

# China Policy Institute Policy Paper: No 7

## Ethnic Violence in Xinjiang: Causes, Responses, and Future Outlook

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### Significance

Ethnic violence has been on the rise in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR). In the short term the violence will be suppressed with the use of hard policies, characterised by a strong security presence. Soft policies, which financially incentivise the promotion of ethnic culture, and programs to improve education outcomes for minorities, will thereafter be stressed. In the long term, both policy strategies practiced by the state do not fully address the main reasons for the rise of ethnic tensions in the region. Left unattended, this will lead to increasing acts of sporadic ethnic violence in the future.

### Main Findings

Tensions between Uyghurs and Hans have increased due to ethno-cultural repression such as state policies that limit religious practices, the phasing out of Uyghur language instruction in schools, and the increasing negative commodification and representation of Uyghurs.

Perhaps the most culpable factors behind current ethnic tensions are socio-economic, such as segmented labour shares and unequal sectoral distribution in occupational categories. Despite state preferential policies in education for ethnic minorities, Uyghurs are not receiving the same returns to their education as Hans. Hans dominate high status and high wage jobs, whereas Uyghurs are at the opposite end of the spectrum. Coupled with growing Han migration to Xinjiang, economic inequalities between Uyghurs and Hans are intensifying, contributing to heighten ethnic-based consciousness.

Since Uyghurs and Hans receive different outcomes in the labour market this can create and reinforce geographical divisions. As a prime example, wages may determine residential location. This is alarming given Uyghurs and Hans already reside in relatively closed ethnic communities and seldom interact meaningfully with each other – which is a necessary and essential component for improving trust between both groups. This does not bode well for economic, social and political integration in the short- and long-term, and will only intensify perceived (or real) differences between Uyghurs and Hans, thus reinforcing ethno-cultural tensions and the propensity for flash ethnic violence.

Framing the issue as “separatist terrorism” rooted and supported by foreign interests is a purposeful strategy by the state to divert attention from the domestic causes behind the rise of ethno-cultural consciousness and inter-ethnic tensions. Beijing's attempts to link the violence to religious terrorism overseas can be effective in reducing the scope of ethnic grievances to the immediate region.

It will be in the best interest of the state to immediately address the growing socio-economic divide between Uyghurs and Hans in the region. This is the most prudent strategy in the long-run to reduce potential tensions and violence between Uyghurs and Hans.

### **Detailed Analysis**

On July 28, 2014, a mass knife and axe-wielding Uyghur attack in the Xinjiang towns of Elixku and Huangdi claimed the lives of 37 civilians, with 59 attackers subsequently killed by security forces. In a similar style of attack, on March 1, 2014, a knife attack in Kunming's Railway Station left 29 dead and injured 130. Chinese state media reported that Uyghur militants were the alleged assailants. This followed two separate outburst of ethnic violence between Uyghurs and Hans in Xinjiang on June 26 and 28, 2013 where 35 people were killed. Suffice to say, ethnic tensions between the nearly 8.4 million Uyghurs (a Turkic, mostly Sunni-Muslim group) and Han Chinese (China's predominant ethnic group) in Xinjiang is intensifying.

### **The State's Response**

The state's response to repeated expressions of Uyghur unrest have consisted of oscillating soft and hard policies. The soft policy approach is exemplified by funding the building and upkeep of mosques. According to the State Information Office there are over 20,000 mosques in XUAR which makes this initiative relatively significant.

In addition, the state has preferential policies in education for ethnic minorities which consists of bursaries, scholarships, remedial programs, and the lowering of minimum requirements for the National University Entrance Examination – a mandatory exam for all students to enter university. Despite preferential policies in education, Uyghurs are experiencing an ‘ethnic penalty’ in the labour market since they are not receiving the same returns to their education as Hans (see ‘Socio-economic Disparities’ section for further evidence). This represents an inefficient allocation of human capital imposing an added economic cost on the region. Given the state's high investment in education, coupled with the costs for maintaining preferential policies, it is imperative that the state reaps the rewards on its human capital “investment”, to ensure Uyghurs realize their potential in the labour market, and the economic losses that come with the under-utilization of their human capital are minimized.

The hard policy approach is illustrated by the state's attempt to intimidate and threaten potential Uyghur dissidents and ‘re-educate’ and ‘reform’ religious leaders to ensure they do not advocate Islamic ‘fundamentalism’ or ‘radicalism’ as defined by the state, or to the prevent leaders to forge connections between the approximately 21 million Muslims in China. For the former point, the experience of Uyghur academic, Ilham Tohti, is instructive. Tohti has visibly spoken out against the state's hard policy approach to govern XUAR, and has

called for greater Uyghur autonomy as guaranteed by the P.R. China's "Regional Ethnic Autonomy Law" issued by the Second Session of the Sixth National People's Congress on May 31, 1984.

