turkistan international Committee

Since September 11, Beijing has been capitalising on the West's campaign against terrorism, adopting similar rhetoric and branding the local Muslim group of the bin Laden clique. Indeed, China got a major boost in its efforts when the East Turkistan Islamic Movement, or ETIM became the first branch of the Uyghur separatist group to be added to the list of terrorist organisations. Maya Catsanis, Amnesty International's press officer for the Asia-Pacific region, argued that the inclusion of ETIM in the terrorist list has emboldened the PRC to take tougher steps in Xinjiang. She estimated that around 3,000 people were detained between September 11, 2001 and the end of the year, and many people were sentenced to long-term imprisonment and several executions took place.[61]

In response to these separatist movements the PRC took two-pronged steps. On the one hand, it has come down heavily on the Uyghurs with repressive measures. The April 1996 launching of the country's most severe and extensive 'Strike Hard' (*Yan Da*) campaign was part of the repression. On the other hand, China adopted Western development policy to uplift the economic situation and thereby wean away the discontented Uyghurs from separatist tendencies. The policy commits the Chinese leadership to promote large-scale infrastructure projects such as rail links, roads, and telecommunications, essential for high-tech industrial growth. The announced plan is for investment of 420 billion renminbi (US$ 52 billion) in fixed assets during 2001-2005 in Xinjiang alone.[62] Diplomatically, it stepped up efforts to build an anti-terrorism coalition. The Shanghai Five, which was later renamed Shanghai Cooperation

Organisation (SCO), is such a manifestation. The Shanghai Five, that emerged as a forum to resolve border disputes took upon the task in the August 1999 summit to discuss the threat of Islamic fundamentalism, drugs, and weapons spreading from war-torn Afghanistan and destabilising Central Asia.[63] The SCO summit in 2000 in Dushanbe agreed to add a military dimension to it with the creation of a joint counter-terrorism centre in Bishkek in order to meet the threat from the IMU and the Taliban.[63] Thus, with the establishment of the SCO, China not only eroded the Central Asian States' sympathy for the Uyghurs but also portrayed China as favourable towards Muslim countries.[64] Further, China continues to maintain close diplomatic ties with Pakistan and Iran, two countries often accused of aiding Islamic movements abroad.[65] China's policy of offering political and economic incentives to the Islamic states thus obviates them to support a Uyghur movement.

Fate of the Uyghur Movement

Given a combination of economic, diplomatic and repressive measures adopted by the PRC, the Uyghur movement faces serious challenges. Uyghur separatists are small in number, poorly equipped, loosely linked and vastly out-gunned by the PLA and People's Armed Police.[66] The Uyghurs do not have a leader like Dalai Lama in Tibet who can be the rallying point for the entire people. Also, not all the Uyghurs want independence. Interestingly, as Gladney points out, China's other nine minority Muslim nationalities do not support the Uyghur cause. Xinjiang is also ethnically diverse. This further weakens the movement. Also, unlike Buddhism in Tibet, Islam currently enjoys less sympathy around the world owing to the combination of political Islam and extremism in many countries. Dru Gladney pointed out that owing to the Chinese state's repression and the 'Strike Hard' campaign, the Uyghur movement seemed to have lost its momentum. At the same, time the international campaigns for Uyghur rights and possible independence have become increasingly vocal and well organised on the Internet.[67] There are about 23 such organisations. The Uyghur identity survives among the diasporic Uyghur community spread across neighbouring Central Asia and Europe. There are about 500,000 Uyghurs in Central Asia, and about 150,000 in Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Western Europe and the US.[68]

China will do whatever it can to retain Xinjiang. On account of its resource potential, nuclear sites, geopolitical location and economic growth, the PRC will continue to give high priority to the region. Xinjiang Ribao carries the commentary:

> "Xinjiang's stability has a bearing on the stability of the whole country and Xinjiang's development has a bearing on the development of the whole country. The important policy decision on Xinjiang's stability made by the central authorities is both an ideological weapon guiding the people of all the nationalities in our region to realize long-term stability and development in Xinjiang, and an important part of the strategic overall situation of ensuring China's modernization and unity."[69]

