China: Xinjiang, Agriculture and the Uighur Population

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Key Points

- As China’s western-most province, Xinjiang is an important region for the Chinese Communist Party, both economically and strategically.

- Xinjiang is home to a Turkic-speaking Muslim Uighur minority who make up eight million of Xinjiang’s 19 million people.

- Agricultural policies that encourage Han Chinese to migrate into Xinjiang have contributed to tensions between the migrant groups and ethnic Uighurs.

- Other policies aimed at resolving ethnic divisions may be needed in order to generate meaningful peace and order within the western region.

Summary

Xinjiang is an important region for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), both economically and strategically. The Chinese Government blames Xinjiang’s recent high levels of violence on Uighur extremists and separatists. The Uighur population, on the other hand, believe that the violence is the result of strict Chinese control over the Uighur population’s culture and religion. Policies aimed at encouraging economic growth through the agricultural sector, and high levels of investment in domestic security, are likely to add to the existing tensions between the Chinese Han and Uighurs. In order to develop sustainable and genuine peace within the western region, the CCP will need to place greater focus on harmonising ethnic divisions and identity politics.
Analysis

History of Xinjiang Province

Xinjiang province is home to the ethnic Uighur population. The Uighurs are a Muslim population and share closer cultural and ethnic ties to Central Asia, rather than China’s dominant Han population. The Turkic-speaking Uighur minority make up eight million of Xinjiang’s 19 million people.

The Uighur-populated region has been under Chinese control since the 18th century. The Uighurs briefly declared independence in the 1940s, but communist forces later reclaimed control over Xinjiang in 1949. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990s, demonstrations calling for Xinjiang’s independence increased after similar ethnic groups emerged as independent states in Central Asia. Beijing quickly began suppressing those demonstrations and Uighur activists were forced underground.

Xinjiang is bordered by eight countries, including Mongolia, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India. It is one of the driest regions in the world, and is almost totally surrounded by mountain ranges, including the Pamirs and Himalayas. The region is rich with mineral and oil deposits, and is scattered with open mines, factories and desert. For China, it has long been a region with significant economic importance. The famous Silk Road ran through the region and traditionally enabled China to connect with important trading partners throughout Asia and Europe.

The Uighur independence movement poses two problems for the CCP. Firstly, their strong ethnic identity is vastly different from that of the Han population and, therefore, is perceived to pose a threat to the stability and control of the regime in Xinjiang. Xinjiang is considered to be a buffer zone between Central Asia and the rest of China, so any loss of control within this area may make Beijing nervous. Secondly, the ethnic Uighur population lives in a geographical region that is rich in resources and economic opportunity. One-third of China’s natural gas and oil reserves are found in Xinjiang, and the region also has large deposits of gold and uranium. Those problems, coupled with the strategic importance of Xinjiang lying along the Silk Road, mean that Chinese policy has developed to ensure that the State maintains control over the ethnic Uighurs.

Han Migration and Ethnic Tensions

Historically, Xinjiang’s Uighur population has outweighed the ethnic Han population. In 1949, 82 per cent of the population in Xinjiang were Uighurs. Due to Beijing’s policies designed to actively encourage migration into the region, however, the Uighur population today makes up just under half of the total population. Xinjiang’s Han population has increased in the region from 220,000 in 1949, to 8.4 million in 2008. Much of this migration can be attributed to the Chinese Government’s incentives to migrate into the region.

According to the CCP, the government has pursued a policy to promote economic development in Xinjiang over demographic development. Strategies to increase the workforce by encouraging migration, however, have caused many Uighurs to resent migrants. The population increase has placed a strain on limited resources including the
availability of land and water resources. Many of the Han Chinese also tend to be wealthier than the ethnic Uighurs. This has led to economic disparity between the ethnic groups and there are claims that both government and private sectors have discriminatory employment practices against the Uighurs.

