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History, Power, and Uyghur Identity Flux?**

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Commentary

Sources of Conflict in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region: History, Power, and Uyghur Identity Flux?

Samuel Glen*

Abstract: *This commentary discusses the historical and contemporary conditions, underlying causes and future trajectories of the Uyghur conflict in the XUAR, China, and deals with issues of ethnicity, identity, religion, and nationalism in the context of the challenges within the region. It shows the asymmetrical historical development of the conflict and how its more contemporary conditions in fact exacerbate rather than assuage the Uyghur conflict in the XUAR. This paper, therefore, seeks to show that the underlying cause of the conflict and Uyghur 'separatist' activity in China are not necessarily a simple one-sided story of terrorist activity or religious extremism, but the result of a distinct power dynamic that perpetually favours the Chinese government in practice and policy, thereby encroaching any legitimate claims Uyghur's may have to form an independent and fully autonomous nation-state on their own terms.*

Introduction

The recent increase in the intensity of the Uyghur conflict and extremist activities in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) is often portrayed by worldwide media as an idealistic and brutish struggle between hostile and rebellious Uyghur 'separatists', religious 'extremists', and violent 'terrorists' rebelling against legitimate Communist party control in the name of Islam and freedom. Its perpetrators are therefore largely portrayed as illegitimate terrorists who engage in nonsensical, irrational and unnecessary violence in doomed struggle for religious independence and autonomy, when it is really a 'David and Goliath' duel for a contested region fraught with double-standard policy and regressive practice. To better understand this conflict, this commentary explores the underlying and historical conditions of the conflict, which seem to be a distinct power dynamic that has perpetually skewed the conflict in favour of the Chinese government. This, combined with the historical flux in Uyghur identity and Islamic practice, has negatively affected the Uyghur's ability to effectively claim true political autonomy and legitimacy within the region in the context of central Chinese party control.

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Historical and Contemporary Conditions of the Conflict

The XUAR, located in the far northwestern region of China, has an area roughly *one sixth* of China's total land area, or 1.66 million sq. km in absolute terms.¹ With a massive land border of some 5,600 km, it is bounded by some eight countries, including: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Russia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India. As a vastly untapped region for much of its history under the PRC, its potential for mineral exploitation - particularly with natural resources such as oil, gas and agricultural production - is enormous. As of 2008, it encompassed a population of 21.3 million, of which 60 *per cent* (some 12 million inhabitants) comprised one of the 46 minority groups in Xinjiang, including Uyghur (at 46.1 per cent, the majority in Xinjiang), Han, Hui, and Kazak to name a few.²

The major religion in XUAR is Islam, with 10 ethnic minority groups professing the religion - Uyghurs again constituting the majority.³ Uyghur Islam, more specifically, has been described as a blend of various religious traditions that combine "animistic elements with Sufi beliefs and Sunni doctrine to form a decentralized religion"⁴, while looking to Turkey and parts of Central Asia and the Middle East as their spiritual home.⁵ Although Uyghurs are spread all throughout the region and other parts of greater China, the vast majority - roughly 80 per cent - reside in and around the Tarim Basin (Southern Xinjiang), which borders Pakistan and Afghanistan.⁶ After centuries of rule oscillating between imperialism, colonialism, cessation and sedentary nomadism, Xinjiang became an official province of China in 1884, when it was formally and administratively integrated with 'China proper', under the rule of the Qing Empire. Its history beyond that fact is often contested and sensitive.⁷

Historically, Uyghurs emerged as predominantly Turko-Mongolian steppe nomads who originated from the Mongolian core lands of the Orkhon valley.⁸ After overthrowing the Turk ruling house in 744, Uyghurs established their own empire, which eventually extended into areas of northwest China and Zungharia, or what would now be known as modern-day Xinjiang. Before the arrival of Turkic groups, Mongolian Uyghurs intermarried with Iranians and other Indo-European peoples, who then constituted the indigenous population of the Tarim Basin.⁹ Due to the ethnic, cultural and linguistic variations that developed throughout Uyghur history, 'Uyghurs' as they are known today, were not classified as such until the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Milward and Perdue 2004, 40). According to Jankowiak, as the term and group changed over time, by the 1980s, it was eventually used to include the majority of the wider Turkic population in XUAR.¹⁰

