CENTRE FOR NON-TRADITIONAL SECURITY (NTS) STUDIES

NTS INSIGHT

September/1 2009

A Centre of S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore

Lifting the Lid Off Xinjiang's Insecurities

The recent riots and attacks in China's western province of Xinjiang have brought to the forefront the long simmering tensions between the Han Chinese and Uyghur communities. What have often been captured in parts of international discourse on this issue are the socio-economic inequalities faced by China's minority communities in the province, particularly the Uyghurs. However, what seems to be new in this conflict is increasing discontent amongst the Han Chinese, who have voiced frustration at their government's ineffective measures to ensure security. This Insight will argue that while the state has implemented economic and other nation-building policies to ensure what it perceives as overall state security, it has not addressed vital human security needs of the people of Xinjiang.

By Sofiah Jamil and Roderick Chia

Introduction

There is a long history of conflict in China's Xinjiang ('New Dominion') province in western China (see Map 1), mainly between its Han Chinese and Turkic-speaking Uyghur communities. In July 2009, conflict reignited between these communities, causing the Chinese President Hu Jintao to return early from the G8 Summit in Italy. The Chinese government's response was excessive

and claimed to be in control of the situation. While Beijing insisted that the conflict was associated with China's current campaign against international terrorism, many international observers have voiced concern that it was a result of repressive Chinese policies in Xinjiang. In a bid to bolster its international credibility the Chinese government then initiated visits by foreign delegations to Xinjiang, promoting the province's diversity through trade fairs and exhibitions. These efforts, however, floundered as a new wave of fresh protests and conflict erupted in the provincial capital Urumqi two months later. This time, it was the Han community who protested against the authorities for not doing enough to protect them from random attacks, in which they were stabbed with hypodermic syringes (*BBC News*, 3 September 2009).

These were the latest developments in a series of conflicts and tension between Uyghurs and Han Chinese in Xinjiang that have simmered for over a decade since the last major conflagration in 1997. Throughout all of these incidents, the Chinese government maintained its stance that it

Map 1: The Xinjiang Uighur (Uyghur) Autonomous Region

Source: The International Institute for Strategic Studies. Available at <http://www.iiss.org>.

has pursued policies that have benefitted the region of Xinjiang – primarily in boosting economic development in an 'autonomous' province. Nevertheless, the Chinese government has acknowledged – during a meeting with a delegation from the Organisation of the Islamic Conference following the July 2009 incidents – that social and economic inequalities as a result of the rapid economic development had been a contributing factor to the conflict. Hence, there is a need to examine why China's economic development and nation-building policies have produced contradictory results. This Insight will argue that while the state has implemented policies to ensure overall state security, it has failed to address vital human security issues of the people of Xinjiang as a prerequisite for effective peace and security for the state.

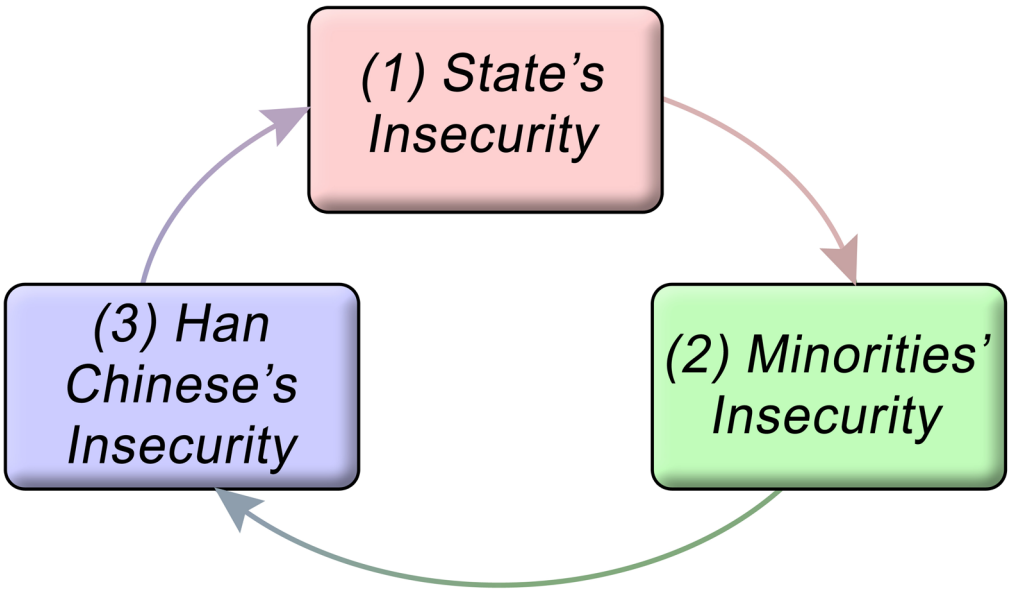
The Intra-state Dilemma: Security for Whom?

