

## **Chinese Central Government Policies in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region and Uyghur Migration**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The Uyghur Muslims of China's north-western province of Xinjiang is of Turkic origin and constitutes almost 45 per cent of Xinjiang's total population. They practice Islam and follow ethnic Turkic culture and traditions and have been demanding a separate homeland out of China's mainland.

The prime concern of Chinese government for this region revolves around internal security and external threats. Xinjiang is home to some 47 minority groups, including the majority Uyghurs; therefore it is highly susceptible to separatist movements. This region stands geo-strategically so significant for China for its vast landmass, covering around one sixth of the country's total area, and bordering eight countries Russia, Afghanistan, India, Pakistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Mongolia and Tajikistan. Xinjiang is not only China's gateway to the resource rich Central Asia region, but also source of abundant natural resources including minerals and hydrocarbon (oil and natural gas). These have been the reasons for aggressive policies launched by Chinese Central government in Xinjiang which is often termed as carrot and stick policy. The harsh policies adopted by the Chinese authorities have targeted the Uyghurs which resulted into their marginalization and suppression, and finally leading to a large scale migration from Xinjiang to the neighboring and Western countries as well.

### **Chinese Central Government Policy towards Ethnic Uyghurs in Xinjiang :**

The Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) is the largest province of China comprising mainly of Uyghur Muslim ethnic group, due to which the region is named as XUAR (Mackerras, 2001). In Xinjiang, Islam is very much assimilated within the local cultural and national identity therefore Chinese authority considers it a particular threat to its regime (George, 1998). The World Uyghur Congress report states that, "the Uyghur activism for promotion and demand of the human rights, religious freedom and democratic system advocated by the Uyghurs in Xinjiang are dubbed by Chinese Central government as terrorist activities" (2004).

After the communist forces became victorious over the nationalists and People's Republic of China came into existence in September 1949, Chinese Communist Party (CCP) headed by Mao Zedong made an effort to transform China. As a result, CCP endorsed communist ideology, a state-

operated economy, and an outright party-state control over its citizens'. These policies utterly failed and resulted into mass famine (Great Leap Forward, 1958–60) and severe political turmoil (the Cultural Revolution, 1966–76). The policies followed during the Great Leap Forward period (1958–66) have aggravated the migration process and it also drastically altered the demographic profile of the Xinjiang region. The policies launched by Mao were often termed as a systematic campaign to suppress the religious practices and influence of Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in Xinjiang rather than understanding and resolving the local problems of the region (Clarke, 2003).

In the early 1950s, the region witnessed tolerant policies which were replaced by strongly oppressive and forceful assimilative ones during the Great Leap Forward in 1958. And the situation worsened with the introduction of the Cultural Revolution in 1966 which in the early 1960s had been comparatively a little moderate. The Cultural Revolution has made it hard for ethnic Uyghurs to practice their religion and cultural activities freely. In late 1970s Deng Xiaoping came into power and devised economic reforms in China which once again followed by slightly lenient policies in Xinjiang, though these policies were politically motivated (Bovingdon, 2004). Deng's moderate policies didn't last for long as there was resentment against these policies among the ethnic minorities which culminated into protests and demonstrations and violent uprisings which compelled Chinese government once again to curb them down ruthlessly (Bovingdon, 2004).

Despite the Uyghur's consolidated efforts against government policies in Xinjiang became prominent as a direct response to Chinese persecution, however they didn't achieve any significant form of political consolidation due to the PRC's overpowering state capacity to repress Uyghur discontent. Chinese government promoted the inflow of Han migrants from other provinces into Xinjiang which further complicated ethnic relationships between them. Because migrants and ethnic minorities are both under privileged in comparison to local Han Chinese, they tend to compete against each other, intensifying inter-ethnic Conflicts (Song and Wu, 2013). In the literature on Uyghurs which addresses the economic development and nationalism issues, many sources acknowledge the fact that Uyghurs' low level of economic development is a major contributing factor in their drive for secession (Kilgour, 2003). Evans opines that, "China has blamed Muslim Uighur separatists from Xinjiang for several public attacks in recent 2009 and 2014 and passed new Anti-Terror Law in 2015 which constituting counter-terrorism agencies in-charge with the identification of terrorist activities and personnel, and coordinate nationwide anti-terrorist works. However, Human Rights Watch criticized it by stating that the law does not sync with international standards, and pointed out that such agency would have enormous discretionary powers" (Evans, 2015).

