EXERCISING SOVEREIGNTY

CHINA’S ‘CORE INTERESTS’ AND UNFINISHED NATIONAL UNIFICATION

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Abstract

This paper applies ideas on sovereignty as a contested and variable set of practices in international politics to the People’s Republic of China’s declaration of ‘core interests’ in Taiwan, Tibet and Xinjiang, with a particular focus on the Uyghurs of Xinjiang in the ‘post-9/11’ environment. While China’s claims to jurisdictional sovereignty in these areas are unrelenting, they continue to be contested in ways that have the potential to destabilize the Chinese state and the international relations of the region. ‘Core interests’ remain zones of unfinished or uncertain national integration and unification, requiring the regular demonstration and exercise of the state’s jurisdictional sovereignty, at times through political violence. In Xinjiang’s case the securitization of Uyghur separatism as part of the ‘global war on terrorism’ has intensified the state’s coercive exercise of sovereignty, increasing inter-communal violence between Han (Chinese) and ‘minority’ people and exacerbating serious problems of national unification.

Introduction

The People’s Republic of China’s (PRC) rapid rise in wealth and power, and therefore in its capacity for national security, has not lessened the ruling Communist Party’s sensitivity to sovereignty over Taiwan, Tibet and Xinjiang. These areas constitute what China’s political leaders now routinely refer to as ‘core interests’ (hexin liyi), implying they are non-negotiable and will be defended with force if necessary (Swaine 2011: 7-8). Each territory is, of course, defined by the state as integral to China’s ‘homeland’ and is therefore a link in the chain of
sovereignty that cannot be broken. From this perspective China’s unrelenting defence of its ‘core interests’ demonstrates a pragmatic adaptation to the territorial imperative of modern, Westphalian state sovereignty, intensified by a drive for national unification to redress the privations of nineteenth-century imperialism. China’s inflexible, sometimes aggressive official policy clearly reflects this understanding of sovereignty. At the same time it obscures the challenges to exercising what is in practice a variable, layered and divided sovereignty. Despite increasing state capacity and a more ‘strategic’ management of dissent and opposition (Wedeman 2006), it remains important to ask: how ‘robust’ is the goal of ‘integrating China with a changing international arena while completing the project of unifying a multinational state built upon the remains of the Qing empire’ (Carlson 2005: 230)?

China’s ‘core interests’ are the most significant zones of an incomplete or unfinished project of national integration and unification. They continue to be contested in ways that have the potential to destabilize the state and the international relations of the region. Despite strict enforcement of the ‘one China’ policy, the reunification of Taiwan is unfinished business, while Beijing’s rule in Tibet and Xinjiang confronts separatist sentiment, resistance and revolt from ‘minority nationalities’ (shaoshu minzu). These zones are therefore critical challenges to what Carlson (2005: 3) defines as China’s ‘jurisdictional sovereignty’. In Tibet and Xinjiang exercising this jurisdictional sovereignty has meant a combination of constant vigilance over ‘minority’ people, the use or threatened use of state violence and large-scale development projects aimed at closer economic, social and cultural integration of the ‘minority’ peripheries with the Chinese core. In Xinjiang’s case the securitization of separatism among the predominantly Muslim, Uyghur population as part of the ‘global war on terror’ has intensified the state’s coercive exercise of sovereignty. Such an approach to exercising sovereignty appears to have increased inter-communal violence between Chinese and ‘minority’ people, as demonstrated by the bloody Urumqi ‘riots’ of July 2009 and their fallout, and exacerbated significant problems of national unification. While these challenges to China’s sovereignty may not portend the imminent collapse of the state, they are no closer to being resolved and may become more difficult to control as China becomes more integrated with the international arena.
Variable Sovereignty and China

Modern sovereignty in politics and international relations seems so clearly tied to the state’s control of territory and its right to regulate the people within that there appears to be no reasonable basis for alternative conceptions. Krasner’s (1999) standard work on the subject acknowledges the at times halting establishment of modern sovereignty, but the three basic forms he discovers all see territorial control as the key: Westphalian, the right to keep external political actors out of the domestic political affairs of a given territory; domestic, the ability of states to actually control political processes within their borders, and; international, the state’s capacity to control cross-border flows. This territorial imperative in sovereignty has been revised, though not entirely abandoned, in recent research on the variable, ‘modular’ and even divided sovereignty of empires (Benton 2010) and in the now vast ‘globalization’ literature, one example of which goes so far as to argue that ‘nation-state walls are modern-day temples housing the ghost of political sovereignty’ (Brown 2010: 133). The elusive and variable nature of sovereignty, particular when states attempt to exercise it, is usefully highlighted by this literature (Benton 2010: 279-281).

At first sight China appears to be an outlier in terms of the variable, modular or divided sovereignty of states. Yet its ‘core interests’ lay precisely in those areas that its sovereign control is not directly exercised (Taiwan) or significantly contested by ‘minority’ alternatives to state-directed national unification (Tibet and Xinjiang). Moreover, as Carlson (2005) has demonstrated, China’s sovereignty is exercised on different levels and to different degrees of state control. He argues that the state is inflexible on territorial (borders and ‘lost’ territory) and jurisdictional sovereignty (Taiwan, Tibet, Xinjiang), but ‘permitted a transgression of the lines created by the economic and authority [domestic] components of sovereignty’ (Carlson 2005: 3) in response to economic reform and international engagement. The state is therefore articulating different sovereign claims and is not able to exercise a singular sovereignty over its various territorial interests. More importantly, in the ‘minority’ border zones of Tibet and Xinjiang the state’s ‘jurisdictional sovereignty’ has required a ruling system significantly different to that applied to the ‘core’ Chinese population. The state may well be maintaining.
overall control, but the securitization of opposition and separatism as ‘terrororism’, which has led to an intensification of state coercian and national unification, risks an increase in inter-communal violence between Chinese and ‘minority’ people. If not contained or ameliorated, this would raise the costs of exercising sovereignty beyond the question of the legitimacy of Beijing’s rule over its ‘minority’ zones to the capacity of the state to maintain order between its various ‘nationalities’.

