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OPINION

Ethnic Crisis in China

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According to official Chinese data there are 56 minority nationalities comprising 8.2 percent of China's total population scattered over 64.5 per cent of total land area, mainly in the north east, north-west, and south west. The main nationalities are some 15 million Zhuang in Guangxi, 10 million Manchu in Liaoning, 8 million Hui in Ningxia, Gansu, 7 million Miao in Guizhou and 7 million Uygur in Xinjiang. The Uygurs are Sunni Muslims and constitute 46 per cent of Xinjiang's population, with smaller percentages of Han (36 per cent) Kazakh (7.7 percent) Hui (4 per cent) Tajiks (2 percent) and Kyrgyz (1 per cent).

Xinjiang, formerly known as Turkestan is China's largest administrative unit covering about one-sixth of the total area of the country. The presence of Taklamakan desert in southern Xinjiang makes much of the region uninhabitable. Another formidable barrier to human habitation is the Tian Shan range, at the centre of this vast territory. Towards the north of the Tian Shan are the towns of Urumqi (Capital of Xinjiang), Turfan and Kudia, and towards further north there are Dzungarian Steppelands. Northern Xinjiang shares borders with the Central Asian republics of Kazakhstan, Kirghizstan and Tajikistan. To the south are the oases and towns of the Tarim River Basin, Yarkhand, Khotan and others. The southern boundary is clearly delineated by the Kuniun mountains which separate Xinjiang from Kashmir.

Xinjiang is of immense importance to China because of its strategic location. Throughout history, Xinjiang functioned as the main gateway to south and west Asia and presence of such oases as Hami and Turfan in the North and Khotan and Keriya in the south were vital to the operation of the silk Route. The trade caravans needed these halting places for food, water and other supplies. The northern routes led to central Asia and the Middle east while the southern ones wound their way to India.

China's interest in Xinjiang is not limited to commerce alone. Concerned about the defence of their territories the Chinese sought buffer zones as a means of protecting their borderlands. Chinese occupation of Xinjiang was primarily aimed at keeping the non-Chinese inhabitants under control and protecting China's core territories in Gansu and Shanxi provinces.

When the Communists assumed the reins of government in 1949 they were determined to reassert Chinese authority over the natives of Xinjiang. They couched this objective as an effort to promote social justice and to preserve the unique characteristics of the national minorities. Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR) was established in 1955, implying that the natives would have a significant measure of independence. However, in reality the government's policy was actually based on the desire to tap the vast old, uranium, gold and other mineral

resources of the region; the awareness that a Muslim majority Chinese province might help China have better relations with the Islamic-world in the western neighbourhood; and an eagerness to secure this strategic location on the border of the volatile Central Asian republics.

Although the Chinese have acknowledged the economic and political significance of Xinjiang, their policies towards the local people have been inconsistent. They have wavered from a stress on consideration of the special characteristics of the national minorities to an attempt to compel these peoples of Turkic origin to assimilate themselves into the majoritarian Han-dominated Chinese culture. However, some conciliatory approach has also been pursued especially since 1976, when the natives of Xinjiang were given permission to use their own language in schools and mass media; to practise Islam; to abide by many of their own customs and beliefs, and often to be governed by their own leaders who were recruited into the Communist Party.

The hard-line policy on the other hand was at its peak during the years of the Cultural Revolution. It required the use of the Chinese language in the region, impeded the practice of Islam, replaced native leaders with Chinese officials and encouraged Han Chinese to migrate to Xinjiang with a deliberate motive to outnumber the non-Han residents. The eventual goal of both the approaches/policies appears to be the assimilation of the native peoples into the Chinese culture.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Xinjiang has become the frontline province for the Chinese in the west, especially since the coming up of independent Central Asian Republics all of which are seething with Islamic radicalism. In the recent years also, the disgruntled nationalities of Xinjiang have constantly expressed their dissatisfaction, sometimes violently, and the Chinese security apparatus has always been able to curb them with iron hand. Even then, controls have grown harder to maintain in the face of greater flow of goods and people from across the frontier. Chinese government officials have expressed their concern about 'separatist' forces, and they foresee the necessity of using force to keep the lid on the ethnic cauldron. Jiang Zemin has himself stressed that "nothing is minor" when it comes to ethnic unrest. Although there are infrequent signs of organised separatism, the Chinese settlers live apart from the locals and discrimination is commonplace. Recent reports of discovery of oil in Xinjiang, as well as long standing Chinese interest in the natural resources of the region, make it likely that China will continue to deal firmly with separatist forces.

The relatively calm profile of Xinjiang has taken a beating since the late 1990s. Riots and bomb blasts have occurred regularly since February 1997. This has exposed the simmering discontent that the Uighurs harbour against the majority Han. The primary reason seems to be the officially sponsored demographic alteration, which has seen Han Chinese settling in the Dzungerian Basin. The Hans today comprise 36 percent of Xinjiang's population. The Han migration, it is believed, is officially engineered to alter the demographic profile and thereby reduce what the Chinse call 'splittist' tendencies.

The central fear that haunts the Chinese is that, if the minorities in 'autonomous regions' like Xinjiang, Tibet and Inner Mongolia begin to develop nationalist sentiments, it would lead to friction with the majority Hans. It is important to remember that the 'Autonomous Regions'

together constitute 65 percent of China's total land-mass. Cultural differences between Han and non-Han only precipitate the issues further.

The separatists in Xinjiang want to establish an East Turkestan (the name given by Turkic speaking people to Xinjiang). They claim that China continues to deny its citizens freedom of speech, association and religion. The State Council and Ministry of Public Security is also accused of issuing directives that restrict and deprive citizens of whatever little freedom they have. Another charge against China is that in 1949, it unfairly annexed the then independent nation called East Turkestan. Officially, the Chinese claim that East Turkestan voluntarily joined the People's Republic of China in 1949.

The harsh measures adopted to crush the rioting and call for independence of Xinjiang may have temporarily yielded some gains for the Chinese, but, if a proper dialogue is not initiated, it has the potential of developing into a crisis at a later date. The role of Central Asian Republics bordering Xinjiang, especially Kazakhstan needs to be understood as the Chinese have accused them of providing a sanctuary to separatists. In the coming days, one believes China will supplement its tough military and law-and-order measures with constructive programmes that will inspire the trust and confidence of the majority Muslims in the Xinjiang province.