Xinjiang, Central Asia and the Implications for China's Policy in the Islamic World

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Until the collapse of the Soviet Union ignited an explosion of interest in Central Asia, most outsiders considered the region a political backwater, an amorphous place of exotic peoples whose time of greatest power had long passed and whose future could have little impact on international affairs. This perception began to change during the 1980s when China's concern over the stirrings of ethnic separatism in Xinjiang helped focus international attention on Islamic revivalism in Central Asia.

The overthrow of the Shah of Iran in 1979 and the assassination of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat in 1981, both at the hands of religious extremists, are among the most severe shocks China has received in its modern relationship with the Middle East. The events inspired internal debate in Beijing about the extent to which Islam in China can be manipulated from outside.[1] Developments in Lebanon, Iran, Algeria and the Sudan forced the Chinese leadership to acknowledge the important role religion plays in Middle Eastern politics. During the 1980s a variety of Middle East institutes and other academic and professional organizations were set up in China to facilitate greater understanding of a volatile region which Beijing considers a major catalyst in international – and internal Chinese – security.[2]

The Central Asian Nexus

Central Asia is where China and the Islamic worlds meet. Three of the five Central Asian republics created out of the demise of the Soviet Union in late 1991 – Kazakhstan, Kirghizistan and Tajikistan – share borders with Xinjiang. One result of the breakup of the Soviet Union has been the increased pressure of religious sectarianism in Central Asia and the transfer of "Middle Eastern" style political/religious dilemmas direct to China's borders. Another has been increased questioning of China's right to sovereignty over Xinjiang, a region which constitutes one-sixth of China's territory, is regarded by Beijing as essential to China's security, and contains natural resources critical to China's modernization programmes.

The Chinese leadership views Central Asia with deep apprehension.

1. Interview with Middle East specialists, Beijing Institute for International Strategic Studies, November 1990.

2. A Middle East Society of China was establshed in July 1982 at a symposium in Kunming. Described by Xinhua as the first of its kind in China, the meeting attracted 100 Chinese Middle East specalists who discussed the situation in the Gulf, Middle East petroluem and co-ordination of research. ("Middle East Society of China established," NCNA 072010, 20 July 1982.)

Chinese Foreign Minister Qian Qichen has privately expressed fears that the Commonwealth of Independent States has "no staying power,"[3] and authorities in Beijing have watched the breakup of Yugoslavia with horror as a possible harbinger for Central Asia. The dislocation and civil strife following the collapse of the Soviet Union and Communist Eastern Europe have underscored the continuing power of ethnic identity, the disruptive impact of refugees, and the ability of religiously-motivated aspirants to power to benefit from social upheaval.

Chinese analysts attribute the problems of Central Asia (in order of gravity) to Islam, pan-Turanianism, economic difficulties, and the influence of Turkey and Iran. One observed optimistically that because there is "no dominant nationality" in Central Asia, there seems no possibility that a strong state united around anti-Han sentiments will emerge on China's north-western periphery.[4] But what benefit is there to China in finding itself flanked by several small unstable states rather than one large, albeit sometimes aggressive, USSR?

All this has reinforced long-held Chinese suspicions that Islam is the path not to submission but to revolt. In particular, the disintegration of Tajikistan and growing conflict in Uzbekistan's Ferghana Valley – which has direct geographical access to Kashgar – have magnified Chinese concerns. China knows that how it manages Central Asian relationships will have profound significance for security inside China as well as for the future of its relations with Russia, Turkey, the Middle East and South Asia.

Xinjiang: Part of China

China's hold on the region known today as the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region has always been troubled. In recent times, Beijing's authority was re-established over the territory only in the 18th century, but the People's Republic of China has followed the Manchus and Republican era leaders in claiming that Xinjiang has "always" been "part of China." An official handbook states that "Xinjiang was officially included in the territory of China in the Western Han Dynasty (206 B.C.–A.D. 24)."[5] No mention is made of subsequent gaps in Chinese authority, centuries during which the region became culturally intertwined with the Middle East and in which non-Chinese kingdoms flourished. A Chinese argument,

3. Private communication from a Western diplomat in Beijing, March 1992. China's belief in the vulnerability of the CIS is openly established. According to *Beijing Review* (*BR*), "Should economic reform fail in Russia, a chain reaction might ensue. As warned by many experts, there is a limit to the people's patience. Once their patience wears off, large-scale social turmoil could sweep the CIS" ("CIS faces uncertain future," *BR*, 23–29 March 1992, p. 12).

4. Interview at China Institute of Contemporary International Relations, Beijing, March 1992.

5. *Xinjiang: The Land and the People* (Beijing: New World Press, 1989), p. 34.

grounded in Confucianism and still in use today, is that because the indigenous peoples of Xinjiang are contentious and often nomadic, it is in the interest of all concerned that China control them. Nationalist aspirations are seldom so easily resolved.