Challenges to China’s Jurisdictional Sovereignty

As noted above, the Chinese state can be seen to exercise a variable sovereignty in its different territorial claims, and each presents a different challenge to state sovereignty. Taiwan is considered part of the ‘Chinese core,’ whereas Tibet and Xinjiang have long been regarded as outlying (waidi) or border (bianjiang) territories, populated with non-Chinese ‘minority nationalities’ (Taylor Fravel 2005: 55-59). Taiwan remains unclaimed in terms of direct rule—unlike Hong Kong and Macao—whereas the state’s rule of Tibet and Xinjiang has faced resistance and revolt. The challenge of Taiwan is to deter de jure independence, which the state sees as illegal secession, while not directly ruling the territory. The challenge of Tibet and Xinjiang is to prevent ethnic ‘minorities’ concentrated in border territories developing separatist movements that threaten the state’s direct monopoly rule.

Comparative studies of separatist conflict place Tibet and Xinjiang within a category where ‘military victory by the state’ is ‘successful but inconclusive’ and there is ‘ongoing or intermittent armed violence’ (Heraclides 1997: 704, 707). Neither case appears to be moving beyond this ambiguous category and, despite the state’s security capacity never being higher than at present, violent conflict in these troubled regions escalated in 2008 and 2009. Whereas the exiled Central Tibetan Administration’s movement for ‘genuine autonomy’ (without territorial independence) enjoys a high international profile and won a period of regular, if fruitless, dialogue with the state (He and Sautman 2005/6; He 2010; Ramos-Lynch 2010; Shakya 2008; Sperling 2004), Uyghur separatism is less prominent, lacks unity and the leadership of a Dalai Lama-like figure, and has not won any concessions to its cause. Soon after the ‘9/11’ attacks on the United States, however, China declared itself a willing participant in the United
States-led ‘global war on terror’ and the state lent Uyghur separatism a far higher profile by casting it in the mould of trans-national Islamist terrorism. Both inside and outside Xinjiang, China apparently confronted a long-standing threat to national security from Uyghur ‘terrorist forces’ fighting for an ‘East Turkistan’ homeland, and official accounts of conflict with Uyghurs were now routinely described in this way (Office of the State Council 2002). The state clearly intended to legitimise suppression of Uyghur resistance and the deepening of Xinjiang’s national integration, as well as improve diplomatic relations with Central Asian states and the United States. But lifting the profile of Uyghur separatism in this way has effectively securatized the issue, meaning it is ‘presented as an existential threat, requiring emergency measures and justifying actions outside the normal bounds of political procedure’ (Buzan, Waever and Wilde 1998: 24). This departure of policy has internationalized Uyghur separatism (Clarke 2010) and intensified state coercion and national integration in ways that fed into the violent inter-communal ‘riots’ of July 2009.

China’s official propaganda, the various claims of exiled Uyghur groups and their supporters, and restrictions on academic field research in this sensitive area have long obscured the precise nature and extent of Uyghur separatism, but the ‘terrorist’ appellation only further muddied the waters. Matters were not made any clearer when claims about Uyghur terrorists found a receptive audience in some political, media and academic circles. By December 2002 both the George W. Bush administration and the United Nations had named the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) in their lists of ‘international terrorist organisations’ with alleged connections to Osama bin Laden’s al Qaeda and the Taliban. Twenty-two Uyghurs were taken from Afghanistan and Pakistan and detained in the United States’ Guantanamo Bay facility, although they were never identified with a terrorist group and were later released to third countries, apart from five who remain in detention because they rejected the resettlement offers made to them (Worthington 2010). Academic studies also emerged (Acharya, Gunaratna and Wang 2010; Gunaratna and Pereire 2006; Reed and Raschke 2010; Wayne 2008) that uncritically linked China with the ‘global war on terror,’ a concept fraught with ‘facile and ill-informed generalisations about Islam and Muslims’ (Millward 2009: 348). While these studies did not condone the state’s repressive policies and saw them as contributing to Uyghur-Han conflict, they took for granted the terrorist threat to China. One argued that ‘the Islamist
terrorist threat to China is manifestly clear and is not ambiguous' and that, alarmingly, in addition to the Uyghurs, Hui or Chinese-speaking Muslim communities may offer a 'favourable environment' for 'breeding terrorism' (Acharya, Gunaratna and Wang 2010: 6, 105). Another was less alarmist but no less certain about the reality of terrorism, seeing China as 'one of the few successes in the global struggle against Islamic terrorism' (Wayne 2008: 9).429

A more judicious analysis of Uyghur resistance since 1949 shows that, despite regular violent incidents, an armed separatist insurgency in control of a territory or region, with a clear leadership structure and organization, has not been able to establish itself. Moreover, not all incidents, such as the bloody July 2009 'riots,' can readily be identified with 'an explosion of separatist sentiment, much less as 'jihadism' or 'Islamic terrorism'' (Millward 2009: 355). Sources both hostile and sympathetic to Uyghur separatism have tended to reach the same exaggerated conclusion: 'Xinjiang is in crisis and the Uyghurs [are] poised to erupt in violence' (Millward 2009: 349). Xinjiang is not a Chechnya, a Sri Lanka, an East Timor, nor even an Aceh. At the same time, a welcome scepticism about the capacity and conditions for separatism or terrorism is required. 429

From 'several quarters' (visitors and scholars, media, Chinese propaganda, Uyghur and rights groups, Han Chinese, 'terrorist think-tank wallahs who have of late discovered China') the same message is heard, if sometimes from diametrically opposed sympathies: 'Xinjiang is in crisis and the Uyghurs poised to erupt in violence' (349). 2009 seems to confirm this, whether expected to be jihadist or nationalist.

