

China and Xinjiang after September 11

by Niklas Swanström



Niklas Swanström is Director of the East Asia Project at the Department of Peace and Conflict Research, Uppsala University. (Photo supplied by S. E. Cornell)

The aftermath of the September 11 bombings created a new situation for the minorities in China's western Xinjiang province, who are primarily Muslims, and for the Chinese government's policies towards Xinjiang. Political developments in the region and internationally after September 11 increased the possibilities for China to put more pressure on the separatist struggle in Xinjiang, with expanded international and regional support. Given strong international reluctance to support any Muslim group, or part of it, that has been branded as terrorist, it is clear that China now has far more possibilities to intensify pressures on the Muslim minorities than has previously been the case. What is less clear is how long the international condemnation of 'fundamentalist' groups will remain; and if keeping pressure on Xinjiang at the current level will satisfy China or if the pressure will intensify. The answer to a large extent depends on China's relations with the Central Asian states and the position of the U.S. in Central Asia.

The relations between China and the Central Asian states have been under a great deal of strain due to domestic problems in Xinjiang. The problem, however, is not between the governments in the region and China but rather a popular support in the Central Asian states for the Uighur liberation struggle in Xinjiang. The governments, on the contrary, are supportive of the struggle against Islamic radicalism and terrorism, and they cooperate with China to suppress cross-border separatism and terrorism. On the positive side, trans-border trade has increased dramatically since the independence of the Central Asian states in 1991, and the black market trade has likely expanded even quicker than the official trade. However, there are major problems that need to be resolved before Central Asia at large, and Xinjiang more specifically, can develop peacefully.

These problems are not only historical, ethnic or religious but also economic and political in nature. The history of Xinjiang's interaction with Central Asia and China before its slow and late integration into the Chinese empire, is too long and complex to detail here. Suffice to say that

Xinjiang is historically, culturally, religiously and ethnically the eastern part of Central Asia, as is obvious from the name 'Eastern Turkestan' used by Uighur separatists. It is also the most recent accession to China, hence the Chinese name Xinjiang – 'New Territories' (lit.: 'new border').

The international community has heavily criticized China for its actions in Xinjiang, actions that have included executions of separatists, suppression of religious practice, and a heavy influx of Han Chinese immigrants. However, international criticism of these policies have softened since the September 11 bombings and the U.S. war against terrorism. Uighur and other Chinese minority militants were trained by bin Laden and fought in Afghanistan and Kashmir for what they consider to be the Islamic cause. When the U.S. and the world turned against bin Laden and the Taliban, the Uighur militants were condemned as terrorists. In August 2002, the U.S. included the East Turkestan Islamic Movement in its list of terrorists. China has more than eagerly accepted the task of eliminating the alleged terrorists that were supposedly trained and supported by bin Laden and the Taliban. China

has also intensified its pressure on Xinjiang as a whole. This has been seen in official pressure on students and officials not to fast during the holy month of Ramadan, and in the new edict that the Uighur language will be prohibited in first- and second-year courses at the university. The Chinese government claims this measure is intended to protect the minorities and give them equal work opportunities after their university education, but Uighurs see it as an attempt to eliminate their cultural awareness and belonging. There are understandable reasons for the Chinese to reverse the teaching to Mandarin since books at higher levels of education in the Uighur language are non-existent, and future employment is dependent upon knowledge of Mandarin. Nevertheless, whether the intentions are good or not, the effect is that the identity and language of the minorities are compromised. This is reinforced by an increased tension between Chinese immigrants and Muslim populations in Xinjiang. The Uighurs are the largest non-Han group in Xinjiang, with roughly half of the region's population – though the figure was ca. 90% fifty years ago. Pressure on smaller minorities like

the Tajiks is even stronger.

