

Uighur Nationalism and Ethnogeopolitics of (East) Turkistan

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ABSTRACT

Ethnogeopolitics or (ethnic)geopolitics is the geopolitics of ethnicity. It is related to the politics of ethnic communities for geographical space. Thus, it is politics of ethnicity for their existence in geographical space. Described and defined in whatever way; politics and geography are present in every existence; crisis or conflict. The present or future configurations of the ethnic landscape, ethnic faults and geopolitical cleavages, stability or instability therein, ethnic conflicts and rivalries (clash of civilizations) or similar phenomena are ethnogeopolitics. Demand for '(East) Turkistan' in itself is a political problem. The very name 'East Turkestan' points to a political territory of an ethnic community that is not China (*i.e.*, away from China). It challenges the sovereignty of China. Whereas the policies of the Chinese government are directed toward creating or sustaining a single political identity (*i.e.*, China). The Uighur nationalism and separatism in Xinjiang do not encompass but rather divide the Chinese sovereignty. In fact, it is a conflict for a separate Uyghur nationality. Thus, separatism or nationalism in Xinjiang or East Turkestan, that goes with an appeal for a separate Turkic 'Homeland' on the grounds of Turkic Culture, using the idea of 'Turkic People' (the peoples who speak Turkic languages), is the best example of ethnogeopolitics. This research aims to interpret the Uyghur separatism, terrorism and extremism in Xinjiang. The objective of this study is to understand the nature of ethnogeopolitics in Xinjiang.

Key Words : Xinjiang, Uyghurs, Separatism, Terrorism, Extremism, Ethnogeopolitics

INTRODUCTION

For centuries Xinjiang was inhabited by ethnic communities with Turkic culture and Islamic religion. These are Uyghurs (sometimes referred to as the Uighurs); a Turkic Muslim community of Chinese Central Asia. These people have a distinct Turkic-Uyghur-Islamic identity. Historically, Xinjiang, has remained the eastern extension of the Islamic world in China (David D. Wang, 1998). Search for a separate Uyghur homeland had created a sense of identity and nationalism in Uyghurs. It has been sustained by the conciseness of their social, cultural, historical and political roots.

How to cite this Article: Shahi, D. K. (2016). Uighur Nationalism and Ethnogeopolitics of (East) Turkistan. *Internat. J. Appl. Soc. Sci.*, 3 (7-12) : 295-304.

The historical legacy of Islam or Islamic culture is an integral part of Uyghur identity and nationalism. The Pan-Turkism and Pan-Islamism has promoted the movement for East Turkestan. There is a deep influence of the Islamic-Turkish faith behind this movement which is still very active in the West and Central Asia. (David D. Wang, 1998). In the recent past, the ethnic nationalism of Uyghurs has got intertwined with Islamic fundamentalism and the ideology of jihad. Since the beginning, violent Islamic radicalization in Xinjiang significantly contributed to the growth of the Uighur insurgency. Insurgent incidents were instigated and organized by Islamic radicals. Radical Islam with an intent of jihad is believed to be one of the major reasons behind these insurgencies.

Islamic radicalization and Uighur insurgency in Xinjiang pose a grave threat to the security and integrity of China. Containing religious extremism, separatism and terrorism are necessary for regional and national security and stability.

Literature Survey :

The rise of ethnic nationalism and ethnic conflict with political intent presents a formidable challenge to national and international security. Many scholars have emphasized on the potential threat that a significant resurgence of nationalism represents to the stability and security of countries. Snyder has warned that the possibility of a rising tide of nationalism poses challenges to security (Snyder, 1990). Holst (1993) has also written that the 'infectious potential' of 'aggressive nationalism' affects the regions of a similar ethnic landscape (Holst, 1993). Mearsheimer has concluded that a concerted effort should be made to keep extreme nationalism at bay (Mearsheimer, 1990). The grave nature of ethnic conflicts fuelled by ethnonationalism demands a review of ethnogeopolitics. It is all more necessary to understand the dimensions of ethnic nationalism and ethnic conflict to contain the 'infectious potential' of separatism, religious fundamentalism and Islamic terrorism. [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). Elizabeth Van Wie Davis and Shichor has presented a detailed description of ethnic separatism in Xinjiang (Elizabeth Van Wie Davis, 2008 and Shichor, 2009). 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)]

