Jihad and Geopolitics: A Case Study of Uyghur Separatism in Xinjiang

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ABSTRACT

Communities engaged in separatism in Xinjiang or in any other region (from Africa to Asia) have (definite) geopolitical objectives. They resort to terrorism to achieve their defined geopolitical ambition. The objective of such violent extremism is easy to comprehend. Invariably it is the creation of a distinct (separate) homeland or a distinct geopolitical entity. At times, if it is an Islamic domain and the communities in question have a distinct Muslim identity, it becomes difficult to differentiate between Separatism and Jihad. The fusion of ethnic separatism and jihad often results in the radicalization of ethnic communities and then the ethnonational conflict serves as a means of geopolitics. Questions of ethnic identity, ethnonationalism and secessionism are inherently interconnected geopolitical realities. Situated in the middle of Inner Asia and Central Asia, Xinjiang or East Turkistan, the desired homeland of Uyghurs, has become another geopolitical theatre of jihad. The jihadis (active in the region) constantly challenge the sovereignty and territorial integrity of China. Jihad is waged for reconfiguration of the geopolitical map of the region. Therefore, it offers a good case study for ethnic separatism and religious extremism, as well as jihad and ethnogeopolitics. This research attempts to analyse jihad in Western China and its geopolitical ramifications.

Key Words : Jihad, Geopolitics, Uyghurs, Xinjiang, Separatism

INTRODUCTION

Communities engaged in separatism in Xinjiang or in any other region (from Africa to Asia) have (definite) geopolitical objectives. They resort to terrorism to achieve their defined geopolitical ambition. The objective of such violent extremism is easy to comprehend. Invariably it is the creation of a distinct (separate) homeland or a distinct geopolitical entity. At times, if it is an Islamic domain and the communities in question have a distinct Muslim identity, it becomes difficult to differentiate between Separatism and Jihad. The fusion of ethnic separatism and jihad often results in the radicalization of ethnic communities and then the ethnonational conflict serves as a means of geopolitics. In such a situation, the idea and ideology of jihad provide them with the geopolitical motivations and therefore the violent

rebellion becomes the method to get to their geopolitical objective. It motivates the Jihadis to commit to the campaign of indiscriminate warfare which they consider to be a legitimate act of 'holy war'. Today it makes a simple explanation of the wider geopolitical phenomenon of ethnic separatism, Islamic terrorism and violent extremism.

Situated in the middle of Inner Asia and Central Asia, Xinjiang or East Turkistan, the desired homeland of Uyghurs, has become another geopolitical theatre of jihad. Therefore, it offers a good case study for ethnic separatism and religious extremism, as well as jihad and ethnogeopolitics.

Separatism in Xinjiang :

Uyghur Muslim violence in Xinjiang has two justifications - ethnic separatism and religious fundamentalism (Davis, 2010). The separatism in Xinjiang has got increasingly tied to religion. Islam lies at the heart of the identities of Muslims in China even though issues involving ethnicity and language have been present to varying extents (Gunaratna *et al.,* 2010). The separatist organizations are increasingly associated with terrorism and violent extremism in Xinjiang. There are signs of a militant cry for jihad. This is a gradual progression towards Islamic fundamentalism and jihad (Boehm, 2009). Even some nonviolent separatist organisations are becoming increasingly radical in their actions (Degang Sun, 2010). In the recent past, terrorist organisations like al-Qaeda, ISIS and their other affiliates (from Africa to Asia) have inspired Jihadis from all over the world. These organisations identify Xinjiang as a legitimate part of Islamic Central Asia (Turkistan). In 2014, East Turkistan Islamic Party, a close affiliate of al-Qaeda, threatened to conduct jihad in China. In the same year, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) also threatened to encroach upon the territory of Xinjiang. These organisations, influenced by their close ties with global jihad are engaged in separatism in Xinjiang (Degang Sun, 2010). They have become an existential threat to the security of China.

Xinjiang is a region with a substantial Muslim population and a turbulent history (Gunaratna *et al.,* 2010). The writings of some analysts of Islam in China, such as Raphael Israeli and Michael Dillon, reveal that Islam in the region is almost unavoidably rebellious and the Muslims are inherently problematic (Raphael Israeli, 2002, Michael Dillon, 1997).

From time to time, the rise of Uyghur nationalism was witnessed in this north western region of China. During these long years, Uyghurs have not only used various means to express their distinct ethnic identity but also tried to assert it. During the 1980s, it started in the form of social disturbances such as demonstrations and marches. Sometimes it turned into violent clashes. In the 1990s it escalated to become violent and turned to terrorism, extremism and separatism. During the 1990s and in the 2000s, Xinjiang has been haunted by quite a number of riots, incidents of insurgencies and even terrorist activities. The two most widely known incidents of terrorism, extremism and separatism are the uprising in Baren and rioting in Yining. These incidents took place in 1990 and 1997, respectively.

