

## **The Radicalisation of Xinjiang: Its Roots and Impact on Human Rights**

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### **Abstract**

Xinjiang, home to the Uyghurs, has been the focus of intense government crackdown. China claims that the province is exposed to security threat especially from what it considers the “Three Evils” which are Terrorism, Extremism and Separatism. This article analyses the radicalisation that have happened in Xinjiang especially among the Uyghurs and its impact on the security and stability of the province. This study uses a qualitative approach. The primary sources are obtained from the Chinese official documents pertaining to the security condition in Xinjiang. Secondary sources are from books, journals, credible articles from the Internet, and local and international newspapers. This study will examine causes of radicalisation and how it has contributed to the rise of political violence. In addition, this paper also discusses the responses by the Chinese authorities which have resulted in the decline of human rights. This study concludes that if the human rights situation in Xinjiang does not improve, this may lead to more serious ethnic tension between the Uyghurs and Hans.

**Keywords:** *Xinjiang, China, Central Asia, human rights, terrorism, radicalisation*

## **1. Introduction**

It is interesting to note that since the September 11, 2001 attacks, the security and stability of Xinjiang have received much attention from like-minded states such as the United States (US), Turkey, international organisations like the European Union (EU), the United Nations Human Rights Commission, international media, international non-governmental organisations such as Amnesty International (AI) and academic researchers. They have all express much interest in the politics and security of Xinjiang. In fact, the Chinese authorities for the first time has openly admitted that the province is being challenged by forces that promote extremist and separatist ideas. Prior to 2001, China has constantly denied that Xinjiang is under threat from terrorist activities. However, it changed its policy and has even published white papers to provide official explanation on the security conditions in Xinjiang.

Therefore, this study intends to seek answers to the following questions: Is the security of Xinjiang really being challenged by radicalisation and extremism? What are the causes of radicalisation among the Uyghurs? When did the radicalisation process begin? What is the impact of radicalisation towards the stability of the province? How did the Chinese authorities respond? What are the human rights implications? How are ethnic relations between the Uyghurs and Hans influenced by the China's policies? Hence, the objectives of this study is to analyse radicalisation of Uyghurs and its challenges towards the security of Xinjiang. Besides, this study also seeks to highlight the Chinese policies and their implications on the human rights conditions and ethnic relations.

This article is presented in six sections. The first section basically outlines the research questions and objectives of the study. In addition, this section discusses the review on some of the notable works on the topic. The second section provides briefly the background of the political and security condition of Xinjiang. The aim of this section is to highlight the evolution of the ethnic relations between the Uyghurs and Hans. Besides, it also focuses on the historical context by discussing the Chinese administration in the province since it became part of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949. The third section will analyse the impact of the involvement of Uyghur fighters in the Afghan War during the 1980s and how it have contributed towards the radicalisation. The fourth section will elaborate how some radicalised Uyghurs demonstrate their frustrations and anger by adopting tactics of political violence in the 1990s until the 2009 Riots. The fifth section discusses the responses by the Chinese government to stabilise the region. However, China has been accused of using excessive force to such an extent that it violates the human rights of the Uyghurs to maintain their cultural and religious identities. Finally, this article will conclude by arguing that the policies adopted by the Chinese authorities have been counter-productive in maintaining long-term peace in the province. Ethnic relations between the Uyghurs and Hans have not improved. Rather there have been an increase of tension and mutual distrust between them. One may argue that ethnic tension in Xinjiang is like a time bomb which will explode at any time in the future.

### ***Literature Review***

The aim of this literature review is to highlight works on the political and security developments in Xinjiang. The works by Lattimore (1950), Benson (1990), Whiting (1980), Perdue (2005), Forbes (1986) and Wu (1984) discusses the historical background of Xinjiang prior to 1949.

Owen Lattimore has laid out the arguments on Xinjiang's geopolitical importance while Dreyer (1976) analyses the Chinese policy and their historical relations with the Uyghurs. Dreyer argues that on the one hand, the policy of "Sinification" with the aim to induce ethnic minorities in Xinjiang to integrate has resulted in nationalistic reactions and ethnic clashes; on the other hand, efforts to accommodate differences by adopting a more pluralist approach and allowing ethnic diversity to flourish equally has produced separatist movements. Dreyer calls this dilemma as "China's paradox".