Xinjiang has witnessed surge in activities of separatism and terrorism during 1980s and 1990s. A number of violent incidents have been reported throughout these years. It involved Uyghurs of Xinjiang. The militant Islam, jihad and ethnogeopolitics have reshaped the nature of conflict in Xinjiang. The radicalization of Uyghurs is influenced by radical ideology of Islam (jihad) and Islamic geopolitics and it influenced the re-emergence of secessionist and jihadi activities in Xinjiang. It is intended to draw the borders of an independent country for Uyghurs. This research provides an analysis of militant Islam, jihad and ethnogeopolitics in growing secessionism in Xinjiang.

Objective of Study:

The conflict for (East) Turkistan a separate homeland, away from China, presents a mix of ethnicity and Islam. It is observed that radical Islam grants the ideological basis for Uyghur nationalism in Xinjiang. In the recent past, Xinjiang has experienced a marked increase in both the frequency and the intensity of violent incidents. This violence has usually involved a call for jihad. It is therefore, necessary to explore the ideological basis of Uyghur nationalism and separatism in Xinjiang. This research aims to interpret the Uyghur separatism, terrorism and extremism in Xinjiang. The objective of this study is to understand the nature of ethnogeopolitics in Xinjiang.

Hypothesis:

Ethnogeopolitics has become a significant security concern for China. This research hypothesises that political radicalization of Uyghurs is causing secessionism in Xinjiang and the ideology of radical Islam is driving them towards jihad.

METHODOLOGY

This research is a qualitative study. It attempts to explain the ethnogeopolitics behind Uyghur nationalism and separatism in Xinjiang. The methodology used in this paper is descriptive and analytical. The research is mainly guided by the processes tracing of the rise of ethnonationalism in Uyghurs and its eventual culmination in ethnogeopolitics (jihad and geopolitics). The information used for the analysis are based on review of literature on history and geography as well as scholarly literature on geopolitics of East Turkistan.

Ethnogeopolitics:

Ethnogeopolitics or (ethnic) geopolitics is the geopolitics of ethnicity. It is related to the politics of ethnic communities for geographical space. Thus, it is politics of ethnicity for their existence in geographical space. Described and defined in whatever way; politics and geography are present in every existence; crisis or conflict. The present or future configurations of the ethnic landscape, ethnic faults and geopolitical cleavages, stability or instability therein, ethnic conflicts and rivalries (clash of civilizations) or similar phenomena are ethnogeopolitics.

The question of ethnic identity and politics around the ethnic space (ethnic territory and territoriality) also relates to ethnogeopolitics. Ethnoterritorial conflicts that exists along the faults in the ethnogeographical configuration exhibit the geopolitics of ethnic spaces or ethnogeopolitics. Ethnogeopolitics or (ethnic) geopolitics is also embedded in conflicts (or resistances) with a specific geographical and political intentions (agenda), the resurgence of ethnicity (ethnonationalism) and eventual reconstruction of a new geopolitical landscape (if it is a conflict of territory or ethnoterritorial conflicts). Nevertheless, if it is conflict to defend or safeguard the existential space or conflict (or clash) for ethnic identity and security, it is ethnogeopolitics. Simultaneously, it describes the violence against an ethnic community. Therefore, attempts to redefine the geopolitical configuration based on ethnicity and attempts to preserve the political geography and its geopolitical configuration are ethnogeopolitics or (ethnic) geopolitics. Violent nationalism, separatism and acts of terrorism by ethnic communities are also part of ethnogeopolitics as it (all) defines and redefines geopolitical

relations. Ethnogeopolitics or (ethnic) geopolitics also describes the phenomena of forced migration, infiltration or refugee question; its causality (influencing factors) and also the outcomes such as changes in the demography and political geography.

