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Ethnic Conflict in Xinjiang and Its International Connections

Yu-Wen Chen

Abstract

This chapter presents the causes of the ethnic conflict in Xinjiang and the internationalization of this conflict since the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949. Despite the focus on contemporary development, this region currently known as Xinjiang has experienced unrest and uprisings for centuries. Instead of resolving the enduring conflict between the Chinese state and the Uyghurs, who are advocating for greater political autonomy or independence, the current PRC policies and practices actually exacerbate the schism. Uyghur diasporic groups have sought to garner international support to put pressure on the PRC. International awareness of the Uyghur issue indeed has grown, but this has not translated into sufficient international pressure to push for reform in China. Instead, the Chinese government has sought to delegitimize foreign influence. Present developments further show how Xinjiang has been turned into a police state. All these imply that in the near future, the Uyghur conflict will likely escalate rather than subside.

Introduction

The area called Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR, hereafter referred to as Xinjiang) in the People's Republic of China (PRC) is today co-habited by diverse ethnic groups, such as Uyghurs (or Uighurs), Kazakh, Manchu, Kyrgyz, Hui, Uzbek and others. There is no up-to-date credible statistics of the population of the area, but various sources have reported the current Uyghur population to be around 10 million, which makes them the most populous non-Han inhabitants therein (Kaltman, 2007: 2; Olson, 1998: vii-ix; Wang, 2001:191; Klimeš, 2018). The Uyghurs are ethnically close to the broadly defined Turkic peoples of the world. The majority of them consider themselves as Sunni Muslims today. Xinjiang's large landmass, ample reserves of natural resources, such as oil and gas, and its geopolitical location as a borderland indicate its importance for the PRC government (Bovingdon, 2010). There are also Uyghurs living in other parts of China. Not all Uyghurs have salient aspirations for political independence, but in recent years, more and more Uyghurs increasingly feel the pain of the ever intensifying governmental control over their lives. This chapter aims to give readers an overview of ethnic tensions in Xinjiang and how these tensions have spiralled into conflict and evoked international reactions.

As part of the PRC's on-going nation-building process, the Chinese state's historiography takes a firm stance on China's long centuries and unbroken reign over Xinjiang. Notable

examples given by the Chinese state include that during the Han dynasty (206 BC -220 AD), there was already an Office of Protector-General of the Western Regions in this area, while the Tang dynasty (618-907) had installed the Anxi and Beiting Beiting Office of Protector-General in the region (Information Office of the State Council of the PRC, 2005). However, Uyghur and Western scholars have often noted that most of these were simply garrisons in oases and that no Chinese dynasty had full control of this region until the eighteenth century when Xinjiang was annexed to the Qing empire in 1759 (Millward and Perdue, 2004: 48; Millward, 2007:24; Tursun, 2008: 93-6). Over centuries, the area experienced Uyghur revolts against China (Mackerras, 2000), but the root of the contemporary conflict and rising international mobilization in support of the Uyghurs can be traced to China's tumultuous Republican Period. Xinjiang was ruled successively by different warlords. One of them, Sheng Shica, was notorious for using torture to clampdown on pan-Turkic and pan-Islamic movements in the region (Hyer, 2006: 81). The Nationalist Chinese's weak and ineffective governance of Xinjiang encouraged Uyghurs to found their own separate states between 1933 and 1944. Both states were, however, short-lived. The first, the Turkish Islamic Republic of Eastern Turkestan, lasted only a few weeks (Shichor, 2003: 281-2). The second, the Eastern Turkestan Republic (ETR), lasted for about five years. The term "Eastern Turkistan" was used to refer to Xinjiang because, historically, Central Asia was called "West Turkistan" by Western colonialists (Hao and Liu, 2012: 211).

According to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), it "peacefully liberated" Xinjiang in 1949. At that time, some Uyghurs thoughts that they would soon obtain full independence as they were promised by Mao Zedong a decade before (Corner, 1984), but the CCP eventually only gave them the "autonomous region", which came into existence on 1 October 1955 (Clarke, 2011: 40-1; Bovingdon, 2004: 5). As for the former ETR leaders, they were either persecuted or fled to Central Asia, India, Turkey, and later to other parts of the world, carrying their nationalist sentiments with them, which became the root of the Uyghur movement's international wing (Wheeler, 1964; Clark and Kamalov, 2004: 169; Kauz, 2006: 134-6). We will examine the Uyghur movement's international wing in the latter part of this chapter.

This chapter is structured around two main questions: what has caused the contemporary ethnic conflict in Xinjiang, and what has led to the rising international mobilization in support of the Uyghurs in Xinjiang. Ethnic groups might have collective identities and yearnings for autonomy and self-determination. However, not all ethnic nationalism would necessarily develop into conflictual relations with the ruling regime. This issue is the same in contemporary China as in other countries around the world. For instance, in Guangdong in southern China, the Cantonese also have a distinct culture and language, yet there is no clear separatist movement in Guangdong (Wang, 2001).

