

## **Ethnic, Religious and Political Conflict on China's Northwestern Borders: The Background to the Violence in Xinjiang**

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### **Introduction**

The demonstrations, riots and bus bombings in Xinjiang in February 1997 and their probable extension to the Chinese capital, Beijing, with explosions on buses around 7 March, represent the most spectacular disturbances involving the Muslim Uyghur community since the foundation of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949. Although this was the first time much of the world's press had taken a genuine interest in the region, the unrest in Xinjiang was far from unprecedented. These events are simply the latest stage of a movement that had been building up since the Opening and Reform programme launched by Deng Xiaoping in 1978 to liberalise the Chinese economy and stimulate contact with the outside world, with which China had almost lost contact during the Cultural Revolution. Economic reforms on this scale were bound to have social and political repercussions and this has certainly been the case in China, not least in the outlying regions of Xinjiang and Tibet.

### **Xinjiang and the Uyghurs**

The Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, to give Xinjiang its full official name, is on the northwestern border of China and stretches 2,000km east to west and 1,650km north to south. Xinjiang has an area of over 1,600,000km<sup>2</sup> and is the largest administrative unit in the PRC. It has common borders with Mongolia, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India and with three Central Asian states, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. It is also close to Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. Its nearest neighbours within China are Gansu province and the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, both of which have substantial Muslim communities; Tibet, which constitutes Beijing's main separatist problem; and Qinghai, which is part of old Tibet, and has both Tibetan Buddhist and Muslim communities (Xinjiang Weiwuer Zizhiqu Renmin Zhengfu waishi bangongshi, 1988; Dillon, 1995) (Figure 1).

The older spelling of the name of the autochthonous ethnic group, Uighur, has generally been replaced in English language publications in China with Uyghur as this is closer to the spelling of the name in the

Uyghur language, when written in the modified Latin script that was used during the 1960s and 70s. Contemporary scholars of their language suggest the spelling Uyghur as the closest to the local pronunciation and that has been used in this article (Hahn, 1991).

Xinjiang, although a provincial-level administrative unit, is not considered to be a province but an Autonomous Region in deference to the non-Han majority of the population. Non-Han people in the region and émigré communities in Kazakhstan, Turkey and Germany do not use the name Xinjiang because of its Chinese imperial and colonial connotations, and refer to the region instead as Eastern Turkestan – *Sharqi Turkistan*. Earlier studies of the region often use the spelling Sinkiang or the term Chinese Turkestan. In this article, the name Xinjiang has been used throughout for consistency and simplicity, even when it is anachronistic and does not imply either support for or opposition to China's control over the region.

### **The Historical Context: Xinjiang before 1949**

The original inhabitants of Xinjiang were part of the great migration of Turkic speakers from what is now Mongolia in the 9th century and the present-day Uyghurs claim descent from them. The ethnic make-up of the Turkic peoples is complex and names have changed throughout history, the ethnonym Uyghur being one of the most problematic (Gladney, 1990). Chinese influence in the region goes back to at least the tenth century, but Chinese power was only consolidated in the eighteenth century, the name Xinjiang (New Frontier) being used first in 1768. The Qing dynasty's military administration encountered constant nationalist and religious resistance, allied to Islamic forces in neighbouring Khokand, but, in 1831, the first Han immigrants from China were allowed to move into southern Xinjiang to cultivate reclaimable land (Fletcher, 1988). A Muslim insurrection under Yakub Beg led to an independent khanate based on Kashghar until it was overthrown by Qing forces in 1878, and Xinjiang was formally incorporated into the Chinese empire as a province in 1884 at the time of the intense British and Russian imperial rivalry in

Figure 1



central Asia that became known as the ‘Great Game’ (Skrine and Nightingale, 1987).

After the 1911 Revolution, which overthrew the last imperial dynasty, the Qing, Xinjiang, under a warlord government, experienced civil wars and armed risings involving Turkic-speaking Muslims, the Hui (or Dungan) Chinese-speaking Muslims and Han Chinese. Eventually, Sheng Shicai took power after clashing with Hui troops under Ma Zhongying and ruled the region from 1937 to 1942 with support from the USSR. Turkic Muslims rose against Sheng in southern Xinjiang in 1937, and an independent Kazakh and Uyghur East Turkestan Republic controlled the northwestern Ili region from 1944 to 1946. (Forbes, 1986). This administration is considered to be the last legitimate government of Xinjiang by many of the Uyghur separatists of the 1990s.