Tension has been growing for years between the Han Chinese and the Uighurs in Xinjiang. In the 1990s and late 2000s, the strain between the two groups turned into violent protests and riots. In 2009, more than 180 people, mostly Han, died as a result of ethnically-motivated street violence. At least four people were killed and eight injured in a knife attack in Korla, central Xinjiang, in 2013. In 2014 riots in Shache, a county in Xinjiang, resulted in 96 people being killed. There have also been reports of suicide bombers and serious terror attacks perpetrated by radicalised Uighur groups.

The East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) is an extremist group founded in Xinjiang. The Chinese Government blames the ETIM for the violence in Xinjiang, while the separatist militants justify their actions as a result of Uighur oppression. In 2017, a knife attack in Xinjiang coincided with the growing threat of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in the region, sparking fears that ISIS could have its sights set on attacking China through its western province. Chinese state media reported in January 2018 that the regional government would construct a “Great Wall” along its 5,700 kilometre border to prevent the infiltration of militants from outside Chinese borders.

**Chinese Communist Party Crackdown**

The Chinese Government has responded to unrest with a major crackdown against the Uighurs. In August 2014, Chinese state media reported that police had shot 59 terrorists and arrested 215 others. During Ramadan in July 2014, the government prohibited the Islamic-prescribed fast. The government has also banned beards and moustaches, and has banned women from wearing traditional veils and head coverings in public.

In order to control tensions and encourage obedience, Beijing has increased its investment in western China. Over the course of a decade, security expenditure in Xinjiang has increased from 5.45 billion yuan ($1.12 billion) in 2007, to 57.95 billion yuan in 2017 ($11.95 billion). Authorities appear to have reacted to the threat of terrorism, and spending on security now exceeds health care (more than double) and social welfare expenditure (11 per cent higher) within the region. Security spending in Xinjiang is almost double the amount spent in Shanghai, which has a population that is similar in size to that of Xinjiang.

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**How much China spends on security per person**

*(in thousands of yuan)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>2016</th>
<th>2017</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tibet Autonomous Region*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xinjiang</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beijing</td>
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<td>Shanghai</td>
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<tr>
<td>Guangdong</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National average</td>
<td>1.74</td>
<td>2.39</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*Estimate

Source: Nikkei Asian Review
Ethnic tensions have led the government to install various security checkpoints throughout the region, and to deploy riot police on some street corners. The region is littered with checkpoints and surveillance; an indication of just how tight Chinese state control is within the region. There are abundant police stations, with some built within 500 metres of each other.

Security policy within Xinjiang was markedly altered when Chen Quanguo was appointed as the region’s Communist Party Secretary in August 2016. In November 2016, Xinjiang residents were told to surrender their passports to police. To travel abroad, Uighurs must undertake an elaborate police vetting process before they can be approved to travel. The government has also invested in education within the region and has built political re-education centres where Uighurs appear to be held for several months at a time, often without formal charges. Education in Xinjiang seeks to strongly discourage Islamic education and emphasises Han cultural systems. The centres aim to promote ethnic harmony and encourage stability within Xinjiang. While China’s policies aim to control the Uighurs and prevent disorder and extremism from developing, they could have the unintended consequence of creating resentment among the Uighurs. If that is not managed, it could undermine the CCP’s authority in the region.

**Agriculture in Xinjiang**

Since 1949, the Chinese Government has focused on the economic and social development of Xinjiang. One of the policies aimed at ensuring the CCP remains in control of Xinjiang is to dilute the population of ethnic Uighurs. Economic incentives through agricultural production are one way of ensuring that there is a steady inflow of Han Chinese into the region.

Xinjiang’s industrial, agricultural and service sectors have grown rapidly. Among other polices designed to ensure control over the minority Uighur population, Secretary Chen has also set about modernising agriculture. While such advancements have a beneficial effect on Xinjiang’s agricultural production, the benefits are not equally shared among all citizens.