But 2009 marks a departure from past patterns and in Chinese and international representations of them (349). Most striking is the irrelevance of international Islamic terrorism or Islamism to what occurred. Demonstrators used PRC flag as do other demonstrators. Desire to 'work within the system, not to separate from it' (355); 'incorrect to characterize it as an explosion of separatist sentiment, much less as 'jihadism' or 'Islamic terrorism'.' (355) Although state media and many blogs have reflexively applied the 'terrorism' to 2009 and Rabiya Kadeer and the WUC, compared to high point of war on terror, this is an 'insignificant' part of the narrative. The word is used to vilify, not to explain. Not linked to al Qaeda or ETIM, even though state media have linked WUC to these
'terrorism' in Xinjiang (Bovingdon 2010; Clarke 2008; Millward 2009; Shichor 2005) should not obscure the significant political challenge to state authority that continuing Uyghur resistance represents. Like the Tibetans, Uyghurs may well have become more concerned about 'cultural autonomy' than the 'unattainable' goal of an independent state (Millward 2009: 357). But this lack of cultural autonomy is symptomatic of the state's failure to 'win recognition as the sole legitimate representative of Uyghur interests and to make Uyghurs think of themselves as Chinese (jonggolouq) and citizens of the PRC' (Bovingdon 2002: 44). The sense of Uyghurs being 'strangers in their own land' has not been overcome (Bovingdon 2010). This is not as explosive as the reality of an armed separatist movement or a 'national liberation' struggle, and therefore lacks the political 'legitimacy' of many separatist or secessionist claims. But non-territorial claims for 'autonomy' can be seen to have a normative legitimacy as a remedy for human rights abuses and the denial of the self-determination of 'minorities' (Bolton, McGivern and Steele 2010: 4-5). If Uyghurs were to consolidate claims for 'autonomy' within the international community, as exiled Tibetans have partially succeeded in doing, then they might begin to construct a case for 'remedial' separatism (Buchanan 2004: 353-354; Buchheit 1978: 122) or a 'remedial right to self-determination' that does not require territorial separatism (Weller 2009). Even this necessarily implies greater political autonomy for Uyghurs, which has the potential to stimulate territorial claims and is precisely the reason that the monopoly state is so strongly opposed to the mobilization of domestic and international support for it. Because 'host state recognition remains the most important factor' (Bolton et al. 2010: 12) determining remedial separatism or autonomy, the Uyghurs remain unlikely to attain either in the near future.

The State and the Dimensions of Uyghur Separatism

From a realist perspective, it is the overwhelming capacity of China's state that defines the limits to the Uyghur seaparatist challenge to state sovereignty. Charles Tilly (2003: 73) also considers the type of state important in shaping contentious politics, describing China as 'an exemplary high-capacity undemocratic regime.' Such regimes allow only a narrow range of claim-making performances and forbid 'many (if not most) technically possible performances.' The surveillance and repressive capacity of the state push most contentious politics into the
‘forbidden range’ and thus toward ‘encounters likely to have violent outcomes.’ There is a ‘medium’ level of violence, usually involving agents of the state, with ‘great variability’ in frequency, but which demonstrates the ‘high political stakes of contention’ (Tilly 2003: 50, 51, 53). The demonstrations, protests and sporadic violence of post-1949 Uyghur separatism, and the state’s aggressive containment of it, conform to this general pattern.

Xinjiang has not always been governed by a ‘high-capacity’ regime, however, and many of the state’s problems in governing the region are legacies from the past. Expressions of resistance and rebellion toward rule from China’s political centre have waxed and waned according to the relative strength of the state. Historically, China’s hold on Xinjiang was always tenuous, despite the invention of an official narrative that denies the region any separate identity and claims territorial control and continuous jurisdiction dating back to 60 BCE (Office of State Council 2002). From the eighteenth century onwards, China’s rule in Xinjiang swung between episodes of violent imposition and periods of little direct administrative control from the centre. The region was brought under China’s control from 1759, but consolidation came only after a series of brutal conflicts and the pacification of both Turkic and Chinese Muslim rebellions under the last, Manchu Qing empire (Paine 1996: 113, 118; Chu 1966: 163-197). After disagreements within the Qing political elite on its value to China, Xinjiang was formally declared a province in 1884 (Lattimore 1950: 47-51). If China’s current territorial boundaries can be said to be legacies of empire (Lattimore 1988), it is not surprising that they date from this period of the last dynasty’s expansionary phase.

Some 65 years later when the People’s Republic of China (PRC) was established, Xinjiang ‘remained culturally distinct and geographically remote’ (Bovingdon 2010: 3), as well as politically distant, from the Chinese core. The occupying Communist forces inherited a fractious regional politics. From the 1920s to 1940s nationalism was penetrating the politics of the Turkic-speaking peoples of the region, further consolidating the modern ‘Uyghur’ identity. Uyghur nationalists of the day actively cultivated an identity that was primarily ‘political in motivation’ (Lattimore 1950: 123), despite the official designation being a hybrid of invented administrative classification and Stalinist-style nationalies policy, believing that it enhanced their ‘cultural autonomy’ and solidarity vis-a-vis other Turkic ‘nationalities’ and Chinese (Roberts
During the same period the fragmented Nationalist (Guomindang) state experienced several rebellions and two periods of separatist government in the region. The first, centred on the southern city of Kashgar, declared itself the East Turkistan Islamic Republic in November 1933, but it failed to unite the various Turkic rebels of the region and was quashed by Chinese authorities by June 1934 (Forbes 1986: 230-232; Millward 2007: 201-206). A second, more successful East Turkistan Republic (ETR) was established in November 1944, centred on the northwest region of Ili (or Three Districts) and its capital, Ghulja. A complicated amalgam of various Turkic nationalists who ‘embodied both Islamising and secular modernising impulses’ (Millward 2007: 226), they divided along ideological and territorial lines between a Soviet-supported group in the northwest and a group in the south that reached a compromise with the Nationalist state. The ETR managed to extract a concession of coalition government with the Nationalists, but had to renounce the goal of independence and drop the term ‘Republic’ as part of the deal. The remnants of the ETR leadership appeared to be on the verge of negotiating a similar compromise with the new Communist state when it was reported that they had perished in a plane crash on their way to Beijing (Benson 1990: 155-166; Forbes 1986: 193-195; Millward 2007: 216-234; Whiting and Sheng 1958: 98-112). Notwithstanding conspiracy theories and the compromises with Soviet and Nationalist forces, it is easy to understand how the East Turkistan Republics, particularly the latter, were re-invented as powerful symbols of Uyghur independence.