#### Communist Political and Military Control

In 1949, troops of the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) People’s Liberation Army (PLA) took control of Xinjiang and a Han immigration programme was announced in 1950. The campaigns against counter-revolutionaries and for land reform,

which were carried out throughout China in the early 1950’s, included, in Xinjiang, the confiscation and redistribution of *waqf* land (land owned by mosques or other religious foundations) and were used to break down the traditional social structure and political and religious authority. The deaths of eight of the leaders of the East Turkestan Republic in an air crash when they were on their way to Beijing to negotiate with the Communist Party leadership in August 1949 is still seen by some Uyghurs as the deliberate elimination by the Chinese authorities of the pro-autonomy leadership in Xinjiang.

On 1 October 1955 the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region was created, with autonomous Mongol, Kyrgyz, Kazakh and Hui counties. Burhan Shahidi, a Tatar, and Seypidin Aziz (Saifudin), an Uyghur, headed the regional government, although real power rested with Wang Zhen, commander of the PLA units which took control in 1949, and the regional Communist Party Secretary, Wang Enmao, both ethnic Hans (Forbes, 1986; McMillen, 1979 and 1984; Toops, 1992). Wang Zhen died in 1993. The quasi-military Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps, “a predominantly Han

organisation of demobilised PLA men, former Guomindang soldiers and resettled Han people” was central in establishing control (MacMillen, 1984: 570).

After the 1958 ‘Great Leap Forward’, radical policies, less sensitive to local feelings replaced the cautious approach of the early 1950s. ‘Local nationalism’ and Han and Muslim leaders sympathetic to the USSR were systematically criticised and bazaars and Islamic organisations closed down. Wang Enmao moderated policies in 1962 after the exodus of 60,000 Kazakhs to Kazakhstan (McMillen, 1984; Yan, 1992: 22-4), but the 1966 Cultural Revolution, during which he was dismissed, caused chaos until the imposition of direct military control in 1971.

The CCP leadership was divided on policy towards Xinjiang in the early 1980s. After a visit to Tibet in May 1980, Hu Yaobang, shortly to become CCP Secretary General, proposed a reform programme which recommended genuine autonomy, economic policies suited to local needs, investment in agriculture and animal husbandry, the revival of cultural, educational and scientific projects and the phased transfer to the interior of Han officials.

In a modified form these proposals were adopted for use in Xinjiang by the CCP Central Committee Secretariat in July. Hu considered that Xinjiang was less of a problem than Tibet as there were no religious leaders or governments in exile comparable to the Dalai Lama in Dharamsala and no independence movement with overseas support. This was not strictly true although the émigré Uyghur leadership under Isa Yusuf Alptekin in Istanbul never had the international profile of the Dalai Lama.

The reformist policies were abandoned after conflict in the central leadership between Wang Zhen, the former Xinjiang military commander and Hu Yaobang, who was purged in 1987, although it was his support for Japanese investment in the Chinese economy, rather than his policies towards Xinjiang that brought about his demise. According to a Han official in Xinjiang sympathetic to Wang Zhen, “*You give them autonomy and they will only turn round and create an East Turkestan. Hu Yaobang also wants to withdraw Han cadres to the interior. That would be surrendering Xinjiang to the Soviet Union and Turkey. Only a traitor would do such a thing. To stabilise Xinjiang we must send hard-liners like Wang Zhen ...here*” (Ruan, 1992: 17-18).

### **Ethnic Groups in Northwest China Today**

Xinjiang is divided between Muslims (most of whom speak Turkic languages – the Tajiks, whose language is related to Persian, being the main exception) and Han Chinese immigrants, the Han Chinese being the majority population of China. The Muslims are in the majority, but are also divided linguistically and culturally.

The largest single group are the Uyghurs, historically agriculturalists, craftsmen and traders, who have a distinctive language and culture of their own, but are also related to other Turkic peoples in Xinjiang and the rest of Central Asia. The great majority of Uyghurs live in Xinjiang which they see as their homeland, although there are émigré communities in Kazakhstan and other Central Asian states, Turkey and Western Europe.

Uyghur nationalism is a relatively recent phenomenon since Uyghurs in the past tended to identify primarily with the main oasis town of the region in which they were born rather than an Uyghur nation. After centuries of Chinese rule, however, and inspired by Muslims in Central Asia, there is a growing consciousness of an Uyghur identity. This is especially true in the *Altishahr* region, which borders on Pakistan and Afghanistan, and is home to 80% of Xinjiang’s Uyghurs.

Other significant non-Han ethnic groups living in Xinjiang include the Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Uzbeks and Tajiks, all, as their names indicate, with relatives in the newly emerging Central Asian states. In addition there are the Hui (known as Dungans in the former Soviet Union), whose language and culture is closer to that of the Han Chinese, although they are also Muslims (Xinjiang Weiwuer Zizhiqu Renmin Zhengfu waishi bangongshi, 1988: 16; Dillon, 1996).

