

China's Vulnerability to Minority Separatism

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Two watershed events frame China's current vulnerability to minority separatism: first, the disintegration of the Soviet Union and its client states from 1989–91, and second, the U.S. war against terrorism that was prompted by the events of September 11, 2001. The first of these encouraged minority separatism; the second facilitated the efforts of the Chinese government to deal with it.

Prior to 1989, ethnic discontents regularly simmered just below the surface with occasional outbursts. While grievances are many and often interact synergistically, most fall into four broad categories: religious/cultural, resource distribution, discrimination, and self-governance. Three geographic areas in particular were chronically restive: Xinjiang, Tibet, and, to a lesser extent, Inner Mongolia. All three are designated autonomous regions rather than provinces, but dissidents among the ethnic minorities who live there have expressed ongoing annoyance that they are unable to exercise any meaningful degree of autonomy. Although party and central government portray the autonomous area system as allowing non-Han Chinese to be “masters of their own homes,” skeptics believe that the system was created to keep them confined in their homes.¹

Impact of the Fall of the Soviet Union

During the period from 1989 to 1991, the disintegration of the USSR into fifteen states and its loss of control over client states such as Mongolia contributed to the weakening of border security in the People's Republic of China (PRC), giving discontented ethnic minorities additional opportunities to advance their

respective agendas. Chinese authorities feared a demonstration effect from the newly established ethnically based states to the PRC ethnic minorities, particularly those who had been divided by borders that had now become more porous.

All three of the chronically restive areas were impacted in one way or another. The Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) now had borders with Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan, as well as with Afghanistan, Pakistan, Mongolia, and Russia. The Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region (IMAR) now abutted not the Soviet client state of the People's Republic of Mongolia but the independent republic of Mongolia. Although the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) had no new neighbors on its borders, it gained an advantage from Mongolia's new freedoms: there was a resurgence in Tibetan Buddhism in Mongolia. The religion had been suppressed under communist rule. Large numbers of Mongols returned to the faith of their ancestors and there was also an upsurge of interest in studying the Tibetan language. Much to the annoyance of the Beijing government, Mongolian authorities invited the Dalai Lama, leader of Tibetan Buddhism, to visit. The lama had been living in exile in India since his followers rebelled against Chinese rule in March 1959. Although the invitation was extended to His Holiness in his capacity as religious leader, the office of Dalai Lama combines both secular and spiritual functions², and Beijing's concern was not without basis.

Particularly during the initial period after the Central Asian states gained independence, there was a significant loss of internal controls within many of them. Power grids, railway lines, and supply chains had been directed by and routed through Moscow. In the absence of central control from the Soviet authorities, supplies of basic commodities were disrupted, latent clan and ethnic disputes reemerged in more powerful forms, and Islamic fundamentalist forces found it easier to operate. These disputes could and did spill across borders, most notably into Xinjiang.

During the same time, the economic reforms initiated by Deng Xiaoping were bringing unprecedented prosperity to the coastal areas of China. However, living standards in the western areas, where the majority of the PRC's ethnic minorities live, remained stagnant and sometimes, when adjusted for inflation, actually declined. Even where development had taken place, locals felt that the benefits went to Han Chinese colonists rather than to the original inhabitants. The TAR, despite receiving large subsidies from the central government, had the lowest per capita income of any provincial-level unit in the PRC; incomes were lowest in the rural areas where most Tibetans live, and highest in the urban areas where most Han live. Among city-dwellers, Han earned more than Tibetans. Southern Xinjiang, which has the highest percentage of non-Han residents in the XUAR, had a per capita income of about half the provincial average. In addition, the average Mongol in Inner Mongolia had a lower income than his or her Han counterpart. By 1989, according to the central government's own figure, the average industrial and agricultural output in ethnic minority areas had dropped to 47.9 percent of the national average.³

Another concurrent development was rising concern about ecological deterioration. While degradation of the environment has been occurring for centuries, post-1949 efforts at intensified cultivation of land have exacerbated the process. The rapid economic growth engendered by Deng Xiaoping's reforms still led to more intensified pressure on the environment. Grasslands deteriorated, forests were denuded, and rivers ran dry or became so polluted that fish died and humans could not drink from them.

Tibetans complained that sandstorms had become both more frequent and more intense over the past two decades. An ambitious project to develop Tibet's river valleys seemed poised to destroy the ecology of the area. In Xinjiang, intensive cotton cultivation, which makes heavy demands on water, dried up lakes and left residents with brackish pools from which to drink. While foreign reporters wrote enthusiastically about a Chinese administration that had made the deserts bloom, locals became concerned about falling water tables and shrinking lakes. Complaints about the deteriorating quality of herding lands in Inner Mongolia have been ongoing since the antirightist campaign and Great Leap Forward of 1957–58. There was, and is, resentment about party/governmental efforts to introduce inappropriate crops and animals that degrade the fertility of the land. Indigenous people in all three areas also resent the introduction of Han Chinese settlers. Whereas the government describes the newcomers as bringing their skills to improve the prosperity of the areas, locals believe that the motive is to overwhelm them ethnically and destroy their cultures.