Scholars from various disciplines, such as history, anthropology, political science, sociology, sinology and religious studies, have all attempted to find answers to why Xinjiang has become a place of rising ethnic conflict. They do so with different approaches, examine the issue from various angles, and sometimes come up with contrasting views on the issue. Furthermore, scholars in and outside China sometimes have starkly divergent views on this topic. As scholars in the PRC are generally tied to the Chinese regime either voluntarily or involuntarily, sometimes it is hard to discern what is purely the views of Chinese scholars and what is the state's view. What is more certain is that Chinese scholars often entertain different views on this issue from scholars outside China. In this chapter, we carefully integrate the views of scholars from China, Japan, and the Western world. To some extent, state views are

carefully integrated as well to sharpen the contrasting views on the thorny topic of ethnic conflict in Xinjiang.

In the following section, we begin with a commonly adopted approach, that is, a historical perspective on the evolution of the conflict. Particular focus is on developments since the establishment of the PRC and how the Chinese state's policies affect the rise or decline of the conflict in Xinjiang. We also introduce various social scientists' views on the topic from their disciplinary lens. Their perspectives depart from historical descriptions but are based on historical evidences. A combination of historical understanding and social scientific analysis of the topic enriches our understanding of the challenges facing Xinjiang. The third section proceeds to explore why the ethnic conflict in Xinjiang has developed an international dimension. Again, we combine both historical and social scientific perspectives to study the internationalization of the Xinjiang issue. As the international escalation of the conflict does not indicate a bright future for the resolution of the issue, in the fourth section, we introduce Chinese and Western intellectuals' debates over the right policy changes that are necessary to handle China's thorny minority issues. Finally, the fifth section concludes this chapter.

Development and Rise of Ethnic Conflict in Xinjiang

Ethnic conflict in Xinjiang was actually not that prominent during the early years of the PRC. From 1949 to 1966, the CCP's nationwide socialist campaigns and class struggles were carried out in Xinjiang as well with the aim of integrating Uyghurs into the Chinese nation. Ethnic and religious affairs were highly monitored and rebellious Uyghurs were executed (Braker, 1985:153-4). Meanwhile, the CCP gradually removed ethnic elites who initially signed the pact with the party around 1949 and replaced them with new cadres that the CCP has recruited and nurtured. People's courts replaced religious courts, and secular state-run schools replaced religious schools (Hess, 2009: 80).

Despite these draconian policies and practices, Clark (1999) in his field trip reported that most Uyghurs were committed to the socialist campaigns that the CCP had carried out and that there was no clear discontent before the Cultural Revolution. The relatively peaceful relations between the Uyghurs and the CCP in the early days of the PRC was not the result of the CCP's benevolent policy towards minorities in Xinjiang, but rather it was the domestic context at that time that allowed ethnic consciousness to be suppressed for the sake of other more pertinent issues facing local populations.

To begin with, the Cold War gave the CCP good opportunity to legitimize its political acts by placing class struggle and socialist transformation before nationality issues (Goldstein, Siebenschuh and Tsering, 1999; Goldstein, Sherp and Siebenschuh, 2004). Ethnic consciousness was suppressed, and anyone who sought to contact the outside world was considered to have committed treason or espionage, according to Xiaowei Zang (2015), an expert of ethnicity in China at City University of Hong Kong (Zang, 2015: 106-7).

Secondly, the CCP's divide and rule tactics did manage to put together a new cohort of elites, ranging from government officials to professionals and modern working class people who are loyal to the party (Zang, 2015:106-7). The CCP co-opted these new elites with benefits, prestige and upward mobility in society in exchange for their support for the regime (Hess, 2009; Clark, 1999).

Thirdly, one should remember that China was in fact one of the most equal countries in the world at that time in terms of Gini coefficient (Zang, 2015: 106-7). There was little inequality between ethnic groups because people were generally equally poor.

The suppressed ethnic consciousness of the Uyghurs during the early days of the PRC was dramatically aroused with the onset of the devastating Cultural Revolution that aimed to eradicate anything deemed a "class contradiction" (Zang, 2015: 108). From 1966 to 1976, radical ways of removing old customs and religious practices of ethnic minorities, persecution of religious personnel, closure of mosques and destruction of religious scripts were rampant in Xinjiang, which evoked the Uyghurs' collective identity and resentment against the oppressors (Barabantseva, 2008: 580; Clarke, 2011: 65-70; Hess, 2009).