To understand why the Chinese government's policies have failed to ensure security, it is useful to first understand whose security the Chinese government is safeguarding. Judging from the recent protests by both disenchanted Han and Uyghur, it would seem that neither of these groups fare well as policy recipients. What appears to be the case is that the policies attempt to ensure state security by putting a lid on simmering issues without fully acknowledging the root causes of the problem; in other words, it is a strategy of containment.

From a human security perspective, this section will evaluate the various and multifaceted issues that the people in Xinjiang face. In our analysis of these issues, we examine selected government policies, since the Communists' 'peaceful liberation' of Xinjiang in 1949, which have sought to ensure state security at the expense of the security of the people in Xinjiang. According to Mahbub ul Haq (Human Development Report, 1994), there are seven dimensions of human security:

- Economic security — ensuring a basic income and employment for individuals.
- Food security — ensuring both physical and economic access to basic food.
- Health security — guaranteeing protection from diseases and unhealthy lifestyles.
- Environmental security — protection from short- and long-term effects of environmental degradation.
- Personal security — protection from physical violence.
- Community security — protection from the loss of traditional relationships and values and from sectarian and ethnic violence.
- Political security — associated with honouring basic human rights.

Figure 1 A positive feed-back loop of how China's policies contribute to various insecurities



The last three dimensions can also be subsumed under what the Copenhagen school denotes as societal security. According to Waever, Buzan and de Wilde (1998), there are three main threats to societal security. In the case of Xinjiang, all of them have been the result of China's policies – particularly in urban areas such as Urumqi:

- Migration: 'X' people overrun or diluted by influxes of 'Y' people; X people's identity is changed by a shift in the composition of the population.
- Horizontal competition: X people change their ways due to the overriding cultural and linguistic influence from neighbouring Y culture.
- Vertical competition – X people will stop seeing themselves as X, due to an integrating project or a secessionist-'regionalist' project that pull them toward either wider or narrower identities.

(adapted from Buzan et al., 1998 p.121)

The following sections will demonstrate that it is primarily the lack of economic and societal security that drives the cycle of state insecurity in Xinjiang. As illustrated in Figure 1, economic and nation-building policies that have been implemented to address state insecurities have threatened the security of ethnic minority communities. Conversely, government responses to address ethnic minority communities' insecurities have in turn fuelled social tensions, thereby threatening the security of the migrant Han Chinese community. Failure to address these social tensions thus triggers socio-political instability and jeopardises the government's credibility. At the same time, the volatile climate makes government officials increasingly weary of the discontented people in Xinjiang.

Safeguarding State Security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Since 1949, the Chinese government – led by the Communist Party of China (CPC) – sought to ensure state security in Xinjiang for two primary reasons. Firstly, to consolidate territorial security along China's borders; and secondly, to secure access to Xinjiang's natural resources to fuel China's developing economy.

In pursuing its nation-building policies, the Communist government sought control over Xinjiang using the provisions of local political power. This was done by designating Xinjiang the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR), with the Uyghurs as its titular nationality, as a means of preventing separatist tendencies. Moreover, Article 53 of China's Interim Constitution (dated September 1949) enshrines ethnic minorities' local autonomy with the 'freedom to develop their dialects and languages, and to preserve or reform their traditions, customs, and religious beliefs' (quoted in Dwyer, 2005). The Communist government had backed this with measures to empower the Turkic–speaking people by identifying and training local Turkic cadres, promoting them to positions of local authority.