Lhasa, the capital of the TAR was already under martial law beginning in 1988. Risking the ire of Beijing, the European Parliament had earlier in that year invited the exiled Dalai Lama to address its meeting in Strasbourg. When the Dalai Lama used the occasion to suggest a compromise with the Chinese government,⁴ Beijing reacted angrily, charging that he was trying to internationalize a purely domestic issue. Persons within Tibet thought to be sympathetic to the Dalai Lama were arrested and, in September, in what was a clear attempt at intimidation, a large police and military contingent was moved into the region and paraded through the streets of Lhasa. Soldiers were sent into monasteries to inspect the premises for weapons and pro-Dalai Lama materials. This weakened the case of any Tibetans who might have been favorably impressed by the idea of a compromise. Demonstrations took place in December. In January 1989, the second-highest ranking figure in the lamaist hierarchy, the normally accommodative Panchen Lama stated publicly that although there had been progress in Tibet since 1950, it had come at too high a price. Four days later, it was reported that the heretofore healthy fifty-one-year-old lama died of a heart attack.⁵ Suspicious minds, noting that the Panchen Lama was survived by both of his parents as well as his siblings, believed that the death did not occur naturally. Later in the year, in direct contravention of Beijing's wishes that the Tibet issue not be internationalized, the Dalai Lama was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

In May and June 1989, there were major protests in Inner Mongolia. Confidential documents made available to a western human rights organization revealed that over ten thousand people had demonstrated in Hohhot, the capital city, and that more than thirty police had been injured while trying to control the crowd.⁶ A Hong Kong newspaper reported that between December 1989 and April 1990, approximately twenty rallies and demonstrations demanding democracy and independence had taken place in the IMAR. In February, an estimated eighty thousand nomads, students, and workers took to the streets with two organizations, the Inner Mongolia National Autonomous Committee and the Asia-Mongolian Freedom Front, said to be leading the drive for independence. In late May, more than forty thousand people demonstrated in Hohhot. Seven people were killed and over two hundred injured after armed police opened fire.⁷

In Xinjiang, the largest demonstrations occurred in 1989. Beginning with two to three thousand students turning out to show sympathy for the hunger strikers in Tiananmen Square in Beijing, one of whom was a Uyghur, the demonstrations quickly turned into something else. The original marchers were joined by fundamentalist Muslims from the Urumqi Koranic Studies Institute and several thousand of their supporters. The second group had an entirely different agenda: to protest against the publication in Shanghai of an anti-Muslim book. The offending book purportedly said that Muslims go to Mecca for the purpose of sexual indulgence, and gave a Freudian interpretation of the design of mosques and other Muslim symbols. The headquarters of the Communist Party was attacked with rocks and steel bars, and cars were overturned. Official sources said that forty vehicles were destroyed and over one hundred fifty soldiers, police, and cadres were injured. Nothing was reported about civilian casualties, presumably because officials stressed that security forces exercised restraint.⁸ A few days later, Beijing authorities banned further distribution of the book.

The authorities were less worried about reaction to the book than about the underlying discontent that had unleashed this rage. During the same time as the book riots in Xinjiang, there were simultaneous Hui (Chinese Muslim) rebellions in Gansu and Qinghai that arose from very different grievances: Qinghai Muslims were angry when a Hui failed to be appointed as vice-governor; no information was made available on what had angered their coreligionists in Gansu. Official media divulged that the "small handful" who were inciting public opinion against party, government, and military had attacked trains, resulting in several suspensions of service on the Gansu-Qinghai rail line.

How much, if at all, these disturbances were coordinated remains a matter for speculation. The authorities, mindful of Muslim rebellions that had periodically paralyzed large parts of northwest China during the dynastic era, were understandably concerned about linkages among Islamic groups. Ever since assuming power in 1949, official sources had railed against the notion that all Muslims are brothers, preferring to emphasize the differing ethnicity of the groups which pro-

fessed the faith: Uyghurs, Kazakhs, Kirghiz, Tajiks, Salar, Hui, and the like. However, the most-wanted list published by XUAR officials mid 1989 seemed to corroborate suspicions of interethnic and interprovincial conspiracy. Of its seven names, three were Hui from Gansu; the other four were Xinjiang Uyghurs. One individual was an itinerant acrobat—someone with a legitimate professional reason for traveling the country, and hence able to coordinate dissident activities while engaged in his craft.

1990 proved even worse. In April, tourists were confined to their hotels when riots broke out in Urumqi, Kashgar, Khotan, Kuqa, Aksu, and Artush. People's Liberation Army (PLA) forces based in the XUAR were evidently deemed inadequate to handle the situation, since elite units from neighboring Gansu were airlifted into several Xinjiang cities. The epicenter of the riots was Baren township in Akto County, where a government decision to proscribe mosques that had been built without official permission aroused local ire. Opposition to family planning policies and the removal of a popular imam also appear to have figured in the antigovernment protests. Official sources placed the number of dead in Baren alone at twenty-two, with eyewitnesses estimating at least three times that many. Up to three thousand may have been killed in total.⁹ The confrontations were said to have resembled real battles, and soldiers reportedly fled on occasions when they found themselves outnumbered and outgunned.

Concerns about foreign involvement were added to the government's fears about interethnic and interprovincial coordination of dissident activities. According to Xinjiang television, a heretofore unknown political group, the Islamic Party of East Turkestan, had called for a jihad to wipe out Chinese rule in the XUAR. A report to the regional people's congress called the rebellion "well-planned, well-organized, anti-party, and anti-socialist." Hui were again prominently involved. Chinese charges of foreign involvement seemed to be supported by an article in a Turkish newspaper. The author mentioned that he and a companion had gained access to the area by pretending to represent an Istanbul travel agency that was preparing a brochure for prospective tourists. The photographs the pair took, however, showed ruined mosques and great poverty. They reported that residents claimed that nuclear testing had caused numerous instances of stillborn babies and of unusual cancers.