The Xinjiang region being a strategic and sensitive region for China, China's imperial dynasties and later the Communist government always gave priority to the region and exercised control through various means. While the rhetoric of nation and nationalism was created to legitimise China's control over the peripheral lands and peoples, at the practical level steps like Han population transfer, and heavy deployment of PLA were adopted to reinforce such control. In fact, originally the non-Han Manchus (Qing dynasty) had adopted the strategy of population transfer in order to ward off Czarist expansionism in the outlying areas of China. Xinjiang was officially incorporated into the Qing territory only in 1884. The CPC appropriated the same Qing strategy of population transfer and gave Xinjiang the formal status of 'autonomous region' in 1955 under a centralised, and tightly controlled unitary state system. After 1960, in the face of growing Sino-Soviet confrontation, large garrisons of the PLA were deployed in the region and the border with the Soviet Union was closed. With the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan a fresh security problem erupted in China's backyard. Xinjiang was then turned into a base for Chinese operations in Afghanistan. In fact, the Chinese leadership supported the Afghan mujahideens against the Soviet military presence in Afghanistan.[70] Close political and religious contacts with Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and some of the other Muslim states were promoted. Dru Gladney therefore, argued that the PRC used the 'Islamic card' to promote international relations.[71] However, the later tolerance of the religion in the 1980s and finally the opening up of Central Asia in the 1990s led to an upsurge in identity and religious consciousness among the Uyghurs and other minority populations in China.

With the independence of the Central Asian States, Islamic resurgence began to afflict the Xinjiang autonomous region. The rise of Taliban further worsened the situation. Reportedly, Uyhgur militants had been trained by, and fought with, the Afghan mujahideens since 1986. In fact, China's own strategy of supporting the Mujahideens in Afghanistan in order to curb Soviet power caused a backlash when the Uyghurs trained by the Taliban unleashed militant

activities in Xinjiang. In fact, after 9/11, China's policy of using the 'Islamic card' boomeranged. China had to rethink its policies towards the Muslim minority. China thus adopted a series of confidence building measures with the Central Asian States and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) was the result to curb Islamic fundamental extremism and terrorism in the region.

Given the persisting problem of Uyghur separatism, China has to rethink its policies toward the minority population of Xinjiang. Its reliance on a coercive strategy to subdue the minority identity in the face of greater Han nationalism is unlikely to resolve the Uyghur issue in the new international environment. Despite economic growth in the region under the Western Development Programme, the region is poor and backward. Uyghurs have lower incomes than Hans, and their religious and cultural identity consciousness is growing.

It is not in the interest of Central Asia or India that radical Islamic separatism or militancy grows in Xinjiang. On this, China, Russia, India and Central Asia appear to have a common interest. With Jammu and Kashmir troubled by a violent fundamentalist movement, India in particular would be cautious about the political evolution in Xinjiang and Central Asia. However, the world community cannot really oppose secular movements for reassertion of basic political, individual, and religious rights—especially if such movements are peaceful. China needs to understand this and bring about political changes that are accommodative towards its minority nationalities.

The Chinese state needs to urgently evolve a political architecture that would allow the Uyghurs or for that matter the Tibetans to maintain their identity and peacefully co-exist with the Hans. Autonomy in the region is needed to effect such a change. But this is not possible as long as China is a unitary state, and insecure about the slightest signs of independence. The reforms, the international campaigns on human rights, the campaigns by the Uyghur diaspora and the role of the media and information all have contributed to make the Uyghur ethnic problem an internationally known issue. This has only made the Chinese state more insecure and has strengthened their desire to root out dissent and establish firm control. It is also not very certain how far the Uyghurs or the Tibetans would like to go once they are given greater autonomy. Would it only lead to greater demand for independence? There does not appear to be an easy solution to this conundrum.

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