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## Uighur Muslims and Separatism in China:

# A Looming Dilemma

Forum >  
East Asia

Although often ignored in Western media, the Uighur Muslims of China have seriously challenged Beijing's political and strategic control of its western region. Culturally, socially, and religiously distinct from the rest of the People's Republic, the Uighurs will present China with one of its most prominent security threats within the next decade because of growing separatist violence, nationalist sentiment, and cross-border contacts with other Muslims.

By Sean Yom

The Uighur Muslims constitute one of the most distinct minorities in China. They write in Arabic script, speak a Turkic language, practice Sunni Islam, and are racially of Turkic stock. With almost nine million individuals as reported in the 2000 census, most residing in the Xinjiang province, the Uighur people boast a rich culture and history that dates back at least 2,500 years. This history has recently been marked by struggle against Chinese control. Separatist Uighurs staged rebellions in 1933 and 1944, proclaiming their fledgling state the "East Turkistan Republic". After World War Two, Mao Zedong's communists, struggling to win the civil war, guaranteed the Uighurs complete autonomy if they helped them to defeat the Nationalists. When the war ended in 1949, the promise bore no such fruit: instead, the Communist regime invaded Xinjiang and encouraged mass immigration of Han Chinese in an attempt to both dilute the ethnic unity of the province and to spur economic development and stability. As a result, while in 1949 the Uighurs made up over 90 per cent of the population, the 2000 census placed them at barely 47 per cent with the Han Chinese as 40.61 per cent since 1990, the Han Chinese population has increased by 31.64 per cent, twice the growth rate of the Uighurs.

During the Great Leap Forward (1958-1961) and the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), the Communist government repressed any forms of ethnic or religious identity assertion. Mosques and Quranic schools closed, religious leaders were arrested or harassed, and in government literature Islam was characterized as a primitive practice. Uighurs enjoyed an uneasy renaissance in the 1980s, as a laxer government policy towards national minorities allowed them to express their Turkic or Islamic identity more freely, although popular literature was still subject to intense scrutiny and censorship.

In the last decade, an increasing number of Uighur groups have called for secession from China, mobilizing support with rhetoric evoking ethnic nationalism, Islamic faith, and titular rights to self-determination. Such separatists have staged violent activities and uprisings in support of their emancipatory ideal. In fact, one of the leading figures of the Tiananmen Square student demonstrations in Beijing in June 1989 was a young Uighur man named Wu'er Kaixi, although the Western media failed to highlight either his Uighur heritage or his Islamic faith. In the last nine years, Uighur nationalists have orchestrated bombings, assassinations, riots, rallies, and kidnappings. In February 1997, huge protests broke out near the border of Kazakhstan, and the ensuing military and police response killed as many as 300 Uighurs. A series of Uighur-claimed bus bombings followed, including one in Beijing; this marked the first terrorist attack in Beijing since the revolution in 1949. Death threats and assassinations have targeted communist officials or sympathizers in the region, while a growing number of peaceful demonstrations (with occasional fringe violence) cloud the urban climate with feelings of hostility and resentment between the Han Chinese and Uighur populations.

This restlessness has resulted in several campaigns by Beijing to repress separatist sentiment (called "splittism" in government documents) through mass arrests, in which thousands of suspected "splittists" have been arbitrarily detained and incarcerated. In addition, the regional government has

passed laws and decrees hindering the construction of new mosques, banning speeches or religious gatherings deemed subversive, and attempting to replace local imams (religious leaders) with those trained by the government. In 1996, Beijing announced a national "Strike Hard" campaign against crime. In Xinjiang, this amounted to a special operation to root out Uighur nationalists and others suspected not of any violations of the law, but rather of having "splittist" sympathies. Private Islamic schools were closed under the pretence that they taught revolutionary ideas, authorities attempted to discourage Uighurs leaving for the *Hajj*; and all religious writings, recordings, and videos required approval from authorities. That enervating crackdown has extended into today's authoritarian atmosphere. Unlike Tibet, whose fight for independence has been celebrated in the Western media, the Uighurs' situation has not attracted global attention. And unlike Tibetans, Uighurs do not have an organizational or spiritual leader; also, the West has been more accepting of Tibet's Buddhism than of Xinjiang's Islam.