Note that these disturbances slightly predated or occurred concurrently with the worldwide challenges to socialism that began with the demonstrations at Tiananmen in spring 1989 and culminated in the formal disintegration of the Soviet Union two years later. The Chinese leadership responded to what it perceived as a further deterioration in its security environment after 1989 in two major ways: first, by tightening political control and, second, by exercising more careful oversight over culture and religion. With regard to political controls, party and government committees were reorganized. A major reorganization of personnel at the top levels of the IMAR's leadership was carried out in 1990. In Tibet,

a soft-line First Party Secretary was replaced by Hu Jintao, under whose tenure riots diminished. This may have been a factor in Hu's rise to become the leader of all China little more than a decade later. Xinjiang received a new military district commander.

High-ranking political figures visited the restive areas to assess the situation and restore social stability. In 1992, for example, Yang Shangkun, then-president of China and concurrently vice-chair of the Central Military Commission led a delegation "to make arrangements to prevent sudden changes." Though the official announcement did not elaborate, there had been an influx of people fleeing interethnic strife in Central Asian areas of the former Soviet Union. Yang informed Xinjiang authorities that they must do a good job in helping the refugees settle down, while not allowing themselves to become involved in the political and religious beliefs of the newcomers. They must not allow the émigrés to bring in weapons, carry out political activities, or go beyond designated settlement areas.

There were no public statements on the numbers of refugees involved or on the amount of destabilization they caused. A Western authority on the ethnic groups of the former Soviet Union estimated that there were less than a thousand Kirghiz refugees in the XUAR, most of them members of a clan that had lost out to the clan of the then-president of Kirghizstan. There were also a smaller number of Dong'an, who had set up a Dong'an Liberation Front in the XUAR.¹⁰

Clearly this new mix of peoples posed problems for central control. During the summer of 1993, five Muslim militant groups reportedly met in Kashgar to support the separatist movement in Indian-controlled Kashmir. In addition to local Uyghurs and Muslim Kashmiris, there were representatives of Hezbollah, affiliated with the Iranian government, mujaheddin from Afghanistan, and an unspecified group from Pakistan. The meeting came a few days after a coordinated series of bomb explosions in five Xinjiang cities. In separate incidents, Chinese armed police clashed with Kazakh militants calling for secession from the PRC and inclusion in Kazakhstan, attacks on Han oilfield workers in Hotien by Uyghur famers shouting "Xinjiang's oil is not China's," and demonstrations by Hui fundamentalists in Gansu.¹¹

Adding to this volatile mix were émigrés from other parts of China. Ironically, in view of resistance of Han to move to Xinjiang in order to develop it in the 1950s and 1960s, thousands of people now streamed in from elsewhere in China. They came in search of economic opportunity rather than, as Mao had wished, for ideological reasons. However, indigenous people tended to view the newcomers as agents of colonization, and were resentful nonetheless.

Resistance engendered party and government attempts to deal with it. Central party and government sources countered charges they were exploiting the resources of minority areas by pointing out that the same areas received large subsidies from Beijing, and that development was a mutually beneficial process: Han

and minorities must work together for the prosperity of all. They also publicized the cases of ethnic minorities who had become prosperous, to indicate that non-Han could enjoy the wealth being created by party and government policies. For example, Uyghur businesswoman Rebiya Kadeer was highly touted by the official media.

Consonant with its publicly-stated belief that ethnic minority discontent would disappear if income disparities could be remedied, the central government announced an ambitious plan to develop western China, where most minorities live. The *xibu dakaiifa*, as it was known, called for massive infrastructure projects including a railroad to Tibet, dam building, and highway construction. Minority group members who were skeptical of party and government motives believed that the real aims of the *xibu dakaiifa* were to integrate their economies more firmly with that of Han China, facilitate the immigration of Han into their areas, and enhance Beijing's control over them.

More coercive measures were also undertaken. By 1994, ethnic minorities were told that if religion interfered with socialism, it was religion that would have to give way. Particularly worrisome to the authorities was the revelation that ethnic minority party members were openly practicing their respective faiths. Atheism is integral to communism, whose founder, Karl Marx, famously described religion as the opiate of the masses. Some party members had sent their children to be educated in religious institutions, including some, in the case of Tibet, in India. With Sino-Indian relations quite strained and the Beijing government's fear of foreign intervention, this was a matter of considerable concern. Tibetan party members were forbidden to send their children abroad for school and warned that those educated outside China would be denied employment when they returned.

The Xinjiang regional party committee called for "sternly dealing with party members and cadres, especially leading cadres, who continue to be devout religious believers despite repeated education; instill separatist ideas and religious doctrines into young people's minds; publish distorted history; [issue] books or magazines advocating separatism and illegal religious ideas; or make audio or video products propagating such ideas."¹² Party directives began to make a distinction between the freedom to either believe or not believe in religion that the PRC constitution theoretically grants to all Chinese citizens. Whereas ordinary citizens would continue to enjoy the "two freedoms," party members were first and foremost members of the vanguard of the proletariat and therefore possessed only one freedom: the freedom not to believe. University students were also expected to limit themselves to one freedom.¹³

Continuing concern with contamination from external communities was evident in the establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO, originally called the Shanghai Five), comprised of China, Russia, and three—later four—Central Asian states: Kazakhstan, Kirghizstan, and Tajikistan, and later joined by Uzbek-

istan. Its charter included the aims of tightening border security and investigating terrorist activities. An agreement was also reached with Mongolia, which is not a member of the SCO, not to support irredentist movements that involve Inner Mongols and to be vigilant against their presence in Mongolia.