The Chinese government's policy of specifically curbing protest and demonstration, leaders and challenging severe sentences has been quite effective in dispersal of warnings to others leading to discourage prospective leaders. Severe censorship regularizing use of internet and other means of monitoring information have put forward significant challenges to any efforts to mobilize the Uyghur people. The government has also been effective in discouraging fellow Turkic speaking peoples in Central Asia from offering support to the Uyghurs by molding its foreign policy towards these republics accordingly. Due to which, Central Asian region did not provided platform for the transnational Uyghur movement and it shifted from Central Asia to the West.

While Debata (2007) makes a critical examination of the Chinese policy towards the minority nationalities of the country in general and Uyghurs in particular, Chaudhuri (2009) expounds Chinese Central Government's basic policy towards Xinjiang and its effect on the nature of Uyghur activities and the magnitudes for the region's future.

### **Causes and Consequences of Uyghur Migration from Xinjiang :**

During the Cultural Revolution, Uyghur ethnic Muslims became the victim of anti-religious and anti-ethnic nationalist policies as a result widespread persecutions, destructions of mosques and violent handling of protests and demonstrations by the government forces increased (Gladney, 2003). As Mao's ideas of China's collective national identity and constant revolution took hold, the Uyghur people were the one who paid heavy prices of such ideology as they were not even allowed to maintain their cultural and religious identity (Atwood, 2010).

Two Chinese government sources highlighted the atrocities faced by the minority ethnic groups during the Cultural Revolution and even mentioned that it had a catastrophic effect on all aspects of the society in China, mostly on religion and culture (White Paper, 1997). Post-Cultural Revolution period considered to be a new era of reorganization, reorientation and reconstruction of Chinese society and economy. As per Chinese Government source (White Paper, 1999), "to preserve the traditional cultures of the ethnic minorities, the state formulated plans or organized specialists for work involving the collecting, editing, translating and publishing of their cultural heritage and the protecting of their famous historical monuments, scenic spots, rare cultural relics and other important items of the historical and cultural heritage". But such reformist policies have claimed to be failing by most of the overseas Uyghur organizations and activists.

After Mao's death upcoming leaders like Deng Xiaoping and Hu Yaobang proved to be much far sighted when they realized that in order to keep the economic reform agenda of the Chinese state in smooth, support of ethnic minority groups was essential. Many organizations were re-established to appease the interests of different minority groups. It is noteworthy that the above mentioned organization was demolished by the Mao during the Cultural Revolution (Clarke, 2007). Deng's economic developments in Xinjiang led to heavy influx of Hans migration to the region and they were offered all the important positions in social and economic sectors which further caused tensions among Uyghur as felt alienated (Rogers, 2014).

It has been observed by many scholars that if Chinese government do not changes its minority policies, Uyghur become significantly dissociated and there is the steep possibility for continued ethnic violence, probably on an even bigger scale than formerly seen. The strategic importance of Xinjiang to the Chinese government and the considerable presence of Uyghur ethnic minority group discontented with Han Chinese rule are the two significant factors contributing to the ongoing ethnic conflicts in Xinjiang and further to the Uyghur migration from the region. In the mid-1990s, religious suppression in Xinjiang compelled many Uyghur youth to flee the region in order to pursue religious teaching from abroad. Turkey and Pakistan seemed to be the most viable countries for this purpose. Some of the Uyghurs who went to study in these countries returned to East Turkestan with a different set of mindset toward the state, society, and religion in China and particularly in Xinjiang. Turkey being ethnically and culturally similar provided a possible a religious and cultural education to immigrant Uyghurs but it later became susceptible to increased political economic pressure from China (Kanat, 2014).

Uyghur migration in Central Asia and its repercussion were well understood by China. Therefore, "China's strategy to deal with the problem in Xinjiang in a double-opening approach which pertains to Central Asia the reason being the huge number of Uyghurs living in Central Asia while sharing ethno-cultural linkages: i) to integrate Xinjiang with Central Asia and China proper in economic terms and ii) to establish security and cooperation with China's Central Asian neighbours. Internally, this agenda has resulted in increased central government investment, particularly regarding construction and infrastructure projects (especially energy related), and enhanced government

control and management of ethnic minority religious and cultural practices” (Becquelin, 2000). In the post-Soviet Central Asia, China's foreign policy reflected the domination of Uyghur issue, hence with emphasis on the establishment of political, economic, and infrastructural links with the Central Asian states, particularly Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, China wanted to uphold its influence over the region so that the Uyghur separatist movement could not get any kind of support from these Republics (Mackerras, 2001). However, the collapse of the Soviet Union also encouraged a resurrection of ethnic minority opposition to Chinese rule in Xinjiang.