In the post-1978 era, Beijing sought to redress the problem with more tolerant cultural and economic policies (Bovingdon, 2004; Joseph, 2010: 347-8, Clarke 2011: 77). Uyghurs were granted a certain degree of freedom in terms of religious and cultural expression. Preferential policies, in areas such as school admission, family planning, job placement and promotion as well as regional infrastructural support, were also implemented (Zang, 2015:109-111).

As part of the CCP's reform of the society towards a market economy, it also had to renounce the class struggle, which was the core of its nationality policy prior to 1978 (Barabantseva, 2008: 581-2; Clarke, 2011: 73; Zang, 2015: 109-111). The CCP had to redefine ethnic issues as challenges in economic development; it centers on improving the economic rights of the Uyghurs, not any other perceived rights (e.g., human rights) (Szadziewski, 2007; Szadziewski, 2009: 212). Ultimately, the government hopes that economic growth would win the acquiescence of non-Han populations in the region, and thus eliminate ethnic friction and solidify national unity.

Surprisingly, even though the economies in Xinjiang have indeed bloomed in the post-1978 era, ethnic tensions have not subsided. One thing that should be noted is that economic development actually creates further intergroup inequality between the Han and the Uyghurs. Barry Sautman (1998), a political scientist and lawyer at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, also points out that Chinese style of affirmative action, as shown in the aforementioned preferential policies, has not really created better inter-ethnic relations, although they has achieved some level of social equity by offering more benefits to disadvantaged minorities.

This situation has been aggravated by the massive influx of Han Chinese into Xinjiang and their control of Xinjiang's mining and exports of oil and gas (Bovingdon, 2004; Schicor, 2003: 284). The Chinese government's approach is deeply rooted in the Confucian assimilationist *ronghe* ideology, which assumes that all minorities have to be *sinicized* into the Han-dominated society. Uyghurs' sense of exploitation fueled by pressures to become assimilated linguistically and culturally to the Han-dominated system is counter-productive to conflict de-escalation.

All these developments led to the increase in demonstrations and uprising in the 1980s, which persisted in the 1990s and beyond. More recent examples include the 2009 Urumchi riot that left almost 200 people dead and the violence in 2014 that spilled over to Beijing and Kunming (Millward, 2004). In response, Beijing has intensified its policy of using economic development to promote ethnic assimilation, while it cracks down harshly on any possible separatist elements in the region. In recent years, scholars have reported an increase in

security-related jobs, deployment of troops and even the massive scale of extrajudicial internment camps (termed “re-education camps” by Chinese authorities across Xinjiang (Zenz and Leibold, 2017; Zenz, 2019; Szadziewski, 2019; see also The Uighur Intervention and Global Unified Humanitarian Response Act of 2019 in the US Congress). The Chinese government expects that these camps will transform and “de-extremize” Uyghurs in the region (Klimeš, 2018; Zenz, 2019). Zenz (2019) noted that this is definitely the largest “social re-engineering” that China has ever had since the Cultural Revolution. “It represents the epitome of China’s securitization approach in its restive western minority regions”, as Zenz (2019: 124) puts it.

The master narrative is that the state forms a kind of “pastoral power”, as coined by Zhang, Brown and O’Brien (2018), to legitimize its policy towards Xinjiang. This narrative supports the notion that the Chinese state is the care taker of Xinjiang, engendering modernity, prosperity and stability in the region. Christoffersen (2002) suggests that one can also consider the Chinese state as an external Uyghur patron (among other foreign patrons) that tries to re-define the Uyghur identity in a way that shows the match between the Uyghur and Chinese state’s interests. To this end, state-sanctioned Islamic institutions were set up and certain Uyghurs who are loyal to the Chinese state are trained and supported.

At the same time, pastoral power is also reflected in the way that the state narrates its responsibility to discipline undesirable behaviors and activities that would break ethnic harmony, national unity and destabilize the region. Scholars have observed that Beijing often uses medical analogies, such as “addiction”, to depict religious belief and to portray the Uyghurs as a biological threat to the state. It then justifies its action in creating the aforementioned “re-education camps” to remedy or “cure” Uyghurs who might harbor radical thoughts (Roberts, 2018).

Beijing’s endeavors, nevertheless, have not borne fruit for a number of reasons. According to Xiaowei Zang (2015), one prime reason for this is that the benefits of economic development are not equally shared and felt by everyone. Some Uyghurs feel deprived and marginalized, comparing their living standards with those of Han Chinese or other minority groups in and outside Xinjiang (Zang, 2015: 112). Second, when the policies of economic development are not implemented with careful consideration for the preservation of culture, religious freedom and other sensitive minority rights, Uyghurs do not appreciate Beijing’s policies (Zang, 2015: 112). Third, in this era of globalization, Uyghurs have more and more means to contact the outside world and understand the international (if not universal) norms for minority rights, religious freedom and human rights (Zang, 2015: 112). These developments give rise to increasing uneasy relations between the Uyghurs and the Chinese state.