Subsequently, Tohti has been repeatedly detained by Chinese authorities over the years, culminating in a life prison sentence due to "separatist activities" since September 2014. For the latter point, this has been a mechanism in other jurisdictions to foster ethnic division and protest, leading to potential political mobilization. The Chinese state is keen to eliminate this possibility in Xinjiang.

The hard policy approach – in play at the moment – is fundamentally a security apparatus. There are strong efforts to clamp down on 'illegal' mosque constructions when the state perceives them to be a threat to security. In present-day Xinjiang there has been an increasing visible security presence exemplified by the rolling out of a grid 'social management system'. Essentially, communities in Xinjiang have been divided into zones, and then a group of party members are assigned to each zone where they are tasked to monitor and conduct surveillance of various activities that are threatening, or potentially threatening, to "social stability". In early 2014, the state announced approximately 200,000 cadres will live with local communities in Xinjiang making this a potentially large and significant undertaking. In practice, there is no conformity in terms of how surveillance is conducted. It varies depending on the area. At the very least, party members have relatively sophisticated technologies at their disposal if they elect – which seems to be employed more readily in the urban areas. This may involve using riot-proof HD Cameras, policing boxes, and introducing 24-hour inspection routes. Furthermore, Uyghurs in both Xinjiang and across the nation are randomly targeted for surveillance and scrutiny by state authorities, who justified their actions citing the need for increased security measures.

The state is also keen to paint the ethnic violence in Xinjiang as religious terrorism. State media have suggested that some individuals behind the violence participated in overseas extremist and terrorist organisations, including Al-Qaeda and ISIS. These claims warrant further investigation. Notwithstanding, they fit a common state narrative that portrays ethno-religious violence as originating outside China, such as in Pakistan, Turkey and Syria, and not home-grown. This narrative allows the state to side-step the domestic root causes of ethnic tensions. Moreover, it is a strategy to contain grievances within the region by suggesting it is not a domestic issue per se, but rather a foreign one. This may placate the scaling up of ethnic violence in other ethnic-dominated areas of China, and more acutely, among the Muslim population spread across China who may want to show a support of solidarity.

### **Ethno-Cultural Repression**

State policies that limit ethno-cultural practices are major contributing factors to Uyghur-Han tensions. The Communist Party of China (CPC) continues to be a staunchly atheist organization. All Party members and employees on the state payroll are not permitted to wear religious attire such as Islamic head scarves and coverings (including the *doppa* cap for males), or engage in religious practices such as fasting during Ramadan. While Article 36 of China's constitution

guarantees religious freedom, in practice, individuals under the age of 18 are not allowed to enter religious places of worship such as churches, temples and mosques, or pray in schools. The study of religious texts is only permitted in designated state school. There are documented accounts of state informers regularly attending gatherings, sermons or prayers in local mosques.<sup>1</sup>

In addition, Chinese authorities have slowly phased out the use of ethnic minority languages as the primary mode of instruction in the majority of schools, leaving Mandarin Chinese the dominant working language.<sup>2</sup> The reaction by members of the Uyghur community in Xinjiang is often one of resistance to the extent of sparking potential violence. For example, in May 2014 a mass protest in front of government buildings in a township in Aksu prefecture's Kucha County turned violent when participants beat the principal of a school and a township official, and pelted stones at the buildings. In retort, state authorities generally respond that the shift to a near-universal use of Mandarin Chinese in schools ensures ethnic minorities can compete on equal footing with Hans in the labour market, and relatedly, to maximize their educational potential. Whether this strategy has been successful is another narrative.<sup>3</sup>

Suffice to say, these practices, in sum, can potentially lead to a process of deculturalization by depriving ethnic minority youths grounding in traditional ethno-cultural values. The lack of meaningful exposure of ethno-cultural group practices at a young age will encourage ethnic minorities to adopt the secular ideology of the Chinese state rather than to practice the ethno-cultural group practices in adulthood. The pressure to adopt 'Han culture' over a hybrid ethnic minority/Han culture, or ethnic minority culture on its own, is further exasperated by the commodification of ethnic minorities. The modern Chinese state has a tendency to depict ethnic minorities as exotic practitioners of "backward" traditions, and prone to poverty and illiteracy.<sup>4</sup> This is contrasted to the Han majority, who are seen as united, modern, and "superior".<sup>5</sup> For the young ethnic minority 'acting Han' is generally seen as the passport for social acceptance and higher status, given it is perceived as a marker of sophistication and 'being modern'.

The overall effects of state policies and practices on ethnic minorities, coupled with the growing numerical presence of Han Chinese in once ethnic minority dominated areas, has led to ethnic minorities worrying that their offspring will be drawn away from their traditional ethno-cultural practices by the attraction of Han materialism.