Agricultural development policies not only encourage Han Chinese into the area, but they also increase poverty among the Uighur population. Those repressive policies have seen large portions of farmland taken away from Uighur farmers and given to Han Chinese migrants. A reduction in farmland not only affects Uighur livelihoods, but in many cases farmers simply cannot afford to feed their families from the land that they retain.

Xinjiang is China’s largest cotton-producing region. In 2016 it produced 67 per cent (3.59 million tonnes) of the national total. Despite being one of the world’s leading producers of cotton, China does not produce it efficiently. It maintains a quota on international cotton imports to protect the local market, and Chinese land-use policies prevent larger cotton farms from being established. Without farms that can accommodate mechanised agriculture, China will price itself out of the international market and will not be able to compete with other countries that may have a competitive advantage in cotton production. Without those protectionist policies, however, local Uighur cotton farmers are likely to struggle. Any change to the status quo is likely to exacerbate current tensions existing within the region.
There is a belief within the Chinese leadership that developing agriculture and textile manufacturing can aid in settling tensions and ethnic conflict. The leaders of Xinjiang province promote organic agriculture and agricultural tourism with the aim of modernising the sector. Those developments, along with the development of the textile industry, could reduce unemployment in both Han and Uighur populations. If not done with due caution, however, there is a danger that discriminatory practices will cap the success of the Uighur population and have little effect on easing tensions.

Threats to Xinjiang’s water supply also have the potential to exacerbate tensions. The region’s arid climate means that there is potential for it to experience future water insecurity. Xinjiang’s growing population and reliance on water-intensive cotton production places further strain on resources that are already declining. Threats to water security will not only worsen current tensions between the two ethnic groups in Xinjiang, but also have the potential to create long-term consequences for the region and wider China.

Over 2,000 years ago, pastoralists built a system of subterranean channels in Xinjiang. With water traveling from the highest peaks of the Tianshan Mountains, the underground system is considered an engineering marvel and a source of pride for the local Uighur population. The system has bolstered the water security of an arid area, allowing farmers, goat herders and traders to function within the region. Following the region’s intense period of industrial development, however, the demand from larger farms and petroleum drillers is drying up the Turpan Basin, the source of many of the subterranean channels from which water is derived. Up to a dozen new underground tunnels are beginning to run dry every year, and others are destroyed by oil contamination. Water security problems will only exacerbate the tensions that already exist within the region. Uighurs will instead be forced to draw water from the state’s piped supply, and the destruction of their ancient underground system is likely to be met with cultural sadness and further add to existing tensions.

**Future Directions**

In early March 2018, the CCP announced its decision to eliminate presidential term limits. That decision enables President Xi Jinping to rule beyond the two-term limit that has existed since the death of Chairman Mao Zedong. The decision may mean that the current trend of Uighur suppression and China’s agricultural policy may be around for many decades into the future.

China’s approach is to ensure that its western frontier will replicate the development of the eastern provinces. That is particularly important for the CCP’s strategy to ensure that the Xinjiang population remains under control and the threat of terrorism is managed. While implementing agricultural policies and investment in domestic security, Beijing may need to consider the overall effect on Xinjiang’s Uighur people.

Investments in the region should be aimed at creating genuine peace and security, rather than ethnic divides that favour Han Chinese immigrants. Developing agriculture within Xinjiang has the potential to ease some of the problems that China’s oppressive policies have had on the Uighurs. If China uses the agricultural sector to further create divisions among the Han and Uighur populations, however, it is likely to only add to the problem that it so
desperately seeks to eradicate. A combination of inclusive and humanitarian policies may assist in the prevention of future Uighurs becoming resentful and, at worst, radicalised.

For the CCP, the existence of any ethnic group that differs from its own narrative is viewed as a threat to the Party’s control over the country. The differences in language, religion and culture influence the oppressive policies against the Uighurs. If the CCP were to consider a different approach, perhaps one that involves dialogue between the Han and the ethnic Uighurs, there may be greater opportunity for stability in the region. For the Uighur population who fear the loss of their religious and cultural identity, it is crucial that Chinese policies do not further antagonise the situation.

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