There is great popular support for the liberation struggle in Xinjiang from the populations of the Central Asian states, especially since many remember the exodus from Xinjiang after the failed establishment of the East Turkestan republic in the 1940s. The Chinese government, on the other hand, enjoys the support of the Central Asian governments against the alleged terrorists in Xinjiang, especially in the light of their own problems with religious fundamentalism. This contradictory situation has been complicated by increased trade between Xinjiang and the Central Asian states. Trade has increased to the extent that the Chinese government claims that many of the people that moved out in the late 1940s and early 1950s are moving back into China to take advantage of the economic boom that is ongoing in Xinjiang. Whether this assertion is correct is doubtful, since many of the Muslim minorities and their descendants that fled China are still suspicious of the Chinese government's intentions. It is, however, clear that the influx of traders to and from Xinjiang has increased tremendously. This influx has not only been positive for the peaceful development of the region, as religious extremisms, weapons and not least narcotics have accompanied these positive effects of trade. The drug trade to Xinjiang has steadily increased, with a rising number of addicts, and as a result, HIV has become a serious problem especially among the minority groups in Xinjiang. Weapons trafficking has further destabilized the region. China and the Central Asian states have attempted to decrease the terrorist activities over the borders through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization by applying harder measures against alleged

terrorists and tighter border controls. This attempt is too recent to have had any effects at this stage, but harder measures have proven, both in Central Asia and in China, to further increase Islamic radicalism and separatism among minorities.

The situation in Xinjiang is not only important for internal security reasons and the peaceful development of all ethnic groups in China; it is also the future highway of the black gold – oil. Xinjiang has its own oil, and other important natural resources, but depletion threatens the Chinese oil wells and the future route for oil is *through* Xinjiang and not *from* Xinjiang. China has invested greatly in Kazakhstan and is prospecting and investing in oil and gas in all states in the region, excluding Tajikistan which has such resources. The Chinese government and Chinese companies have proposed a pipeline from Iran to the Chinese coast and the plan of a pipeline from Kazakhstan to China is already in progress. The oil can, however, only be transported through Xinjiang, and a volatile region would threaten the crucial import of oil from Central Asia. China's possibilities to stabilize the region are either to exterminate all the minorities – clearly an impossible solution – or to decrease the separatist tendencies in Xinjiang by peaceful means. The September 11 bombings may have created new opportunities for suppression, but very few opportunities for dialogue and peaceful coexistence.

The American presence in the region has made China determined to quickly resolve the terrorist/separatist questions without U.S. involvement, through the SCO which has established a regional anti-terrorist center in Bishkek. These attempts are nevertheless fairly new, and the efforts that

have provided some results are unilateral, or at best bilateral. The cooperation between China and Kazakhstan aimed at destroying Islamic fundamentalism has proven relatively effective though. Most of the rebels from Xinjiang currently travel and trade through Tajikistan which has little security at its borders, or through Pakistan.

It is clear that China will have to engage more countries in the region in the war against terrorism and separatism. Whether or not China is comfortable with it, the U.S. military presence is there to stay until President Bush or the U.S. Congress decides that it is an unnecessary involvement abroad, which is unlikely to happen in the near future. Can then China cooperate with the U.S. in the war against terrorism, and separatism? This is more problematic since China would react very strongly if the U.S. engaged Chinese subjects and captured them for interrogation in Cuba or any other location. The destruction of Uighur militants is acceptable and supported by China which regards them as terrorists, but the capture and detention of Chinese subjects would be regarded as an infringement of Chinese sovereignty. A possible alliance between China and the U.S. would therefore be very fragile and the Chinese preoccupation with national sovereignty would be the delimiting factor.

The situation for China and the minorities in Xinjiang has dramatically changed since the September 11 bombings. China's manoeuvrability has increased and the Central Asian states cooperate with China in their suppression of separatism in Xinjiang, both so that they can suppress their own Islamic radicals and out of fear. China is, however, uncomfortable with the U.S. presence in the region, and would conceivably prefer internal

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prone to violence and awash with weapons, can ill afford another round of civil war after having suffered bloodshed for 24 years.

Also fuelling insecurity is the continued dominance of the warlords, all having personal and political agendas at odds with that of the Karzai government; the botched U.S. bombing raids including one on a wedding party in central Urozgan province killing 48 civilians and injuring 118; the record, unmanageable repatriation of about 1.3 million Afghan refugees from Pakistan, Iran and other neighbouring countries; and the slow pace of reconstruction. Hope is giving way to despair and there is talk again of warlords stocking up on arms flowing into Afghanistan from outside in preparation for future battles. Afghanistan is again at the crossroads and there are no easy answers to the plethora of problems confronting the Afghan people. Besides other urgent steps, one initiative that would determine the restoration of peace and stability in Afghanistan is creating a balance between the U.S. military objectives and the needs and aspirations of the war-weary Afghans. □

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turmoil rather than having the U.S. military machinery literally on the other side of the border, as was the case in the Vietnamese and Korean Wars.