Demand for '(East) Turkistan' in itself is a political problem. The very name 'East Turkestan' points to a political territory of an ethnic community that is not China (i.e., away from China). It challenges the sovereignty of China. Whereas the policies of the Chinese government are directed toward creating or sustaining a single political identity (i.e., China). The Uighur nationalism and separatism in Xinjiang do not encompass but rather divide the Chinese sovereignty. In fact, it is a conflict for a separate Uyghur nationality. Thus, it has geopolitics into it. The claim for the separate nationality is based on their distinct ethnic identity. Thus, separatism or nationalism in Xinjiang or East Turkestan, that goes with an appeal for a separate Turkic 'Homeland' on the grounds of Turkic Culture, using the idea of 'Turkic People' (the peoples who speak Turkic languages), is the best example of ethnogeopolitics.

Geography of Xinjian and Cultural Geography of Uyghurs:

The narrative of ethnogeopolitics of a region or a socially and politically bound space are representations of its cultural history and political geography. The cultural history of ethnicity or ethnic geography remains embedded in ethnogeopolitics. It encapsulates past and present politics and it shapes future geopolitics. For a deep understanding of the ethnogeopolitics of a region, understanding of the cultural, historical and political geography is worth pursuing.

Xinjiang or the conventional Sinkiang is an autonomous political (administrative) region of China. It is the largest political subdivision in China. In the 'political terms' it is called Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region.

Xinjiang is situated in the heart of the Eurasian landmass. It is situated in the north western part of the country. It is bordered by the Chinese provinces of Qinghai and Gansu in the east and by Tibet Autonomous Region in the south. It has borders with seven countries. Afghanistan and Pak occupied Kashmir is located to the southwest of Xinjiang. The Central Asian countries of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan are located to the west and northwest and Russia and Mongolia are located in the north and northeast of Xinjiang (Church, 2010).

Geographically it is spread over 2000 km from east to west and 1650 km from north to south. Thus, it has an area of over 1600 th. sq. Kms that comprises roughly one sixth of total area of China (Church, 2010). It is the largest province within China. Mountains and deserts characterize the landscape of Xinjiang. Geographically it contains Dzungar Basin and Tarim Basin. Both the basins are divided by Tian Shan Mountains. Its borders are defined by the Altai mountains to the north and the Altun and Kunlun Mountains to the south and the Pamir and Karakorum to the southwest and west (Church, 2010). Geographically the area of Xinjiang is the land of oasis. Historically it was settled along the ancient trade route. The oasis towns on 'Silk Roads' were the main cultural centres of Xinjiang.

Xinjiang is the largest political region of China, but due to its geography dominated by mountains and desert, is a comparatively sparsely populated region. Traditionally it was occupied by 'Turkic People' Uyghurs, Kazakh and Uzbek (presently it is also occupied by

almost equal number of Han Chinese). In the present ethnic landscape also, Uyghurs (Turkic Muslims) are the dominant community. In the present demography (according to the 2010 census), Uyghurs accounts for 44 percent and Han Chinese accounts for about 41 percent of the population of Xinjiang. (Nick Holdstock, 2014).

Although a large number of Uyghurs are geographically concentrated in Xinjiang, there is also a significant Uyghur population across the borders of China. The three neighbouring countries Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan have a significant number of Uyghur populations (Nick Holdstock, 2014). Ethnically Uyghurs belong to the same cultural community which emerged in Central Asia and then eventually spread as far as Turkey. They lived in the region for more than 1,000 years. Their language is similar to Kazakh and Uzbek.

Geocultural Configuration of Xinjiang or East Turkestan and Ethnogeopolitics:

Central Asia and West China are contiguous geocultural areas (areas with common cultural, historical and political elements). There are many geocultural (linguistic, religious) commonalities between Central Asia and West China. Xinjiang is geographically adjacent and culturally close to Central Asia. Thus, it is often referred to as ‘Chinese Central Asia’ (David Kerr and Swinton, 2008).

