

Ethnonationalism and Ethnogeopolitics : A Case Study of Uyghur Separatism in Xinjiang

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ABSTRACT

The rise of ethnicity and nationalism or ethnonationalism has become a popular subject of scholarly inquiry. Over the last 50 years, it has stimulated the growth of a diversity of literature. The 'ethnic nationalism' (also called ethnonationalism) connotes identity with and loyalty to a nation. Ethnicity is an inalienable component of nationalism, as it provided an important source of national identity. There is a close relationship between ethnicity and nationalism. The rise of ethnonationalism and the call for separatism becomes challenging for the stability of any country. It becomes all more challenging (destabilising) when ethnic communities extend beyond the state borders. Then it becomes an instrument of geopolitics. This research presents an account of the surge of ethnonationalism in Uyghurs and evaluates the separatism in Xinjiang. This research basically questions the ethnogeopolitical milieu (and impact of the neighbouring environment) for the rise of ethnonationalism and development of extremism in the north western Chinese province of Xinjiang.

Key Words : Uyghurs, Xinjiang, Ethnonationalism, Separatism, Ethnogeopolitics

INTRODUCTION

Xinjiang (新疆, New Frontier) is the north western territory of China. It is inhabited by Turkic-speaking Muslim communities. Uyghurs represent the largest ethnic community of this region. From time to time, this north western region of China has witnessed the rise of Uyghur nationalism. 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. In the 1990s it escalated to become violent and turned in 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 of last century are the uprising in Baren and rioting in Yining. These incidents took place in 1990 and 1997, respectively. Urumqi witnessed one of the bloodiest riots in

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contemporary Chinese history in 2009. It was followed by riots in Hotan and Kashgar in 2011. The persistence of ethnic nationalism (coupled with terrorism and extremism) has not only disturbed the peace and stability in China but has also attracted the attention of the international community.

This research evaluates the separatism in Xinjiang and the movement for East Turkestan, which resurfaced in the 1980s and became active since the 1990s. This research basically addresses a few questions; What accounts for this surge of ethnonationalism in Uyghurs during the 1980s and 1990s? What was the opportunity that led to a sudden rise of ethnonationalism in Xinjiang? It also questions the ethnogeopolitical milieu (and impact of the neighbouring environment) for the rise of ethnonationalism; What was the neighbourhood effect that provided the sustainable resource to the separatist movement and offered space for the development of extremism to emerge in the north western Chinese province of Xinjiang?

Literature Survey:

Scholars from all over the world have paid attention to the issue of ethnonationalism. The rise of ethnic nationalism (coupled with terrorism, extremism and separatism) in many regions of the world has been a continued search of scholarship.

Many scholars from China and also from the western world have presented the timeline of the rise of Uyghur nationalism in Xinjiang. Michael Dillon has presented a detailed description of ethnic, religious and political conflict on the north western borders of China. He has presented the background to the violence in Xinjiang (Michael Dillon, 1997, 2003). Thierry Kellner has presented another informative account on the Uighur situation in China (Thierry Kellner, 2002). Arianne M. Dwyer has presented his studies on Uyghur nationalism. It has taken shape of separatism and throwing challenges to the territorial integrity of China (Dwyer, 2005). The rise of Islamic fundamentalism coupled with terrorism, in the last 20 years, has further compound the problem. Warikoo has presented different dimensions of Uyghur nationalism and separatism in Xinjiang (Warikoo, 2000). Debata has also written on ethnic and religious separatism in Xinjiang (Debata, 2008). Although different scholars have written extensively on Uyghur nationalism and ethnoreligious separatism in Xinjiang even many others have written Islamic fundamentalism therein, there has been inadequate consideration of ethnogeopolitics in these studies.

The religion (Islam) is a crucial determinant of geopolitics in Inner Asia and Central Asia. It is all more obvious in West China or East Turkistan. It is therefore more pertinent to evaluate the role of Islam in geopolitics in Xinjiang.