In teasing out the exact source of unrest in Xinjiang, scholars actually have different views. For instance, Svante Cornell (2002), a security studies expert, argues that ethnic grievances are not as important as the institutional design of autonomy itself. After comparing several institutional designs of autonomous systems, Cornell (2002) comes to the conclusion that the systems themselves can actually induce or facilitate conflict and even separatist movements. He argues that the Chinese autonomous region system basically gives the Uyghurs an opportunity to have an imagination of their collectiveness. Several scholars have similar views, asserting that the Soviet Union and the PRC systems of assigning ethnic groups to ethnonational categories and giving them certain preferential treatments basically helped institutionalize their collective existence as a group (Gladney, 1991; Roeder, 1991; Roy, 2000), giving them the capacity to seek greater autonomy and even secession.

Not all scholars, however, agree with Cornell that the Uyghurs grievances are not an important factor of the rising unrest in Xinjiang. Gardner Bovingdon, an expert on Xinjiang at Indiana University, argues that the autonomy that is given to Xinjiang exists only in name only and that preferential policies often produce counter-productive results. Numerous scholars have concluded that constant reform of ethnic policies only creates further grievances and are the main reason for the increasing protests and unrest in Xinjiang (e.g., Moneyhon, 2002; Bovingdon, 2004).

It is also worth noting that some social scientists have applied a focused on Xinjiang as a case study in which a particular theoretical framework can be tested. For instance, Wang (2001) argues that Western theories on peripheral nationalism cannot explain well the diverse situations in China where some areas, such as Xinjiang, have exhibited more tendencies for separatism, while others, such as Guangdong, have not. Western theories, such as that of Ernest Gellner's (1964), focus on peripheral nationalism in backward regions, asserting that industrialization tends to bring negative impacts that prompt backward regions to break away from the center. Wang (2001), however, points out that this cannot be applied to Xinjiang's case as separatist movements existed even before Xinjiang was industrialized under the rule of the PRC. Wang (2001) then proposes a theoretical model that examines the relationship between elite status and national identity. Comparing Xinjiang with Guangdong, Wang stresses that Xinjiang's local elites were granted lower and fewer opportunities in the central government and that their locals also have a unique identity that is quite different from that of the core Han-dominated nation-state. This explains why separatist sentiments and movements are more prominent in Xinjiang, while similar aspirations are nearly absent in Guangdong, where the local Cantonese population has no problem identifying with the Han Chinese nation and where the local Cantonese elites enjoy relatively higher status in the central government (Wang, 2001).

