

China's Minority Policy in Xinjiang and Uyghur Migration

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Introduction

Uyghurs are ethnically Turkic speaking Muslim people living primarily in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR), the largest province situated in the north-west of China. They follow Islam as well as practice Turkic culture and customs. As they claim that they are the original inhabitants of this region so demanding for the Separate independent state out of China.

To secure itself from internal as well as external threats, Chinese Government adopted suppressive attitudes towards Uyghurs in Xinjiang as this region is very prone to the separatist activities as per Chinese authority. Its geo-strategic location is crucial for China's geo-political ambitions. Xinjiang is also largest Chinese province having abundant natural resources, minerals and hydrocarbons (oil and natural gas) and it is also gateway to the resource rich Central Asia region. It shares international boundaries with Russia, Afghanistan, India, Pakistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Mongolia and Tajikistan. These above mentioned factors are primarily accountable for China's harsh cultural, socio-economic and political policies in Xinjiang. These harsh policies contained Uyghur's freedom of practicing religion, cultural and traditional practices, and elementary education system and even affected their daily life activities. As a result, this suppression of the Uyghurs has forced them to migrate intensively to the neighboring and Western countries.

China's Policy towards Ethnic Uyghurs in Xinjiang

In Xinjiang, Islamic religious and cultural practices are exceptionally prevalent within the local and national identity of Uyghurs and therefore Chinese authority perceives it a particular threat to its internal security (George 1998). The World Uyghur Congress report states that, "the Uyghur activism for promotion and demand of the human rights, religious freedom and democratic system advocated by the Uyghurs in Xinjiang are dubbed by Chinese Central government as terrorist activities" (2004).

Chinese Communist Party (CCP) came into power in September 1949 and its head Mao Zedong put an extra effort to bring socio-political and economic changes to transform China. Consequently, CCP followed communist ideology, a state-run economy and a complete party-state control over Chinese people. Mao's policies failed badly leading to the mass famine (Great Leap Forward, 1958–60) and severe political turmoil (the Cultural Revolution, 1966–76). The Great Leap Forward has instigated ethnic minorities to migrate from Xinjiang to the neighboring former Soviet Central Asian Republics which considerably changed the demographic pattern of the region. However, Mao's policies are often considered to be a systematic campaign to oppress religion freedom of ethnic Uyghurs along with reducing the impact of Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) over the region while according to the Chinese authority, Mao's policies were launched to understand and resolve the problems of different ethnic people living in Xinjiang (Clarke 2003).

The earlier 1950s significant tolerant Chinese policies were converted into strongly suppressive and powerful assimilative ones with the launch of Great Leap Forward in 1958. The launch of the Cultural Revolution in 1966 further worsened the situation. As a result it became really tough for ethnic Uyghurs to practice their religion and cultural activities independently. When Deng Xiaoping came into power after the demise of Mao Zedong in late 1976, he formulated economic reforms in China which once again ensured slightly forbearing policies in Xinjiang. However Deng's policies were merely politically motivated. Consequently, these moderate policies have not lasted for long and aggravated resentment against these policies among the ethnic minorities. The anti-government sentiments turned into protests and demonstrations and violent uprisings and Chinese government handled these uprisings by launching 'Strike Hard Campaign' to suppress them down ruthlessly (Bovingdon 2004).

In order to curb down the anti-government activities, Chinese government promoted the inflow of Han population from other provinces into Xinjiang which resulted into complicated ethnic relationships between these two ethnic groups basically. These influxed Chinese Han population into Xinjiang were more privileged than any of the ethnic minorities which further intensified competition between them leading to the inter-ethnic clashes (Song and Wu 2013). It has been suggested by many scholars that the low level of economic development is one of the prime reasons making Uyghurs wary of Chinese government and its policies (Kilgour 2006). Evans opines that,

“China has blamed Muslim Uighur separatists from Xinjiang for several public attacks in recent 2009 and 2014 and passed new Anti-Terror Law in 2015 which constituting counter-terrorism agencies in-charge with the identification of terrorist activities and personnel, and coordinate nationwide anti-terrorist works. However, Human Rights Watch criticized it by stating that the law does not sync with international standards, and pointed out that such agency would have enormous discretionary powers” (Evans 2015).