In terms of geocultural history, Turkistan is a remnant of an old empire (Ottoman empire). The medieval Islamic scholars used the term ‘Turkistan’ to refer to the parts of Central Asia dominated by Turkic speaking people. Xinjiang is called as Chinese Turkistan to distinguish it from Russian Turkistan (geographically both the regions were called Central Asian Turkestan) (Millward 2007). Thus, Xinjiang or Chinese Turkistan or East Turkistan represents the historical and geocultural region that lies within the political boundary of China.

As opposed to the collective Chinese identity, Uyghurs have always looked for a transnational identity and nationality outside China. It is an alternative to the assimilation of their identity into China (David Kerr and Swinton, 2008). The geocultural nationalism of Uyghurs is based on the collective identity in the history, culture and faith of Turks and Turkistan. The faith and culture of Islam unite it with Central Asia and West Asia, which has some commonality of ethnicity and language. The other cultural, political and territorial ideas existing across Central Asia supports ethnonationalism of Uyghurs and the idea of East Turkestan. The separatism in Xinjiang is also influenced by the ethnic (religious) politics of Central Asia and Inner Asia. Thus, it is opposed to the idea of ‘One China’ and most closely associated with Central Eurasia.

Geopolitical and Geostrategic Significance of Xinjiang:

The location of any region is significant in geopolitical and strategic affairs. Xinjiang has a unique geopolitical location in the geography of Inner Asia and Central Asia. It represents the western frontier region of China.

In the historical geography of China, it was Known as Xiyu or the ‘Western Regions’ (Millward 2007). Xiyu became Xinjiang or New Borders or New Frontier in the 18th century when the Manchus (rulers of Qing dynasty) established their control over this area. Its location and geography have had significant effect on politics and geopolitics of the region. Frontier location of Xinjiang has helped China in order to enlarge political influence across

the borders.

It is an established fact that the geographically advantageous regions are also geopolitically and strategically advantageous. Xinjiang is (and has always remained) indispensable for China because of its geographical location. For a long period of time, this region was used as a buffer against the threat coming from the west. Historically it has served as a security 'buffer zone' for China against regular invasions by nomadic hordes and (more recently) the Soviet Union (and perhaps Afghan instability today?).

Xinjiang is situated at the starting point of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). As it promises access to the Indian ocean, it has created opportunities for open commerce across the borders.

Owing to the Sino-Soviet conflict, the frontier remained impenetrable for decades, the cross-border interactions increased only since 1990s (Witt Raczka, 1998) after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The regional and global changes of the past century have also changed the geostrategic significance of Xinjiang. In the changed circumstances, particularly after the 1990s, Xinjiang has proved to be the gateway to Central Asia and easy access to the central Asian resources.

The economic interdependence of Central Asian countries and China in the production and trade of oil and natural gas proves the geopolitical significance of Xinjiang. It is the natural route for pipeline of oil and natural gas originating from the Caspian Sea region, Central Asia and the Middle East. Thus, Xinjiang has the potential to be the most assured and secured corridor for accessing energy resources under its own control. Besides, the location of Xinjiang on the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) has increased the importance of this frontier region and it is now an important element in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Therefore, it is regarded as the future of China.

Besides all these locational advantages, Xinjiang is one of the most important sources of raw material for China. It possesses huge reserves of gold and copper besides strategic raw materials such as oil, gas and uranium. Some experts believe that the sand of the Taklamakan contains more oil and gas than Saudi Arabia. (Nick Holdstock, 2014). China accepts Xinjiang as a land of opportunity precisely because of its location and resources. Since the last few decades, the unexpected volatility of the area has produced hopes and fears in the region (Witt Raczka, 1998)

The strategic and energy objectives of Beijing are based on stability in Xinjiang. Thus, the territorial integrity of China and the stability of Xinjiang is its prime concern (Malika Tukmadiyeva, 2013). The peace and stability in Xinjiang are also important for Central Asian security. The rise of Islamic terrorism in the region could destabilize the whole region and could topple any hope of further advancement of the region.

'Xinjiang Problem' Geopolitical History of 'East Turkestan':

It is believed that the term 'East Turkestan' was first coined by Russian Turkologists in the 19th century. He perceived an affinity between the peoples of the Tarim Basin (the desert region of Xinjiang) and those of 'West Turkestan'; the area in Central Asia that corresponds with the states of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan.