In forecasting China's imminent crisis, the Uighur dilemma should be analysed in a geostrategic context. Clearly, China needs Xinjiang. The province accounts for one-sixth of China's landmass and holds vast deposits of minerals and oil. In fact, some Chinese geologists believe that the energy reserves under Xinjiang match those of Kuwait, and the national oil industry has eagerly begun to tap this resource. Moreover, it is the site for China's nuclear testing and accommodates a heavy military presence. During the Cold War, the province shared a long border with the Muslim underbelly of the Soviet Union; now, it has eight neighbours: India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, the Russian Federation, and Mongolia. Events in Central Asia echo throughout Xinjiang; for example, many Uighurs saw the withdrawal of the Soviet military from Afghanistan in 1989 as proof that the dedicated struggle of a Muslim people against an infidel enemy could result in victory. Many Uighur separatists operate or smuggle weapons from Central Asian countries, with whose populations they share strong ethnic, historical, and cultural ties. However, the governments of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan have not offered safe refuge to Uighur criminals or separatists wanted by their much larger and more powerful neighbour. In addition, Russia wishes for closer relations with Beijing and so will not support Uighur independence.

Understandably, Beijing does not want a "Kosovo" effect (separatism followed by repression followed by Western intervention) or a "Chechnya" effect (separatism followed by repression followed by a grueling, costly war). Not only would widespread internecine fighting in Xinjiang be costly in human, military, and financial terms, but it would encourage cross-border incursions by nearby Islamist groups, stress China's fragile alliance with bordering states, and endanger access to Xinjiang's natural resources, thereby increasing reliance upon Middle Eastern providers who might, in turn, impugn Beijing for its internal repression of Muslims.

The Uighurs' growing unrest has two implications: first, China should expect an increasing flow of illicit arms from Pakistan, Afghanistan, and other Central Asian countries into Xinjiang. There have been reports of Uighurs enrolling in Islamist-style training camps in Pakistan and Afghanistan, where they learn guerilla tactics and weapons proficiency; some have even fought with Taliban units. Beijing wishes to

prevent Islamist notions of jihad and other organizational ideologies from penetrating its territory. It realizes that Uighurs have fought in Chechnya, and it does not want Wahhabi-style Islamism to seep into Xinjiang via Afghanistan or Tajikistan. Such militancy could strengthen separatist movements and also provide momentum for new ones to coalesce.

Second, China will move towards closer political relations with Russia and the Central Asian countries. The recent transformation of the Shanghai Five into the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, comprising Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and China, intended not only to counter Western influence in the region but also to combine resources and information in order to combat Islamist terrorism, extremism, and separatism — the three scourges that all of its member countries wish to eradicate. Also, the Russian-Sino Friendship Treaty signed in late July, which proclaimed Russia and China to be "good neighbours" and strategic partners, portends the two countries' hostility towards Islam. Both face internal Muslim populations that, if granted full autonomy, would severely damage their territorial integrity, and perhaps even initiate a chain of Balkanization by encouraging more minority groups to secede. A higher degree of multi-lateral political-military collaboration will result from these initiatives. That these countries recognize the threat separatist movements pose to their sovereign control of highly disputed territories signifies that the Uighur problem will not merely be a Chinese concern.

Popular revolt in Xinjiang still lies in the future, but whether this scenario will materialize or instead remain a separatist dream depends entirely upon the willingness of unregenerate Chinese leaders to accept a *modus vivendi* that yields more latitude to the religious, political, cultural, and social practices of the Uighur populace. The Uighurs will provide Beijing with its biggest internal confrontations in the coming years, one that will heavily stress its political, cultural, and economic ties with Muslim states. ◀

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