Once territorial control over Xinjiang was secured, the Communist government pursued its eco-

nomic development plans via the creation of a hybrid military-civilian organisation known as the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (XPCC). Established in 1954, the XPCC consisted of predominantly Han Chinese and was (and still is) the government's main vehicle for capitalising on the province's natural resources and mobilising manpower. In line with this, the state sponsored Han migration from eastern China to Xinjiang. Not only did in-migration address issues of unemployment and overpopulation in eastern China, it also reflected nation-building tendencies to assimilate Xinjiang and its non-Han inhabitants and thereby bring about the conditions necessary for rapid, large-scale economic development and modernisation. In addition, the XPCC played an important role in defence and security by providing lightly-armed units to support the People's Liberation Army in times of emergencies (McMillen, 1981; Becquelin, 2004).

Xinjiang's rate of development under the XPCC was astounding. By the early 1960s, the XPCC had cultivated one third of Xinjiang's farmland, and over 60 per cent of its work was mechanised. In addition, the XPCC was often lauded for its efforts in conducting scientific research for agriculture, and had ultimately become an integral part of the region's economy (McMillen, 1981). State-sanctioned Han migration into Xinjiang continued well into the 1980s and 1990s. In the 1990s, the Han Chinese were willing to move to Xinjiang, given the growth of lucrative opportunities as a result of developing economic infrastructure in Xinjiang's urban areas. Hence, in the eyes of the state, security in Xinjiang was ensured as the region became economically sustainable and ethnic minorities were brought under control with political representation and leadership.

Mis-managing Minority Insecurities


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While the above-mentioned policies may have facilitated economic and state security for the Chinese government, it has nonetheless had adverse human security implications for majority of the people in Xinjiang.

Growing Economic Inequalities

Firstly, there were growing social and economic inequalities between the Han and other ethnic minorities, of which the Uyghurs were the dominant group. Han in-migration had altered the region's demographics dramatically as the proportion of Han Chinese in Xinjiang grew from 37.6 per cent in 1990 to 40.6 per cent of the total population in 2000 (Clarke, 2008). This therefore reduced the non-Han population's leverage as being a significant majority. This overall statistic however hides the more apparent demographic asymmetry between urban and rural areas. Given the economic opportunities in the cities, most Han migrants live in urban areas while the under-developed rural areas remain predominantly non-Han. In the capital Urumqi – the region's economic powerhouse but also the scene of much ethnic conflict in recent months – Han make up 73 per cent of the city's population while Uyghur make up 12.8 per cent (Dillon, 2004). This thus reflects the first threat to societal security.

This is exacerbated by the fact that the phenomenal rate of economic development seemed to have privileged Han in-migration, rather than create more opportunities for the local ethnic minority populations. For one, minority communities – such as the Uyghurs – have historically been in-

volved with agricultural and nomadic practices. XPCC encroachment to develop the rural regions, further minimised Uyghurs ability to carry out their traditional livelihood practices. As such, many Uyghurs had to find employment in the cities. With the lack of technical expertise, however, they worked primarily as blue-collar workers in the industrial sector. This is further compounded by the lack of equal opportunities in employment, as Han Chinese, who dominated many management positions in businesses, would be more comfortable with employing fellow Han Chinese as they share the same language. Such socio-economic marginalisation has also led to the stereotype that Uyghurs are lazy and generally inferior to Han Chinese, thereby increasing discrimination towards the former.

The growing economic disparities between Han and non-Han also have ramifications on future generations' education prospects. According to the findings of a 2001 CPC report, it was noted that the high increase in school and tertiary education fees have made it difficult for students of minority descent to afford an education. As such, the lack of qualifications is a further setback in ensuring employment.

Diminishing Minority Culture and Identity

This therefore leads to another contradiction in Chinese government policies. While it sought to enhance unity amongst its citizens, it inadvertently increased resentment amongst the various groups and contributed to problems of insecurity in the region. This is reflected in the government's moves to introduce standard Mandarin Chinese in Xinjiang's education system as a response to reducing the economic disparities between the Han and Uyghur communities. The state notes that learning Mandarin Chinese would not only serve to increase the employability of national minorities but also integrate them further into the wider Chinese society, and thereby contribute to nation-building. By the year 2002, Mandarin Chinese was the medium used from the third year in primary schools and in almost all courses at Xinjiang University and other institutions of higher learning, while Uyghur-based language textbooks were much less available (Dillon, 2004).