The new regime did not have to occupy Xinjiang through military conquest, as in Tibet, but small insurgent groups seeking independence persisted into the mid-1950s, underground parties continued into the post-Mao era, and demonstrations and sporadic violence have occurred since the 1980s (Bovingdon 2010: 5; Dillon 2004: 52-55; Millward 2007: 238). Although relatively small-scale, these were the more obvious manifestations of a broader 430

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430 Uyghur went through several incarnations before the contemporary, linguistic one was officially recognised in 1935. In 744-840 CE it referred to Turkic nomads of the Mongolian steppes who followed shamanistic and Manichean beliefs; 844-932 CE it was applied to oasis dwellers of Turpan who were influenced by Manichean, Buddhist and Nestorian Christian beliefs; 932-1450 CE it referred to an elite, primarily Buddhist-influenced, Turkic society, centred on Turpan and known as Uyghuristan. It was not used at all over the next five hundred year period, during which the people in the region underwent a gradual conversion to Islam, and generally identified themselves with their local oasis. See Justin Jon Rudelson, Oasis Identities: Uyghur nationalism along China’s Silk Road (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), pp. 4-7; Lattimore, Pivot of Asia, pp. 103-128.
resistance to the state’s nation-building project in Xinjiang (Bovingdon 2010: 7). The new state began constructing its own system for integrating the predominantly Muslim, Turkic-speaking peoples of the region, of whom the Uyghurs formed the majority. As part of their broader ‘nationalities’ (minzu) policy for governing non-Chinese regions, in 1955 Xinjiang became the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (Xinjiang Weiwuer Zizhiqu). In this they adapted practices reaching back to the Qing dynasty, and borrowed from the Soviet Union’s nationalities policy. Rather than the Soviet model of nominal federal ‘republics,’ they preferred a system of ‘autonomy’ (zizhi), in theory allowing self-rule at local and regional levels while the state exercised overall national authority.

The state was nonetheless careful to counter any impression that autonomy implied independence: in practice the system was designed to facilitate partial self-rule while discouraging separatism. A divide-and-rule approach to the various ‘nationalities’ of Xinjiang resulted in thirteen different groups being identified, with at least six of these (Kazak, Kyrgyz, Hui, Mongol, Tajik and Sibe) given autonomous status at various levels of local government. Of the twenty-seven autonomous units in Xinjiang, an identified nationality formed the majority in only twelve. Being in the majority, the province as a whole was designated ‘Uyghur,’ but the parcelling out of autonomy to different groups at the local level diluted the potential political weight of this majority. This form of ‘autonomy’ translates to little more than the appointment of members of the recognised nationalities to local representative bodies and government offices. While the leaders of autonomous areas are drawn from the nationality with a demographic plurality, in a curious echo of Manchu Qing monitoring of Chinese officials, their deputies are high-ranking Chinese Party members. All autonomous levels of government are under the authority of central authorities and the Communist Party, whose leaders in Xinjiang are almost always Chinese. The Xinjiang branch of the Party answers directly to the Central Party in Beijing, and all major economic development and infrastructure projects in Xinjiang are determined from Beijing. Political authority in Xinjiang was thus more centralised than ever once it became an ‘autonomous region’ (Gladney 1991; Millward 2007: 242-246).

In addition to the convoluted system for dividing the political authority of ‘nationalities’ at the local level, the Communist Party leadership revived a Qing dynasty practice for settling Chinese in Xinjiang. They combined military state farms with civilian and penal colonies in a
system designed to secure and develop border frontiers while reducing population density in eastern China. In the early 1950s the system was reorganised into the Production and Construction Military Corps (Shengchan Jianshe Bingtuan), or Bingtuan for short. This unique hybrid of civilian and paramilitary organisations became the primary vehicle for recruiting hundreds of thousands of Chinese migrants, as well as absorbing large masses displaced by famine or ‘rusticated’ youth sent down to the countryside, to Xinjiang through to the mid-1970s. It is estimated that the Bingtuan managed the resettlement of over five million Chinese during this period. Around 90% of the members of Bingtuan are Chinese, and these constitute about one-seventh (2.8 million) of the total population of Xinjiang (Becquelin 2000: 77-84; McMillan 1979: 61-66; McMillan 1981: 65-96; Millward 2007: 251-254; Seymour 2000: 174-175). The Bingtuan are increasingly dedicated to urbanisation and the commercial and industrial development that goes with it, and less focused on agricultural and paramilitary roles, but they continue as the major instrument of state policies for the development and integration of Xinjiang with the greater Chinese economy (Cliff 2009: 84-85).

Such mass Chinese in-migration has over time become a major cause of Uyghur-Han tension and conflict. Although official population figures are shaped by state sensitivity, it is estimated that the Chinese proportion has grown from around 5-10% in 1949 to 40-42% (7-8 million) in recent years, compared to the Uyghur ‘minority’ of about 47% (8-9 million). The Chinese proportion may be significantly higher due to an itinerant workforce, with official estimates for 2000 of 790,000 considered conservative, and the movement of younger Uyghurs to wealthier coastal areas in search of work. The movement of population in and out of Xinjiang became much more fluid in the post-Mao period when coercive policies gave way to more incentive-based economic migration. The Chinese predominate in modern urban centres, mainly in the eastern and northern corridors, spreading outward from the capital, Urumqi, while the Uyghurs account for over 80% of the population in the more traditional southern cities of Kashgar, Khotan and Artush (Becquelin 2000: 65-66, 75-77; Bovingdon 2002: 47-52; Mackerras 2004: 8; Toops 2004: 254-260). Some exiled Uyghur groups, like some exiled Tibetans, see the weight of the Chinese population as constituting a form of internal colonisation or even cultural genocide (Uyghur American Association 2004; Clarke 2008: 274). While claims that increasing Chinese in-migration undermines the identity of Uyghurs and other
'minorities' are not new, the scale and intensity of conflict that it generates varies according to the number of new arrivals and the extent of economic discrimination in their favour. The proportion of the Chinese population actually declined slightly in the 1980s as economic reforms drew Han and Uyghurs into the developing urban centres of eastern China. But policies designed to boost economic development in Xinjiang have discriminated in favour of immigrant and local Chinese employees. Large-scale state investments in cotton production during the 1990s and the massive infrastructure, energy and industrial projects of the 'great opening up of the West' (xibu da kaifa) policy, begun around 2000, tended to use local Chinese workers and attracted a further influx of immigrant Chinese (Becquelin 2004: 358-378; Goodman 2004: 317-334). Although these large injections of state funds boosted Xinjiang's rate of growth to among the highest in China, the greater the Turkic population of a given area (mainly in the south), the lower was the GDP per capita in that area (Wiemer 2004: 177-178; Becquelin 2004: 372). In the capital, Urumqi, there is a similar story of Uyghur exclusion in development projects, and Chinese also tend to predominate in professional and skilled jobs (Chaudhuri 2010; Howell 2009: 3-5).