Research Questions:

Uyghur nationalism is not confined just to claim their ethnic distinction, but it has moved on to demand for a separate Uyghur Homeland of East Turkestan. It has emerged as an independence movement with an aim to establish its own Homeland. The centuries-old search for national identity and nationality has turned to terrorism, extremism and separatism.

Ethnogeopolitics; Islam, Jihad and Geopolitics has added new dimensions to this search. The rise of Uyghur nationalism, extremism and separatism in Xinjiang offers a relevant case

of rising ethnonationalism and ethnogeopolitics.

The main research question of this research is; What accounts for the rising ethnonationalism Xinjian? What are the ethnogeopolitical challenges of Uyghur ethnonationalism? These are the twin research questions have been addressed in this study. The main concern of this research is to explore the reasons as to why there has been an upsurge of Uyghur activism in China.

The incidents of terrorism and extremism in Xinjian require a radical reassessment of Uyghur nationalism. It also demands for the study of ethnogeopolitical milieu and neighbourhood effect in rise of ethnonationalism.

Significance of the Study:

The conflict in Xinjiang is not a simple ethnic conflict and struggle of nationality but it includes both jihad and geopolitics. Thus, an interpretation of ethnogeopolitical milieu and neighbourhood effect helps in a better understanding of the Uyghur nationalism and ethnic conflicts in Xinjiang. This study is not simply an attempt to explore the issue of ethnonationalism but also explores the dimensions of ethnogeopolitics. Thus, this research also contributes to the understanding of ethnogeopolitics.

METHODOLOGY

This study is a case study of Uyghur separatism in Xinjiang. It elaborates on the nature of extremism and separatism in Xinjiang. The research is mainly guided by the processes tracing of the rise of ethnonationalism and the 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.

Ethnic and Geopolitical Landscape of Xinjiang:

Xinjiang is the largest province in China. It is located in the northwest frontier region of China. Its geography provides it a unique set of opportunities and constraints.

The western region of China (Xinjiang) occupies a significant position in the geopolitical landscape of Asia. It is situated in the heart of the Eurasian continent. It has common borders with Mongolia, Central Asian states of Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, Afghanistan and India (Pak occupied Kashmir). Thus, Xinjiang has a very strategic location. In addition to that, Xinjiang has vast natural resources. Xinjiang has abundant of oil, natural gas and other minerals as well. The resource base of the region makes it one of the most important regions of China.

Xinjiang holds the distinction of being remote region of China. But it has always remained connected to the mainland China. Historically, it is situated on the ancient silk route (connecting West Asia to East Asia). It has historically served as the crossroads between the Chinese kingdoms and the intermediate region. It has traditionally ensured cross-border relations of the region with the rest of the world. The people of the region have had religious and kinship ties and active trade contacts with the other regions. But its remoteness has always elevated

the regional problems.

Xinjiang presents a unique case of geographical and ethnocultural diversity. Xinjiang is inhabited by various ethnic communities including Uyghurs, Kazakhs, Kirghiz, Tajiks and Mongols. Although it is a multi-ethnic region, the Muslims are in majority in this region. A sizeable Muslim population is also present in almost all the neighbouring countries (except Mongolia). The people of the region have maintained an intimate relationship with the communities living in the adjoining areas of Central Asian Khanates of Kokand and Bukhara, Afghanistan and northern India.

Since the historical past, Xinjiang had an important geopolitical location in Inner Asia and Central Asia. Chinese interest in Xinjiang had originated out of their need to safeguard the mainland from foreign incursions. Beyond the Great Walls, it has remained a buffer zone against any attack (from the west). In the recent past also, due to its location at the fringe of three great empires, it was a prize in the 'Great Game'. It was a sought-after territory for Chinese, Russian and British empires during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Stability in Xinjiang is important for the stability and unity of China. Because any instability in Xinjiang would limit the exploitation of natural resources (oil, natural gas and other resources). It would obviously impact the economy of China. Besides negative economic consequences, the instability in Xinjiang would affect the stability of Chinese society. Ethnic conflict in Xinjiang is a potentially destabilizing source for China. Internally this region could aggravate the ethnic problems in other regions, such as Tibet. Besides, such instability might signal the opportunity for independence to other regions. The issue of separatism in Xinjiang is also of vital importance for regional and global security. The instability in Xinjiang would directly affect the ethnogeopolitical situation in Central Asian countries also.