### **Disturbances Since 1980**

There were disturbances in Aksu in April 1980, which were suppressed by People’s Liberation Army troops with great loss of life, a riot in Kashghar in the same year in which many hundreds were injured and many demonstrations against ethnic and religious discrimination, which came to a head in 1989 at the same time as the suppression of the Democracy Movement in Tian’anmen Square in Beijing (Gladney, 1991). In April 1990, the opposition to Chinese control reached a new level of intensity when riots at Baren in the Kyrgyz region of southern Xinjiang called for a *jihad* against the Chinese and the establishment of an independent Eastern Turkestan state. The insurgents had acquired small arms and bombs and the rising was

only suppressed after large numbers of troops were brought in from outside Xinjiang. The Chinese media reported that young Uyghur militants were being trained and armed by Islamic groups in Afghanistan.

In May and June 1991, there were also armed insurrections in the cities of Bole and Dacheng in the northwestern part of Xinjiang. Bomb attacks on buses in the Xinjinag capital Urumqi in February 1992 injured many and there are reports of bombings in many other towns in Xinjiang in March the same year. In June 1993, a bomb exploded at government buildings in Kashghar, killing at least ten people and other bombings were reported (Dillon 1995: 17-26). In April 1995, there were serious disturbances in the area around the town of Yining (also known as Ili or Ghulja) near to the border with Kazakhstan, and some demonstrators demanded that the Yining area be incorporated into Kazakhstan (SWB FE/2336, 22/6/95).

### **‘Strike Hard’**

A systematic crackdown on crime throughout the whole of China was launched in April 1996. Known as the ‘Strike Hard’ campaign, it was also directed against political organisations and separatist activists in Tibet, Inner Mongolia and in Xinjiang. Uyghur nationalist sources clearly have reason to emphasise the size and strength of the opposition to Chinese rule, while, conversely, the official Chinese media has tried to demonstrate the success of its rule in Xinjiang and the weakness and criminality of the independence movement. The authorities in Xinjiang were acutely aware of the parallels with the Chechen struggle for independence in Russia and gave the war in Chechnya as one of their reasons for clamping down so hard.

Several attacks on police and other symbols of Chinese control took place in Urumqi. On 24 April, two young Uyghur men opened fire on four police officers, two of whom were killed instantly. One of the Uyghurs was killed in a battle that lasted over two hours and the other escaped. On 3 June, three Uyghurs shot at a group of police in the Erdaoqiao and Sanshihanza quarters of the city, injuring three of them. The Uyghurs were arrested, one badly injured with bullet wounds to the stomach. On 6 June, a bomb exploded in the Ergong railway administrative offices at a club where Chinese employees were watching videos – 18 Chinese were killed and 32 injured. Police arrested all traders from the south of Xinjiang who were in the area and some were imprisoned on suspicion of being separatists (WUNN, 25/6/96).

Pro-independence organisations in Xinjiang claimed that between April and June, some 4,000 *talibs*, students of Islam, were arrested and sent out of the region to prison camps in Qinghai. Camps in Xinjiang received Han Chinese prisoners from Qinghai in exchange. On 18 June in Urumqi, 10,000 troops and police searched the homes of families suspected of separatist sympathies and 300 people were arrested. Between 9-20 June, communications within Xinjiang and with the rest of China were disrupted because of sabotage, and special guard units drawn from the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps had to be formed to supplement police guarding the roads and railway lines (Urumqi radio, 22/6/96; Voice of Eastern Turkestan via WUNN). Official Chinese sources spoke of building a “*steel wall*” to protect the stability of Xinjiang (SWB FE/2641, 18/6/96).

Yusupbek Mukhlissi, head of the United National Revolutionary Front, based in Almaty, is reported to have claimed on 12 July that the number of arrests was unprecedented. He said that 10,000 people had been arrested in Aksu and a further 8,000 in Urumqi, although in other reports the 8,000 figure is said to refer to Urumqi, Turpan, Ghulja and Karamay. These figures were denied by the Chinese authorities. Nevertheless, according to a report on Urumqi radio on 8 July, 400 criminals had been arrested and sentenced in Ghulja and the heads of 3,700 families had been obliged to sign statements that no member of their family would carry out any further activities against the Communist Party.