The CCP’s strong handling of ethnic and religious affairs in Xinjiang especially Uyghurs have somehow discouraged prospective leadership propagating anti-government sentiments. China has severely censored internet and other means of communication along with a strong surveillance over any effort to mobilize anti-government activities. China has also become successful to discourage external support from its Central Asian neighbors through its foreign and economic ties as they also have Turkic speaking population which could have been a regular source of support to Uyghurs. Subsequently, the Uyghurs did not get the appropriate support from Central Asian region for the Uyghur movement therefore Uyghur moved from Central Asia to the Western countries.

While Debata (2007) makes a critical examination of the Chinese policy towards the minority nationalities of the country in general and Uyghurs in particular, Chaudhuri (2009) expounds Chinese Central Government’s basic policy towards Xinjiang and its effect on the nature of Uyghur activities and the magnitudes for the region’s future.

Causes and Consequences of Uyghur Out-Migration from Xinjiang

The Cultural Revolution is observed as a hard phase for Uyghur ethnic Muslims as they had become the victim of anti-religious and anti-ethnic nationalist policies by Chinese Government. In this period, widespread persecutions of ethnic minorities, destructions of places of religious worship like mosques and ensured cessation of protests and demonstrations by government forces was intensified (Gladney 2003). Mao’s ideas of collective national identity and constant revolution in China remained responsible for heavy persecution and suppression of ethnic minorities of which the Uyghur people were the one who suffered the most of such ideology as they lost their cultural and religious identity (Atwood 2010).

The atrocities faced by the ethnic minorities in Xinjiang during the Cultural Revolution is well described in one Chinese government source in which it is mentioned that Cultural Revolution had a disastrous effect on all aspects of the society in China, mainly on religious and cultural practices (White Paper 1997). The Post-Cultural Revolution period witnessed a new era of restructuring, reorientation and rebuilding of Chinese society and economy. As per Chinese Government source (White Paper 1999), “to preserve the traditional cultures of the ethnic minorities, the state formulated plans or organized specialists for work involving the collecting, editing, translating and publishing of their cultural heritage and the protecting of their famous historical monuments, scenic spots, rare cultural relics and other important items of the historical and cultural heritage”. However, these reformist policies have claimed to be failing by most of the overseas activists and Uyghur organizations.

According to some of the scholars, Chinese government had never changed their minority policy which is the reason why Uyghurs got disassociated and it paved the way for continued ethnic clashes and violence on even a larger scale. In the mid-1990s, two prominent factors responsible for the ongoing ethnic conflicts in Xinjiang and further to the Uyghur migration from the region are strategic importance of Xinjiang to the Chinese government and the considerable presence of Uyghur ethnic minority group discontented with Han Chinese rule. Contained religious and cultural freedom in Xinjiang compelled many Uyghur youth population to migrate from the region with an intention to pursue their religious teaching from abroad as well. Hence, Turkey and Pakistan became the most favorable countries for the same purpose. Uyghur after receiving the education from such brethren countries they came back with a different attitude towards the society, state, nation and religion in China and mainly in Xinjiang. Due to the cultural and ethnic affinities, Turkey provided shelter and religious education in the beginning but due to the emerging potential political and economic ties with China, Turkey became suspicious in the Uyghur’s eyes (Kanat 2014).

Uyghur migration in Central Asia and its repercussion were well understood by China. Therefore, “China’s strategy to deal with the problem in Xinjiang in a double-opening approach which pertains to Central Asia the reason being the huge number of Uyghurs living in Central Asia while sharing ethno-cultural linkages: i) to integrate Xinjiang with Central Asia and China proper in economic terms and ii) to establish

security and cooperation with China's Central Asian neighbors. Internally, this agenda has resulted in increased central government investment, particularly regarding construction and infrastructure projects (especially energy related), and enhanced government control and management of ethnic minority religious and cultural practices" (Becquelin 2000). After the Soviet dissolution, Uyghur issue became the focal point in the China's foreign policies towards newly independent Central Asian Republics (CARs) as Xinjiang shares border with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. So, China began to establish the political, economic and infrastructural ties with the CARs, maintained its influence over the regions so that Uyghurs separatist movement won't get any support from them. However, Soviet Union's collapse also motivated a resurrection of ethnic minority opposition to Chinese rule in Xinjiang.