Ethnonationalism and Ethnogeopolitics:

The rise of ethnicity and nationalism or ethnonationalism has become a popular subject of scholarly inquiry. Over the last 50 years, it has stimulated the growth of a diversity of literature. The 'ethnic nationalism' (also called ethnonationalism) connotes identity with and loyalty to a nation. Ethnicity is an inalienable component of nationalism, as it provided an important source of national identity. It is formally acknowledged that there is a close relation between ethnicity and nationalism. Connor has written extensively on the politics of ethnonationalism. In fact, Connor coined the term 'ethnonationalism' in 1973, and thereafter wrote a series of articles that have made the term familiar today. Connor warns that there is a necessary linkage between the political legitimacy of ethnic identity and the self-determination of nations. It contains the seeds of a radical redrawing of the political map (Connor, 1973). It becomes all more challenging (destabilising) when ethnic communities extend beyond the state borders. Then it becomes an instrument of geopolitics. There have been an equally good number of studies on ethnonationalism in China.

China has an old history of Muslim rebellion. Xinjiang has experienced the Muslim rebellion of 1864 - 78. During subsequent years there have been many more rebels. During the years of 1920s and 1930s, Xinjiang witnessed a gradual deterioration of ethnic relations between the Han Chinese and Turkic Muslims. Both the communities have a difference in religion, language, culture. Both are distinct in regards to ethnicities and ethnic territoriality.

There was simmering discontent which quickly bred a large-scale insurgency. These incidents also witnessed the massacre of Han Chinese by Turkic Muslims. One peculiar aspect of these ethnic conflicts has remained ethnic separatism. Empirical evidence suggests that Uyghur (Muslim) identity and separatism have become coterminous, supporting and sustaining each other. Rebellion from the so-called occupation of China has remained the thrust of every conflict. Uyghurs have always tried for an independent existence of East Turkistan.

In 1931 a rebellion broke out in Komul (Hami). (Hami is situated at a strategically important location. It is located at the gate to the mainland China) In 1931 and 1932, the uprising gradually spread throughout the whole region. Turfan also witnessed insurgent activities. Some of the Tungans and Kazaks in northern Xinjiang also rebelled against Chinese presence. A small community of Russians also rebelled. It is believed that these Russians were supported by the Soviets. Ultimately the Great Game was not over yet. Sinkiang (Xinjiang) certainly had a significant place in the geopolitics between Soviets and China.

Soviets had made many attempts to penetrate in Sinkiang even in intervening years of 1920s and 1930s. They eventually succeeded through indirect intervention. Turk rebellion of 1930s eventually led to the establishment of the Republic of East Turkestan. Although this (Turkish-Islamic Republic of Eastern Turkestan) existed for only a short period (1933-34). However, it was overthrown by the Han Chinese in 1934 (Nick Holdstock, 2014). It created the national identity of Uyghurs (Turks). Some scholars accept it as a new chapter in political history of the Xinjiang. There is a continuity (of this success) in the ethnic or national identity of Uyghurs.

Between 1931 and 1949, Sinkiang was racked by four major and numerous minor Muslim rebellions. 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).

The intensity of the search for Uyghur homeland of East Turkestan declined after 1950's. It almost calmed down for about two decades since then, and re-emerged in 1980s and 1990s. For a variety of reasons the separatist movements have strengthened since 1990 in Xinjiang (Colin Mackerras, 2001). There is a combination of various reasons for this surge of violent ethnic nationalism. Most of them are long-standing, including the strained relations among the various nationalities living in Xinjiang. What changed in the 1990s, however, was the collapse of Soviet Union (December 1991). The Soviet threat has been replaced by religious and ethnic forces, which gave impetus to ethno-nationalism in Xinjiang (Colin Mackerras, 2001). The religious fundamentalism, particularly the influence of Islam has added a new dimension to it.