This socio-economic discrimination in large part follows from the rapid development models of the state, which favour those with the work and language skills suited to urbanisation. But at heart it is a consequence of the lack of precisely the sort of political autonomy that minority nationalities policy appears to promise. Many people in China have suffered the negative effects of arbitrary state rule, intense ideological struggles, and such tragic policy failures as the famine of the Great Leap Forward and the violence of the Cultural Revolution. In 1962 about 60,000 Uyghurs and Kazaks, with Soviet encouragement, fled across the border in the wake of famine (Bovingdon 2010: 60). The attacks on mosques and religious artifacts and practices in Xinjiang were part of the 'most assimilationist and intolerant' policies of the Cultural Revolution period (Bovingdon 2010: 51-52). But for many Uyghurs, Tibetans and other 'minorities' the system of autonomy itself became the main conduit for repression and regular abuse at the hands of 'outsiders' (Millward 2007: 237). This system is not one of monolithic repression or deprivation, but one in which the central authority of the state attempts to control the dimensions of Uyghur identity. Many Uyghurs have taken this politically assigned identity and 'sought to define and exploit it on their own terms' (Gladney 2004: 225). As in
other areas that potentially challenge its authority, such as religious communities, the state cultivates and co-opts an acceptable or ‘patriotic’ face of Uyghur identity. There are thus officially sanctioned standards of political appointment, economic opportunity, Islamic practice, and cultural, linguistic and educational attainment that are tolerated and promoted. It is the tightly controlled limits of this identity and the denial of genuine self-determination that are the causes of contentious politics in Xinjiang. The fortunes and life conditions of Uyghurs and other minority peoples have tended to follow the policy swings emanating from Beijing rather than their assigned ‘autonomous region.’ With the exception of the relatively more liberal reform period of the early 1980s, when there was some support from Beijing for allowing Uyghurs and other minorities more local autonomy and reducing the role of Chinese officials, for over twenty years now the state has followed a dual strategy of ‘the loosening of economic policy with political tightening’ (Bovingdon 2010: 53). This strategy was primarily a response to increased Uyghur separatist protest and violence in the wake of the creation of newly independent Central Asian states with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. But it was ramped-up and intensified when Beijing declared itself to be part of the ‘global war on terror’ soon after the 9/11 attacks on the United States.

**Discovering Terrorism, Stoking Inter-communal Conflict?**

China’s rapid expression of support for the ‘global war on terror’ appeared to mark the state’s newly discovered frankness about what it described as ‘terrorism’ within Xinjiang. Just ten days before September 11, the Secretary of the Communist Party Committee for the region, Wang Lequan, declared that ‘Xinjiang is not a place of terror’ (Amnesty International 2002: 7). Such reticence had dissipated by January 2002, with the release of what remains the most comprehensive official report on China’s brand of terrorism. ‘Over a long period of time—especially since the 1990s,’ the report stated,

the ‘East Turkistan’ forces inside and outside Chinese territory have planned and organized a series of violent incidents in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region of China and some other countries, including explosions, assassinations, arsons, poisonings, and assaults, with
the objective of founding a so-called state of ‘East Turkistan’ (Office of State Council 2002).

The report claimed that from 1990 to 2001 these same unspecified forces were responsible for over two hundred terrorist ‘incidents,’ resulting in the deaths of 162 people (of ‘all ethnic groups’) and injuries to over 440 people, even though only 57 deaths were specifically enumerated. Perhaps most importantly from the perspective of the ‘global war on terror,’ the report also claimed that there were intimate links between East Turkestan terrorists, Osama bin Laden and the Taliban. Both bin Laden and the Taliban allegedly supported, trained and coordinated the activities of a group called the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM, said to be led by Hasan Mahsum), as well as other ‘East Turkestan’ terrorist groups. Members of these groups, it was said, engaged in terrorist acts not only in Xinjiang, but also in Afghanistan, Chechnya and other parts of Central Asia. The official report did not, however, directly link the ETIM to any ‘terrorist’ attack inside China (Office of State Council 2002).