Another prominent scholar on China's policy towards Xinjiang is McMillen (1979). He considers Wang Enmao (王恩茂), the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)'s First Secretary and Political Commissar in Xinjiang in the 1950s and again in the 1980s, a capable and effective leader who was able to balance the demands of the central party policy and the complex ethnic relations in Xinjiang. Hence, the PRC's policy in Xinjiang especially during the administration of Wang Enmao was able to accommodate the ethnic and strategic realities of the province.

Other notable scholars such as Fuller (1992) and Walsh (1993) analyse the impact of the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 towards Xinjiang. Fuller and Walsh argue that since the collapse of the Soviet Union, China has reaffirmed its commitment to the inclusiveness of Xinjiang as part of China and its willingness to defend it at all cost. At the same time, China has adopted a pragmatic approach to the newly independent Central Asian republics. They argue that China aspires to be a major regional actor among the Central Asian republics. Fuller considers Xinjiang as a bridge or link between Central Asia and China.

At present, scholars such as Starr (2004) analyse the problems which have arisen due to the integration policies adopted by the Chinese government. Similarly, works by Dillon (2004), Tyler (2003) and Millward (2006) provide information on the political evolution,

economy and society in Xinjiang. They highlight opposition by the Uyghurs to Chinese rule. These works, on the other hand, focus on the role of trans-national advocacy groups such as Amnesty International (AI) and other international organisations such as the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in influencing the CCP to conform to international human rights norms.

Dru C. Gladney in his work *Muslim Chinese: Ethnic nationalism in the People's Republic* (Gladney, 1996) analyses the Hui Muslim ethno-religious nationalism and culture. There is another recent book by Gladney (2004) where two chapters are devoted to the role of Uyghur diasporas in highlighting the plight of those living in Xinjiang to the international community. Apart from *Dislocating China: Reflections on Muslims, minorities, and other subaltern subjects* (2004, London: Hurst), Gladney has written several books on Muslim minorities living in China such as *Ethnic identity in China: The making of a Muslim minority nationality* (1998, Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace). Gladney's works provide useful information for this study on the history, culture and language of Muslim minorities in China, especially the Uyghurs.

## **2. Background**

Xinjiang is the largest province of China located on its northwest borders with eight countries namely the Russian Federation to the north, Mongolia and Kazakhstan to the northwest, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to the west, as well as Afghanistan, India and Pakistan (Jammu Kashmir) to the southwest. Besides, the province is also significant because it is the only Chinese province situated in Central Asia. Therefore, Xinjiang can be considered a “bridge” linking China with the Central Asian republics as well as other countries in the Caucasus region.

The province is also of strategic importance to China because it is located in an area that is rich with oil and gas reserves which represent one of China's major sources of energy. Historically the region has been a strategic area as it was part of the ancient "Silk Road". Traders and travellers who used this route include Marco Polo. However, beginning from mid-18th century, the region has been administered by the Chinese and declared a Chinese province in 1884 (Gladney, 1996: 71). Western explorers such as Sir Aurel Stain and Sven Hedin referred to the area as "Chinese Turkestan" (Benson, 1990: 19).

It is interesting to note that in recent times, Xinjiang has increasingly become more important as it is located on the route of the "Belt and Road Initiative" or BRI. Hence, the Chinese government has taken efforts to "revive" the Silk Road by linking the province with other important cities in Central Asia such as Bishkek, Almaty, Dushanbe and Tashkent. It must be noted that Xinjiang is also rich with its natural resources especially oil and gas. For example, Tarim Basin is thought to contain nearly 240 billion cubic meters of natural gas reserves and 11 billion tons of crude oil reserves (*ibid.*: 185).

Ethnically, people in Xinjiang can be divided into two major categories: the Turkics who are natives of Xinjiang and the non-Turkic people. The Turkics are further divided into the Uyghurs<sup>1</sup>, Kazakhs, Kirghizs, Uzbeks and Tajiks with the majority of them being Muslims. The Uyghurs (45.2 percent) are the largest ethnic group in Xinjiang followed by the Kazakhs (6.7 percent), Kirghizs (0.86 percent), Tajiks (0.7 percent) and Uzbeks (0.6 percent) (National Bureau of Statistics and State Ethnic Affairs Commission, China, 2003). The Uyghurs are also predominant in the southern part of Xinjiang. They live mainly in Kashgar, Aksu, Turpan, the Kizilsu District and the Khotan Autonomous Prefecture, the Kizilsu Kyrgyz Autonomous Prefecture and the Tashkurghan Autonomous County (*ibid.*).