The implications of this historically developed flux in identity are twofold. Firstly, as outlined by Rudelson and Jankowiak¹¹, China was able to (quite opportunistically) manipulate the Uyghur people by implementing

policies causing them to respond in ways that both divided and weakened themselves and other indigenous peoples of Xinjiang, for example, acculturation, that is, the adaptation of indigenous populations in both its active and passive forms, or what was also known in earlier dynastic times as Yi Yi Zhi Yi (以夷制夷), or *divide and rule in minority inhabited areas*, with striking examples evident in Xinjiang during the Qing era.¹² Secondly and alternatively, it can be viewed as Jankowiak explains, as a bonding process, in which:

Ethnic groups, in spite of their own assertions, are not immutable and pure, with roots in timeless past. Rather, they are the byproduct of the convergence of people of disparate backgrounds, whose struggles often produce a *belief in a shared history* that serves as a *rallying point* in the creation of a *common identity*.¹³

Arguably, throughout their history, today's Uyghurs have been affected by both points of view in this regard.

In addition to the implications of Uyghur's identity flux, from a modern-day perspective, total control of Xinjiang was arguably never permanent or absolute. Significantly, including the reign of the Uyghur empire from the eighth century until its decline in the mid-ninth century.¹⁴ This succession continued uninterrupted until a substantial effort was made by the Qing empire to fully integrate it with the Chinese interior, even though they *also* had trouble maintaining it over time. By doing so, the Qing empire restructured the Uyghur-China *power dynamic* in a way that arguably pinpoints the time of Xinjiang's more permanent integration into 'China proper'. As Millward and Purdue explain:

By first establishing military and civil administrations and then promoting immigration and agricultural settlements, it (the Qing empire) went far toward ensuring the continued presence of *China-based power* in the region. It made sure that settlers, voluntary or involuntary, supported themselves under *state supervision*, and worked to strengthen commercial links between Xinjiang and the Chinese interior. By creating facts on the ground, the Qing, initially at least, *aimed to control Xinjiang forever*.¹⁵

From a politico-national historical perspective, these conditions can of course be construed in many different ways, depending on whose viewpoint is taken and what is being discussed. Of course, by effect, this dichotomy produces two starkly contrasting sides to the one reality, which, according to

Bovingdon, is an ineluctable condition of politico-nationalist history, and one prone to manipulation.¹⁶ Indeed, as Millward and Tursun point out, Xinjiang's political history of the twentieth century alone is "more complex than the narratives of *either* Uyghur separatist groups *or* the Chinese state implies", and "sits uncomfortably with the black-and-white nationalistic assumptions of either side".¹⁷ However, as has been shown, because Uyghurs were not in a position to make a united effort towards an independent Uyghur nation-state, they were, in essence, subjected to the more contemporary conditions of the conflict.

Moving on to the contemporary conditions of the conflict, it would appear that Uyghurs and central Chinese policy are both heavily influenced by the nature and repercussions of trans-border flows, particularly the sharing of religion and nationalistic sentiments from XUAR's neighbours. These external influences play a significant role and are a prominent factor on the condition of the Uyghur conflict within XUAR and beyond. As Starr aptly states:

While it is an exaggeration to say the external influences have defined Xinjiang, it is hard to find another region on which such diverse external cultural forces have been so consistently exerted. Together, these act like *external gravitational fields*, pulling Xinjiang in different directions and away from whatever inward cultural moorings it may have.¹⁸

Similarly, Millward and Turson describe this phenomenon as being 'hemmed in' by or 'squeezed between' contradictory pressures.¹⁹

Religion likewise has a dimension in the contemporary conditions of the conflict, which can be described as a dichotomous relationship between Uyghur Islam and official Chinese atheism. As mentioned earlier, in this way, many Muslims of Xinjiang with long held cultural, religious and kinship ties, look to their west for spiritual enlightenment and identity, rather than to Beijing.²⁰ Uyghur Islam can also be cited as one precipitant to the historically decentralised nature of Uyghur nationalism. As a predominantly decentralised religion, Islam arguably affects the way Uyghurs govern themselves: focusing more on the community, rather than the nation more broadly. In this way, the decentralised nature of Islam has perhaps added to Uyghurs' lack of unity and nationalistic self-determination in claiming an independent nation-state. However, this point in itself would need further research and analysis to establish any kind of correlation.