The state thus seized the opportunity afforded by its ‘membership’ of the ‘global coalition’ against terrorism to openly re-define Xinjiang as part of the problem. The most immediate reason for doing so was to proceed with its suppression of separatism in Xinjiang with less fear of international censure from states like the United States. Although this response was hardly surprising, it was built upon a misleading representation of Xinjiang. As already noted, the diversity among the people of Xinjiang and the Uyghur population, and the fragmentation of separatist groups, has assisted the state in enforcing control through a divide-and-rule approach. But this diversity and division was entirely absent from China’s post-11 September report, which chose to tar all separatism with the same terrorist brush. The tenor of the report betrayed the profound political problems confronting the state in its continuous efforts to counter resistance and separatism in Xinjiang. Their position appeared alarmist and

431It is not entirely clear which groups operate outside Xinjiang, but other groups named in this official report include: East Turkestan Liberation Organization, Shock Brigade of the Islamic Reformist Party, East Turkestan Islamic Party, East Turkestan Islamic Party of Allah, East Turkestan International Committee, Uyghur Liberation Organization (Kyrgyzstan), Islamic Holy Warriors (Afghanistan). Those named as ‘ringleaders’ include: Tursun Turdi, Muhammat Tursan, Yasin Muhammat, Hogaxim Qasim, Muhammatjan Huzir. The report claims the Chinese police have arrested over 100 terrorists who were trained in Afghanistan and ‘other countries’ and then ‘sneaked’ back into Xinjiang. On these groups and the official accounts of casualties from ‘terrorism’ see also James A. Millward, Violent Separatism in Xinjiang: a critical assessment, Policy Studies 6 (Washington, DC: East-West Centre, 2004), pp. 12-18; Millward, Eurasian Crossroads: a history of Xinjiang, p. 340.
coy at the same time, a feature of official statements since 9/11 noted by several academic observers (Bovingdon 2010: 105; Clarke 2008; Shichor 2005). Association with the most lethal forms of international terrorism condemned purportedly widespread separatist violence in Xinjiang. Yet the government reassured the populous that its ‘crackdown’ on such violence ‘targets only a few core members and criminals.’ ‘Toward the majority of the people involved, who have been hoodwinked,’ the government claimed to adopt an ‘attitude of educating and helping them, and welcomes them back to the true path’ (Office of State Council 2002).

The combination of alarm and reassurance suggests a level of political opportunism and the need to establish the bone fides of terrorism to an international audience while playing down its scope to law abiding Uyghurs and potential supporters of Xinjiang’s economic development. But in raising Uyghur seapartism to the level of the ‘global war on terror’ the Chinese state securatized the issue as both a domestic and international problem. This raised the international profile of the Uyghur issue (Clarke 2008) and, while the state may have achieved some short-term gains in its relations with the United States and Central and South Asian states, subsequent events, such as the July 2009 ‘riots’ in Urumqi, showed that the state’s capacity to contain violence was weakened rather than increased.

The state’s own estimates of deaths and injuries over more than a decade of ‘terrorist’ violence appeared relatively low in comparison with the human cost of separatist violence in such areas as Chechnya, Sri Lanka, Mindanao and Aceh. The casualties also appeared to be the consequence of small-scale attacks, with one or two deaths in each incident. Nor was there a clear indication of the criteria on which the violence was judged to be ‘terrorist’ rather than separatist or even criminal. Careful, scholarly studies of the claims of terrorism have cast doubt on the nature and extent of the violent incidents listed in this official report (Bovingdon 2010: 113-128, 174-190; Clarke 2008; Millward 2004; Roberts 2012). The balance of available evidence suggests that while the Chinese government has indeed experienced problems with periodic violent opposition and protest, including some terrorist-style attacks, it faces a more significant political problem in trying to contain and control broader hostility to its rule in Xinjiang. Contrary to the state’s information, the largest and most violent incidents occurred in the 1990s and subsided from 1998. There were no allegations of terrorist activity within Xinjiang post-9/11 until a raid on an alleged ETIM training camp in January 2007, in Akto, near
the border with Kyrgyzstan (Panda 2007). At the same time, there has been a tendency in official reports to trawl for violent incidents and cast them as separatist or terrorist after the event (Bovingdon 2010: 188-190). Leading up to the Beijing Olympics of 2008 there were reports of kidnappings and attempted hijackings by Uyghur ‘terrorists,’ and for the first time official media reports drew a link between Uyghur terrorism and the violent protests in Tibet. The most intensive period of the ‘global war on terror’ was nonetheless less restive or violent in Xinjiang than the period of the 1990s. As Gardner Bovingdon (2010: 133-134) notes, this relative decline in violence is indicative of more intensive repression rather than a measure of ‘increasing satisfaction’ among Uyghurs and other minorities.

Indeed events from the 1990s on suggest the ways in which the combined strategy of more liberal economic development and tighter political control is failing to integrate the Uyghurs more closely with the Chinese core. Moreover, although separatist violence continues to be contained, let alone alleged Islamic terrorist violence, inter-communal violence between Uyghurs and Chinese in Xinjiang may be increasing in response to the state’s more intensive repression, as witnessed in the July 2009 ‘riots.’

The most significant incidents of violent resistance since the 1990s demonstrate the close relationship between the state’s policies and Uyghur responses. Before the 2009 ‘riots’ these were the Baren incident of April 1990 and the Ghulja (Yining) incident of February 1997. China’s official account presented the Baren incident as an organised ‘counter-revolutionary rebellion,’ led by Zeydin Yusup and his East Turkestan Islamic Party. Clashes between demonstrators, said to be shouting Islamic slogans, and local government officials escalated into a shootout in which Zeydin Yusup was killed. His followers were pursued into the hills by the military, leading to further casualties and the arrest of defeated ‘rebels’ (Millward 2007: 326-327). Other, academic accounts suggest the riots were provoked by the government closure of a newly built mosque in Akto, a town in Baren county, close to Kashgar, or complaints about the application (from 1988) of birth limits to minorities. Demonstrations grew into demands for religious freedom and spread to other towns throughout Xinjiang. When security forces were called out to quell the riots, including units of the PLA and Production and Construction Corps, some estimates suggest over 120 were killed in the resulting violence (Millward 2007: 327). The Ghulja riots of February 1997 were the culmination of almost a year of clashes with security
forces that were charged with implementing one of several ‘strike hard’ (yanda) anti-crime campaigns. These campaigns have been carried out every year in Xinjiang since 1996. They are often combined with broad security sweeps to warn against separatist activity or detain people for questioning (Bovingdon 2010: 53, 131-134). A sweep through Ghulja in the Ili region in search of separatist forces sparked a violent protest by over 1,000 Uyghurs on 5-6 February. During the protest, students were reported to have paraded an East Tukistan flag through the streets. The brutal actions of the security forces in putting down the demonstrations, and the hundreds of arrests, provoked further violent protests. Exiled Uyghur organisations claimed that over 100 people were killed (Chang 1997: 410). Other accounts claim that, over a two-week period, 3,000 to 5,000 people were arrested. Toward the end of February a train was derailed, and then three bus bombs exploded in Urumchi to coincide with the funeral of Deng Xiaoping, killing nine people and injuring twenty-eight others (Amensty International 1999: 18-25).