Jonathan Lipman has noted that if Kosovo and Bosnia are to serve as lessons, failure to accommodate Muslims can lead to national dismemberment (Lipman, 1997). The geopolitical and strategic value of Xinjiang makes it necessary for China to allow its integration. The internal stability of China depends on the stability in Xinjiang. The loss of this region could

support the desire for secession in Tibet, Mongolia or other areas. Ethnicities of these areas also consider themselves not Chinese and thus seek the creation of exclusive space for themselves.

Literature Review :

Many scholars have written extensively on the ethnicity and ethnonationalism of Uyghurs. Owen Lattimore (1950) has explained the geopolitical significance of Xinjiang. Whiting (1980), Wu (1984), Forbes (1986), Benson (1990) and Perdue (2005) have presented historical and geographical accounts of Xinjiang. Gladney has written several books on Muslims in China. One such book is Ethnic identity in China: The making of a Muslim minority nationality (Gladney, 1998). It gives a detailed description of the history, culture and language of Muslim communities of China. It also includes a detailed account of Uyghurs. There is also extensive source material on terrorism, separatism and religious extremism in Xinjiang. Fuller (1992) and Walsh (1993) have analysed the impact of the disintegration of the Soviet Union on the stability of Xinjiang. But there is a limited explanation for the metamorphosis of separatism and the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in Xinjiang.

Herbert Yee and Colin Mackerras, has reflected upon the issues of ethnic and religious identity among Muslims of China (Herbert Yee, 2005 and Colin Mackerras, 2009). Shichor and Van Wie Davis has presented a detailed description of ethnic separatism in Xinjiang (Shichor, 2007). Gladney has presented another account on Islam in China and its role in separatism in Xinjiang (Gladney, 2003). Steele and Kuo have also presented an account of Terrorism in Xinjiang. They have evaluated the role of radical Islam and its relation with the acts of terror. They are of the opinion that Islamic extremism has spawned a significant terrorist movement (Steele and Kuo, 2007). Kendrick T. Kuo has presented an account of the Salafi-jihadist threat in Xinjiang. He believes that it is posing an existential threat to the Chinese political system in Xinjiang (Kendrick T. Kuo, 2012).

Many scholars have explored different dimensions of religion and geopolitics. Indeed, for centuries religion and (radical) religious movements have influenced international relations and international politics (Nyroos, 2001, Agnew, 2006, Dijkink, 2006, Sturm, 2013). However, the geopolitics of religion has not been thoroughly explored. Its analysis becomes more relevant with reference to jihad and geopolitics. Of all different kinds of political-religious terrorism, (transnational) jihadi terrorism is the most threatening extremism (Bakker, 2006). The emerging political language of jihad makes it more pertinent. It has shaped (and it has even more potential to shape) the configurations of the future geopolitical landscape of the world. This research is an attempt fill the voids.

Objective of the study:

This research seeks to answers few basic questions; what is the exact dimension of Uyghur extremism? What are the causes of the radicalisation of Uyghurs? How and when this process of radicalisation started? How it is impacting the security and stability of the western province of Xinjiang and China? It also attempts to analyse jihad and its ramifications for geopolitics.

Methodology:

This study is a case study of Uyghur ethnogeopolitics. It elaborates the nature of extremism and separatism Xinjiang. The research is mainly guided by the processes tracing of the rise of ethnonationalism and emergence of secessionist demand for the Uyghur Homeland of East Turkestan and its eventual culmination in ethnogeopolitics (jihad and geopolitics). The study mainly depends on secondary sources of information and employs published literature and documents. Besides secondary sources of information, this research is also based on the analysis of YouTube videos of Uyghur jihadis.

Geopolitical History of Xinjiang and Uyghur Nationalism:

Xinjiang is situated in the far north western region of China. It is the largest cultural and political entity in China. It accounts for about one-sixth of the territory of the country. Geospatially it shares borders with Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Russia and Mongolia and of course with Pak occupied parts of India. Its demography is predominantly represented by the Turkic-Muslim ethnic communities. It contains Uighur, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Tajik, Uzbek, Hui, Mongol, Tartar, Russian, Solon, Xibo, Manchu and Han Chinese (Michael Clarke, 2008). Uyghurs are, of course, the largest ethnic community of the region.

The origin, formation and strengthening of Uyghur identity and nationalism have strong roots in the historical, political and cultural processes of the Uyghur homeland. Many scholars present a unique argument that since the Uyghurs have remained historically distant from mainland China, they have developed their own identity. It is different from the identity of the people of China. It is also the reason for the ethnonationalism of Uyghurs.