Transnational Uyghur diaspora face challenges in achieving unity due to disagreement on their objectives, interests, strategies, and leadership. The Uyghur Diaspora in Muslim countries such as Central Asian Republics, Turkey, Pakistan and Afghanistan have different sets of attitude towards the Uyghur cause that those of the Uyghurs living in Western, democratized states. The PRC's policies in Xinjiang have augmented Uyghur solidarity socially but not politically. Although there are some rays of hope arising for the Uyghurs with the emergence of leaders such as Rabiya Qadir. However, the external movements pertaining to the Uyghur Human Right violations in Xinjiang by PRC policies have only served to worsen ethnic tensions and less relief to the religious and cultural freedom have been assured (Phillips, 2012).

Further, China banned Uyghurs to use Islamic names for their newborn children (Hillman, 2017). Since 2011, China has invested so much money on domestic security than on its external defence. Chinese government has started confiscating the passports of Uyghur minorities in 2016 which poses a direct threat to the basic right of freedom of Uyghurs. The increasingly suppressive security policies adopted by Chinese government in Xinjiang troubled Uyghurs and created anti-Chinese sentiments among various ethnic minority groups (Hillman, 2017). In one of the World Uyghur Congress reports its mentioned that “any issue related to Uyghurs gets publicity only when there is any terrorist attack in the region instead of showing the daily difficulty faced by the Uyghurs in order to cope with the Chinese policies and it creates a negative image of the Uyghur population terming them as terrorists” (World Uyghur Congress, 2014).

### **Chinese Mobilization against Uyghurs :**

Uyghur out-migration from Xinjiang generated fear amongst Chinese authority regarding the prospective involvement of the host countries to Uyghur movement through promoting political and the religious rights of Uyghurs in Xinjiang. However, China's main concern revolved around socio-political shelter provided by the Central Asian Republics to the Uyghur (Luedi, 2014).

One of the main reasons to create Shanghai Five Organization in 1996 was to address increasing Uyghur anti-Chinese activities in Central Asia by the Chinese authority. China, Kazakhstan, Russia, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan were primarily member of this organization and China and Russia have been the driving forces of this organization. Shanghai Five later changed into Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and is used by China to curb the activities of Uyghurs in the Central Asian Republics. It has been observed that in every formal meeting of the SCO, China's prime concern relies on restriction the cross border terrorist activities in order to save the national unity and territorial integrity. Additionally, “the diplomatic relations between China and Central Asia basically depend upon trade and mutual transnational security interests and development of trade and commerce between them only possible when they address their security concerns successfully. Therefore, China's main security concern while dealing with Central Asia is the threat of increasing Islamic militancy among the Uyghur population in Central Asia. China also wanted Central Asian Republics to contain the Uyghurs activities, which could be a potential threat to the stability of the

Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region” (Borgeas, 2013).

The China’s developed economic and trade cooperation with Turkey also went into the favour of China. As a result, Turkish government at many occasions has asserted that Xinjiang is a part of China and any Uyghur separatist activity in Turkey would not get any support from its people and government. This considered being a major diplomatic victory for China (Debata, 2007).

Coming of new government in Afghanistan has changed the Afghan-Chinese relations with regard to the Uyghur issue as the new Afghan government with pro-Chinese approach won Chinese confidence in order to gain economic and political benefits. As a result, a number of Uyghurs were deported from Afghanistan to China. Therefore, China’s economic and diplomatic influence over most of its neighboring countries have badly affected the Uyghur issue in Xinjiang and it further allowed it to legitimize its anti-Uyghur actions in the region in the name of curbing terrorism and extremism (Matta, 2015).

Pakistan being an Islamic country and always keeping its agenda of bringing Islamic countries of the region together consistently denied providing any kind of support to the Uyghurs because it shared great economic and political relationship with China. Pakistan government on several occasions stated that “Pakistan would never support the Uyghur separatist movement. It was after the 1990s that Pakistan has taken strict measures against Uyghurs in Pakistan and it has close Uyghurs settlement within the boundaries of Pakistan along with the deportation a numbers of Uyghurs to China and killing of suspected Uyghur terrorists” (Fayaz, 2012).