The Uyghurs can be found in other parts of Central Asia such as Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and parts of Russia. They may be politically divided but are ethnically similar. The non-Uyghur category consists of the Han Chinese, Hui, Mongolian, Dolan, Lopliks, Abdal, Salar, Dongxiang, Zhung, Tibetan, Taranchi, Sibo, Solon, Bonan, Manchurian and Russian peoples (Dawamat, 1993: 79). The Hans are the largest non-Uyghur community due to migration from China proper since the late 1950s. The Chinese Hans are concentrated in the northern and eastern parts of Xinjiang.

It is noteworthy to mention that the previous socialisation between the two ethnic groups has a tremendous impact on influencing the political development of the province. Historical events have created a negative impression of the Hans amongst the Uyghurs who view them as colonists and whose presence in Xinjiang threatens the survival of the Uyghur culture, tradition and the Islamic faith. Besides, the Hans are also perceived as “robbers” who have plundered the Uyghur homeland and marginalised its populace. Similarly, the Chinese also have a negative impression of the Uyghurs who are considered to be an inferior ethnic group. In fact, they hold the view that the Uyghurs were once part of the “Greater Hans”; considering themselves to be more civilised and superior, hence the Uyghurs should be subdued and controlled.

Past socialisation has demonstrated that the Uyghurs have been struggling against the Chinese authorities, therefore the separatist movement in the region is nothing new; only the nature of the Uyghur struggle has changed over time. The early nature of their struggle was mainly led by chieftains such as Yakub Beg, attempting to regain control of East Turkestan from the Ching Dynasty (1644-1911). The collapse of the Ching Dynasty in 1911 and the shift from monarchy to republic rule in China has helped transform the nature of the Uyghur struggle from

one that was feudalistic to one that is ideologically based. Other than that the drastic change was brought about because unlike the previous Uyghur leaders who were chieftains and warriors, the Uyghur nationalists in the 1930s and 1940s were educated in Russia and other Western nations such as Britain.

Hence, the Uyghur nationalism started to be influenced by Western ideas such as democracy and principle of self-determination. For example the Kulja Declaration of the East Turkestan Republic (ETR) in 1944, which called for the creation of a democratic government, included issues such as freedom of religion and upgrading of education and public health. The structure of the central government of the ETR was based on modern government structure which comprised of a national council with ten ministries.

The nature of Chinese policies over the Uyghur population can mainly be divided into two major categories, namely, the policy of direct control and indirect control. Direct control involves the use of the might of the Chinese military to defeat Uyghur uprisings which was also employed by the Ching Dynasty during the Yakub Beg's rebellion in the 19th century. The Koumintang (KMT) used both direct and indirect control in the early years of the republic when they ruled through their proxies such the Chinese warlords and directly later taking over the province by defeating the separatist movements in the 1930s and 1940s such as the Turkish Islamic Republic of East Turkestan (TIRET) and the ETR.

### **3. The Afghan War and Radicalisation of Uyghurs**

It must be noted that political violence in Xinjiang is not a new phenomenon, but in fact the continuity of the Uyghurs' struggle for independence since the Ching Dynasty. This is further complicated by



the support the Uyghurs receive from other pan-Turkic nationalists and religious extremists in neighbouring states. The experience encountered by the Uyghurs during the Cultural Revolution had increased their frustrations which consequently contributed to the political violence during the 1980s and 1990s. The Uyghur dissidents organised several political organisations which aimed at championing the rights of their people and seeking self-government in Xinjiang. Among them were the Eastern Turkestan Islamic Party, the Eastern Turkestan Gray Wolf Party, the Eastern Turkestan Independence Organisation, the Eastern Turkestan People's Party and the Eastern Turkestan Liberation Front (Kostrzewa, 1996: 210). All of them were banned by the Chinese government and many Uyghurs who were alleged to be members of these organisations were arrested by the police (*ibid.*).

Besides, in the 1980s the opening up of borders had increased the contacts between the Uyghurs with other Muslims living in Pakistan, Central Asia and the Middle East, which resulted in the Uyghurs being exposed to radical ideas (Rogers, 2007: 93). It is worthwhile to mention that following the Sino-Soviet rivalry and border clashes, in the 1960s and 1970s, China agreed to support the Mujahideen against the Soviet occupation in Afghanistan. The dictum of “my enemy’s enemy is my friend” was China’s motivation in supporting the Mujahideen in their struggle against their common enemy, the Soviet Union. John Cooley argues that the Chinese were in fact providing weapons to the anti-Soviet Afghan government as early as June 1979, six months prior to the Soviet invasion into Afghanistan (Cooley, 1999: 72-73). During the 1980s, the Chinese government had in fact recruited some Uyghurs to fight with the Mujahideen.