Uyghur Diaspora has appeared to witness many difficulties in realizing the unity because of their different approaches, attitudes, competitive leaderships and interests. The Uyghurs living in the countries with Muslim majority like CARs, Turkey, Pakistan and Afghanistan have different approach towards the Uyghur Cause than that of the Uyghurs living in the Western, democratic societies of USA, Germany. Under the potential leadership of Rabiya Qadir, there are still some rays of hope to raise the Uyghur cause internationally (Phillips 2012).

In the series of containing cultural practices of Uyghurs, recently China has banned the use of Islamic names for the newborn babies like 'Imam', 'Muhammad' etc. China spends more on its internal security rather than on its defence as it is more insecure from its Muslim ethnic minority than from any of the external threat. The confiscation of the Uyghur passports by Chinese authority in 2016 indicates the killing of the basic Human Right of freedom (Hillman 2017). In one of the World Uyghur Congress reports it is mentioned that "any issue related to Uyghurs gets publicity only when there is any terrorist attack in the region instead of showing the daily difficulty faced by the Uyghurs in order to cope with the Chinese policies and it creates a negative image of the Uyghur population terming them as terrorists" (World Uyghur Congress 2014). Installations of surveillance camera in large number in Xinjiang again fueled the mistrust against the Chinese authority among Uyghurs.

Chinese Mobilization against Uyghurs and Host Countries Response

The Outward migration of Uyghurs from Xinjiang has amplified Chinese concern over the extended support and prospective involvement of the host countries for the Uyghur movement (Luedi 2014).

China took initiative in creating Shanghai Five Organization in 1996 with an intention to create its influence over the CARs and also to maintain its internal security, so that they would not extend their support to Uyghur movement. Three out of five Central Asian countries namely Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan along with Russia and China became the founder member of this organization however China and Russia remained driving force behind this organization. In 2001, Shanghai Five became Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), as one of the leading security organization of Asia. China through this organization has strongly pressurized other members to have a proper mechanism to fight with terrorism and extremism. According to one report, “since 1996 Beijing has received ample assurances from fellow members of the Shanghai Five that organizations representing Uyghur opposition groups will not be allowed to operate from Central Asia. The governments of Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, under severe pressure from China, dissolved Uyghur political parties, closed newspapers, and arrested militants, particularly after serious riots in Yining, Xinjiang, in 1997. In 1999, Kazakhstan repatriated three Uyghur refugees on China’s request”. (Human rights watch 2001).

Additionally, “the diplomatic relations between China and Central Asia basically depend upon trade and mutual transnational security interests and development of trade and commerce between them only possible when they address their security concerns successfully. Therefore, China’s main security concern while dealing with Central Asia is the threat of increasing Islamic militancy among the Uyghur population in Central Asia. China also wanted Central Asian Republics to contain the Uyghurs activities, which could be a potential threat to the stability of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region” (Borgeas 2013).

With reference to the Turkey, China adopted more exhaustive economic and trade policies which has given it leverage to the context of Uyghur activities within the Turkish territory. Therefore, Turkish government on several platforms has asserted that Xinjiang is an integral part of China and any kind of anti-Chinese activities would

not get any help from our people or government. This is considered to be a major foreign policy achievement of China over the Uyghurs (Debata 2007).

China's increasing economic presence in Afghanistan has further consolidated its position vis a vis Uyghur issue as Ghani government seemed to be favorable to China irrespective of religious and ethnic affinities with the Uyghurs. Afghanistan deported a number of Uyghurs which is an example of China's strong link with Afghanistan. Therefore, it is highly observant that China's powerful economic and diplomatic linkages with its neighboring countries has seriously jolted the independent Uyghur movement and made them more vulnerable to the Chinese atrocities in the name of eradicating terrorism and extremism in Xinjiang (Matta 2015).

Pakistan being a flagbearer of Muslim brotherhood consistently denied providing any kind of support to the Uyghurs because of the China's considerable economic investment in developmental projects in Pakistan. Pakistan government on several occasions stated that "Pakistan would never support the Uyghur separatist movement. It was after the 1990s that Pakistan has taken strict measures against Uyghurs in Pakistan and it has close Uyghurs settlement within the boundaries of Pakistan along with the deportation a numbers of Uyghurs to China and killing of suspected Uyghur terrorists" (Fayaz 2012).