Uyghur nationalism is not confined just to claim their ethnic distinction, but it has moved on to demand a separate Uyghur Homeland of East Turkestan. It has emerged as an independence movement with an aim to establish its own Homeland. David Wang claims that the experience of the East Turkestan Republic (1944-1949) is imprinted in the memory of the Uyghurs. For several decades, it has been a symbol of the Uyghur homeland of East Turkestan and it still exists. The centuries-old search for national identity and nationality became the movement for independence of East Turkestan (David Wang, 1998). This movement started as an ethnic movement but has now turned to terrorism, extremism and separatism.

Uyghur Nationalism and Rise of Separatism in Xinjiang:

It is generally observed that all movements for separatism are fed by the existence of separate ethnic identities. The distinct Uyghur nationalism is the driving force of separatism in Xinjiang. Now it is also established that the separatism by Uyghurs of Xinjiang has got influenced by the broad political environment or milieu of Inner Asia and Central Asia.

Generally, the endeavours of ethnonationalism become aggressive as it becomes the reason for conflict. Consequently, the separatism in Xinjiang has become the determining element of the geopolitical processes that are taking place in this region. The present circumstances in the geographical milieu and the flare of Uyghur nationalism have the potential to change the political landscape of China.

Uyghur nationalism has remained a long-lived separatist movement in Xinjiang. It is

attributed to a wide variety of causes. Ethnonational distinctiveness is one and the most important regions of ethnic separatism. It was sustained by the emigree Uighur in exiles in Turkey. The idea of Turkistan, inclusive of all Turkic nations of East and West Turkistan, has always been there. The disintegration of the Soviet Union and the rise of Turkic countries in Central Asia have also contributed to it. Conflicts in Inner Asia and Central Asia have all added to the separatist movement in Xinjiang. Besides, the increase in recent terrorist violence in Xinjiang is attributed to the rise of political Islam, jihad and geopolitics.

Metamorphosis of Separatism:

Some scholars believe that the Chinese policies in Xinjiang were responsible for increased incidents of terrorism, but it is certainly not the only factor contributing to the intensification of Uyghur separatism. The proliferation of terrorist organisations in Xinjiang and the radicalisation of Uighur were responsible for its metamorphosis into separatism and terrorism. It is difficult to deny the role of the neighbourhood effect in fuelling the crisis (militancy). The role of radical Islam in Inner Asia and Central Asia during the intervening years gave a boost to separatism and terrorism in Xinjiang. Undoubtedly, the religion and geopolitics of the region was equally or rather more important factor for the development of Uyghur separatism and terrorism in Xinjiang.

The spread of radical Islam served to fertilize the jihadism in Xinjiang. Under the influence of radical Islam, the separatist movement in Xinjiang increasingly embraced violence. The call for jihad became the greatest motivation for it. It has not only radicalized the relatively peaceful separatist movement but also helped to unite the separatist movements which was responsible for the subsequent terrorist operation inside and even outside China.

Jihad and Geopolitics:

Jihadi terrorism is the product of a combination of Islamic ideology and the idea of jihad. Jihad is a generic word (noun) in the Arabic language that is literally translated as 'struggle' or 'fight'. It is also used for 'striving' for something (desired). In the normative Islamic sense, it connotes striving for the sake of Allah. But it is interpreted as an act of violence in the name of Islam. In fact, the intent of jihad is embedded in the militant version of Islam. In that respect, Jihad is a geopolitical philosophy. Since the emergence of this (religiopolitical) ideology, it has changed the geopolitical landscape of the world. In the recent past, it has emerged as the most important factor of geopolitical conflicts all over the world and more particularly in Africa and Asia and of course in parts of Europe.

The cultural revolution in Iran of 1979 generated renewed aspiration for the independence of East Turkistan. During the 1980s the borders of Xinjiang were opened for interaction with the outside world. The opening up of borders increased the contact between Uyghurs and other Muslims living in Pakistan, Central Asia and the Middle East. This interaction resulted in Uyghurs being exposed to radical ideas. It also resulted in the spread of the Salafi-Wahhabi ideology in Xinjiang.

Some scholars believe that conflict in Xinjiang is a conflict of cultural and religious identity. Islam and Islamic identity have become an instrument of resistance. Jihadi ideologies of Salafism and Wahhabism are particularly considered potentially subversive. Because

Salafis and Wahhabis desire to recreate the caliphate and wage jihad to establish an Islamic rule.

During the 1980s, Chinese policies literally opened the door to Salafi Wahhabi influence. These ideologies emanated from neighbouring countries and have a pathway into Xinjiang. It inculcated the idea of jihad in Uyghurs. It helped Uyghurs to be more radicalized.