Shortly after the first meeting of the SCO, the central government began a patriotic education campaign. As it concerned minorities, this involved professions of allegiance to the party and central government, and the foreswearing of affiliations with any outside forces. In Tibet, monks and nuns who refused to publicly repudiate the Dalai Lama were arrested and tortured. Also in that year, Beijing arrested the reincarnation of the Panchen Lama who had been approved by the Dalai Lama and substituted a child of its choice. The first child simply disappeared; exile sources have given him the title of the world's youngest political prisoner. Beijing's candidate lives in the capital city, where he is said to receive instruction in both Tibetan and Chinese. Symbolically, Beijing was proclaiming that it, and not the Dalai Lama, controlled the practice of lamaist Buddhism.

China has also pressed other states not to give aid, comfort, or visas to dissidents in exile. For example, any country that invites the Dalai Lama to speak, even if on strictly religious matters, can expect a stern *démarche* from Beijing. Turkey has been warned that continued good relations, including trade contracts, depend on curbing the activities of its exiled Turkic Muslim communities.

Also during the mid 1990s, Beijing instituted a series of police crackdowns known as the *yan da*, or Strike Hard, campaign. While officially targeted at criminal activities in general, the foci of the campaigns in minority areas were "illegal religious activities and splittism." The distinction between legal and illegal religious activities rests on those activities controlled by the government (legal) and those that involve the nonofficially-sanctioned private or group practice of religion (illegal). This in turn called forth a cycle of resistance, which engendered more police retaliation. According to Amnesty International, Xinjiang has executed a Uyghur every four days on average since the campaign began.²⁴ Official media continue to regard all dissension as tantamount to separatism and terrorism, an equation made internationally easier after September 11, 2001.

While praising its role as protector and developer of ethnic minority cultures, party and government left no doubt that they, rather than minority artists and intellectuals, would determine the form and content of these cultures. Cultural and religious activities were carefully monitored, since they could serve as a cover for anti government political activities. The government contends that caches of rifles have been found in monasteries, that some Islamic schools have indoctrinated students with fundamentalist ideas, and that the Uyghur *maixilaifu* festival and Mongolian cultural associations have provided cover for subversives to coordinate their actions.¹⁵ The government also facilitated the entry of more Han Chinese into minority areas in order to reduce the minorities' proportion of the population—a measure critics refer to as "ethnic swamping."

The Chinese government's concern that cultural and religious organizations provide its critics with convenient fora to spread subversive ideas is understandable. It has also led to the suppression of individuals and groups who appear to be genuinely concerned with bettering their communities. For example, by the 1990s, alcohol and heroin abuse had become serious problems in Xinjiang. Needle sharing has led to an HIV/AIDS problem as well. Locals attributed the substance-abuse problems to alienation among young men who felt marginalized by Han domination, both psychologically and economically. The health care system, poor in most Han areas, is still more rudimentary in minority areas, particularly the rural environs where most minorities live. It cannot cope with the epidemic.

Concerned citizens who tried to form self-help groups found themselves under investigation for subversion. The aforementioned Rebiya Kadeer was arrested and sentenced to eight years in prison, allegedly for revealing state secrets to her husband while he was visiting the United States. Kadeer's supporters maintain that she did no more than send local newspapers to her spouse while he was abroad. They believe that her real offense was organizing a grassroots movement, the Thousand Mothers Association, consciously modeled on America's Mothers Against Drunk Driving, that had not been suggested by the government and functioned independently from it.¹⁶ That the central authorities could authorize the arrest and incarceration of the woman who had been its emblem of a minority member who prospered indicates the level of the governments concern with loss of control.

In Tibet, Gyaye Phuntsog, a popular local figure, was sentenced to six years in prison for "damaging the stability of the nation." He ran an orphanage funded by a combination of a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) grant and private donations.¹⁷ The orphanage, like the Uyghur self-help organizations, did not depend on the government and operated apart from official supervision. It was closed. In Inner Mongolia, cultural associations have drawn the attention of authorities for the same reason, resulting in the arrest of their founders, who include history professors and book sellers.

September 11 and Its Repercussions

Shortly after the September 11, 2001, attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon, the Chinese government let it be known that Uyghur terrorists had been trained in Osama Bin Laden's camps in Afghanistan.¹⁸ While this had long been rumored within Xinjiang, the particular time that the PRC government chose to disclose this information and the conduit it selected—a mid-rank scholar interviewed by a communist-owned Hong Kong newspaper—led suspicious minds to conclude that Beijing intended to use the threat of terrorism to restrict minority rights further. Publicity focused on the "three evils" that were threatening Xinjiang: terrorism, separatism, and extremism. In practice the three seem to be

understood as interchangeable, with separatists, a term that appears to include all other dissidents as well, assumed to be terrorists and extremists. A thousand al Qaeda-trained terrorists were said to be present in Xinjiang.¹⁹

Security, already tight, became even more so from fear that terrorists might seek to disrupt the PRC's National Day, October 1. Large contingents of troops were reportedly headed for border regions, and precautions were taken in major cities such as Shanghai and Beijing.²⁰ The number of people allowed to go on the *hajj*—pilgrimage to Mecca—declined from two to three thousand to fewer than a thousand and, to minimize the possibility of impressionable young people being converted to extremist causes, only those people fifty years of age and over were permitted to make the voyage. Only those over eighteen are allowed to enter mosques.²¹ In Tibet, the informers that are routinely placed in monasteries and temples became more numerous and more vigilant.