Post-9/11 the state attempted to present these incidents as evidence of the East Turkistan terrorist movement linked to the international terrorism and Islamic extremism of al Qaeda and the Taliban. But the government’s 2002 report manages to link only four incidents with particular groups. The Ghulja riots of 1997 are blamed on the East Turkestan Party of Allah, a group not mentioned in any other context. Another group mentioned, the East Turkestan Liberation Organisation (ETLO), was the only one directly linked to a specific death or injury in Xinjiang (one poisoning death in Kashgar). The ETLO, led by Mehmet Emin Hazret, was accused of other attacks, both inside Xinjiang and in Turkey and Kyrgyzstan. It was also linked with the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and terrorist training camps in Chechnya and Afghanistan. Hazret has denied all the official accusations against his organisation. The organisation accused of direct links with the international terrorism of al Qaeda and the Taliban was the ETIM. These links were said to include a meeting with Osama bin Laden, funding from al Qaeda and training in al Qaeda and Taliban camps. Hasan Mahsum, the leader of ETIM, was alleged to have trained terrorists and sent them into Xinjiang and other parts of China where they established their own training bases and weapons-producing workshops. The Pakistan government stated in December 2003 that Mahsum was killed in a raid on an al Qaeda camp on the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. Almost nothing in detail is known about several other groups
mentioned in China’s 2002 report. In December 2003 China’s Ministry of Public Security issued a new list of terrorist organisations linked to al Qaeda, which mentioned, in addition to the ETIM and ETLO, the World Uyghur Youth Congress and the East Turkestan Information Centre, based in Munich. The leaders of each group (Dolqun Isa and Abduljelil Qarkash, respectively) were the main targets, standing accused of financing, instructing and participating in terrorist acts associated with Xinjiang separatism. Before these accusations were made, both groups were primarily associated with publicity, the calling of congresses, and political promotion for Uyghur and Xinjiang issues (Millward 2004: 22-28).

Incidents such as the Ghulja riots of 1997, resembled demonstrations against government policy that degenerated into large-scale violence between local people and the authorities. One of the targets of the ‘strike hard’ campaigns begun in 1996 was ‘illegal religious practices.’ These included the revival of traditional practices, such as mashrap (social gatherings, particularly of Muslim youth) and private Koranic and religious instruction, which were eventually prohibited, leading to the arrest of religious students. The pressure of the strike hard crackdown may have contributed to the resentments that sparked the Ghulja riots (Millward 2004: 17; Becquelin 2000: 88-89).

Strike hard campaigns have become a fixture of state policy dealing with any form of organised opposition or separatist sentiment. One of the most extensive campaigns against Uyghur separatism was launched early in 2001, and was stepped up after 11 September. According to Amnesty International, this resulted in over 3,000 arrests and 20 executions from September 11 to the end of 2001 (Amnesty International 2002: 19). Later reports suggested that tens of thousands of people had been detained for investigation, with hundreds being charged and some being executed (Uyghur Human Rights Project 2007: 4). The state-run Xinjiang Daily reported that in 2005 18,227 individuals were detained for endangering state security (Uyghur Human Rights Project 2007: 4). These crackdowns make any form of opposition or separatist sentiment extremely difficult to express. Moreover, they represent the more aggressive aspects of a broader government strategy to stifle Uyghur separatism. In more recent years this has included attempts to clamp down on the development of religious, cultural and language practices. The authorities have not been prepared to tolerate unauthorised gatherings for religious purposes, and they have strictly enforced rules prohibiting religious
instruction or mosque attendance for children under eighteen. The government has also reduced the amount of class instruction given in ‘minority’ languages and merged some dedicated Uyghur schools with mainstream Chinese schools. These measures appear to be part of a more intensive policy to ‘Sinicise’ minority cultures. Since 2004 the state has openly promoted a policy of integration through development. During strike hard campaigns and other crackdowns on separatism, it has been said that Uyghurs inhabit an Orwellian world of state control and regular security sweeps. A wrong word here, an anti-Chinese joke there, can sometimes be sufficient grounds for detention (Bovingdon 2002: 76-78). The ‘global war on terror’ unfortunately provided a degree of tacit endorsement to the excessive application of state powers. It extended to China the opportunity to expand its influence in the Central Asian region and improve relations with the US.

In addition to its internal security crackdowns in Xinjiang, China’s government presented the problem of their ‘East Turkistan terrorist organisation’ as a part of regional and international terrorism. Although their own official accounts did not turn up many ‘terrorist’ attacks within China after 1998, they did point to attacks allegedly carried out by the Uyghur diaspora in Central Asia and further afield (Millward 2004: 26-28). China routinely linked separatist violence in Xinjiang with foreign support or ‘hostile’ external forces, from both exiled Uyghurs and states like the US, which aimed to split or subvert China’s sovereign territory. It was with these concerns in mind that China pursued a policy of wooing the Central Asian states on the borders of Xinjiang. This culminated in 1996 with the formation of the Group of Five (China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan; with the 2001 addition of Uzbekistan, the organisation became known as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation). The original purpose of this group was to deal with border disputes, but it rapidly turned toward the regional suppression of trans-border Islamic insurgents. Through a combination of diplomatic pressure and increased trade and investment, China extended its influence throughout these Central Asian states (Sheives 2006: 207-214). Initially these states were slow in responding to China’s requests to crackdown on exiled Uyghur separatists within their borders, but this changed with the 9/11 attacks. They subsequently co-operated in repatriating Uyghurs to China for trial and kept a tight rein on Uyghur organisations operating inside their borders, particularly in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, and by the early 2000s Uyghur political organisations were banned.
The Central Asian states could also see their own interest in joining China’s counter-terrorist campaign, given that many of them faced at times violent Islamic insurgencies. China helped establish a joint anti-terrorism centre in Tashkent (in June 2004), gave military aid to Kyrgyzstan, and launched a series of joint military exercises with its SCO partners. The SCO itself now routinely reflects China’s concern to work against all forms of ‘terrorism, separatism and extremism’ (Sheives 2006: 213).