Besides the Uyghurs, other Turkics from Xinjiang including the Kyrgyzs, Kazakhs and Uzbeks were recruited by the Chinese military intelligence. They were selected because of their cultural and religious

empathy with the Afghans. According to Rashid, the Pakistani officials had confirmed that hundreds of Uyghurs were trained in Pakistan to fight the Soviets in Afghanistan (Rashid, 2002). During the Afghan War, China had also provided the Mujahideen weapons estimated to be at US\$400 million (Lufti, 2001: 205). According to Cooley, in 1985, the Chinese government had established military training camps within Xinjiang such as those in Kashgar and Khotan to train Turkic fighters (Cooley, 1999: 75). They were especially trained with the methods of using modern weapons such as surface-to-air missiles and light portable weapons.

Upon the withdrawal of the Soviet troops from Afghanistan, many of the Turkic fighters returned to Xinjiang (Clarke, 2007). However, they continued their “battle” against the Communist ideology in Xinjiang. Hence, the Uyghurs’ resistance had turned more violent by using methods such as bombings, burning down of government buildings and the killing of government officials in the late 1980s and 1990s. According to Michael Winchester, the leader of the Baren riots, Zahideen Yusuf, was inspired by the victory of the Afghan struggle against the Soviets (Winchester, 1997: 31).

Another important feature of the resistance was the rise of religious militants and the use of small arms like machine guns, hand grenades and dynamites in their attacks. Therefore, this convinced the CCP to impose more stringent laws. It is very important to note that the increased violence in Xinjiang is due to the inconsistent policy of Beijing towards the Turkic Muslims. This was because of the impact of China’s role during the Afghan War whereby China’s support for the Mujahideen had enabled contact between militants within and outside Xinjiang (Lufti, 2001: 205).

A series of armed resistance happened in Xinjiang during the 1980s; one of them took place in Aksu which is located between Urumqi and

Kashgar (Debata, 2007: 141). It occurred in April 1980 and the CCP had to bring in the armed forces to subdue the riots. The outbreak of riots prompted CCP leaders to visit the province to assess for themselves the conditions in Xinjiang. For example, in October 1980, Wang Zhen (王震), a member of the Politburo, was dispatched to Xinjiang. During Wang Zhen's visit in November, he ordered the Xinjiang CCP to implement strict measures to counter the ethnic unrest (McMillen, 1984: 576).

In the following year on 30 October, another riot broke out in the city of Kashgar. It was due to the dissatisfaction of the Uyghurs regarding a trial in which a Han was accused of murdering a Uyghur youth during a fight (Becquelin, 2000: 66). The riot turned violent when the rioters started to attack the local Hans who were living in Kashgar. The rioters shouted anti-Chinese slogans such as "Down with the *Heidaye* government" and "Long Live the Republic of Uyghuristan" (*ibid.*). Finally, the CCP had to mobilise the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) to subdue the rioters. According to Chinese sources, the outbreak of violence resulted in two deaths and 200 injured. By the end of 1981, at least 30,000 Hans fled Xinjiang for Shanghai due to fears of being attacked by anti-Han demonstrators (Dillon, 2004: 60).

It noteworthy to mention that the growth of religious extremism in Xinjiang has been a result of the Afghan War during the 1980s especially China's policy in training the Uyghurs to fight with the Mujahideen that had backfired. According to Cooley, "when you decide to go to war against your main enemy, take a good look at the people you chose as your friends, allies or mercenary fighters to see whether they already have unsheathed their knives and are pointing them at your own back" (Cooley, 1999: 241).