Pakistan, a PRC ally but also the home of a growing Islamic fundamentalist movement with known ties to al Qaeda, was pressured to return Uyghur dissidents. Turkey, the strongest supporter of Uyghur rights, agreed to ban organized Uyghur groups, and China persuaded the Nepalese government to include a roundup of Tibetan refugees in Nepal in its efforts to crack down on an indigenous Nepalese Maoist insurgency.²² According to human rights groups, Mongols were also placed under close scrutiny. Human rights organizations report that China has pressed other countries to prevent or cancel political events organized by diaspora Muslims, Mongols, and Tibetans. Beijing has used economic incentives such as free-trade zones, purchases of a country's exports, and promises of investment to help ensure compliance with its wishes.

In August 2002, U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage announced that Washington had placed the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) on the United States's official list of terrorist organizations, along with Hezbollah and al Qaeda, and had agreed to support placing ETIM on the United Nations Security Council's list of terrorist groups.²³ Human rights groups protested this, arguing that although some ETIM members had met with Osama bin Laden, there was no substantive al Qaeda-ETIM link. The number of ETIM leaders thought to be associated with terrorism was variously estimated between four and fourteen. U.S. State Department officials who had seen the evidence for an al Qaeda-ETIM link averred that they found it convincing; academics and others who were familiar with ETIM hypothesized that America's real motive in deciding to proscribe the group was to better U.S.-China relations ahead of President Bush's meeting with Chinese leader Jiang Zemin in October 2002.

Human rights groups continue to publicize of and protest poor treatment of ethnic minorities, drawing international attention to their plight. Minority diaspora groups have added websites to their cultural activities. Tibetan groups have been very successful at drawing attention to their plight, drawing from a wide spectrum of the population that includes, but is not limited to, celebrity movie actors, rock

stars, and those interested in the Buddhist religion. Several major cities in Europe and the United States have Tibet Houses that organize speeches and cultural activities. Rock concerts that include acts ranging from chanting monks to the Beastie Boys, have sold hundreds of thousands of tickets and DVDs. The International Tibet Independence Movement, among other activities, sponsors walks and peace rides to promote its cause; for example, the "Indy to Windy," from Indianapolis to Chicago, took place in December 2004. Web sites include those of the International Campaign for Tibet, <http://www.savetibet.org/>; the Students for a Free Tibet, <http://www.tibet.org/>; the Tibet Information Network, <http://www.tibetinfo.org/>; the Free Tibet Campaign, <http://www.freetibet.org/>; Rangtzen (Independence), <http://www.rangzen.org/>; the Canada Tibet Committee, <http://www.tibet.ca/>; the Web site of the Tibetan government in exile, <http://www.tibet.com/>; Voice of Tibet—Voice of the Voiceless, <http://www.vot.org/>, and many more.

Uyghurs and Inner Mongols have also become better organized and more active in pressure group activities in recent years. In April 2004, at a meeting in Germany, two leading Uyghur exile groups merged into a unified organization called the World Uyghur Congress. It elected Erkin Alptekin, son of a former leader of a pre-1949 Xinjiang government, as its first president. Organizers hoped that Alptekin's lineage and high visibility would promote the Uyghur cause as much as the personality of the Dalai Lama had done for the Tibetan cause.²⁴ Some would argue that this position is already occupied by Rebiya Kadeer. Another Uyghur exile group formed a government-in-exile in a September 2004 press conference at the U.S. Capitol, naming Anwar Yusuf Turani as its prime minister. Other officials of the new government reside in Kazakhstan, Turkey, and Australia. The government announced its goal as "to tell the world about East Turkestan and raise the cause of freedom and independence."²⁵ Diaspora websites include the Munich-based Eastern Turkestan Information Center, <http://www.uygur.org/>; and the East Turkestan (Uyghuristan) National Congress, <http://www.eastturkistan.com/>. Other supportive organizations are located in several Turkish cities, Sweden, Brussels, London, the Netherlands, Canada, and Moscow. Inner Mongols have the Southern Mongolia Human Rights Information Center, based in New York City, <http://www.smhric.org/> and the Inner Mongolian People's Party, <http://www.innermongolia.org/>, headquartered in Princeton, New Jersey.

There have also been contacts among different dissident ethnic groups. According to Asia Watch, as early as 1986, exiled ethnic leaders from the territory of the PRC joined forces to publish a journal entitled *Common Voice: Journal of the Allied Committee of the People of Eastern Turkistan, Mongolia, Manchuria, and Tibet Presently Under China*.²⁶ In 1996, a consortium of Inner Mongol human rights activists demanded that China free "thousands of innocent Tibetans, Uyghurs, Kazakhs, and other non-Chinese from detention and halting policies against the people of Inner Mongolia, Tibet, and Xinjiang to eliminate

them by sinicizing them by force. . . . We call on the international community to put political and economic pressure on China's government."²⁷ In 1998, a Uyghur exile group stated that, if the PRC were to attack Taiwan, Uyghurs would seize the opportunity to rebel.²⁸ Inner Mongols addressed an open letter to the people of Taiwan, appealing for a common front for independence.²⁹ In 2004, the ethnic Mongolian author of *Golden Holy Mountain*, a book depicting communist cruelty against Mongol and Tibetan culture and religion, applied for political asylum in Australia.³⁰ Contacts among Uyghur and Tibetan pro-independence groups are ongoing.