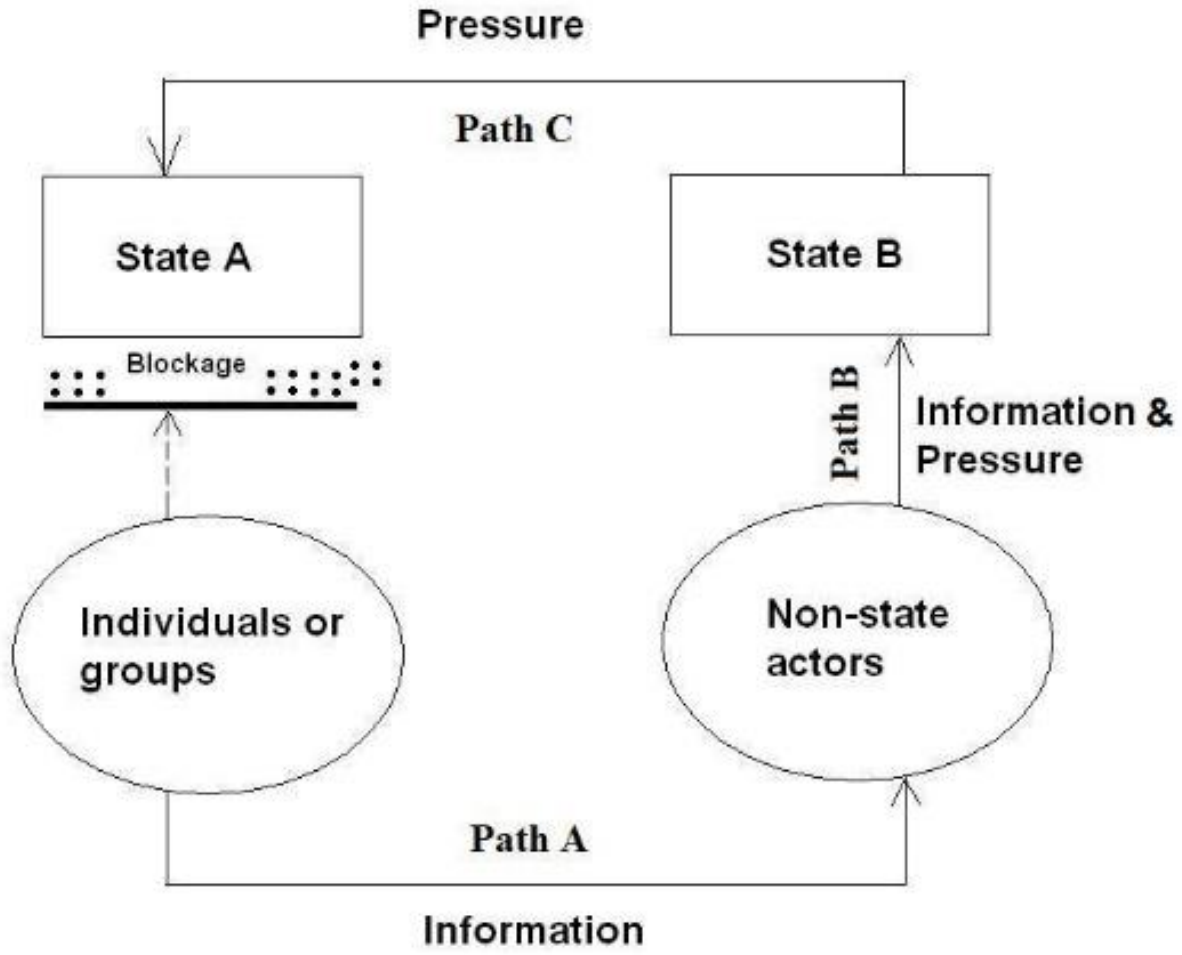
Internationalization of the Conflict

Ethnic conflict in Xinjiang is on the rise, and the development of its international dimension is not conductive to the resolution of the conflict. As stated earlier, after the establishment of the PRC, some Uyghur elites left China, carrying their nationalist sentiments with them, which sowed the seeds of contemporary Uyghur overseas movements (Ercilasun and Ercilasun, 2018). Two notable Uyghur leaders, Mehmet Emin Bugra and Isa Yusuf Alptekin, are presented here as examples. They took Turkey as their new home in the early 1950s, as Turkey shares cultural, religious and ethnic parallels with Uyghurs (Shichor, 2009). At that time, Turkey did not recognize the PRC regime. Turkey, thus, served as a base for them to revive Uyghur nationalism overseas (Besson, 1998: 4; Shichor, 2003; Mizutani, 2007: 153).

Political scientist Yu-Wen Chen (2011and 2014) in her analysis of the rise of the global Uyghur lobby in the contemporary era proposes to borrow a conceptual framework from the social sciences, particularly Keck and Sikkink's (1998) interpretative framework of transnational advocacy networks (TANs), to critically examine the efforts and actual impact of the Uyghur diaspora's work. TANs engage in a boomerang pattern in which access to the articulation of interests is blocked in one country, prompting political entrepreneurs to bypass domestic channels and seek international allies to push forward transformation at home. In

the Uyghur case, Bugra and Alptekin's political entrepreneurship helped channel the voice of Uyghurs abroad and resuscitated the nationalist cause suppressed back in Xinjiang after 1949. This, thus, creates "Path A" as depicted in Figure 1. Their political activism included informing state and non-state actors around the world about the situation in Xinjiang through petition letters and news reporting, paving the way for "Path B" in Figure 1 (Tyler, 2003: 224-5).

Figure 1: Boomerang Pattern (Redrawn from Keck and Sikkink, 1998)



Conceptually, the boomerang framework seems to depict the Uyghur case well, that is, suppression in China prompted overseas Uyghur nationalist movement in the hope that such activism would create international pressure for China to change its policies in Xinjiang. Chen (2014) cautions, however, that it is not easy to find empirical evidence of such international leverage ("Path C" in Figure 1).

For instance, during early days of the PRC, China was closed to the outside world, making it immune to international pressure. Uyghurs in Central Asia were also under the Soviet control and were hard to mobilize. Moreover, during the Cold War, the West had more pressing issues to solve than to care about the protection of minority rights in the PRC. It was hard to detect any real boomerang effect at work (Chen, 2014).

The trend, however, started to change in the 1980s when China opened itself up to the world and could no longer shield itself entirely from international scrutiny. In addition, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the independence of Central Asian states in the 1990s, provided new incentives for Uyghurs to take up the nationalist cause. Moreover, due to the increasing salience of international human and minority rights, Uyghur diasporic activists discovered that if they could frame their nationalist cause as struggles for human and minority rights, they would find resonance in international norms and, thus, garner international sympathy and support. Social scientists sometimes use the concept of "opportunity structure" to depict the arrangement of institutions and values that would enable activists to advance their work. In the case of Uyghur overseas activism, one can say that the international opportunity structure started to become more open for Uyghur activism from the 1980s; it gained new momentum in the 1990s and continues to expand its transnational networks up to the present time (Chen, 2014).