#### 4. Impact of Radicalisation: Political Violence in Xinjiang

The political and security conditions in the 1990s became worse due to riots and demonstrations. The Uyghurs' motivation for independence was further strengthened by the disintegration of the USSR and the independence of the former Soviet republics in Central Asia. One of the worst riots was in the 1990s which occurred in the town of Baren, 50 kilometers southwest of Kashgar. The Chinese authority held the Eastern Turkestan Islamic Party (ETIP) responsible for the riots. It started on 5 April 1990 when a group of Uyghur men criticised the Chinese policies toward ethnic minorities while attending prayers at a mosque (Shichor, 1994: 74). It eventually developed into a mass demonstration against the Chinese Han. The police were unable to subdue the riots and their weapons were confiscated. The rioters even threw bombs at police stations and attacked government buildings. On the following day, the rioters murdered five government officials. Among them was Xu Xinjian (许新建), the Deputy Political Instructor of Aksu County Border Defence Regiment. Police from the Kashgar Battalion who were despatched to inspect the troubled area was attacked and two of them were killed and one wounded (*ibid.*, 75). Therefore, the CCP had to deploy the Public Security Bureau, the People's Armed Police and militia units from Kashgar to suppress the riots (*ibid.*).

The damages due to the riots had been uncertain as there were conflicting reports. According to Chinese sources, six police officers and one Uyghur cadre had been killed. Whereas, the foreign press and Uyghur organisations abroad reported that there were over 60 deaths (Dillon, 2004: 62-63). What was certain was that the riots further convinced the Chinese authorities that harsher policies had to be implemented. One such policy was the "strike hard" policy that disregarded the basic human rights of the Uyghurs.

However, this did not prevent some Uyghurs from becoming more aggressive and violent. On 5 February 1991, several explosions occurred in Urumqi which was the provincial capital of Xinjiang, whereby three persons were killed, four seriously wounded and another 11 suffered minor injuries. This was followed by another explosion at a bus terminal in Kuqa County of the Aksu Prefecture on 28 February which killed one person and wounded 13. The aim of the attack was to create fear among the Han Chinese living in Xinjiang (*ibid.*).

Three years after the Urumqi bombings, Xinjiang was again faced with yet another civil unrest. It happened on 22 April 1995 in the district of Ili, which is located in the northwest of Xinjiang. Residents of the district gathered at Yining, the administrative town of the district, demanding independence. They shouted anti-Chinese slogans such as “Long Live Uyghur Xinjiang” and “End Communist Rule in Xinjiang”. About 50,000 people gathered during the rally (*ibid.*: 68-71). Two days later as many as 100,000 people who consisted of workers, teachers and shopkeepers organised a strike to protest against the presence of Chinese in the district. The demonstration turned violent and many government offices in Ili district were attacked and ransacked (*ibid.*). Local police units were unable to disperse the angry crowd. Some of the rioters were armed with light machine guns, smuggled in from Russia. During the 1995 Ili civil unrest, as many as 88 people were killed and 200 injured as a result of the fighting between the local police units and the insurgents. Finally, the CCP State Council and Central Military Commission had to dispatch 20,000 troops from the 33rd and 41st divisions to subdue the civil unrest. As a result, a curfew and martial law were imposed in the district (*ibid.*).

The martial law did not deter the Uyghurs from other districts from continuing their anti-Han Chinese struggle. Local leaders who

cooperated with the Chinese authorities were considered as traitors and targets of attacks by the separatist groups. Among the victims of the politically motivated assassinations were Abliz Damolla, an executive committee member of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, Yecheng County Committee in Kashi Prefecture and an *imam*.<sup>2</sup> Both of them were stabbed by two Uyghurs on 24 August 1993. Similarly, in March 1996, in the district of Aksu which is located between Urumqi and Kashgar, Hekim Sidik Karihaji, the vice-chairman of the Islamic Association of Aksu Prefecture was assassinated. The assassination was politically motivated as the Uyghur separatists considered Hekim Sidik Karihaji as a traitor to their community for collaborating with the Chinese government (Dillon, 2004: 72).

It is noteworthy to mention that during the Ili civil unrest, two top officials were sent to monitor the situation. They were Luo Gan<sup>3</sup>, secretary general of the State Council and Li Jing, deputy chief of the General Staff. Their presence proved that the civil unrest in Xinjiang had become a serious concern for Beijing and the situation in Xinjiang cannot be ignored or dismissed as mere demonstrations but rather insurrection against the Chinese rule. Hence, the main consideration of the CCP was to ensure the interest and the safety of the Han Chinese in the province at all cost.