Impressive though these efforts were, they have had relatively little effect on persuading countries to put meaningful pressure on China to change its ways. It is not clear that even a concerted international effort could succeed in inducing Beijing to adopt a softer policy. There have been some successes—for example, in the late 1990s, Tibetan groups were able to get the World Bank to suspend a loan to resettle poor Han and Hui in Tibetan areas of Qinghai province. Leaders circulated the email addresses of the bank's governors along with suggested draft letters, and supporters flooded the bank officials' inboxes. Some camped out in front of the World Bank building for days in spite of chilly weather and sprinklers that discharged water on them just before dawn. Representations by foreign government officials visiting Beijing have succeeded in freeing some prisoners. The United States has also thus far resisted Chinese pressures to return Uyghurs who were captured in Afghanistan and are currently being held at the Guantanamo Bay military base. Such achievements, however, are few and far between.

Meanwhile, although tighter control by the Chinese government and greater reluctance of foreign governments to interfere any major minority outbreaks of violence, small-scale violence and demonstrations, typically in response to local grievances, continue to occur. In 2002, a bomb exploded in the Karze area of Qinghai; a popular lama was held responsible. In late 2004, Tibetans were sentenced to three-year prison terms for raising the snow lion flag which authorities construed, probably correctly, as advocating Tibetan independence.³¹ At the same time in neighboring Qinghai, more than two hundred Tibetan students protested because people from outside the region were being given jobs that had been promised to local university graduates.³² Also a riot broke out in southeastern China's Guangzhou province when police attempted to arrest a Uyghur for selling fried mutton without a license. The offender initially left the area but soon returned accompanied by seventy people carrying knives and steel pipes. News reports were vague, mentioning only that there had been several injuries. Underlying ethnic tensions rather than the license issue per se were held responsible.³³ Underlying ethnic tensions were also believed responsible for a Chinese Muslim (Hui) clash with Han that left one hundred fifty people dead in Henan province in central China. The precipitant was a traffic accident in which a Hui taxi driver fatally struck a six-year-old Han girl. Martial law was declared and a news blackout imposed. The situation might have

become much worse: police stopped a seventeen-truck convoy of Hui men en route to the troubled area; they are believed to have been mobilized by cell phone.³⁴

In Inner Mongolia, numerous arrests were made of people distributing leaflets and planning demonstrations to protest the sale of Chinggis (Genghis) Khan's mausoleum to a Chinese company that planned to demolish the edifice and build a larger one in order to attract more tourists. A popular local rock band believed to be in sympathy with the cause had its concerts cancelled, and curfews were imposed on the IMAR's university campuses. Security personnel warned the webmaster of a Mongolian student forum, <http://www.minimongol.com/>, to terminate the Web site.³⁵

In addition to being mainly responses to local grievances, these demonstrations and riots have not exceeded the coercive capacity of the state to deal with them. At best, they have been able to win only small concessions. There are in addition differences of opinion among dissidents on what goals they espouse. The Dalai Lama, for example, says what he wants is true autonomy, not independence—most other groups of Tibetans in exile are strongly in favor of independence. The Web site of one Inner Mongolian diaspora group states its aim as securing human rights and democracy for the Mongols of Inner Mongolia, not specifying whether these are to be achieved within or outside of the PRC; another is unabashedly pro independence. Independence for Inner Mongolia seems less realistic than for Tibet or Xinjiang, since there are only four million Mongols in a total population of approximately 22 million people in the IMAR. Although virtually all Uyghur diaspora Web sites seem to be strongly pro-independence, those inside the XUAR are less unified in their desires. Some Uyghurs are said to have reacted to the independence of the Central Asian Muslim states by realizing how bad life can be under independence;³⁶ others were impressed by the new institutions and influences they found there.³⁷ A third, more optimistic, group feels that it is possible to have both independence and economic prosperity if the Han were expelled and Xinjiang people had access the area's resources for themselves.³⁸

Conclusion

Under current conditions, the threat to the security of the PRC from its ethnic minorities is small. However, the underlying grievances between Han and dissident minorities remain unresolved, and some have even worsened. I am skeptical of the Beijing government's contention that, as ethnic minority prosperity increases, grievances will diminish. Even should the gap between Han and minorities' standards of living be significantly narrowed, antagonisms are unlikely to disappear. Minority groups that are more prosperous will have more time and money to devote to cultural interests, which will confront Beijing's conviction that central party and government decision makers rather than indigenous people will decide how to guide and shape cultural development. Also, many of the minority grievances are not

simply material but intimately concerned with issues of self-identity and group aspirations as well.

Moreover, the material gap appears to be widening. The Develop the West program has so far failed to bring prosperity to minority areas, and there are strong indications that it may actually worsen income disparities. The above mentioned protest by Tibetan students in Qinghai is but one example of many. The transport and infrastructure improvements that are meant to facilitate trade with minority areas are being built and maintained by Han. Moreover, they are predominantly urban in nature, whereas the overwhelming majority of ethnic minorities live in rural areas. Han enterprises in minority areas tend to be better funded and better managed than those of minorities, and have even been able to compete with them in the sale of traditional minority products.³⁹

Party and government face a dilemma: assuming, as they profess to believe, that reducing the income gap between predominantly Han areas and predominantly minority areas will reduce Han-minority tensions, the only way to achieve development under current conditions appears to be by using Han to do it. This in turn benefits the Han, not the minorities, thereby worsening tensions and increasing the income gap.