The name 'East Turkestan' acquired political resonance in the 1930s. Following a rebellion in 1933, the East Turkestan Republic was established around the southern city of Kashgar. However, it was overthrown by the Han Chinese in 1934 (Nick Holdstock, 2014). Another republic with the same name was established in 1944. It was a more stable entity (it was politically supported by the Soviet Union). It lasted until 1949, when it was finally subsumed by the communist regime of China (Nick Holdstock, 2014). Since then, the term 'East Turkestan' has often been used by those who regard the region as a politically separate entity from China and seek its independence.

Uyghur nationalism coupled with insurgency re-emerged in the 1980s and reached a peak in the late 1990s. Although it lost some of its momentum in subsequent years but got revitalized during early years of 2000s. Over the past twenty years, the unrest in Xinjiang has intensified and Uyghur nationalist feeling has strengthened (Remi Castets, 2003). A series of terrorist attacks took place before the 2008 Beijing Olympics. It finally culminated in the riot at Urumqi in July 2009. Kunming witnessed another incident of violent attacks in 2014. This is to be expected given the strong sense of ethnic identity among the Uyghurs and their political history.

The aspiration of Uyghur nationalism is continuously supported by the neighbouring countries with Turkic ethnicity. Countries in the neighbourhood and also located far away continuously support them in their efforts to gain autonomy or independence to preserve that very identity. On many occasions, Chinese government has accused Turkey of supporting Uyghur radicalism. Islamic radical Turks from Turkey have historically been sympathetic to the Uyghurs (demand for Turk nationalism) because both the Turks share the same ethnicity. In fact, President of Turkey, Erdogan once proclaimed, 'Eastern Turkestan is not only the home of the Turkic peoples but also the cradle of Turkic history, civilisation and culture On one such occasion he said that 'the martyrs of Eastern Turkestan are our martyrs'. There was wide spread believe that while West Turkestan was being persecuted by Soviet Union, East Turkestan (Xinjiang) was occupied by China (Colakoglu, 2014). The priority of the Pan-Turkish movement was to free the 'imprisoned Turkic World'. There are evidences that Uyghur separatism got ideological support from Turkey and other Islamic countries.

During 1985 the international borders of Xinjiang were reopened. It permitted the reestablishment of transborder contacts. The opening of borders has radically changed world views of Uyghurs and notions of what constitutes Uyghur ethnic identity (Rudelson, 1997). With the opening of the borders Uyghurs began to move more freely into Central Asia. The interaction between the two communities of Uyghurs has helped shape the current conception of a common Uyghur identity on both sides of the border (David Kerr and Swinton, 2008). The situation in Afghanistan and the influence of militant Islam also contributed to intensifying the jihadist activities in Xinjiang. The surge of expressions of ethnic identity led to the rise of ethnonationalism.

During this period many Uyghurs even went out to study in madrassas of Pakistan, Afghanistan and beyond where they came into contact with Wahhabi ideology. The appeal of radical Islamic ideology has attracted many Uyghurs to participate in violent jihadis. In the course of time, some Uyghurs joined the ranks of the Taliban and after the soviet withdrawal, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) (David Kerr and Swinton, 2008). Thus, the

emerging Uyghur nationalism got inspired by the ideology of jihad. Nevertheless, Wahhabism is central to the Islamic revival of Xinjiang and Central Asia or West Asia, so the religious extremism in each of these countries in the periphery of China influenced and got influenced by the political Islam. Even the experience of national separatism, religious extremism and violent terrorism followed the pattern set by Central Asian extremist and terrorist organisations.

Xinjiang is closely linked to the geography of Central Asia by historical, cultural, religious and ethnic contacts. Due to the contiguity of language, culture and religion, ethnic relations in Xinjiang get easily influenced by the geopolitics of Islam that is prevalent in the countries of Inner Asia and Central Asia. The Chinese officials also talk about the growth of extremism in the region during the eighties and nineties due to their contact with other Muslims in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Central Asia. In particular, Uyghurs came in contact with jihadi elements from neighbouring countries. The Islamic contacts fuelled the extremism and separatism in Xinjiang. These incidents of demonstrations and protests even witnessed Islamic slogans shouting.