The province continued to experience ethnic violence and in February 1997, another insurrection against Chinese rule broke out in Yining. According to the Uyghur diasporas living in Kazakhstan, the insurrection was a reaction against the Chinese authorities who allegedly executed some Uyghurs for separatism. Moreover, some Uyghurs were upset with the government's decision to ban the Uyghur traditional gathering known as *mashrap*. All these led to another insurrection which occurred during the celebrations of *Id al Fitr* and Chinese New Year. On 5 and 6 February 1997, while most people were in a festive mood, some

Uyghur youths attacked the Han residents. At least ten Hans were killed and more than 100 injured including police and paramilitary personnel (Dillon, 2004: 92). The authorities imposed a curfew. Military units from the other districts were called in to suppress the insurrection. According to Amnesty International, the police and military violated human rights by opening fire on the crowd regardless of whether they were the demonstrators or not. Hence, this incident had resulted in several people, including women and children, injured (Amnesty International, 1999: 2).

Despite the efforts of the Chinese authorities to suppress any insurrections that occur, the political violence in Xinjiang did not end. In March 1997, it was alleged that a group of Uyghur separatists were responsible for the bombing of a bus in China's capital city of Beijing injuring 30 people (*The Economist*, March 1997). Hence, the ethnic violence in Xinjiang was no longer confined to the province anymore; instead it had spread into other cities. The province witnessed a series of explosions in March 2008 for which the Chinese authorities alleged the Uyghur separatists to be responsible. On 23 March 2008, the Uyghurs held anti-government protests in the town of Khotan, which is located in the western region of Xinjiang. According to the CCP, the Uyghurs were motivated by the 2008 Tibetan unrest. The authorities maintained tight control on information from the area and reports of deaths or the denials of deaths by the CCP could not be independently verified (*The Wall Street Journal*, April 5, 2008).

It is important to note that during the Olympics torch relay the police conducted a massive security operation in Kashgar as they feared that the Uyghur separatists would disrupt the event. In August, during the Olympics in Beijing, Xinjiang again encountered a series of explosions which claimed 31 lives. The Chinese authorities alleged that the Uyghur separatists were responsible for these attacks. They claimed that the aim was to bring international attention to the situation in

Xinjiang (*ibid.*). According to Rohan Gunaratna<sup>4</sup>, the Uyghur separatist groups such as the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) were “responsible for a series of bombings in Xingjiang [sic] and elsewhere in China in the lead up to the recent Beijing Olympics” (Gunaratna, 2009: 1-2). Gunaratna also claims that ETIM had received training, weapons, finance and ideology from international terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda (*ibid.*).

In the following year, on 5 July 2009, another major riot occurred in Urumqi, the capital city of Xinjiang. The riot was triggered by the death of two Uyghur workers in Guangdong and the way the Chinese government handled the case. The Uyghurs alleged that the Han employers in Guangdong discriminated against the Uyghur workers and treated them poorly. In addition, the Uyghurs in Xinjiang also alleged that fellow Uyghurs working in Guangdong were also discriminated against by Han workers. On 25 June 2009, fighting occurred between the two groups in a toy factory in Shaoguan, Guangdong over a rumour that six Uyghur workers raped two female Han workers, which resulted in the death of two Uyghurs. The incident had caused the Uyghurs to be very upset. It had also triggered frustration and anger among them and on 5 July 2009, at least 1,000 Uyghurs protested and attacked the Han Chinese. Police attempted to quell the rioters with tear gas, water hoses, armoured vehicles, and roadblocks, and the government imposed curfew in most urban areas. Two days later, on 7 July, the Han retaliated against the Uyghurs. According to the authorities, 197 people were killed and 1,721 were injured. In addition to the loss of lives, many vehicles and buildings were destroyed.<sup>5</sup>

The Uyghur diasporas rejected the figures provided by the Chinese authorities, claiming that the death toll was higher. During the ethnic clashes, the authorities shut down Internet services and restricted cell phone services in Urumqi. On 8 July, Chinese president Hu Jintao



cut short his attendance of the 35th G8 summit and returned to China due to the situation in Xinjiang. The Chinese central government, however, had claimed that the riots were planned from abroad by the World Uyghur Congress (WUC). However, Rebiya Kadeer, the president of WUC, denied the allegations. In less than six months after the July “Urumqi Riots” ended, the province faced another ethnic clash. This clash, occurred in mid-August, involved as many as 476 individuals getting stabbed with hypodermic needles.