However, such a measure was clearly a threat to societal security as the Uyghurs perceived it as a means of wiping out their local language and culture. Statements by government officials also seem to insinuate the inferior value of minority languages. According to Wang Lequan, Regional Secretary, or CPC chief, of the Xinjiang People's Congress (and thus the XUAR), 'the languages of the minority nationalities have very small capacities and do not contain many of the expressions in modern science and technology, which makes education in these concepts impossible. This is out of step with the 21st century' (quoted in Becquellin, 2004). Hence, in the eyes of the state, the use of the Chinese language as being a superior marker of success and national unity was the most pragmatic solution in ensuring the further development of the people of Xinjiang. In the eyes of minority groups, however, this was seen as discriminatory.

Limited Political Autonomy, Repression and Rise of Ethno-nationalism

The creation of the XUAR has also produced contradictory outcomes. What was meant to be a policy of ethnic control for nation-building in the hinterlands ultimately facilitated in fostering a sense of a pan-Uyghur identity – one that had first emerged at the end of the 19th century – and which looked towards creating a nation based on that identity (Starr, 2004). This is because Uyghur identity is increasingly taken to be a given by the Uyghurs themselves, and is perceived to be existentially threatened as a result of the above-mentioned socio-economic policies.Some

from the Uyghur émigré community have claimed that Uyghurs in Xinjiang are 'experiencing a form of 'cultural genocide' at the hands of the Chinese state, and that the Chinese want to replace Uyghurs 'with their own people as colonists' and assimilate the rest, in a process of 'wiping out' Uyghur culture (Clarke, 2008).

Furthermore, ethnic minority leaders in the XUAR had limited political power to voice their communities' concerns. While the minority autonomy policy placed non-Han officials in positions of visible authority, the real power still lay in the hands of upper-level party officials, who were predominantly of Han origin (Millward and Tursun, 2004). Any attempts to voice separatist tendencies were quelled. Such was the case in the early 1950s when the state ran campaigns to purge Turkic cadre leaders that were linked to the two former East Turkestan Republics, which were entities of self-determination that lasted briefly in the early half of the 20th century. The state's tendency to suppress separatism comes despite the fact that the Communist regime had initially given the promise of full-fledged autonomy; this was actually a means of drawing the fringes of the Chinese state into more centralised control, which was a reason for the creation of the XUAR.

While Uyghur disenchantment with the Chinese government developed into occasional conflicts (which were quickly quelled by the Chinese authorities), it was only in the late 1980s that social tensions and conflict tended to be on the rise. There are several reasons for this. For instance, international developments increased the Chinese state's anxiety towards separatism in Xinjiang. In particular, the breakup of the Soviet Union and Islamic revivalism around the world caused the Chinese state to worry that separatist elements in Xinjiang would strengthen their ethnic affinity with their ethnic compatriots in the former Soviet Central Asian republics. In light of this, China sought to improve relations with its Central Asian neighbours via trade concessions and by obtaining assurances and support from Central Asian governments to tackle Uyghur separatists. Nevertheless, the opening of China's economy and its westernmost borders for trade throughout the 1990s only served to facilitate the spread of ideas, as well as larger political and social bases for ethno-nationalism to be asserted through diaspora and exile communities (Roberts, 2004). As a result, separatist elements in Xinjiang were able to garner greater support for their cause.

This led to a series of attacks against the Chinese state, of which the latter responded with greater repression. The 1990 Islamic-inspired insurrection in Kashgar, for instance, was a turning point in which the Chinese government decided to tighten its control over Xinjiang, by way of increasing Han in-migration and repressing its predominantly Muslim Uyghur population, who were cast as potential terrorists due to their allegiance to their faith. According to Kung (2006), 'Chinese religious policy is primarily a policy of control.' Any act of protest was dealt with severely, such as the 1997 Yining incident, where a peaceful protest against restrictions on religious and cultural activities ended in bloodshed. As such, what has unfortunately transpired is that due to the Chinese state's insecurities and suspicion towards its Muslim minority population, its repressive actions in Xinjiang have not only increased Muslim, particularly Uyghur, resentment towards China, but also allowed militant separatists to validate their acts of terror against the state.