In recent years, it has been reported that “a number of Uyghurs fighting for East Turkistan’s independence have moved to Syria and Iraq from Afghanistan with a goal to fight along with various extremists groups. In these countries, Uyghurs have formed their own units and also collaborated with other Central Asian militants units comprising Uzbek, Tajik, and Kyrgyz etc. All these militant units from Central Asia and Xinjiang particularly fight for the Al-Qaeda linked Al-Nusra Front” (Rashid, 2016). According to one western scholar, China has so far avoided involvement in the Syrian crisis due to its doctrine of non-interference of its foreign policy and a calculation that its core national security interests are not directly compromised which somehow has given this impression that none of the external powers have any right or say regarding the ongoing ethnic tensions in the Xinjiang region of China (Clarke, 2016).

Uyghur migration to Germany and its positive attitude towards this process has given serious concern to the Chinese government. It is evident that Uyghur issue is taking the center stage in the German politics which annoyed China and compelled her to put pressure on German government to change its attitude and policies regarding the Uyghurs. According to the Chinese authority by gaining moral and political support from Germany, the Uyghur organization worldwide and particular in Germany would be stronger in asserting their solidarity with the Uyghur separatist movement in Xinjiang. Germany is the only country, with which China has laid so much efforts in putting economic pressure because China is dependent on Germany on this front (Shichor, 2013). However, Chinese leadership believes that Germany would not support or promote Uyghur terrorist activities by any means.

Both China and the European Union (EU) are victims of terrorism and are strongly opposed to all forms of terrorism. Therefore, China developed stronger ties with the EU not only in economic sphere but also to fight against terrorism and separatism. Both sides are also strongly adhered to restrict any linkage between terrorism and any particular country, nation, ethnic group or religion (White Paper, 2003).

According to Jai (2016), “the migration of Uyghurs from Turkic countries to the West and to

United States of America took place in the early 1990s and USA being a democratic country has given asylum to Uyghur refugees and provided them with social and economic opportunities to get settled. However, all the efforts of American government to support the Uyghur cause witnessed a swift change after the September 11 terrorist attacks in the New York City of USA. The War on Terror campaign paved the way for Chinese authority to continue military crackdown against the Uyghurs. US supported China this time as it wanted to stop terrorism in any form”.

The White Paper (2009) states that, “the East Turkistan terrorist organizations, with East Turkistan Islamic Movement as representative, have carried out actions in Central and South Asia over a long period of time, creating many bloody incidents of terror and violence, including assassinations, arson and attacks on police”. Due to which many countries have deported Uyghur refugees in varying degrees, under economic and diplomatic pressure from China (Chen, 2016).

Following the Communist takeover of China in 1949, China looked towards India with suspicion over its prospective support to Turkic Uyghur Muslims. The reasons behind the Chinese concerns of India’s support to the Uyghur activism were two folded, firstly the historical and cultural relation that people of India and Xinjiang region have in common and secondly the sympathetic attitudes of Indian Muslims towards their Uyghurs Muslims brethren. For example, in 1950, two top Uyghur leaders, Mohammad Amin Bughra and Isa Yusuf Alptekin, fled Xinjiang with 200 families for the Indian State of Kashmir to acquire shelter from Indian government which caused insecurity in China regarding this event until the two Uyghur leaders left for Turkey in 1950 in absence of any sympathetic attitude from Indian side and it provided some relief to the Chinese authorities on this front. As even today, India itself facing severe problem of terrorism, extremism in Kashmir which is a strong deterrent towards showing any sympathy to any separatist movement in the world including Uyghur separatist movement in Xinjiang (Debata, 2016). Recently, India’s refusal to allow Uyghur activist Dolkun Isa to visit India in connection with a conference at Dharamshala spells India’s stand on Uyghurs clearly.

### **Conclusion :**

Chinese policies in Xinjiang have ultimately forced the ethnic Uyghurs to migrate from the region to a place where they could practice freely their religion and culture which China has severely restricted since 1950s. It further aggravated the anti-Chinese sentiments among the Uyghurs not only in Xinjiang but also in Uyghur Diaspora in abroad. China has been forcefully suppressing this resentment in and outward through generating economic and diplomatic pressure over the host countries. Therefore, it is the demand of the time that the Human Rights violations by the Chinese government must be taken into consideration by the International and regional organizations. However, any kind of involvement of Uyghurs in terrorist activities must also not be ignored as well. Finally, it is solely up to the Chinese government to assimilate Uyghurs in the main stream by acknowledging their right to practice to religion and to follow their culture and traditions in any harmless manner.

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- \* indicates a primary source

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