In terms of cross-border flows, ironically instigated by central government policy in the economic "Opening up the West" strategy, trade relationships and contact with Uyghur's family abroad became more prevalent in recent times, with two border regions most important: Pakistan

and Afghanistan to the southwest and the Central Asian states of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan directly west. In both cases, the cultural influences of the trans-border flow of ideas not only reflect historically held cultural ties but also include different global cultural movements that have appeal in Xinjiang's neighbouring states. For example, from Pakistan and Afghanistan, the cultural influence has been largely religious and includes exposure to various political movements now popular in the Islamic world. From the independent states of Central Asia, the cultural influence has been more Western, secular, and nationalist in character, most likely emerging from the legacy of Soviet rule and the impact of Western development.²¹

Meanwhile, typical central government response to ethnic unrest in XUAR has been to class the trans-border flows as negative 'external factors' adding to the instability of the region, and to place certain restraints on Muslims by restricting contact with its southwest, and on the construction of Mosques and Islamic practice in Xinjiang.²² Interestingly, Mackerras conversely asserts China's motive to blame external forces is in part to 'deflect responsibility from their own behaviour and policies' (Mackerras 2012, 507), which seems to be just as plausible precipitants of unrest as 'external factors'.²³ Furthermore, China seeks those very same Central Asian states to form cooperative economic and security relationships, such as the Wu Guo (五国) or *Group of Five* (also known as the 'Shanghai Five'), to prevent their citizens from promoting Uyghur nationalism inside Xinjiang.²⁴ In 1999, for example, in line with their security agreement, Kazakhstan extradited two Uyghurs with Chinese citizenship under threat of the death penalty for 'separatist activity' without much ceremony, with similar occurrences in Kyrgyzstan for 'terrorist activity'.²⁵ All the while, these conditions are arguably fomenting the Uyghur conflict within Xinjiang.

Underlying Causes and Origins of the Conflict

As depicted in the media, XUAR is a fragile region filled with turmoil, unrest and upheaval. This is evident by the chilling July 2009 riots with reports of some 200 deaths, and more recently with other violent attacks carried out in Kunming, and other regions in China.²⁶ However heinous these crimes may be, most of these responses are outward manifestations of a much deeper angst against central Chinese control and cannot simply be passed of as 'senseless'. For example, in 2010, Amnesty International produced a report reviewing the 2009 riots and alleged human rights violations. It concluded that the riots "took place against a back-drop of resentment built up over years of government repression and discrimination against Uyghurs", blaming the uprisings due to restrictions on religious freedom; development strategies that in practice favour Han-Chinese; language policies essentially

rendering Uyghur (language) obsolete; discrimination in employment; and, disproportionate economic growth.²⁷

All these, of course, are important factors evidencing the causal nature of the conflict and cannot be understated; however, as mentioned in the introduction, this paper has sought to outline the deeper underlying cause of this long-term conflict, which can be pinpointed more accurately to the asymmetrical development of the Uyghur-China power dynamic and the Uyghur's flux in identity over time. Therefore, this section will analyse the Uyghur conflict in this regard, by reviewing Chinese regional autonomy policies and its effect on minorities' national self-determination, with Uyghurs taken as an example.

According to eminent sociologist Fei Xiaotong, China exhibits a unique national form, with what he described as *Duo Yuan Yi Ti* (多元一体) or *multiple organs, one body*, seemingly to portray China as one united, multinational empire.²⁸ Somewhat contrastingly, Rudelson and Jankowiak describe the way China pursues what they term a 'monocultural model', as one in which China claims autonomous regions have always been an 'inalienable part of China', apparently using it as a unifying mythology to promote social solidarity and 'perpetual cultural continuity'.²⁹ What is important here is the tenacity with which the Chinese central government and its regional policy seem to follow these narratives, arguably imposing it on minority groups that, at least in the case of Uyghurs, seem to hold a conflicting interpretation. In this way, we can see that a monocultural view is a relatively one-sided approach to a painting that has two sides.

According to Rudelson and Jankowiak: "the active pursuit of a monoculturalist model has shaped China's official position on national and regional historiography", because, to the central government, there is only one kind of historical narrative: "stories that demonstrate people's allegiance to China".³⁰ This one-sided perspective brings in to play the skewed power dynamic disproportionately favouring the Chinese state's historical view. As Bovington states, "The powers of the two sides as judges of each other are grossly mismatched, whereas Uyghurs can only protest that Chinese historians spread lies, Chinese Communist Party (CCP) officials can accuse Uyghurs of subversion and declare their works illegal".³¹

While official Chinese law and policy in principle recognises internal autonomous regions' right to autonomy and self-government by "ensuring their equal footing ... and satisfied desire ... to take an active part in the nation's political activities"³², it however, does not extend the right of self-determination: the ability to form an independent Uyghur nation-state, which Uyghur nationalists by and large are demanding. It can therefore be considered incomplete, hypocritical and one-sided in its approach toward autonomy.