The idea of nationalism and separatism has always remained in every movement of Uyghurs. What is new in the affairs of Xinjiang, is the change in ethnogeopolitical landscape of Inner Asia and Central Asia.

Ethnogeopolitical Milieu of Xinjiang and Ethnic Separatism:

The seeds of ethnic separatism were always present in the soil of Xinjiang (Sinkiang). The geographical location of Xinjiang is an important factor in the separatism in the far western region of China. Urumqi, the regional capital of Xinjiang is closer to Kabul than

Beijing. Historically this situation facilitated the closeness of Xinjiang to its western neighbours. The geographic concentration of Uyghurs in the far western region of China provided an appropriate situation of ethnic separatism. These Turkic communities have cultural closeness to their western neighbours.

The ethnic landscape of the western region of China had many faults. It gradually became wide and wider. Gradually the ethnic cleavages got sharp between the two dominant communities of the region. The cultural differences of Uyghurs with the Han Chinese community are also responsible for the cultural disintegration of East Turkistan.

Cultural disintegration is the precondition of political disintegration. The separatist movement in other parts of the world obviously supported this hypothesis. Uyghur separatism in Xinjiang is no exception to this assumption.

In ethnic and demographic terms Xinjiang is described as a Muslim (Turkic Islamic) dominated area under Chinese control. It has remained strongly opposed to Chinese dominance. Ethnic oppression or cultural repression by others (Han Chinese) is blamed for the rise of separatism in Xinjiang. But (only) it cannot be blamed for fuelling extremism.

The outcry of Uyghur nationalism has a blend of religion and nationalism. The religious revivalism in Xinjiang and more particularly in the neighbourhood region was responsible for religious extremism. The radicalisation of Uyghurs is more to be blamed for the incidents of 1990s. The credit for the radicalisation of Uyghurs goes to the growth of political Islam in Inner Asia and Central Asia. It simply encouraged extremism among Uyghurs. The ideological appeal of political Islam in Uyghurs added sharpness of extremism.

The success of any separatist movement depends on the ethnogeopolitical milieu of its surrounding region. The ethnogeopolitical milieu of Inner Asia and Central Asia provided sustenance to the separatist movement in Xinjiang. Increased contact of Uyghurs with other Muslims living in Pakistan, Central Asia and the Middle East, resulted in the Uyghurs being exposed to radical ideas. Nicolas Becquelin has presented a geopolitical analysis of Xinjiang. According to him geographically and ethnically the troubled Chinese province of Xinjiang belongs to Central Asia. He has evaluated the role of external factors in the changes taking place in Xinjiang. He has particularly evaluated the impact of Soviet disintegration and the emergence of Central Asian countries since 1991. According to him, it constitutes a watershed in Chinese policies toward Xinjiang (Nicolas Becquelin, 2000).

Xinjiang not completely isolated or insulated from the radical milieu of Inner Asia and Central Asia. The situation in the neighbourhood of Xinjiang was always conducive to the growth of separatism. The situation became more favourable since the geopolitical changes in the region, particularly after the 1980s. The resurgence of Uyghur separatism in Xinjiang is attributed to the neighbourhood effect. Uyghurs have ethnic, religious and linguistic contiguity. It reveals the cultural and even political significance of Uyghurs. The relatively unstable conditions in the neighbourhood of Xinjiang and presence of Islamic fundamentalism provides suitable breeding ground for terrorism and separatism. Change in the cultural landscape of inner Asia and Central Asia and export of Islamic fundamentalism from neighbouring region led to the radicalization of Uyghurs. The ideology of Islam (Islamic philosophy) and call for jihad shaped terrorism and extremism in Xinjiang.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union coincided with the wave of unrest in Xinjiang in

1990-91, including a rebellion inspired by Islamic ideology (Malika Tukmadiyeva, 2013). During early 1990s Uyghurs came into contact not only with anti-Beijing Uyghur organisations such as the United National Revolutionary Front in Almaty, but also with the resurgence of political Islam spreading across Asia and finding its most powerful expression in Iran and Afghanistan. It also received moral and practical support from jihadi groups there. Uyghur population may in time be won over to a more distinctly Islamic form of protest (Michael Dillon, 1997).