Chinese suppression of terrorists trained by bin Laden and Taliban is justified to secure internal stability and acceptable by international law, but the fighting has influenced the every-day life of the relatively secularized Muslim population in Xinjiang. The strongly repressive methods that have developed over the region and internationally create more, rather than less, Islamic fundamentalism within Xinjiang. If China is to stabilize the region, increased pressure is the wrong solution as it will feed the militants, while increased trade and higher living standards could decrease the number of militants. The problem will not be solved by increased trade. However, a purchasing power that is much higher than the Central Asian republics combined with cultural freedoms would probably entice the overwhelming part of Xinjiang to accept to stay within China. It should not be forgotten that Xinjiang is relatively secularized and the Xinjiang version of Islam is very tolerant, as long as Taliban-style organizations do not get a hold on the people. □

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Madsen)**

The six months that the recent war scare lasted was not unique. It appears that the two parties quarrel before they fight. The good news is that three of the four wars were short and conventional. They did not in the first instance aim at civilians. The bad news is that a coming war may force Pakistan to resort to nuclear arms within 72 hours of losing out in a conventional war.³ The risk of such a scenario materialising will increase in the months of September and October.

A longer version of this article will be published in Danish in "Militært Tidsskrift" around October 1st, 2002

Notes

¹ I am borrowing the term 'war scare' from Sumit Ganguly. My general line of argument is also akin to Ganguly's. See e.g. Sumit Ganguly (2001) *Conflict Unending. India-Pakistan Tensions since 1947*, Columbia University Press, New York and Woodrow Wilson Center Press, Washington DC.

² Bidwai, Praful og Achin Vanaik (1999) *South Asia on a Short Fuse. Nuclear Politics and the Future of Global Disarmament*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, p. vii.

³ Joseph, Josy 'War unlikely before September', May 20, 2002 from <http://www.rediff.com/news/2002/may/20war.htm>

⁴ Sudarshan, V. and Ajith Pillai, 'Game of Patience', *Outlook*, May 27, 2002, p. 39.

⁵ Air Marshall (ret'd) Kapil Kak in Burke, Jason and Peter Beaumont, 'Nuclear neighbours teeter on brink of Armageddon', *The Observer*, 2 June 2002, p. 17. □

NIAS Information Gateway to ASEM in Asia
<http://www.niaslinc.dk/Gateways/ASEM>

NIAS Information Gateway to ASEM in Asia has been launched on the occasion of the 4th Asia-Europe Meeting in Copenhagen 23-24 September 2002. It is intended to complement the official ASEM4 website (<http://www.um.dk/ASEM>) by providing relevant background information concerning the ASEM process, the ASEM partners and the relations between the Asian and European partners. There are links to further readings for the interested through the Asia-EU bibliography 1990-2002 and a selection of relevant Asian news sources, which will include highlighting of the latest news in Asian media concerning ASEM4 and Asia-Europe relations. For those who wish to have more information of a specific Asia-related issue, we also provide the opportunity to ask us for assistance in finding references to further information through the 'Ask about Asia' service.

This is a dynamic website and we warmly welcome your participation and suggestions of interesting information links or other improvements.

The website will be continuously updated until 15 October and will be available until 31 December 2002. □

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Washington must stay the course in Central Asia. While that need not mean an open-ended large-scale military presence, it does entail a continuing military presence, perhaps through NATO and the new NATO-Russia Council, if not other mechanisms, and a large-scale political and economic presence as well.

Not only does the failure of the SCO teach us critical lessons about the difficulties inherent in trying to bring about regional cooperation in Central Asia; it reminds us that nature abhors political and military vacuums as well as physical ones, and that if we do not learn from the mistakes of the recent past, somebody else will fill that vacuum. But that state's leadership may not be as benign as America's. □