

China and Xinjiang: Kunming incident

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That China is facing increasing dissidence in recent times in its minority areas is a statement of fact that needs no additional corroboration. This dissidence is particularly acute in both Xinjiang and Tibet. Last week the Chinese official media reported that more than 10 members of the Xinjiang ‘separatist forces’ knifed to death more than 29 civilians at Kunming Railway station; seriously injuring another 130. This occurrence was labelled as a ‘terrorist’ action and the Chinese also admitted that such violent attacks have been increasing in Xinjiang since 2009. The Regional Public Security Bureau reported that about 190 such attacks have taken place in 2012, admitting to an increase over 2011 by a ‘significant margin.’ It has also been admitted that Uyghur ‘separatists’ have changed tactics and have started attacking civilians instead of the ‘symbols’ of governmental authority such as police stations, police vehicles or regional party and government offices. Fortunately for the Chinese authorities the separatist Uyghur group led by Rebiya Kadeer has not achieved significant traction.

Significantly the Chinese authorities do not concede any laxity on their part or aver that their policies may be faulty; but pin the blame on ‘outside’ interference that seeks to destabilize China, prevent its rise as a ‘global power’ and to exploit ‘gullible’ Uyghurs. The Chinese say that they face the triple threats of terrorism, separatism and extremism. The present Chinese government claims that historically Xinjiang has always been a part of China since BC 60; although this claim is rather far -fetched since Xinjiang finally became a part of China only under the Qing dynasty [1644-1911]. Chinese texts would have us believe that Xinjiang was never ‘conquered,’ but that even when it was under the sway of local rulers, it was always reunited [tong yi] or was recovered [shou fu] by the motherland. This questionable version of history is used as a means to demonstrate the inalienable links that bind mainland [Han] Chinese and the Uyghurs of Xinjiang [New Dominions]. For the Uyghurs the Chinese designation of the region as ‘Xinjiang’ is in itself a distortion for they are Turkic in ethnic origin, Sunni Muslim by religion and culturally more akin to the Central Asian Kirghiz, Kazakhs and Turkmen. For them their land [Xinjiang] is East Turkestan.

To keep Xinjiang, which is about 1/6th of the Chinese landmass, under tight control is an absolute strategic necessity for China. It brooks for no laxity. Strategically located Xinjiang borders eight countries, is the home of China’s nuclear testing facilities [Lop Nor], contains sustainable reserves of oil and gas and if China is to access the vast Central Asian oil and gas

reserves a network of pipelines would have to traverse through this region to reach the markets of eastern China.

In the main the fulcrum of Chinese policies towards Xinjiang has rested on two pivots. Firstly they have flooded Xinjiang with Han Chinese migrants from mainland China in a bid to change the demographic profile of the province. From barely constituting 6 per cent of the population at the time of the founding of the People's Republic in 1949, the Han Chinese are now about 44 percent of the population. The Han Chinese reside and work mainly in the cities with Urumqi, the capital, now being only 6 per cent Uyghur. This has resulted in a distortion with the bulk of the development works being concentrated in the urban areas; much to the detriment and immense dissatisfaction of the Uyghurs, who live mainly in the rural areas. Even scarce water supplies have been diverted to the cities marginalizing most Uyghur farmers. The Uyghurs feel that the huge development plans that China has undertaken in Xinjiang have largely benefitted the Han Chinese living there resulting in severe unemployment amongst the younger generation of Uyghurs. This has led to acute dis-satisfaction with Chinese rule.

Secondly the Chinese have tried to assimilate the Uyghurs into the mainstream; but this has only led to complaints of discrimination, restrictive religious practices and the suppression of Uyghur language education. Similarly in their bid to 'modernize' the ancient city of Kashgar, the Chinese have destroyed large parts of the city in order to develop modern shopping malls and housing complexes with running water and electricity; much to the chagrin of some Uyghurs who see this as yet another attempt on the part of the Chinese to destroy their cultural heritage and identity. The end result has been that the two communities live in distinct 'ghettoized' areas and rarely mix socially. With distinctive eating habits; the Uyghurs being Muslim abhor pork, the Han Chinese relish the dish with the result that it is not uncommon to see in a restaurant the two communities sitting quite separately!

The Kunming massacre is bound to have widespread repercussions within Chinese society. A certain disdain and loathing is bound to develop for the minorities, particularly Muslims. In turn this will lead for calls for enhanced security measures and even more repressive policies towards the minority provinces of Xinjiang and perhaps Tibet. Muslim Uyghurs living outside Xinjiang in other parts of China are probably afraid for any retaliation, which in turn could spark fears of vigilantism. The fact that the Chinese government has had to issue a specific press censorship order covering the Kunming massacre, that nothing but the Xinhua version would be permitted to be published, underscores their fear that the situation is still volatile. Even the People's Daily had to warn people not to turn their anger for terrorists to 'hostility towards an ethnic group.' It is easier said than done. It is for this reason also that the Chinese government took days to come in support of the Russian position on the events in Ukraine; but were very careful to underline that Ukrainian 'territorial integrity' must be maintained. The Chinese themselves fear 'separatist' movements and would not support any Russian attempt to slice away Crimea from the Ukraine. In addition the Chinese press has been careful to attribute the Kunming killings to 'jihadist' Islamic influence on Xinjiang separatists, but the question that remains unanswered is how this 'influence' was allowed to penetrate the well-guarded Chinese frontier?

The Xinjiang dissidents timed their killings for maximum effect knowing full well that the National People's Conference [NPC] was just about to begin its deliberations. To deflect blame the Chinese leadership has already attributed this incident to 'outside' influence, for otherwise uncomfortable questions might yet be asked of the leadership acumen of the President Xi Jinping, who had underlined domestic stability and law and order as his prime objectives. In time, if not already, the Chinese authorities will begin to focus their attention on the jihadi/Sunni Islamic terrorist elements that are well entrenched within Pakistani society. They are aware of their potential for creating disaffection amongst their fellow Sunni Muslim brothers living in Xinjiang. In the future China will have to guard rather assiduously the road they built linking POK with Xinjiang. Here lies yet another opportunity for India and an issue for common purpose with China.

Views expressed are of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the IDSA or of the Government of India.