According to the 1999 White Paper issued on ethnic policy in China:

... equality among ethnic groups means that, regardless of their population size, their level of economic and social development, customs and religious beliefs, every ethnic group is a part of the Chinese nation, having *equal* status, enjoying the *same rights* and performing the same duties in every aspect of political and social life according to law, and ethnic oppression or discrimination of *any form* is firmly opposed.³³

Judging by this excerpt, which is by no means unique in its rhetoric, it becomes apparent that Uyghur nationalists are embroiled in a conflict in which they are unequally yoked. Although the Han-Chinese ethnic group seem to be enjoying the rights of a nation-state, this unfortunately is not extended to the Uyghurs in the XUAR. Moore similarly describes this point in regards to the hypocrisy of self-determination and ethnic minorities' citizenship within a multicultural state:

...secessionist movements are fuelled by nationalism, and are accompanied by rejection of the idea of equal citizenship in a state in which they (Uyghurs) are not a majority. It is therefore *hypocritical* that their (China's) own self-determination involves imposing this status (citizenship) on their own minorities.³⁴

Therefore, China appears to be pursuing two contradictory policies at the same time. In policy and principle, they recognise ethnic minorities' right to autonomy and self-government on one hand, but with the other are favouring discriminative and hypocritical practices that shifts the power dynamic of the dichotomous Uyghur-China relationship so that it is perpetually skewed in their favour. This, in turn, leaves the Uyghurs feeling helpless and vulnerable in a supposedly 'autonomous' region quite distinct from central Beijing, yet physically and ideologically so close to the comparatively independent states to their west.

Possible Trajectories and Conclusion

Looking to the future, there are three possible trajectories that can be seen. The first and most likely scenario is that Uyghurs and the XUAR will remain under CCP control for the foreseeable future. Uyghurs will still possess broad rights of citizenship within the Chinese state, excluding the right to self-determination, and will continue to endure restrictions placed on their

practice of religious and other cultural beliefs. However, this will likely perpetuate the conflict and potentially increase the unrest over time. The second, and perhaps least likely, scenario is that Uyghur claims to an independent nation-state will be heeded, potentially splitting up Xinjiang into different boundaries based on ethnic groups. This option potentially has the greatest implication for the stability of the region, which is one of many reasons why it is least likely to occur, not least because China is not ever likely to secede power over the XUAR. Finally, the middle ground scenario, which may be best over the long term for all parties, is one in which Xinjiang, the region and the Chinese government negotiate to find a workable standpoint accessible to all points of view, which will aid in establishing new rules and policies that retain stability and cohesion in the region, while allowing for greater autonomy for Uyghurs, vis-à-vis religious belief and practice and cultural and kinship links with neighbouring states.

In conclusion, this commentary has argued that Uyghurs in the XUAR are unable to legitimately vie for secession due to a double standard in the regional autonomy policies of the CCP. Due to an in practice monocultural stance of the CCP, Uyghurs, as citizens, are hypocritically discriminated against at the most basic level of human rights, self-determination, vis-à-vis the ability to form an independent nation-state. It was shown that with such a dichotomy of conflicting national interests and a power dynamic skewed towards the Chinese state, in its present form, Uyghurs will not likely have any legitimate force to claim an independent state while adhering to Chinese policies alone. This begs a further question: what actions will Uyghurs need to take to have a realistic and substantial claim at creating an independent nation-state in the future? Will their actions require drastic measures and what will be the central government's response? Can we ever expect an atypical response or will this conflict be embroiled ever longer in dire struggle for true freedom? According to the analysis provided, it would appear that the third scenario outlined above would be the most likely to provide a starting point for any legitimate claims of an independent state under peaceful terms, but this would be a long-term goal, and would take the goodwill of the region and the Chinese government to eventually realise.

NOTES

¹ Information Office of the State Council. (2003, May 1). *History and Development of Xinjiang*. Retrieved April 15, 2014, from History and Development of Xinjiang: <http://www.china.org.cn/e-white/20030526/foreword.htm>

² A. Howell and C. Fan, 'Migration and Inequality in Xinjiang: A Survey of Han and Uyghur Migrants in Urumqi', *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, 51 (1) (2011), p.123.

