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Xinjiang Unrest: Catalyst for New Grand Vision for China?

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The 5 July Xinjiang incident has its roots in the loopholes of China's developmental approach. It is obsessed with growth at the expense of social justice and governance, especially at the local levels. The incident should serve as a catalyst for China to seriously contemplate a new grand vision for the country's future.

THE 5 JULY riots in China's Xinjiang region marked the most violent ethnic conflict for decades in China. Three stories have emerged as to why an incident of such a scale had taken place.

The official Chinese story is that the unrest was fanned and incited by various Uighur groups in exile. The view popular in the West is that the riots occurred largely because of the Chinese government's disregard for the human rights, culture, traditions and political freedom of local ethnic minority groups. A noticeable voice coming from the Muslim world is that China's government has badly treated and discriminated against the Muslim communities in the social and economic arenas, inviting revenge from some radical Uighurs. The Turkish government has even used the term 'genocide' to characterize the handling of tensions in Xinjiang.

All the three stories are partially true. But there is a fourth story, perhaps an even more important one that needs to be told and taken into account. That is, the Xinjiang incident has its deep roots in the loopholes of the Chinese developmental approach: The approach has been too obsessed with growth rates at the expense of social justice and governance, especially at the local levels. The riots should serve as a catalyst for China to seriously contemplate a new grand vision for the country's future.

Symptom of China's Problems in Transition

Three questions warrant careful thought before we fully understand the fourth story about the limits of China's developmental approach.

Firstly, why did this tragic unrest happen at a time when China has made so much socio-economic progress after 30 years of reform and opening up? Secondly, why have hundreds and thousands of Han

Chinese switched or attempted to switch to minority identities since the late 1980s, if there are institutionalised discriminations against ethnic minorities? What is often glossed over in the aftermath of the incident is the fact that there are many affirmative action programmes in favour of the ethnic minorities. Thirdly, with regard to the official explanation, the question is why these groups in exile were so effective in inciting the unrest as alleged?

The deep cause of the riots has to be found in the flaws of China's developmental strategy. Over the decades, nearly double digit annual growth rates have brought China much wealth. However, many notable socio-economic problems have also emerged and seem to have intensified in recent years. These negative aspects include the urban-rural divide, widening income gap, scanty social welfare and services, rampant corruption, abuse of power by local governments, and favoritism in the allocation of public resources. Ethnic Uighur minority people, the vast majority of whom live in the rural areas and have far fewer connections (*guanxi*) to public offices became the victims of the downsides of China's developmental approach. They face the same experience that millions of the downtrodden Han Chinese have been going through.

The negative aspects of China's development have inflicted so much pain and stress to the numerous people at the social bottom that many of them chose to vent their anger through violence. According to official figures, there were as many as over 80,000 instances of mass incidents annually in China in the past few years, notable examples being the mass unrest at Weng'an in Guizhou and Shishou in Hubei province. What differentiates the Xinjiang incident from numerous other incidents of mass unrest is the fact that the sufferings of many ethnic minority people are unfortunately linked to ethnic relations. This significantly exacerbated the ethnic tensions that had existed for quite a long time in Xinjiang.

Beijing Should Boldly Tell the Story

The Xinjiang incident has become a rare event that simultaneously pits China against both the developed and much of the developing world. To mitigate external criticisms, China needs to courageously explain to the outside world that this is not purely an ethnic problem, but a problem rooted in China's socio-economic transition.

Telling the story may not completely dispel the misgivings in the West and in the Muslim world. But not doing so will likely put China and its ethnic issues constantly in the spotlight and damage China's international image and national interests. China faces the risk of its ethnic policy and ethnic relations being completely framed by the West and the opinion leaders in the Muslim world. Many people in China may feel such explanation tarnishes the reputation of the ruling elite and negate the great achievements that China has made. This worry is unnecessary. After all, the economic miracle in China has been acknowledged worldwide. Candour will only win respect from the rest of the world.

Catalyst for a New Grand Vision?

No doubt, China will undertake a comprehensive review of this incident. It would be fortunate if such a review is done in relation to mounting social tensions throughout China in the larger context of China's development trajectory rather than on the Xinjiang incident alone.

The Chinese government's pro-people policy measures in recent years definitely have helped in mitigating grievances at the grassroots level. But numerous signs show that these programmes are far from sufficient. Popular resentment over abusive governance at the local levels seems to be on the rise. The numbers and destructiveness of social unrests have not decreased in recent years. The socio-political structure that disadvantages the social bottom seems to have been further consolidated.

The Xinjiang incident should be a wake up call for China. It is time for China's leaders to

courageously develop a new grand vision for China's future, but what should it be? Many elements in the late leader Deng Xiaoping's old grand vision seem to have been fulfilled or are now incompatible with the social-economic reality in China.

A new grand vision will have to tackle three major issues: social equity, social welfare, and government accountability and responsiveness. These goals may seem too conservative in the eyes of liberal advocates. But hopefully, success in meeting these challenges will lay a good foundation for China's search for a more sustainable political, social, and economic development model for the future.

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