Currently, the most prominent organization that is advancing the Uyghur cause internationally is the Munich-based World Uyghur Congress (WUC). The WUC is an umbrella organization of Uyghur diasporic organizations drawn from around the world. The WUC was officially set up in 2004, with Erkin Alptekin, son of Isa Yusuf Alptekin (who died in 1995), as its first president. Yu-Wen Chen's 2014 book titled "The Uyghur Lobby" is the first academic book documenting the global networks of the WUC and their impacts. In Chen's analysis, she found that the international influence of the WUC's networks varies in different countries. In Germany, WUC activism has increased public awareness, particularly the awareness of certain sympathetic German politicians, to the Uyghur issue, thereby boosting the chance that this might be taken up in the German Parliament (Chen, 2012; Chen, 2014). In the US, in contrast, the Uyghur issue has been able to move from mere promotion of awareness of the issue to actual drafting of congressional bills to prompt state actions. The most recent and notable congressional bills include the Uyghur Human Rights Policy (UHRP) Act of 2019 in the U.S. House (H.R. 649) and U.S. Senate (S. 178) and the Uighur Intervention and Global Unified Humanitarian Response (UIGHUR) Act of 2019 (H.R. 1025). These three congressional bills were introduced against the backdrop of the Chinese state's mounting suppression in Xinjiang, where internment campaigns targeted at the Uyghurs and other Turkic peoples in China have been deemed by American lawmakers as serious human right violations. Both bills offer legal framework for the US to sanction Chinese officials responsible for human rights violations in Xinjiang (Szadziewski, 2019).

Although Uyghur overseas activism has been able to achieve some modest success in raising awareness and garnering foreign sympathy, there is still no clear evidence that Beijing has succumbed to international pressure. Hence, there remains a lack of the boomerang effect as depicted in Path C (Figure 1), although aspirations to achieve it continue.

When exploring the international connections of the Uyghur activism, scholars have also cautioned that one cannot assume that the voices of Uyghur diasporic organizations echo the views of those Uyghurs residing in China (Petersen, 2006). Similarly, one cannot assume that Uyghurs in China desire political independence as certain diasporic organizations have been asserting. This view raises another issue, that is, to what extent can the Uyghur diaspora communicate with their kindred in China and have accurate and updated information about their sentiments and views of their situations. Studies have not been able to answer this question. Keck and Sikkink's TANs framework allows us to see that there is actually not enough pressure from above ("Path C") nor below ("Path A") for the boomerang effect to occur (Chen, 2014).

Beijing's counter-action to the growing international activism of the Uyghurs can be seen in its move to settle the Uyghur problem within both regional and global frameworks. Globally, the September 11 terrorist attacks on the United States gave China an ideal opportunity to frame its crackdown on Uyghurs as part of the global war against terrorism. Foreign influence is portrayed as interference in Chinese domestic affairs, and international activism is deemed as inflaming separatist and terrorist movements in Xinjiang (Ministry of Public Security of People's Republic of China, 2003; Hoshino, 2009:98-9). In order to safeguard its territorial integrity, Beijing legitimizes the need to tighten its grip on Xinjiang and further restrict the scope of autonomy it gave to the Uyghurs.

Regionally, Beijing has tried to resolve the Uyghur issue within the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), a modern and secular organization that aims to counter religious fundamentalism, terrorism, and crime (e.g., selling of drugs and arms) (Clarke, 2007a: 323-42; Clarke, 2007b: 261-89; Mackerras, 2001: 289-303). The SCO has given China a stage to exercise its diplomatic muscle and forge an anti-terrorism alliance in Central Asia. Although the Uyghurs are culturally, linguistically and religiously connected to populations in Central Asia, such as the Kazakhs, Central Asian governments have often opted to cooperate with Beijing to shut down Uyghur publications as well as to arrest and transfer suspected Uyghur "terrorists" back to China to face trials (Burkhanov and Chen, 2016).

Moreover, since 2013, China's Silk Road Economic Belt initiative has designated Xinjiang as its core, and it uses the region as a hub to expand cooperation into Central Asia (Bitabarova, 2018). From the perspective of the more security-oriented SCO, through the recent development-oriented Silk Road Economic Initiative, China has made Xinjiang's status even more crucial and inseparable from Beijing, thus helping to justify the need to quell unrest therein.

Furthermore, part of Beijing's effort to link the Uyghur self-determination cause with terrorism is to establish the narrative that Uyghur diasporic activists are masterminding riots in China. For the Chinese government, delegitimizing Uyghur diasporic efforts and undermining its reputation is essential. Beijing's strategies to delegitimize the Uyghur diasporic activism can be further categorized into three (Chen, 2014).