It is noteworthy to mention that since the CCP took over the administration of Xinjiang in 1949, the province has been experiencing numerous ethnic clashes between the Chinese Hans and the Uyghurs. The government reformed its policies in the early 1980s by granting more economic opportunities and cultural freedom to the Uyghurs. They were intended to appease the Uyghurs’ anger towards Chinese rule and to promote suitable conditions for the economic development of the province. Unfortunately, despite the liberalisation of policies, the intended result did not materialise and the Chinese were caught in a “Catch-22” situation. This is because if the Chinese government were to grant further freedoms to the Uyghurs, they would be more content with the government but would also strengthen their ethnic and religious identity which would lead to Uyghur separatism and antipathy toward the Han Chinese. According to Frederick Starr, “greater autonomy will not elicit a burst of gratitude, but rather will elicit much more explicit demands for political and ethnic autonomy. This is the terrible paradox the Chinese have created for themselves.” (Starr, 2004)

It is interesting to point out that China has adopted the “carrot and stick” approach which is aimed at promoting economic development and maintaining stability in Xinjiang. The CCP adopted the “carrot” approach by granting some freedom to the Uyghurs such as the right to worship and use their language as well as some preferential policies such

as job employment in government departments. The “stick” or coercive approach is used when the CCP is confronted by the separatist groups demanding for independence. This shows that China is willing to take a hard-line approach to defend its national unity and security. It also wants to send a signal to the international community that it will never give up its sovereignty over any of its provinces including Xinjiang. The crucial issue for the CCP is not whether the human rights conditions in Xinjiang have improved; instead ensuring the safety and security of the province and the Han Chinese living in Xinjiang takes precedence.

### **5. Chinese Government Response: Strike Hard**

The CCP has adopted stringent policies in Xinjiang as response to the security situation in Xinjiang. It is noteworthy to mention that by December 1990, the CCP had instituted hard-line stance against any possible ethnic unrest. The PLA had declared that it would become a “great wall of steel and iron safeguarding the Chinese motherland”<sup>6</sup>. In addition, the CCP also declared that it would reassert its control over the practice of religion in Xinjiang. The strategies highlighted in the Strike Hard policy were condemnation of the separatist movements in Xinjiang, strengthening control of ethnic as well as religious affairs and a full-scale mobilisation at all levels of the security apparatus to counter social unrest in the region. The Strike Hard policy also suggested the use of diplomacy in the Central Asian region to pressure neighbouring countries into cracking down various Uyghur groups that were in exile.

In addition, only *haji* applicants aged 50 and above were allowed to visit Mecca and no Uyghurs were given permission to study in either Iran or Pakistan. Private religious schools and mosques were closed and many Uyghurs suspected of harbouring anti-Chinese sentiments were arrested and executed. The CCP also examined the publication and

printing of religious books. The government issued “Document Number 175” which referred to a “Three-No” policy: “no questioning, no telling, no visiting”. No one was allowed to question what had happened in Yining, nor were they allowed to tell outsiders the true story, and they were not allowed to visit relatives who had been imprisoned in Yining.

According to an Amnesty International report, instant trials were conducted for those accused of taking part in the riots followed by immediate public executions (Amnesty International, 2002). The protest in Baren, Kashgar in April 1990 by certain Islamic groups reinforced these fears. It is noteworthy to mention that from the mid-1990s onwards, private mosques and religious schools were shut down (Millward, 2006). Government employees and university students were constantly being reminded that prayer, fasting during Ramadan and the wearing of the *hijab* or head scarf were inconsistent with Communism, and therefore they may be dismissed if they continued practicing their religious obligations. It is interesting to note that according to the Chinese constitution, citizens have two religious freedom. They have the right to believe and the right not to believe in religion (*ibid.*). Since the mid-1990s the CCP has emphasised that all party members, government employees as well as students should only adopt one freedom: the freedom not to believe in religion.

The closing down of religious schools caused many Uyghurs to start private religious classes in their homes to the extent of risking the lives of their family members. This was because if their activities were to be discovered by the police, family members as well as the religious teacher will be arrested. Some had been sent to labour camps for “re-education”. Abulahat Abdurixit, the chairman of the Xinjiang Autonomous Region, stressed that the government must prohibit and enforce bans on every kind of publication that contradicted the Chinese version of Xinjiang’s history, advocated Uyghur nationalism and created religious awareness.

Many mosques were closed down because they were considered “bad influence” to youths. For example, in Karakash, south of Xinjiang, it was reported that the government closed down the Dong mosque because it was located near a school (Amnesty International, 2002).