Insecurity of Han Chinese: When State Security Backfires

Such insecurity has clearly affected not just China's ethnic minorities, but also the Han Chinese. There are several reasons as to why the Han Chinese's security is threatened. For one, tense and repressive conditions in Xinjiang since the 1990s have made the prospects for peace so volatile that even the slightest disagreement could trigger conflict. Such was the case in the lead-up to the July 2009 riots, where false claims that a Han female factory worker had been raped

resulted in a brawl in the factory in Guangdong, in which – according to Chinese state media – two Uyghur workers died and 60 were injured. Secondly, given the inability of ethnic minorities to express their resentment against the government, it is likely that some may decide to vent their anger on innocent Han Chinese. The recent sporadic syringe attacks in Urumqi reflect this, as most of the 531 victims were of Han origin.

Such instability in Xinjiang has also done little for the Chinese government's credibility amongst its citizens. While the state has attempted to curb separatist tendencies in Xinjiang, it has failed to acknowledge the growing resentment amongst the Han community in the region. Given the increasing incidents of conflict between the ethnic groups, the Han have become more disillusioned with the government's ability to handle the situation. This is further exacerbated by the fact that the current CPC chief in Xinjiang, Wang Lequan, has been in power since 1994. Previous party chiefs have usually held the post for about four to eight years. Speculation about corruption and cronyism only further fuelled their dissatisfaction and lowered their patriotism in a state that has prided itself as being able to take care of its people.

In addition to this, recent reports of three Hong Kong journalists, who were beaten up by riot police while reporting on the syringe attacks in Xinjiang, has triggered discontent amongst Chinese citizens beyond Xinjiang. Journalists and other activists in Hong Kong have protested against the beatings, and called for better protection of journalists working in mainland China. In an interview with the New Tang Dynasty Televsion (NTDTV), Chairman of the Democratic Party of Hong Kong, Albert Ho, condemned the beatings as undermining the freedom of information in China (NTDTV.com, 14 September 2009). As such, it is clear that the state's failure to provide for the personal security of its majority Han population would only further reduce their credibility, and thereby create greater momentum for political instability.

Conclusion

In essence, we see that the social tensions are rooted in a combination of historical and contemporary events – from the establishment of a province deemed 'autonomous' with the Uyghurs as its titular nationality, to waves of migration by the Han, as well as state policies towards economic development, education and social control.

Despite the negative ramifications as a result of their policies, the Chinese government still seems to adopt a business-as-usual mentality. Development projects in Xinjiang continue to grow with very little regard for the minority communities' well-being and security. Recent news has noted the state's plans of expanding coal production in the region by developing 139 large and medium-sized coal mines in Xinjiang by 2010 (*Xinhua News*, 23 August 2009). In addition, there are plans to demolish most of the old quarter of the city of Kashgar in southwestern Xinjiang. The authorities will relocate up to 220,000 residents of 'Old Kashgar' to 'modern' housing estates, claiming that this will improve their quality of life. Some have estimated that at least 85 per cent of Old Kashgar will be torn down, and in the process destroy ancient sites of Islamic architecture as well as homes that have been passed down within families over generations. Many Uyghurs in Kashgar consider this an attack on their culture and heritage, especially with little or no consultation with residents who will be displaced (Tharoor, 2009).

In closing, there are several issues for the Chinese government to consider as a means of improving its relations with its minority communities. Firstly, the Chinese government should consider mechanisms of making the distribution of revenue from such development more acces-

sible to all the peoples of Xinjiang. Secondly, the government could re-consider how it measures development and success in its education and technical skills policies. Indicators of measuring success will need to take into acknowledge the diversity of the communities in Xinjiang, insofar that discrimination should be minimised. Thirdly, the government should loosen restrictions on religious and cultural activities, as a means of showing that it is willing to provide for the societal security needs of its people. By doing these, it will likely set the groundwork for rebuilding trust amongst the people of Xinjiang and between them and the state, and perhaps be a more effective and sincere form of nation-building.

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