In midst of emerging Islamic consciousness, many Uighurs travelled to Pakistan to study Islamic teachings in madrassas. Some of the Uighurs studied under the patronage of the Jamiat-i-Ulema Islami. Many of these madrassas promoted more radical views. The religious teaching of these madrassas helped instil in them radical ideas of Islam. All these developments led to the radicalization of Uighurs. These madrassas also provided an important site for the recruitment of jihadis (fighters). As early as the 1980s Uyghurs participated in the Afghan War. During the late 1980s and early 1990s, hundreds of Uyghurs were trained in Pakistan to fight the Soviets in Afghanistan (Rashid, 2002). Upon the withdrawal of the Soviets, many Uyghur mujahedeen* returned to Xinjiang (Clarke, 2007) where they continued their struggle for the liberation of Turkistan from Chinese occupation. *A person who is engaged in religious war is called a mujahid (in plural mujahedeen). The violent acts of these mujahedeen or jihadis are claimed to be in furtherance of the goals of Islam (Bakker, 2006).

The geopolitical developments of the 1980s and 1990s in Inner Asia and Central Asia gave a boost to the separatism in neighbouring regions of western China. The rise of Taliban in Afghanistan and the disintegration of the Soviet Union was a morale boost for separatists in Xinjiang. It had an intense neighbourhood effect on Xinjiang. Since then, Uyghurs also received support from other Turkic nationalists and religious extremists in neighbouring countries.

Since the late 1990s, the orientation of the separatist movement in Xinjiang has begun to change. During this period, the most important feature of the Uyghur rebellion was the rise of jihadis (religious militants). These Uyghurs were trained in the use of lethal weapons. Hence, the Uyghur rebellion turned violent. The violence in the 1990s and 2000s have established the existence of terrorism and extremism in Xinjiang.

The movement for East Turkistan; a homeland of Uyghurs, separate from China got ideological support and funding from the Uighur emigree population and sympathisers from other Islamic countries. It also received weapons and explosives from the neighbouring countries. Consequently, it contributed to the political violence in Xinjiang, during the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s.

Jihad and Future Geopolitics:

Jihad is a weapon in the often-extremist ambitions of Muslims. It is often successfully used to influence the political outcomes of geopolitical conflicts. Since the 1980s, the militant Uighurs have been deeply involved in the jihadi activities around the region and elsewhere in Inner Asia and Central Asia. They have proliferated everywhere, even in other troubled areas of East Asia. They have also been found fighting for Muslim extremists causes in Syria. Uyghurs aspire for the geopolitical and religious restoration of Islam in this region.

Since the very beginning, some factions of Uyghur militants have had established contacts with the Taliban and Al-Qaeda. Eastern Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) was one of

them. Later on, an increased number of Uyghur entered the ranks of transnational terror organisations like the Islamic State (IS). There are confirmed reports of the participation of Uyghur in Syria, along with the ISIS fighters. It reshaped the jihadist landscape of the region.

Uyghur separatism of Xinjiang has become an integral part of the jihadi phenomena of Salafi and Wahabi ideology. Gradually its support base has increased and its fighting strength has also increased. Today its magnitude is much larger than what it was in the late 1990s. Since then, they have registered remarkable survival and growth. In these years Salafi and Wahabi thought has entered deep into China. The violent incidents of 2009 confirm the presence of Islamic fundamentalist organisations in Xinjiang. It has greater geopolitical ambitions.

The presence of these jihadis in the region will certainly have an effect on the future geopolitics of Inner Asia and Central Asia.

Conclusion :

Communities engaged in separatism in Xinjiang or in any other region (from Africa to Asia) have (definite) geopolitical objectives. They resort to terrorism to achieve their defined geopolitical ambition. The objective of such violent extremism is easy to comprehend. Invariably it is the creation of a distinct (separate) homeland or a distinct geopolitical entity. At times, if it is an Islamic domain and the communities in question have a distinct Muslim identity, it becomes difficult to differentiate between Separatism and Jihad. The fusion of ethnic separatism and jihad often results in the radicalization of ethnic communities and then the ethnonational conflict serves as a means of geopolitics. In such a situation, the idea and ideology of jihad provide them with the geopolitical motivations and therefore the violent rebellion becomes the method to get to their geopolitical objective. It motivates the Jihadis to commit to the campaign of indiscriminate warfare which they consider to be a legitimate act of 'holy war'. Today it makes a simple explanation of the wider geopolitical phenomenon of ethnic separatism, Islamic terrorism and violent extremism.

Islam and Islamic identity have become an instrument of resistance in Xinjiang. Under the influence of radical Islam, the separatist movement in Xinjiang increasingly embraced violence. Consequently, it contributed to the political violence in Xinjiang, during the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s. Uighur jihadists first came to the world's attention in 2001, when the United States (US) and coalition forces killed and captured a number of them fighting alongside the Taliban and Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan under the banner of the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM). Now these jihadis have become a global phenomenon.

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