The first is to show the discrepancy between the aspirations of Uyghurs in China and Uyghur diasporic activists. China argues that Uyghur diasporic activists do not represent the interests of Uyghurs in China. The Chinese state is the only provider of welfare and safety for Uyghurs in Xinjiang. The second de-legitimization strategy is to expose the discrepancy between the interests of overseas Uyghur individuals and organisations that represent the Uyghur diaspora. The fact that overseas Uyghurs are fragmented serves Beijing's interests well (Ercilasun and Ercilasun, 2018). In addition, Chinese embassies and consulates try to prohibit overseas Uyghurs from taking part in political activism (Chen, 2014).

Beijing has, therefore, been successful in instilling fear into overseas Uyghurs and preventing them from openly representing the Uyghur diasporic community. The greater the discrepancy of interests between the individuals who comprise the diasporic community and Uyghur organisations, such as the WUC, that claim to represent them, the better it is as far as the Chinese government is concerned. These inhibitions, so well-instilled by Beijing, curtail any sizable mobilization of overseas Uyghurs (Chen, 2014).

The third strategy employed by China to delegitimize the overseas Uyghur movement is to monitor and dissuade other international actors from supporting Uyghur diasporic activism. So, while Uyghur diasporic organizations have legal status to operate in liberal democracies like Germany, the Chinese government is tireless in its efforts to shatter this legitimacy by linking Uyghur activities to militant or terrorist acts, in the hope of diminishing foreign support for Uyghurs.

An example of Chinese government's effort to delegitimize Uyghur diasporic organizations is seen in the case of Rebiya Kadeer, leader of the WUC. Although she is often described by Western media as a human rights champion, the Chinese government depicts her as a separatist and claims that she orchestrated the July 2009 riots in Xinjiang from abroad. Chen (2014) reported that in all articles published in the PRC journals or magazines (e.g., Wang, 2009; Wang and Ho, 2009; Wang and Wang, 2009), there are identical or nearly identical narratives to discredit the WUC and Kadeer. It is quite hard to discern whether these are penned by Chinese scholars or not. What is undeniable is that these articles are all state-sanctioned. Kadeer and the WUC, unsurprisingly, have continuously denied all accusations.

Overall, Uyghur international activism has borne limited fruit. Its strongest achievement is being able to raise public awareness and glean sympathy. It has not, however, been able to create sufficient leverage to force policy concessions from the PRC. Notwithstanding these limits, one should bear in mind that "expressive politics" is a vital element of ethnic conflict. Due to their ability to continuously take collective actions, Uyghurs and their like-minded sympathizers get "symbolic reassurance" regarding the value of their struggles, as various political scientists have noted (Edelman, 1971: 53-64; Schuessler, 2000: 17-51). This psychological incentive suggests that in the near future, the Uyghur conflict will likely escalate rather than subside (Chen, 2014). The study of the Xinjiang conflict is a good empirical example of the spill-over effect, which is often observed in conflict studies.

Intellectual Debates over Policy Changes

Scholars from both China and abroad have debated heatedly on the right approach to redress the Xinjiang problem. The Chinese government and some Chinese scholars believe that the relatively more liberal approach towards the Xinjiang issue in the 1980s created a breeding ground for separatist and militant movements. Uyghur and foreign scholars, in contrast, ascribe the current problem to Chinese increasing suppression and strike-hard policies in Xinjiang. The latter's views are more tenable because organized revolts within this region are not restricted to the post-1980 era. As noted at the outset of this chapter, the region's history is full of rebellions. In addition, Beijing tends to regard all kinds of grievances in Xinjiang as suspected acts of separatism and terrorism. Not all Uyghur grievances translate into violence. The day-to-day grievances felt by the locals reflect dissatisfactions with current policies and practices.

In recent years, there have been a number of English scholarly publications that seek to bring Chinese perspectives to non-Chinese readers and help English readers gain a more in-depth understanding of what is actually being debated among China's public intellectuals and scholars. For instance, James Leibold's 2013 piece in the East-West Center's *Policy Studies* provides a detailed analysis of how Chinese intellectuals of various political hues articulate the challenges facing China's policy makers and what they consider constructive methods to

redress current problems. Leibold's (2013) work simultaneously points to the hidden tensions among Chinese scholars who are debating policy reforms. There is also a "turf war" between various social science disciplines regarding what kind of experts have the right to speak on those issues.

James Leibold is a historian specializing in China's ethnic issues and is active on social media. His views are well thought of in Western media. While Leibold's work sheds light on Chinese elites' thinking regarding the PRC's ethnic policies in the contemporary era, a read of Allen Carlson's 2012 chapter in Peter J. Katzenstein's edited book *Sinicization and the Rise of China* will further help readers contextualize the emergence of these new intellectual debates in modern Chinese history.