Amy Reger<sup>7</sup> also confirms that the Chinese government prohibited the Uyghur Muslim employees from fasting during Ramadan 2008. Uyghur Muslim government employees were encouraged to shave their beards and free lunches were served during Ramadan in order for the Uyghur Muslim employees to break their fast. According to Amnesty International, about 8,000 Islamic prayer leaders or *imams* and religious teachers were forced to attend political indoctrination classes. The aim was to ensure that they abided by socialist ideas and remained loyal to the CCP.

In addition, the CCP has also attempted to suppress the Uyghur culture and traditions. The CCP fears that the Uyghur culture would be a motivating force for separatism. It is a deliberate effort to control, monitor and sterilize Uyghur culture so that it cannot inspire the Uyghur for self-rule. Several cities in Xinjiang which serve as iconic places for the Uyghur culture and traditions have undergone drastic changes. For example, in the historic city of Kashgar, the government has planned to demolish 85 percent of its old town.

Besides that, the government has renamed Kashgar as “Kashi”, a more Chinese-sounding name. Many Uyghurs including those living outside Xinjiang fear that a form of cultural genocide is taking place in Xinjiang, which may create a new generation of Uyghurs who neither know nor appreciate their own culture and ethnic heritage. Donald McMillen believes that “the CCP wants to totally ‘integrate and assimilate’ minorities in Xinjiang and create a ‘Chinese’ nation and maintain the CCP’s supremacy” (personal communication with Donald McMillen)<sup>8</sup>.

## **6. Conclusion**

The “reform and opening-up” policies advocated by Deng Xiaoping have made the CCP recognise human rights norms while it maintains its view that the norms need to be interpreted based on local variables such as economic conditions, history, culture and traditions. China continues promoting the view that socio-economic development is the way to improve the conditions of China’s minorities. Hence, since the early 1980s the Chinese government has granted certain rights to the minorities living in Xinjiang. The aim was to appease the Uyghurs and gain their support in developing the economy of the province. However, the economic development of Xinjiang has also intensified the migration of Hans into the province.

Although the CCP has liberalised its policies towards the Uyghurs, this does not mean that it will tolerate any secessionist attempts by the Uyghurs. Furthermore, there were some Uyghurs who continued to resist the Chinese administration. In fact, the resistance had turned more violent in the 1990s after the disintegration of the USSR and in the 2000s. Consequently, the CCP has halted the liberal policies and reverted to harsher approaches by implementing the “strike hard” policy.

This study concludes by emphasising that the freedom of religious and cultural expression granted by the CCP in the 1980s was hijacked by the separatist movements. The separatist movements in the 1990s have caused the CCP to be in a “Catch-22” situation whereby the policy of liberalisation by allowing greater religious freedom and freedom of movement has “backfired”. Hence, the main goals of the CCP are to defend the territorial integrity and security of the province, protect the presence of the Chinese Han in Xinjiang and ensure the economic development of Xinjiang. Basically, China will do whatever it takes to achieve its interests in Xinjiang even at the expense of violating human rights norms.

## Notes

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1. The meaning of the term *Uyghur* is unclear. However, most Uyghur linguists and historians regard the word as coming from *uyughur* (*uyushmaq* in modern Uyghur language), literally meaning “united” or “people who tend to come together”. *Uyghur* is often pronounced /'wi:gər/ by English speakers, though an acceptable English pronunciation closer to the Uyghur people’s pronunciation of it would be /u:.i'gʊr/. Several alternate romanisations also appear: *Uighur*, *Uygur*, and *Uigur*. The Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region’s provincial government

recommends that the generic ethnonym adopted in the early 20th century for this Turkic people be transcribed as “Uyghur”.

2. In Islam *imam* is a person who leads in prayer.
3. In 2007 Luo Gan (羅幹) had been elected as the 5th Secretary General of Political and Legislative Affairs Committee of the Communist Party of China Central Committee.
4. Rohan Gunaratna is a professor at the Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technology University in Singapore. He is also the head of the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (ICPVTR).
5. “Kazakh Uighurs hold mass protest” (reported by Peter Leonard), *ABC News*, 19th July 2009 (updated 22nd July, 2009). <<http://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory?id=8121182>>
6. 新疆日報 (*Xinjiang Daily*), 29th November 1990.
7. Amy Reger is a researcher at the Uyghur Human Rights Project.
8. Personal Communication with Professor Donald McMillen at the Faculty of Arts and Administration, University of Southern Queensland, Australia, via email on 18th September 2010.

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