A significant jihadi presence lies across the borders of China, particularly in countries of Central Asia, Afghanistan and Pakistan. It provided the geographical milieu of radicalization and extremism. International support has also played a crucial role in the development of the separatist movement in Xinjiang. It has been proved, severally, that Uyghur nationalism has an Islamic Jihadist vision. The presence of Taliban and mujahidin (Warriors of Islam) encouraged them to become its fighting force. Due to the neighbourhood effect, Uyghur population got quickly influenced by Salafi Wahabi ideology. Wahhabism and Salafism nurtured the extremism among Uyghurs.

There is a stabilised link between extremist movements in Xinjiang and foreign missionaries in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Uyghur separatism has significant foreign influences. The separatist in Xinjiang also received funds and weapons from Pakistan, Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, Turkey. It has been confirmed that hundreds of Uyghurs were trained in Pakistan to fight the Soviets in Afghanistan. Upon the withdrawal of the Soviet troops from Afghanistan, many of the Turkic fighters returned to Xinjiang (Michael Clarke, 2007). They continued their 'battle' against the Chinese authority. There is a large number of refugees emigre in Afghanistan, Pakistan (Peshawar), Iran and Turkey. These countries also provided safe haven to Uyghurs.

The proliferation of Salafi Jihadism in Pakistan and Afghanistan and in the neighboring Central Asian countries is at the roots of jihad in Xinjiang. Islamic resurgence in West Asia and outreach of political Islam between China also affected the radical elements in Xinjiang. When Uyghurs came closer to Al-Qaeda, the jihadist fight became broader than a national one. Pakistan and Afghanistan also provided jihadi training camps to Uyghur separatists. Jihadi elements outside China have support for the unrest in Xinjiang. They are continuously aiding and abating Uyghur rebels.

Due to the neighbouring influence jihad in Xinjiang became the war on all enemies of Islam. The jihadis now aggressively pursue Islamic agenda. Persuaded and pressured by the terrorists, some nonviolent Uyghurs are becoming increasingly radical in their actions (Degang Sun, 2010). Influenced by their close ties with global jihadism, the terrorist groups targeting China openly challenge the legitimacy of Chinese administration in Xinjiang (Degang Sun, 2010). The contemporary Islamist extremist/terrorist phenomenon has emerged as one of the most significant threats to both regional and international peace, security and stability (Kowalski 2005). In 2014 Al Qaeda declared war on China. Earlier in the same year, ISIS had also condemned China for the crackdown in Xinjiang.

China always blames Turkey for its support to Uyghur separatist organizations. On many previous occasions Erdogan has supported the Uyghurs and their independence movement for East Turkestan. In 1995, Erdogan erected a memorial in Istanbul to

commemorate martyrs of Eastern Turkistan, or, who lost their lives in the struggle for independence. In 2009, Erdogan condemned the Chinese authorities for the crackdown in Xinjiang. He termed it as 'near genocide' (Christina Lin, 2014). Until recently Turkey provided every support to the terrorism and extremism in Xinjiang.

Conclusion:

The success of any separatist movement depends on the ethnogeopolitical milieu of its surrounding region. The ethnogeopolitical milieu of Inner Asia and Central Asia provided sustenance to the separatist movement in Xinjiang. Increased contact of Uyghurs with other Muslims living in Pakistan, Central Asia and the Middle East, resulted in the Uyghurs being exposed to radical ideas. The relatively unstable conditions in the neighbourhood of Xinjiang and presence of Islamic fundamentalism provides a suitable breeding ground for terrorism and separatism. Change in the geopolitical and cultural landscape of inner Asia and Central Asia and export of Islamic fundamentalism from the neighbouring region led to the radicalization of Uyghurs.

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