The dissolution of Soviet Union and the formation of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan on the basis of ethnic identity certainly gave a boost to the aspirations of Uyghurs to form their own state. (Nick Holdstock, 2014). The spillover effects of Islamic nationalism from Central Asia affected the Xinjiang region in China (Stephen Iwan Griffiths, 1993). On the other hand, the language, culture and religion were the possible sources of conflict between Uyghurs and Han Chinese. These conflicts in the name of nationalist assertion led to the activities of destabilisation accompanied by occasional incidents of violence. There were waves of protests and incidents of explosions (Millward, 2004) in Xinjiang. In the period 1990-2001 Xinjiang experienced more than two thousand terrorist activities in the name of Uyghur nationalism.

Uyghur separatism and Islamic radicalism poses grave challenge for China (Shichor, 2005). Uyghur jihadis first came to the attention of the world when the United States and its allies invaded Afghanistan in 2001. 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).

The ultimate aim of ETIM was the liberation of Xinjiang. It seeks to violently split the territory of China and link it with other Uighur territories across Central Asia. Its members have trained with Al-Qaeda and the Taliban in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. After 9/11, the US Department of State labelled ETIM as a foreign terrorist organisation because of its relationship with Al-Qaeda and the Taliban.

Response to the Uyghur Separatism:

The peace and stability in the frontiers region of any country deserve constant surveillance. The nationalist clashes and conflicts seek to change borders and create domestic and regional instability, emanating inevitably from unstable border areas. Ethnic conflict in the name of nationality and religion also impacts other countries of the region. Therefore, China is trying hard to de-radicalize Uyghurs to address the upsurge in terrorist violence. It has also taken some authoritarian and drastic measures to ensure 'national security'.

Chinese geopolitics is also directed towards single sovereignty, single territory and single

political authority and thus Chinese policies are directed towards eradicating ‘three evils’ of separatism, terrorism and extremism and to promote a common political identity of China. In order to counter the perceived threat of the independence movement of Uyghurs, China formed an intergovernmental organisation in 1996. It was known as the ‘Shanghai Five’. China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Russia were its members. The organisation was renamed as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) in 2001 when Uzbekistan joined it. Its goals include ‘making joint efforts to maintain and ensure peace, security and stability in the region’.

China remains, of course, one of the most sovereignty conscious countries. In a counter move of terrorist activities in Xinjiang, China named four East Turkestan separatist organizations as terrorist organisations in December 2003. These organizations included the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) and Eastern Turkistan Liberation Organization (ETLO). According to the Chinese sources, ETIM and ETLO in particular had links with al-Qaeda and the Taliban. Besides, Chinese government has taken other measures to crack down on Uyghur militants.

China is actively trying to protect its borders from an influx of Islamic extremism but it is difficult to insulate its Turk (Muslim) citizens from the ideological influence of jihad.

Conclusion:

Historically, Xinjiang, has remained the eastern extension of the Islamic world in China. It was closer to the centre of the Islamic world rather than the civilization in China (David D. Wang, 1998) The Pan-Turkism and Pan-Islamism has promoted the movement for East Turkestan. There is a deep influence of the Islamic-Turkish faith behind this movement which is still very active in West and Central Asia (David D. Wang, 1998).

In the recent past the ethnic nationalism of Uyghurs has turned into an Islamic movement. It has brought in Islamic extremism with Salafi-Jihadi ideology. The radicalized Uyghurs desire to create a separate Uyghur Homeland. China fears that separatism in Xinjiang has and will continue to gain support from international Islamic extremism.

Separatism in Xinjiang and growing Uyghur extremism is a threat to not only China but also to the countries of Central Asia, especially those with sizable Uyghur populations. The political instability in China would impact all of Asia. Therefore, all these countries are worried about the contagion of increasing Muslim radicalization.

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