The ‘global war on terror’ also sparked a revival in relations between the US and China, which only a few months before 9/11 were, according to one report, ‘on the verge of extinction’ (Gittings 2001: 5). Perhaps the most remarkable concessions that China gained were those from the United States itself. Indeed, the US Department of State initially gave considerable ground in accepting the official Chinese view of separatism and terrorism in Xinjiang. The US’s Patterns of Global Terrorism 2001 report (released in May 2002) acknowledged China’s cooperation with the ‘international community’ in fighting terrorism and praised the ‘encouraging and concrete’ results of counter-terrorism dialogue with China. The report also referred to Chinese concerns regarding ‘Islamic extremists’ operating in and around Xinjiang, and ‘credible reports that some Uyghurs who were trained by al Qaeda have returned to China’ (United States State Department 2002: 16-17). The US subsequently established an FBI presence in its Beijing embassy as part of its global counter-terrorism operations. China called on the US to be consistent in its prosecution of the ‘global war on terror’ and proscribe ‘terrorist’ groups operating in Xinjiang. In August 2002, the US acceded to the appeals of the Chinese government and formally listed the ETIM as a terrorist organisation, and the UN followed suit in September. Moreover, the US reinforced the impression that the ETIM was responsible for most of the terrorist attacks in Xinjiang (Millward 2004: 13-14).

These concession to China’s view of its terrorist problem proved to be short-lived. Faced with criticism from exiled Uyghurs and human rights groups, the US adopted a more cautious public discourse on ‘terrorism’ in China. US reports on global terrorism and those on religious freedom in China routinely point out that anti-terrorism measures should not serve to suppress the religious practices of Muslims in China. In December 2003 the US government refused to list a second Uyghur group nominated by China, the East Turkestan Liberation Organisation. In a more recent revision, the US State Department re-assigned the ETIM to a list of ‘groups of
concern,’ taking it off the terrorist list (United States State Department 2007). In 2004 the National Endowment for Democracy awarded a grant in support of the Uyghur American Association. The Bush administration endorsed the role of Rabiya Kadeer in leading exiled Uyghurs, and President Obama has returned to the annual convention of raising concerns with China’s human rights in relation to religious freedom (Mackerras 2009: 139-144).

Perhaps the most devastating blow to China’s change of policy toward the Uyghurs post-9/11 was the serious outbreak of violence associated with the July 2009 ‘riots’ in Urumqi. Although again clouded by a lack of open reporting and independent evidence to match official accounts of what occurred, events initially appeared to follow the pattern of previous demonstrations that turned violent. A group of perhaps hundreds of Uyghurs gathered in the northern parts of Urumqi, to protest against what they believed to be lenient treatment of Chinese accused of killing at least two Uyghur workers in a factory in the southern province of Guangdong. These workers were reportedly killed, and hundreds injured, after a false rumour spread that the Uyghur men had raped two Chinese woman. News of this incident spread to Xinjiang through the Internet and social media, sparking the July 5 demonstration in Urumqi. When the People’s Armed Police and possibly PLA troops attempted to force the demonstrators southward, away from a public square, attacks upon shops and Chinese in the vicinity allegedly broke out. What role the police and paramilitary may have played in the violence remains unclear. The ‘rioting’ that followed, and the actions of Chinese vigilante groups over subsequent days, led to the deaths of 197 people and thousands injured, the majority Chinese according to official reports. Communication networks with Xinjiang were shutdown and the events were considered serious enough for President Hu Jintao to return from a state visit in Italy to take charge. In an unusual measure, the Urumqi Party secretary, the highest ranking official in the city, was removed from his position. Some official accounts linked the ‘riots’ to terrorism and the ETIM, and accused Rabiya Kadeer and the World Uyghur Congress of agitating events. But the Uyghur demonstration appears to have been prompted by perceived injustice toward fellow Uyghurs in the south of China and showed few overt signs of separatist sentiment or even demands for greater autonomy. The troubling development was the rapid escalation of inter-communal violence between Uyghur and Chinese, and this was further exacerbated by a reported spate of syringe attacks, many of which were based on rumour, that set off further
Uyghur-Han violence and large demonstrations of Chinese concerned with their security. This serious breakdown of relations between Uyghurs and Chinese in Xinjiang, from which Urumqi has not yet fully recovered, is in large part the legacy of the hard-line policies against separatism since 9/11 and the increasing attempts to integrate Uyghurs into a Han-centric vision of national unity. More intense resentment on both sides appears to be the result (Bovingdon 2010; Millward 2009).

Conclusion

China’s state continues to expand its national wealth and capacity for regional and international influence. If anything, the assertion of its jurisdictional sovereignty in ‘minority’ zones has become more intensive. Yet the by now long-term experience of its ‘minority’ policies appear to be further from achieving their goal of national unification with the Chinese core than any time since the Cultural Revolution. The exercise of jurisdictional sovereignty over ‘minority’ zones continues to be challenged and appears to be a key factor in increasing ‘minority’-Chinese inter-communal violence. In casting Uyghur separatism as part of the ‘global war on terror’ the state effectively engaged in securatization of the issue, raising its international profile, intensifying state coercian and national unification policies. The risk is that this will further consolidate divisions between ‘minority’ and Chinese people, expanding the opportunity for mobilizing political violence on an inter-communal basis. Uyghurs, like Tibetans, cannot in sober reality hope for the independence of a separate state, and the majority do now seek ‘genuine autonomy’ instead. Concessions in this direction would ameliorate Uyghur-Chinese conflict, but would also challenge the state’s monopoly on power and risk escalating demands toward separatism or secession. This at times tragic dilemma for China’s jurisdictional sovereignty appears no nearer to satisfactory resolution.
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