Beijing has made several attempts to improve education for minorities, all of which have run athwart various problems. For example, given the poor quality of schools in Tibet, it has made arrangements for some young people to study in China proper. This has elicited complaints of children being torn from their parents and culture to be sinicized under the guise of educating them. Education in Tibetan schools in India is proscribed due to Beijing's concern of contamination by the exile community. In Xinjiang, as in many other ethnic minority areas, it was deemed unfeasible to instruct university students in their native language. As of 2002, instruction was in Mandarin only. This caused complaints that party and government had abandoned earlier promises to develop minorities' languages in order to sinicize them.⁴⁰

Environmental conditions continue to deteriorate. The IMAR's deserts expand each year, abetted by policies that forced nomads to settle down. Rather than move from pasture to pasture as their ancestors had, Mongols' herds now graze in fixed locations, denuding the land. In March 2002, the worst sandstorm in memory bathed Beijing in gritty yellow dust for days; particulate matter from the storm, which had blown in from the IMAR desert, was found as far away as Taiwan, Korea, and Japan.

In Xinjiang, intensive cotton cultivation has exhausted the capacity of traditional subterranean aqueducts. Authorities responded by constructing irrigation stations fed by motor-pumped tube wells, many of which are drilled very deep into the earth. This has caused water tables to drop precipitously in a situation described in terms such as "looming crisis."⁴¹ The construction of the controversial Golmud to Lhasa railway was undertaken with pledges that the fragile Tibet environment would be

protected. However, a report commissioned by the U.S. embassy in Beijing found that promises to replace turf that had been displaced were not being honored, that endangered species were being poached, and that garbage disposal was lacking. Finally, railroad workers from AIDS-infested Golmud were likely to spread the disease into the TAR.⁴² As noted, AIDS is already a problem in Xinjiang.

Some have predicted that, as the poverty gap and alienation widen and the HIV/AIDS epidemic continues to spread, some of the infected may, feeling they have little to lose, become suicide bombers.⁴³ The deputy director of the PRC's Environmental Protection Administration, writing in *People's Daily*, stated flatly that serious pollution could choke off economic growth, exacerbate already serious income inequality, and increase the gap between the country's affluent east and the underdeveloped west.⁴⁴ A health crisis would create a still greater drag effect on growth.

There have been suggestions that the tensions between the PRC government and its restive minorities would improve if Beijing were only willing to provide a middle way—that it would be better advised to cease its fear of loss of control to the degree that it could tolerate grassroots movements with no apparent subversive motive and even encourage their leaders. Until this is done, say proponents of the middle way, those whose cultures are being suppressed will cling more tightly to them. The predominantly moderate Muslims of the XUAR will be propelled toward fundamentalism; more Tibetan and Mongol pacifists will become more militant. Granting some degree of genuine autonomy might, they surmise, undercut the arguments of more extreme members of ethnic minorities and bring about a degree of peace.⁴⁵

This is an attractive argument, and impossible to disprove. However, one should also consider the PRC government's concern that granting small autonomies may prove the slippery slope toward demands for more freedoms, and eventually end in demands for independence. Since it has thus far been able to keep minority unrest under control, Beijing may see the risks of changing policy as outweighed by any hypothetical benefits. Although dissidents have become better organized and coordinated, it is highly unlikely that, under current circumstances, any combination of angry minority groups could succeed in seriously challenging central government control.

On the other hand, present circumstances are changing, and central control may indeed be contested. The PRC government faces severe challenges. Peasant protests in Han areas grow more numerous and larger each year. Unemployed workers are more willing to take their protests to the streets. According to official figures, more than 3 million people took part in fifty-eight thousand "mass incidents" in 2003, a 14.4 percent increase over the year before.⁴⁶ Ecological deterioration is serious in Han areas as well. Also, despite stringent family planning regulations, the population continues to grow, making more demands on the environment. And the financial system is shaky.⁴⁷

A synergy of some combination of these elements could create the conditions for separatist elements to realize their hopes for some form of independent political status. Small local grievances can be folded into larger ones, and a gradual disintegration is not impossible. An old Chinese saying observes that everyone takes a stone out of a crumbling wall. To extend the metaphor, the cement of communism has weakened, and the stones of dissatisfaction are numerous. For now, these discontents do not exceed the repressive powers of the state. But that they may do so some day cannot be ruled out.

NOTES

1. The phrase is used by Gardiner Bovingdon in *Autonomy in Xinjiang: Han Nationalist Imperatives and Uyghur Discontent*, East-West Center Policy Studies No. 11 (Washington, DC: East-West Center, 2004), 14.

2. Tibetans object to the Western term "God King," but this seems to be the nearest approximation of his position that the English language is capable of.

3. "Economic Gap Widens in Minority Areas," *Xinhua* (Beijing), August 25, 1989.

4. His Holiness proposed that Beijing be responsible for Tibet's foreign policy; that Tibet be governed by its own constitution or basic law; that a new Tibetan government be formed, comprised of a popularly elected chief executive, a bicameral legislature, and an independent legal system; and that Tibet become a demilitarized zone, with the PRC retaining the right to maintain military installations in Tibet for defensive purposes only, until Tibet's neutrality had been internationally established. See "Tibet's Leader Outlines Plan," *South China Morning Post* (Hong Kong), June 16, 1988.

5. *Zhongguo Xinwen She* (Beijing), January 24, 1989, in FBIS-China, January 25, 1989.

6. "Jingxin Dongpo De 56 Tian" [56 Soul-Stirring Days] (Beijing: State Education Commission, 1989), cited in *Crackdown in Inner Mongolia* (New York: Asia Watch, 1991) (hereafter referred to as CIM), 7.

7. *Cheng Ming* (Hong Kong), July 1, 1990, cited in CIM, 7.

