

Unrest in Xinjiang: Underlying Issues and the Chinese Response

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The July 2011 outbreak of violence has once again brought the Xinjiang Autonomous Region in China and the Uighurs to international attention. These incidents reflect the continued resentment and feelings of marginalization and persecution among the Uighurs in China. From Beijing's perspective, the fresh round of violence is particularly worrisome as it comes ahead of the China-Eurasia Expo being organized in Urumqi from 1 to 15 September 2011 to showcase development in Xinjiang and boost regional economic cooperation. Significantly, violence erupted despite an overwhelming military and security presence in the area exposing the limitations of Beijing's policy of crushing dissent with hard power options. The 'strike hard campaign' has been the cornerstone of China strategy to deal with what it describes the three evils – "terrorism, separatism or splittism."

Understanding the Roots of Discontent

The violence so far has been sporadic with sudden surges in attacks met with massive military crackdowns. The immediate provocation for the recent attacks were the indiscriminate detention of Uighur men; restriction on the use of black headscarves and robes by women; and the confiscation of farmland and demolition of houses for redevelopment. These are examples of the deep-rooted grievances that continue to galvanize the ethnic cleavage and the separatist sentiments in the region. This is despite Beijing's claim that there is no discrimination and that massive investments and aid have significantly raised the living standards of the local population.

Beijing consistently maintains that the violence is being instigated and perpetrated by "terrorist" elements among the local and overseas Uighurs based in Europe and the United States or belonging to the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) (or the Turkistan Islamic Party -TIP) operating from Pakistan.

Over the years, the groups like the ETIM have sharpened their military and propaganda skills by training with other militant groups in the tribal areas of Pakistan. This explains China's rather uncharacteristic public expression of concern about the safe-havens in Pakistan, following the recent spate of attacks in Xinjiang. However, number of ETIM militants is rather small and their access to Xinjiang is limited. Though the involvement of external stimuli as a catalyst the violence cannot be ruled out, it is more important to examine the situation on the ground.

Aliens in their own homeland

In Xinjiang, China faces the conundrum of bridging the gap between the centre and the periphery complicated by a unique set of needs and interests arising from an ethnic minority. Over the years Beijing has implemented policies of integration supplemented with force and general repression. The Uighurs consider these

aggressive attempts at integration an affront to their religion and culture giving rise to concerns of dilution or even outright destruction of their identity. Increasing Han migration into Xinjiang, forced relocation of Uighurs to other parts of the country and the widening gap between the Han and Muslim minorities in terms of socioeconomic development has led to a sense of marginalization producing discontent in the region. Uighurs see Han Chinese usurping political and economic opportunities in the region. The Han Chinese see the Uighurs as an ungrateful race that despite pro-minority policies of the government such as exemption from the one-child policy and heavy economic investment in the region, continue to be rebellious and often violent.

Much of the violence in the region stems from the cleavage between Han and the Uighur communities even though there have been instances of terrorist attacks directed at the state and its institutions especially during the 2008 Olympics. The 2009 Urumqi riots were sparked by an ethnic brawl in a toy factory in Guangzhou, where Uighur workers were rumoured to have assaulted a Han woman, resulting in the death of two Uighur. This led to attacks against the Han Chinese in Xinjiang. Riots spread with raids conducted by the Han Chinese seeking to take revenge on the Uighur who had caused the disturbance. The attacks in Kashgar on 31 July 2011 were triggered by the demolition of traditional Uighur houses in the centre of the old city, which officials claimed were unhygienic and potentially dangerous in an earthquake. But Uighurs believe that this is a well orchestrated state attempt to break up their communities.

With regard to the recent attacks, Uighurs appear to be yet again acting out their anger and frustration against the Han Chinese and by extension the state. The perpetrators are mostly unorganized, apparent from the lack of sophistication in the attacks. For example, in August 2008, the perpetrators drove a dump truck into a group of People's Armed Police Force (PAPF) officers during morning exercise and used knives and a handgun. In August and September 2009, a group of Uighurs stabbed civilians and police officers in Urumqi with hypodermic syringes which were rumoured to carry HIV or anthrax. In July 2011, two Uighurs drove a vehicle into a Han Chinese crowd, following it up with knife attacks. These attacks do not reflect operational command and control and tactical sophistication, which is the hallmark of organized and group-based resistance.

Winning arguments with bullets?

Beijing errs in failing to distinguish local, ethnic or religious grievances from a terrorist motivation. This is not to dispute that there is a terrorist threat to China especially in Xinjiang. But the threat from organized entities like ETIM or for that matter Al-Qaeda is of limited consequence at least at present. Beijing needs to appreciate that extremism and terrorism often take root due to marginalization and repression – perceived or otherwise. This becomes more aggravated where the identity of a particular population is at stake.

The Chinese response to the unrest in the region reflects insensitivity and arrogance. The response is characterized by a huge military insertion, followed by killings, arrests and swift executions. But an overwhelming use of force and deliberate attempts to ignore cultural and religious issues in Xinjiang could well be fulfilling

Beijing's own prophecy about the root causes of discontent and violence in the region.

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