Émigré Uyghur sources collecting information on the arrests produced a detailed list of the numbers arrested in Hoten prefecture from April to July. A total of 2,220 were taken in by police with 580 of them coming from Karakash, 450 from Hoten city, 370 from Hoten county, 250 from Kerye county, 200 from Lop county, 180 from Guma county, 120 from Chira county, and 70 from Niya county. There were 420 arrests from Kargilik county in Kashghar prefecture in the same period (WUNN, 16/7/96). A Chinese border guard officer and twenty of his men were killed on 4 June (some sources give July) in fighting on the Khunjerab Pass on the border with Pakistan (WUNN, 13/7/96). In addition, a statement by the United National Revolutionary Front on 15 July claimed that 450 Chinese troops and militiamen had been killed in Xinjiang since April (WUNN, 16/6/96).

What were described as illegal mosques and religious schools were closed down in Luntai county in central Xinjiang in June 1996 and police “*confiscated a quantity of reactionary books and*

*publications promoting national separation, as well as some illegal religious publicity materials*" (SWB FE/2635, 11/6/96). On 4 July, Xinjiang television reported that police had seized guns and ammunition, some apparently manufactured in Pakistan (SWB FE/2664, 15/7/96).

Senior military and police officers met from 8-12 July in Urumqi to review the Strike Hard campaign, according to a report on Urumqi Radio on 14 July. It was decided to extend the period and scope of the campaign and use it as a method of clearing up separatist elements in Xinjiang. Pro-independence sources say that information was given to the meeting that 450 members of the military and public security had been killed during the campaign and 1,000 had been injured. The meeting observed three minutes silence to commemorate the dead and agreed that financial assistance be provided for their families and that it must be decided within 10 days which of those arrested were to be given death sentences. The areas where the campaign was to be carried out next were identified as Karashar, Lopnor and Korla counties in Korla prefecture and all the counties of Kashghar and Hotan prefectures (WUNN, 18/7/96).

In early 1997, reports, unconfirmed by the Chinese authorities, began to emerge from Xinjiang that 10 or 20 separatists had been secretly executed, and it is these executions that may have fuelled the violence in Yining, Urumqi and Beijing. The chairman of the Xinjiang People's Government, Abdulahat Abdurixit, speaking to the regional CCP committee on 13 August 1996, praised the success of the Strike Hard campaign in cracking down on *"violent terrorist acts and separatist and sabotage activities"* and *"illegal religious activities"* (SWB FE/2702, 28/8/96).

### **Uyghur militancy and the opening of the Borders**

As a result of the Sino-Soviet dispute which began in the late 1950s and culminated in military action between Chinese and Soviet forces in 1969, the borders between China and the USSR were effectively sealed. The most important single factor was probably the flight of Kazakhs and many others from China into the Soviet Union in 1962, mainly to avoid the intensification of the programme of collectivisation that China was undertaking at that time. Sino-Soviet relations remained unsatisfactory for over two decades and Mikhail Gorbachev's visit to Beijing in 1989, which was designed to rebuild relations, went disastrously wrong with the suppression of the Democracy Movement in Tian'anmen Square and its environs on 4 June.

After the collapse of Soviet power in 1991 and the emergence of the newly independent Central Asian members of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), border controls on the former Soviet side were relaxed and contact between the divided Turkic peoples was unofficially renewed. In 1992, Deng Xiaoping made a celebrated tour of southern China designed to draw attention to the need for accelerated economic reform and to demonstrate his support for the Special Economic Zones such as Shenzhen to the north of Hong Kong, which had been created to draw in foreign investment. Central Document Number 4, a confidential internal paper first referred to in June 1992, outlined plans for creating open cities in the border regions to encourage cross-border trade.

In September 1992 Prime Minister Li Peng timed an inspection tour of Xinjiang to coincide with the Urumqi Border and Local Trade Fair and put his personal support behind the policy of opening the region to cross-border trade by visiting the Korgas trading post which is on the route to Kazakhstan through Yining.

The number of official border crossing points increased and cross-border trade began to play an important role in the economy of Xinjiang and its neighbours. Not only was northern Xinjiang trading with the Central Asian republics, southern Xinjiang was increasingly in contact with Pakistan and the bazaar of Kashghar was being regularly visited by Pakistani traders.

As well as regular trade, there has been an increase in religious contact and Muslim organisations have been importing copies of the Qur'an and other devotional material such as sermons, both in print and on audio-tape and video-tape into Xinjiang. The Chinese authorities have consistently expressed concern about the importation of this material and the cross-border trade in weapons and drugs.