8. Xinjiang Radio, May 26, 1989, in FBIS-CHI, June 2, 1989; Xinjiang Radio, June 19, 1989; Carl Goldstein, "Letter from Xinjiang," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, August 9, 1989.

9. Justin Rudelson and William Jankowiak, "Acculturation and Resistance: Xinjiang Identities In Flux," in *Xinjiang: China's Muslim Borderland*, ed. S. Frederick Starr, 316 (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2004).

10. Author's conversation with Paul Goble, then a senior associate of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 16, 1993.

11. "Smoldering Grievances," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, September 23, 1993; Lincoln Kaye and John McBeth, "Peace Dividend: Asia's Big Two Adjust to Israel-PLO Accord," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, October 7, 1993.

12. "Regional Discipline Inspection Commission and Regional Supervision Department Call on Discipline Inspection and Supervision Organs Across Xinjiang to Strictly Enforce Political Discipline and Maintain the Stability of the Overall Situation," *Xinjiang ribao*, May 22, 1996; translated in FBIS-CHI, June 7, 1996, 82-84.

13. Bovingdon, *Autonomy in Xinjiang*, 36.

14. Justin Rudelson, *Ethnic Minorities in China: Tibetans and Uyghurs*, statement to the Congressional-Executive Commission on China, June 10, 2002 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2002), 24 (hereafter cited as CECC 2002 Report).

15. Luo Wanghao, "Determined Efforts Must Be Made to Eliminate 'Vermin'; Eradicate Poisonous Weeds," *Xinjiang ribao*, July 28, 1997; trans. in FBIS-CHI, August 11, 1997.

16. Jay Dautcher's "Public Health and Social Pathologies," in Starr, *Xinjiang*, 276-95, summarizes these developments.

17. Statement of Bhuchung K. Tsering to CECC, 37.

18. Bao Lisheng, "Three Evil Forces Threaten Xinjiang's Stability: Interviewing Pan Zhiping,

Director of the Central Asia Research Institute of Xinjiang Academy of Social Sciences," *Ta Kung Pao*, September 20, 2001.

19. Information Office of the State Council, "East Turkestan Terrorists Cannot Get Away with Impunity," *Beijing Review*, January 31, 2002.

20. Peter Walker, "China Celebrates National Day; Sends Troops to Thwart Xinjiang Separatists," *Agence France Presse* (Beijing), October 1, 2001.

21. Dolkun Kamberi statement, CECC 2002 Report, 28.

22. Bhuchung K. Tsering, CECC 2002 Report, 16.

23. Erik Eckholm, "American Gives Beijing Good News: Rebels on Terror List," *New York Times*, August 26, 2002.

24. Joshua Kurlantzick, "Repression and Revolt in China's Wild West," *Current History* (September 2004), 266.

25. "Uyghur Exile Group Forms a Government," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, September 23, 2004, 8.

26. CIM, 6.

27. Irja Halasz, "Unrest in Inner Mongolia," *Reuters*, February 28, 1996, <http://www.innermongolia.org/>.

28. "Uyghurs Said Waiting for Opportunity to Rise Up in Xinjiang," *Central News Agency* (Taipei), June 6, 1998, <http://www.cna.gov.tw/>.

29. "Taiwan Independence, No Chinese Empire," speech by Oyunbilig, representing the Inner Mongolian People's Party, at rally, June 28, 1997, <http://www.innermongolia.org/>.

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31. "Tibetans Jailed for Banned Banner," *Associated Press* (Beijing), September 25, 2004.

32. "Tibetans Protest over Han Joba," *South China Morning Post*, October 10, 2004, 5.

33. "Chinese Riot Police Clash with Uyghurs," *Reuters* (Hong Kong), November 9, 2004.

34. Joseph Kahn, "Ethnic Clashes Erupt in China, Leaving 150 Dead," *New York Times*, October 31, 2004, 5.

35. "Mongols Resist Government's Plan of Privatizing Chinggis Khan Mausoleum, Police Impose Curfew on College Campuses in Inner Mongolia," <http://www.smhric.org/>.

36. Rudelson statement, CECC 2002 Report, 49.

37. Sean Roberts, "A Land of Borderlands: Implications of Xinjiang's Trans-border Interactions," in Starr, *Xinjiang*, 228.

38. Author's interviews, 2002 and 2004.

39. Statement of Arthur N. Holcombe, CECC 2002 Report, 8.

40. For a fuller explanation of this problem, see June Teufel Dreyer, "The Evolution of Language Problems in China," in *Fighting Words: Language Policies and Ethnic Relations in Asia*, ed. Michael E. Brown and Sumit Ganguly, 353–484 (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003).

41. Stanley W. Toops, "The Ecology of Xinjiang: A Focus on Water," in Starr, *Xinjiang*, 275.

42. "Environmental Protection along the Qinghai-Tibet Railway," <http://www.usembassychina.org.cn/sadnt/Qingzang-Railway.htm/> (accessed April 2003).

43. Rudelson statement, CECC 2002 Report, 25.

44. Wang Xiangwei, "Pollution Crisis 'Puts Economic Growth at Risk,'" *South China Morning Post*, October 29, 2004, <http://www.scmp.com/>.

45. Bovingdon, *Autonomy in Xinjiang*, ix; and Rudelson statement, CECC 2002 Report, 23.

46. Josephine Ma, "Three Million took Part in Surging Protests Last Year," *South China Morning Post*, June 8, 2004, <http://www.scmp.com/>.

47. A more detailed consideration of these issues may be found in June Teufel Dreyer, "The Limits to China's Growth," *Orbis* 48, no. 2 (Spring 2004): 233–46.



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