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Xinjiang: Defusing Tensions through Development

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Synopsis

For the past decade, development efforts in the predominantly Muslim region of Xinjiang have been eclipsed by an anti-terrorism drive. China needs to balance its policy of dealing with extremism with a stronger push for economic development in the country's Western region.

Commentary

THE ADOPTION of a national anti-terrorism legislation in October 2011 and Xinjiang party chief Zhang Chunxian's endorsement of severe crackdowns on religious extremism signaled a toughening of China's stance to curb terrorism. In the first two months of this year, the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) recruited 8,000 police officers and conducted public lectures to crackdown and discourage illegal religious activities. This toughening is, however, now pursued in tandem with Xinjiang Chairman Nuer Bekri's commitment to develop Xinjiang's economy further in a bid to narrow the "wide gap" in development between the province and China's coastal provinces. The accelerated economic development is part of the overall strategy to defuse ethnic hostilities and religious extremism.

This balancing of a hardline approach with economic development is long overdue. If the further opening of Xinjiang is accompanied by violent crackdowns on "terrorism", the future trajectory of the province will be one of severe political repression and ethnic conflict. That could impair China's Great Western Development strategy for Xinjiang and the other provinces in Western China. Xinjiang's strategic location and large Muslim population pose a formidable challenge to China's central government. The lack of economic development in Xinjiang, which trails far behind China's national economic growth, has been a sore point for many residents of the province, especially the ethnic Uyghur. Indeed, there are concerns amongst the Uyghur that the crackdown on extremism and terrorism ignores the other sources of conflict in the province such as social discontent due to unemployment and economic imbalances.

Dissent and repression

The July 2011 ethnic violence in Xinjiang stemmed from the long-standing Uyghur discontent at being marginalised by the Han Chinese. This has been met by the same pattern of repression by the state. The violent crackdowns that followed every major incident in Xinjiang reflect the willingness of the party and state authorities to use force to quell what they have dubbed initially as separatist and pro-independent protests, and later as terrorist attacks. Uyghur protests and the corresponding crackdowns have led the apathetic

international community to raise concerns over human rights violations in Xinjiang.

The intensity of dissent that occurred in 1997 and 2009 aggravated by the “war on terror” increasingly became the rationale for the state’s intensified “strike hard” campaigns in Xinjiang. The shift in policy from anti-separatism to anti-terrorism effectively blurred the real cause of Uyghur discontent. The discourse on “US-led counter terrorism” provided the Chinese government the excuse to “legitimately” crack down on perceived threats of terrorism and religious extremism in Xinjiang even on non-violent Xinjiang protests.

Some Uyghur discontent can be traced back to the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (XPCC), which is virtually a parallel government and bureaucracy for the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR). It was established as part of Deng Xiaoping’s experiments to induce economic growth in Xinjiang. However instead of catering to the needs of the Uyghur and ethnic minorities in Xinjiang, the XPCC, which is predominantly led by Han Chinese, operated directly under the State Council in Beijing, making it virtually independent of the XUAR.

This became a source of dissatisfaction among the Uyghur who are increasingly discriminated through education and employment policies. Given the growing Uyghur dissent against Han domination of vital aspects of Xinjiang, the so-called autonomy has increasingly disenfranchised the Uyghur and favoured the Han Chinese while remaining an important tool for the party and state authorities to exercise repression.

Ethnic conflict in Xinjiang has also been fuelled by policies of assimilation and integration, spurring the massive influx and settlement of Han Chinese into Xinjiang. This has threatened Uyghur culture, language and religion which are essentially Turkic and Muslim. The Uyghur language was slowly eliminated from the educational system in Xinjiang with the increased use of Mandarin as the medium of instruction.

The state also attempted soft repression of Islam in 1996 when it issued a list of “unlawful” religious activities that came short of banning the practice of Islam itself in Xinjiang. The most recent White Paper on the Development and Progress in Xinjiang (2009) identified “East Turkistan” forces as the culprits advocating separatism and organising violent “terrorist” attacks in Xinjiang, indirectly targeting the Muslim Uyghur.

Uyghur discontent with and resistance to Han Chinese do not, however, reflect any aspirations for a separate Islamic state, a point that has been missed by the government in Beijing. The security dilemma for China is aggravated by its failure to address the needs and sources of discontent among the Uyghur population in Xinjiang. Beijing’s approach of looking at Uyghur discontent as separatism, terrorism and religious extremism is a self-fulfilling prophecy.

What Can Be Done

The blurring of the distinction between Uyghur discontent and extremism will only serve to further alienate the Uyghur from the predominant Han Chinese population. Addressing the concerns of the Uyghur instead of using more repression will, on the contrary, facilitate the integration of the Uyghur while respecting their ethnicity, culture and religion.

The state should respect the inherent and legally-recognised rights of the Uyghur which include their right to preserve their ethnic identity. Equal recognition and respect for the rights of citizens who include both the Uyghur and the Han in Xinjiang would be appreciated not only by the Uyghur but also by the international community.

An essential step is for the state to facilitate peaceful dialogues and reconciliation between the Uyghur and the Han in Xinjiang instead of increasing the use of repressive policies on peaceful protests. This will in turn lower the risks of conflict and promote economic development in the region.

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