Domestic and International Sources of Uyghurs' Conflict with the Chinese State

Xinjiang is located along the ancient Silk Road and historically has been the nexus connecting the East with the West. As one of the five ethnic minority autonomous regions in China, it is situated within a large and strategically important territory bordering several Central and South Asian countries. The Uyghur people, a Turkic ethnic group traditionally inhabiting various oases across contemporary southern Xinjiang, is currently the largest ethnic group living in Xinjiang. In addition to the Uyghurs, there are also many other ethnic groups, including Kazakhs and Mongols, who historically roamed the steppes of northern Xinjiang. The Han Chinese, relatively recent arrivals, are currently the second largest ethnic group in Xinjiang, mostly concentrated in urban areas in northern Xinjiang (Toops 2004).

In recent years, we have seen more violent forms of resistance from some Uyghurs towards the Chinese state, and many of such incidents have been designated as acts of terrorism by the Chinese government. In 2009 in Urumqi, the capital of Xinjiang, a protest by Uyghurs turned into a deadly riot that resulted in more than 200 civilian casualties, mostly Han Chinese. In November 2013, ethnic Uyghurs crashed a car in Tiananmen Square in Beijing, killing five people. In May of this year, bombs detonated at the Urumqi railway station and at a market, killing more than 30 people. Earlier in March, knife-wielding Uyghur attackers killed 29 civilians at Kunming Rail Station in China's southwestern Yunnan province. This perhaps indicates that the security threat to the Chinese state and society posed by Uyghurs is now spreading outside of Xinjiang. Continuing the trend of assassinating co-ethnics suspected of collaboration with the Chinese government by more radical Uyghurs, a prominent Uyghur cleric, the government-appointed Imam of Id Kah Mosque in Kashgar, was murdered in late July. Such outbursts of violence indicate the deterioration of security in Xinjiang.

The ongoing ethnic strife between Uyghurs and the Chinese state is historic and dates back to the 18th century. After the Qing dynasty eliminated the Dzungar Mongols in the mid-18th century, Xinjiang ("New Territory" in Chinese) was incorporated into the Qing Empire and the Uyghurs, along with other Turkic and Mongol people, became Chinese subjects. Immediately after the collapse of the Qing dynasty in 1911, Xinjiang entered a period of political chaos when Han Chinese and Hui Muslim warlords exerted intermittent control, while the Uyghurs rebelled and managed to establish two small, short-lived East Turkestan Republics (ETR). The second ETR (1944-49) was heavily supported by the Soviet Union. After the founding of the communist People's Republic of China (PRC), the ETR was forced by Soviets to be absorbed into the PRC (Millward and Tursun 2004). Thus, different from Tibet, which was to a great extent annexed through military means and waged rebellions throughout the mid to late 1950s, Xinjiang during the early years of the PRC was relatively peaceful. During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), Xinjiang was subject to similar types of radicalism ravaging the entire country. There was dissent and resistance to Chinese rule at this time; however, inter-ethnic relations between Uyghurs and Han Chinese during Mao China were relatively peaceful (Bellér-Hann 1997).

Uyghurs' political resistance towards the Chinese state has intensified since the early 1990s, when the number of reported incidents of Uyghur political mobilization spiked up. For example, during the Baren Incident of 1990, the rebel group Islamic Party of East Turkistan planned a series of synchronized attacks on government buildings, calling for jihad to kick out the Han Chinese from Xinjiang (Millward 2004; Dillon 2004). Also throughout the 1990s, there

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was a string of bombings and assassinations carried out by Uyghur separatists that targeted public places, particularly Uyghur government officials and religious clerics believed to collaborate with the Chinese government (Millward 2007:330). Following the Strike Hard Campaign of 1996 that targeted illegal religious activities, a large riot occurred in Yining (Ghulja) in early 1997. During this event, "rioters torched vehicles and attacked police and (Han) Chinese residents; their banners and slogans included calls for Uyghur equality and independence as well as religious sentiments" (Millward 2004: 17).

The CCP government's handling of Xinjiang and the Uyghurs since the founding of the PRC has much to blame. Beijing has little tolerance for political dissent – not to mention its draconian aversion to ethnic separatism as demanded by some Uyghur nationalists. Thus, any Uyghur making political demands, even if they are reasonable or moderate calls for cultural autonomy and equal treatment, can potentially be branded as a separatist and face severe repression from the state. Due to the Chinese state's fundamental distrust of Uyghurs' loyalty, Uyghurs have also been progressively disenfranchised politically within Xinjiang. An increasing number of leadership positions have been filled by Han Chinese or other more loyal ethnic minorities, such as Kazakhs and Mongols. Additionally, Uyghurs have faced increasing economic marginalization. The Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps, a semi-military organization staffed predominantly by Han Chinese, controls a large slice of the Xinjiang economy (Seymour 2000). Han Chinese migration into Xinjiang for the past few decades led to their domination of most urban businesses. Culturally, the Uyghur language has also been increasingly marginalized, and their religion, Islam, has been under constant surveillance of the Chinese state. The atheist CCP's official regulation on religious practice forbids its party members and youth under 18-years-old to follow any religion. In today's Xinjiang, however, Uyghurs have arguably become more religiously conservative than before, which is manifested by their observing more of the "orthodox" forms of Islam. This turn towards conservative and radical Islam has led to the Chinese state campaign against the "Three Evil Forces" among the Uyghurs – Terrorism, Separatism, and Religious Fundamentalism. However, during such campaigns, racially profiling Uyghurs has the effect of alienating the otherwise more moderate members of the Uyghur community. All of these domestic factors are crucial in explaining Uyghurs' resistance towards the Chinese state in its current radical forms.

However, a variety of international factors in the past and present have also exerted significant influence in facilitating the Uyghurs' political mobilization (Han 2013). The former Soviet Union, which incorporated much of Central Asia, played a significant role in shaping Uyghurs' perception of modernity and their inspiration for self-determination. Not only was the Soviet Union actively involved in the production and growth of modern Uyghur nationalism (Roberts 2009), but it was also directly involved in the founding of the second ETR by providing intelligence, weapons, and military training for Uyghur rebels (Forbes 1986). After the Sino-Soviet split, the Soviet Union orchestrated a mass exodus of Uyghurs and other Turkic people to Soviet Central Asia in 1962 and used its Central Asian Republics as bases for nationalist propaganda directed at Uyghurs in Xinjiang from the 1960s to the 1980s.

The independence of the five Central Asian Republics in the aftermath of the Soviet collapse provided strong ideational inspiration for the Uyghurs in Xinjiang (Roberts 1996). Consequently, nationalism as an ideology once again gained much traction among Uyghur nationalists. Influenced by the Ferghana Valley in Central Asia, and also by Afghanistan and Pakistan (Waite 2006), conservative Islamism also started to spread in Xinjiang. Thus it might not be a coincidence that the spike in violent Uyghur resistance towards the Chinese state coincided closely with the political changes in Central Asia since the early 1990s.

Lastly, the Uyghur diaspora community helped promote the profile of the Uyghur in the West, which provided opportunities and resources not only to sustain the Uyghur nationalist cause, but also to help instill a sense of hope and support for the Uyghur people in Xinjiang. In light of the current radical turn among some Uyghurs towards conservative Islam and violent tactics toward the Chinese state, it is hard to measure how much sway the western-based secular Uyghur community still has in Xinjiang.

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