Both Leibold and Carlson point out that the idea of "depoliticalization" and "culturalization" of ethnic issues expressed by Ma Rong, a Peking University sociologist, has left an imprint on various intellectuals' thinking.

Ma argues that the current preferential policies amplify the differences between ethnic groups. Many socioeconomic issues should be managed as issues among individual citizens regardless of their ethnicity, but current policies tend to regard issues as conflicts between ethnic groups, thus exacerbating ethnic relations. In Ma's view, instead of protecting the rights of different groups, the government should protect the rights of all citizens of China.

For readers who might not be able to read the original Chinese texts of Ma's writings, one can consult his two English language articles published in *Asian Ethnicity*. The first, published in 2007, contains Ma's depoliticization proposal. In the second article, published in 2014, Ma defends his approach to counter those who have either criticized, or misinterpreted his proposal. Barry Sautman (2012, 2014), for instance, comments that Ma's proposal, although "paved with good intention", will ultimately impair minority rights and worsen ethnic relations. Ma's response not only countered Sautman's critique, but focused on the fact that apparent supporters of his approach had actually misinterpreted his work. Here, he was particularly concerned with the work of Hu Angang and Hu Lianhe. As mentioned in Leibold's work (2013: 19), Hu Angang is regarded as something of a policy "guru" who has access to top party leaders.

Both Hu Angang and Hu Lianhe place emphasis upon attenuating ethnic identity, which at first glance seems to echo Ma's depoliticalization idea. Ma, however, refutes this notion by explaining that what he advocates is a pluralist society. This differs from the view of the two Hu's, who stress depoliticalizing ethnic issues and integrating minorities into the Han-dominated Chinese society. Ma stated that he has always tried to keep China's unity and diversity in balance. In his 2007 article in *Asian Ethnicity*, he draws upon Jürgen Habermas's *Postnational Constellation* to argue that his China would be a place where "at the national level, the members of all ethnic groups should respect the common social norms; at the ethnicity level, each should respect, even appreciate, the cultures of other groups" (Ma, 2007: 215). Leibold (2013: 1) also points out that here the shadow of Ma's mentor, the renowned sociologist Fei Xiaotong, is apparent. Ma believes that he is upholding the right interpretation of Fei's "multiple origins, one body" (多元一体) paradigm.

Ma goes on to explain what he means by depoliticalization—to "reduce the political color in ethnic relation" (Ma, 2014: 4)—but he does not deny "the political demands of minorities for equal rights and fair participation" (Ma, 2014: 5). Carlson (2012: 61), however, observes that there is "an element of (Han) cultural superiority in Ma's thinking. It was only in Ma's 2014 "defence" article, with his clarification of what he meant by "depoliticalization" as stated

above, that the impression of cultural superiority was corrected. Ma's depoliticalization discourse circulates widely in intellectual circles and has inspired other Chinese scholars' works in this area. Nonetheless, most public discussion of depoliticization favors national unity under the umbrella of Han Chinese civilization. But again, Ma clarifies in his "defence" piece in 2014 that he does not "privilege the Han majority or any minority" (Ma, 2014: 7). Among other differences, Ma also argues that minority elites should be "respected, trusted, and encouraged" to play roles in the transformative process, but also cautions against the outright push for interracial marriage and integration, as advocated by the two Hu's and their followers. It appears that while Ma does agree with a more assimilationist approach, he understands that this has to be done incrementally and that attention needs to be paid to the diversity of models that should be implemented in light of the pace of development in different minority regions. Despite ongoing debates of this type among Chinese intellectuals, there is little evidence of their impact on the Chinese leadership, which favors the status quo, coupled with very minor reforms.

Conclusion

While the Western media offer us a channel for understanding what is going on with respect to ethnic relations in China, the sometimes biased media coverage and an overreliance on English sources/perspectives give the impression of a China that is indifferent to its various minorities. What is often ignored is that since 1949, China's non-Han populations have enjoyed certain preferential rights and privileges. How to keep the country united while balancing its diversity is a daunting task for the regime. Despite a number of affirmative policies, Chinese society remains divided along ethnic lines and in recent years has even witnessed an escalation of ethnic tensions.

While this chapter's focus is on how the Uyghur issue has escalated into conflict both within and outside China, it is noteworthy that Uyghurs have used more subtle means to express their grievances in their daily life, even via music and arts. A 2014 edited book by Trine Brox and Ildikó Bellér-Hann of the University of Copenhagen, for instance, provided several empirical case studies on less visible ways of grievance expression. These studies demonstrate that beyond engaging in conflictual relations, Uyghurs actually have nuanced ways of accepting, negotiating, challenging, or dismissing the Chinese state's policies. Unfortunately, as long as the Chinese government takes the *ronghe* ideology for granted, Uyghur resistance, either in subtle or open forms, will continue.

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