³ L. Harris, 'Xinjiang, Central Asia and the Implications for China's Policy in the Islamic World', in C. Mackerras (ed), *Ethnic Minorities in Modern China*, (New York: Routledge, 2011), p. 137.

⁴ W. Jankowiak, 'Ethnicity and Chinese Identity: Ethnographic insight and political positioning', in C. Mackerras (ed), *Ethnic Minorities in Modern China* (New York: Routledge, 2011), p. 137.

⁵ Harris, 'Xinjiang, Central Asia and the Implications for China's Policy in the Islamic World', p. 137.

⁶ M. Dillon, 'Central Asia: The View from Beijing, Urumqi and Kashghar', in C. Mackerras (ed), *Ethnic Minorities in Modern China*, (New York: Routledge, 2011), p. 150.

⁷ See for example, J. Millward and P. Perdue, 'Political and Cultural History of Xinjiang Region through the Late Nineteenth Century', in F. S. Starr (ed), *Xinjiang: China's Muslim Borderland*, (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2004), pp. 27-62; and G. Bovingdon, 'Contested Histories', in F. S. Starr (ed), *Xinjiang: China's Muslim Borderland*, (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 2004), pp. 353-374.

⁸ Millward and Perdue, 'Political and Cultural History', p. 40.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Jankowiak, 'Ethnicity and Chinese Identity', p. 137.

¹¹ J. Rudelson and W. Jankowiak, 'Acculturation and Resistance: Xinjiang Identities in Flux', in F. S. Starr (ed), *Xinjiang: China's Muslim Borderland* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2004), p. 299.

¹² See also A. Rahman, *Sinicization Beyond the Great Wall: China's Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region*, (Leicester: Matador, 2005), pp. 157-158.

¹³ Jankowiak, 'Ethnicity and Chinese Identity', p.132.

¹⁴ Millward and Perdue, 'Political and Cultural History', p. 42.

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 56. Emphasis added.

¹⁶ Bovingdon, 'Contested Histories', p. 353.

¹⁷ J. Millward and N. Tursun, 'Political History and Strategies of Control, 1884-1978', in F. S. Starr (ed), *Xinjiang: China's Muslim Borderland*, (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2004), p. 64. Emphasis added.

¹⁸ S. F. Starr, 'Introduction', in F. S. Starr (ed), *Xinjiang: China's Muslim Borderland*, (New York: M. E. Sharpe 2004), p. 7. Emphasis added.

¹⁹ Millward and Tursun, 'Political History and Strategies of Control', p.65.

²⁰ Harris, 'Xinjiang, Central Asia and the Implications for China's Policy in the Islamic World', p. 137; and S. Roberts, 'A "Land of Borderlands": Implications of Xinjiang's Trans-border Interactions', in F. S. Starr (ed), *Xinjiang: China's Muslim Borderland*, (New York: M.E. Sharpe 2004), p. 225.

²¹ Roberts, 'A "Land of Borderlands"', p. 225.

²² Harris, 'Xinjiang, Central Asia and the Implications for China's Policy in the Islamic World', p. 137.

²³ C. Mackerras, 'Causes and Ramifications of the Xinjiang July 2009 Disturbances', *Sociology Study*, 2 (7) (2012), p. 507.

²⁴ Roberts, 'A "Land of Borderlands"', p. 232.

²⁵ Ibid, p. 234.

²⁶ See Amnesty International. *"Justice, Justice": The July 2009 Protests in Xinjiang, China* (London: Amnesty International Publications, 2010); and P. Cai, 'What's behind China's Xinjiang problem?', *Business Spectator*, 3 March 2014, <http://www.businessspectator.com.au/article/2014/3/3/china/whats-behind-chinas-xinjiang-problem>, accessed April 15, 2014

²⁷ Amnesty International. *"Justice, Justice"*, p. 6.

²⁸ J. Leibold, 'Ethnic Policy in China: Is Reform Inevitable?', *Policy Studies*, (Honolulu: East-West Centre, 2013), p. 1.

²⁹ Rudelson and Jankowiak, 'Acculturation and Resistance', pp. 140-141.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Bovingdon, 'Contested Histories', p. 353.

³² Information Office of the State Council, *National Minorities Policy and Its Practice in China*, 1 September 1999, retrieved April 15, 2014, from National Minorities Policy and Its Practice in China: <http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/whitepaper/1.html>

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ M. Moore, *National Self-Determination and Secession*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 140. Emphasis added.