In recent years, it has been reported that "a number of Uyghurs fighting for East Turkistan's independence have moved to Syria and Iraq from Afghanistan with a goal to fight along with various extremists groups. In these countries, Uyghurs have formed their own units and also collaborated with other Central Asian militants units comprising Uzbek, Tajik, and Kyrgyz etc. All these militant units from Central Asia and Xinjiang particularly fight for the Al-Qaeda linked Al-Nusra Front" (Rashid 2016). According to one western scholar, China has neglected its involvement related to the Syrian crisis because of its principle of non-interference of its foreign policy until its national security interests are compromised (Clarke 2016).

Initially Germany supported and provided all possible help to the Uyghur immigrants due to Which Uyghurs strongly put their voices against Chinese atrocities in Xinjiang. However, China felt threatened and hence devised its policies with Germany in a manner that the Centre stage taken by the Uyghur Diaspora in Germany could be restrained. Germany is the only country, with which China has laid so much efforts in

putting economic pressure because China is dependent on Germany on this front (Shichor 2013). However, Chinese leadership believes that Germany would not support or promote Uyghur terrorist activities by any means.

European Union and China have similar intentions of curbing radical activities within their territories, so they developed joint mechanism to fight terrorism and extremism along with extensive economic cooperation. Both sides are also strongly stick to restrict any linkage between terrorism and any particular country, nation, ethnic group or religion (White Paper 2003).

According to Jai (2016), “the migration of Uyghurs from Turkic countries to the West and to United States of America took place in the early 1990s and USA being a democratic country has given asylum to Uyghur refugees and provided them with social and economic opportunities to get settled. However, all the efforts of American government to support the Uyghur cause witnessed a swift change after the September 11 terrorist attacks in the New York City of USA. The War on Terror campaign paved the way for Chinese authority to continue military crackdown against the Uyghurs. US supported China this time as it wanted to stop terrorism in any form”.

The White Paper (2009) states that, “the East Turkistan terrorist organizations, with ETIM as representative, have carried out actions in Central and South Asia over a long period of time, creating many bloody incidents of terror and violence, including assassinations, arson and attacks on police”. Due to which many countries have deported Uyghur refugees in varying degrees, under economic and diplomatic pressure from China (Chen 2016).

Malaysia released 11 ethnic Uyghurs Muslims who fled to the Southeast Asian nation after a Thai jailbreak last year. Moreover, in a recent press conference event Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad said “they did nothing wrong there” (Reuters 2018). Malaysian leader's move to send ethnic Uighur Muslim detainees to Turkey defied a Chinese extradition request and threatens to agitate already strained bilateral relations between them (Bowie 2018).

Following the Communist takeover of China in 1949, China looked towards India with suspicion over its prospective support to Turkic Uyghur Muslims. The reasons behind the Chinese concerns of India’s support to the Uyghur activism were two

folded, firstly the historical and cultural relation that people of India and Xinjiang region have in common and secondly the sympathetic attitudes of Indian Muslims towards their Uyghurs Muslims brethren. For example, in 1950, two top Uyghur leaders, Mohammad Amin Bughra and Isa Yusuf Alptekin, fled Xinjiang with 200 families for the Indian State of Kashmir to acquire shelter from Indian government which caused insecurity in China regarding this event until the two Uyghur leaders left for Turkey in 1950 in absence of any sympathetic attitude from Indian side and it provided some relief to the Chinese authorities on this front. As even today, India itself facing severe problem of terrorism, extremism in Kashmir which is a strong deterrent towards showing any sympathy to any separatist movement in the world including Uyghur separatist movement in Xinjiang (Debata 2016). Recently, India's refusal to allow Uyghur activist Dolkun Isa to visit India in connection with a conference at Dharamshala spells India's stand on Uyghurs clearly.

Conclusion

Chinese policies in Xinjiang have ultimately forced the ethnic Uyghurs to migrate from the region to a place where they could practice freely their religion and culture which China has severely restricted since 1950s. It further aggravated the anti-Chinese sentiments among the Uyghurs not only in Xinjiang but also in Uyghur Diaspora in abroad. China has been forcefully suppressing this resentment in and outward through generating economic and diplomatic pressure over the host countries. Therefore, it is the demand of the time that the Human Rights violations by the Chinese government must be taken into consideration by the International and regional organizations. However, any kind of involvement of Uyghurs in terrorist activities must also not be ignored as well. Finally, it is solely up to the Chinese government to assimilate Uyghurs in the main stream by acknowledging their right to practice to religion and to follow their culture and traditions in any harmless manner.

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