### **Border Security and Relations with the newly independent Central Asian Republics**

The Chinese government moved swiftly to formalise relations with the Central Asian republics as they gained their independence after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The Chinese Foreign Minister, Qian Qichen, interviewed in November 1992 after a visit to Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and the Russian Federation, highlighted their problems in achieving economic independence as they had been tied so closely to the Russian economy. He was optimistic about trade prospects because of improved transport, but pointed out that: *"since China had neither contact nor economic and trade*

*cooperation with Central Asian republics in the past, there was no mutual understanding.*" He underlined China's policy of maintaining, "*good-neighbourly, equal and mutually beneficial cooperation between China and the CIS*" ('Principles of Relations with the CIS', 1992).

Xinjiang's leaders were initially positive about the benefits to China of the break-up of the Soviet Union. Song Hanliang, CCP Regional Secretary, speaking at the National People's Congress in Beijing in March 1992, highlighted export opportunities (SWB FE/1338, 25/3/92). Formal relations between Xinjiang and CIS states were clearly a high priority – Tomur Dawamat, Chairman of the Autonomous Region government at the time visited Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in November 1990, and after signing a trade agreement with China, the Kazakhstan President, Nursultan Nazarbayev predicted economic and political benefits from the developing rail network (SWB FE/1284, 22/1/92).

Border security meetings with a joint delegation from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Tajikistan have discussed troop reductions (SWB FE/1556, 5/12/92), as did President Yeltsin during his visit to China in December 1992. The Russians are playing their traditional role of senior partner and a joint Russian and Chinese memorandum has outlined phased reductions up to the year 2000, on the lines of troop withdrawals from Mongolia (SWB FE/1569, 21/12/92). Meetings on border issues continue and a document on the principles for the compilation of a topographical map of the border was signed, but discussions continued into 1993. In December 1993, a Chinese diplomatic and military delegation met a joint delegation from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Tajikistan in Beijing to continue discussions on the reduction of armed forces. A further round was scheduled for February 1994. A Russian delegation visited Heilongjiang province to discuss border defence in November and December of 1993 (SWB FE/1867, citing Moscow Radio).

The first session of the working group on drafting border agreements between China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan took place in Beijing on 15 April 1993. The discussions were mainly legal ones relating to the terms of delimitations of the western sector of the Russo-Chinese border (SWB FE/1666, 19/4/93).

Political stability in Central Asia could lead to unprecedented economic development for China and the CIS, but this depends on the outcome of the

civil war in Tajikistan and the political crisis in Uzbekistan. Some refugees fleeing the fighting in Tajikistan have moved into the Pamirs near to the Tajik regions of Xinjiang. In Uzbekistan, there is growing support for militant Islamic groups, particularly the rigid Saudi-backed Sunni Wahhabi sect which is funding the building of mosques and madrasas (Quranic schools), some of which may be providing military training. The Wahhabis are opposed both to Sufism, long established in Central Asia and China, and to the Islamic Renaissance Party which is linked to the Muslim Brotherhood (Rashid, 1992).

In the wake of the Strike Hard campaign of summer 1996, the governments of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan moved to support China's clampdown on Uyghur separatists. The leader of the Attan organisation, Amantay Asilbekov, was warned to stay at home on 28 June during the visit of Jiang Zemin to Almaty as his group had planned to stage a demonstration against China's nuclear test programme at Lop Nor in Xinjiang. A radio journalist, Batirhan Darimbet, was arrested by the police and held for six hours the same day as it was believed he would support the demonstration, and was only released following the personal intervention of the Almaty city prosecutor. In Kyrgyzstan, the Uyghur and Russian-language newspaper *Ittipak* (Solidarity), critical of China's policies in Xinjiang, was banned from publishing for three months in March 1996 by the Justice Ministry but was allowed to resume its activities on 25 June (WUNN, 18/7/96).

### **Ethnic Nationalism and Political Islam**

The Chinese authorities have reacted to the disturbances by labelling them the work of a small group of hooligans and criminals and have consistently extolled the virtues of a multicultural Xinjiang firmly under the control of Beijing. There have been attempts to reduce inter-ethnic tensions by increasing the number of non-Hans in government service and the public security forces, but ironically this has added another layer to the conflict with Uyghurs working for the government being attacked, sometimes physically, as collaborators. The constitution of the People's Republic of China and its political structure allow no scope for the legitimate discussion of nationalist aspirations of minority communities within the country, so it is not surprising that they find their expression in political violence.

With the opening of the borders in 1992, Uyghur nationalists came into contact not only with anti-Beijing Uyghur organisations such as the United

National Revolutionary Front in Almaty, but also with the resurgence of political Islam spreading across Asia and finding its most powerful expression in Iran and Afghanistan. Taking these societies as their examples and probably receiving moral and practical support from religious groups there, including the Sufi orders, a significant section of the Uyghur population may in time be won over to a more distinctly Islamic form of protest.

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