### **Migration and Settlement Patterns**

Since the establishment of XUAR in October 1955, the CPC instituted a program of resettling Hans to 'rusticate' urban youths and integrate the non-Han population into China. As a result, Xinjiang's Han-population increased steadily. In aggregate terms, between 1953 and 2010 the Han Chinese population increased their share of the region's total population from 6.1 percent to 40.1 percent.

Xinjiang's Hans have a tendency to settle in wealthier urban areas, while Uyghurs tend to constitute the majority in rural areas or the poorer urban areas of southern Xinjiang. This is alarming since their geographical variances points to a propensity for low levels of meaningful interactions between Uyghurs and Hans, which is a

necessary component to engineer trust between both groups. Officially, 80.8 percent of Uyghurs reside in rural areas, in comparison to 46.4 percent for Hans; 9.0 and 10.1 percent of Uyghurs live in the town and city, with a corresponding figure of 13.0 and 40.6 percent for the Han population.

The strong Han presence in cities encourages claims that a form of internal Han colonization, through encirclement or population swamping, is taking place in the region. Fuelling this claim are statistics which indicate that between 1991 and 2011, Han presence in Xinjiang's urban areas increased at a positive rate of about 1.78 percent, with the corresponding rate for Uyghurs at -0.07 percent.

### **Socio-Economic Disparities**

Xinjiang's socio-economic environment is the most appropriate context to understand underlying Uyghur-Han tensions. Simply put, Hans earn more than Uyghurs in Xinjiang. They are over-represented in high-status and high-paying occupations (e.g. professional and managerial jobs), in which over 35 percent of the Han working population works in comparison to 13 percent of Uyghurs. Ethnic tensions and the rise of ethno-cultural consciousness for Uyghurs ensues from the fact that the group's job options are limited to low-status and low-paying positions.

Ironically, economic incentives continue to be one of the main tools Chinese authorities use to manage the Uyghur population, in spite of their poor economic performance in the labour market compared to Hans. This has been one of the key aspects stressed in the recent Central Work Forum (CWF) on Xinjiang in 2014. To boost employment and income levels for Uyghurs, the CWF on Xinjiang proposed to increase fiscal transfers. This does not necessarily increase the odds of Uyghurs obtaining high status/high wage jobs. Moreover, the CWF recommendations to increase urbanization and interregional migration, while a good step in principle, often means more Han migration into urban Xinjiang rather than ethnic minority migration. Finally, the last major recommendation to "strengthen state education" while important, can have a moot effect given that Uyghurs have difficulties obtaining high status and high wage jobs in spite of having a strong education background. The underlying idea behind authorities' belief in this policy strategy is that Uyghurs primarily want a comfortable economic life for themselves and their offspring – a reasonable premise for any group. However, complications arise as this reality has not come to pass when using the Han Chinese experiences as a gauge for success, which the majority of Uyghurs use as a yardstick. Uyghurs continue to watch the better paying jobs go to Hans while the more labour-intensive, poorer paying positions are designated to Uyghurs.

Until socio-economic inequalities between Uyghurs and Hans have been corrected in the labour market, Uyghur ethno-cultural consciousness will be acute, and Uyghur-Han Chinese conflict will continue to play a significant role in the history of Xinjiang.

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*Views and assessments articulated in the CPI Policy Papers are that of the author. They do not necessarily represent the views of the CPI at the University of Nottingham.*

## **Endnotes**

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<sup>1</sup> See Fuller, G.E. and J.N. Lipman (2004) "Islam in Xinjiang", in F.S. Starr (ed.) *Xinjiang: China's Muslim Borderland*. Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, pp. 320-352; Tam, J. and Hasmath, R. (2014) "Navigating Uncertainty: The Survival Strategies of Religious NGOs in China", *University of Oxford Department of Sociology Working Paper* 2014-07: 1-17.

<sup>2</sup> See Hasmath, R. (2011) "The Education of Ethnic Minorities in Beijing", *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 34(11): 1835-1854.

<sup>3</sup> See Hasmath, R., Ho, B. and Liu, E. (2012) "Ethnic Minority Disadvantages in China's Labor Market?", *University of Oxford China Growth Centre Discussion Paper* 16: 1-35; Hasmath, R. (2011) "From Job Search to Hiring to Promotion: The Labour Market Experiences of Ethnic Minorities in Beijing", *International Labour Review* 150(1/2): 189-201.

<sup>4</sup> See Hasmath, R. (2014) "The Interactions of Ethnic Minorities in Beijing", *University of Oxford Centre on Migration, Policy and Society Working Paper* 14-111: 1-26.

<sup>5</sup> See Blum, S. (2001) *Portraits of Primitives: Ordering Human Kinds in the Chinese Nation*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.