Until modern times, the period of greatest Chinese influence in Xinjiang occurred during the Tang dynasty. But although the Han Chinese claimed much of Central Asia under the Tang, Chinese suzerainty was often more a fiction perpetrated by the tribute system than an indication of actual control.[6] As a result of the Chinese defeat by Arab forces at Talas River near Samarkand in A.D. 751, Tang armies fell back into central China leaving only scattered garrisons in Central Asia. This turning point in Asian history, which the victorious Muslims followed up culturally but not militarily, has been poorly documented, even by Arab historians.[7] However, Thomas J. Barfield's meticulous study of China's relationships with nomadic empires should be sufficient to dispose of any historic Chinese claim to Xinjiang other than by conquest. Through the fiction of the tribute system, Barfield argues, there arose a symbiotic relationship in which the Uighur served as a buffer for the Tang against lesser contenders for regional power. The relationship was increasingly that of equals, and with the passing of Uighur power in the 9th century, the Tang themselves did not survive long.[8]

The Mongols, who ruled during the Yuan dynasty from 1270 to 1368, already controlled Xinjiang when they finally consolidated their control over China. Large portions of Central Asia, including Transoxiana as well as Xinjiang, had passed to Jagatai, son of Genghiz Khan, when the great khan died in 1237. Under the Mongol brotherhood, Xinjiang was incorporated into Mongolistan and administered by Jagatai and his successors from Aksu and later Kashgar. In no way was the area considered a part of China. Out of the reshuffling of Turkic and other inner Asian peoples which accompanied and followed the Mongol conquests arose the ethnic groupings which characterize Central Asia today.

Most of the indigeneous peoples of modern Central Asia, including the non-Han population of Xinjiang, are of Turkic stock and speak languages comprehensible to modern Turkish speakers. The majority

6. See, for example, Joseph F. Fletcher, "China and Central Asia, 1368–1844," in John King Fairbank (ed.), *The Chinese World Order: Traditional China's Foreign Relations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968).

7. "It is only in Ibn al-Athir that we find an accurate account of the conflict between the Arabs and the Chinese [in 751] which decided the face of the Western part of Central Asia. Neither Tabari nor the early historical works of the Arabs which have come down to us in general make any mention of this, while Ibn al-Athir's statement is completely confirmed by the Chinese History of the Tang Dynasty." W. Barthold, *Turkestan Down to the Mongol Invasion*, 2nd ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1928), p. 3.

8. Thomas J. Barfield, *The Perilous Frontier: Nomadic Empires and China, 221 B.C. to A.D. 1757* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1989), pp. 131 and 153.

of modern Xinjiang's 14 million citizens share ethnic ties with Central Asia: Uighur, Kazakh, Kirgiz, Tajik, Uzbek and Tatar nationalities are among Xinjiang's 13 ethnic groups. Like the other Central Asians, most of the indigenous peoples of Xinjiang are Sunni Muslims of the mainstream Hanafi school who look to Turkey and the Middle East rather than to China as their spiritual and cultural home.

The map of Ming China (1368–1644) makes clear that Xinjiang went its separate way for the next several centuries. Not until the 18th century, under the Manchu Qianlong Emperor, did China reassert control and then only after long effort and with not entirely conclusive results. But by 1759 Xinjiang as well as the Ferghana Valley, today shared between Uzbekistan, Kirghizistan and Tajikistan, had been restored to the Chinese empire.

Han Chinese colonization of Xinjiang dates from this period. The Manchus did not support, but could not prevent, Chinese settlements in Xinjiang, "foreseeing the inevitability of expensive and dangerous conflicts."[9] Conflict was indeed endemic and Xinjiang was governed as a virtual military colony. Among many revolts, that of 1817 led by the Sufi Muslim leader Jahangira lasted for seven years before being suppressed. Others followed, including major crises in 1847 and 1852. The so-called Tungan Rebellion (1862–76) embroiled portions of Qinghai, Ningxia and Gansu as well as Xinjiang and its principal leader, Yakoub Beg, was nearly successful in restoring the khodjas, Muslim rulers of the region from the 15th to the 17th centuries. The important Ili region of Xinjiang, occupied by Russia in 1871, was returned to Chinese sovereignty in 1881 by the Treaty of St Petersburg and in 1884 Xinjiang was raised to the status of province. But in effect China and Russia had divided Uighur territory between themselves, leaving Russia in control of more than 500,000 square kilometres, including the Ferghana Valley, which China still considers to be "Chinese" territory.

Since the birth of the new Central Asian republics, Beijing has been careful to avoid public mention of these territorial controversies. But a recent internal document stressing China's claim to all of Mongolia suggests that similar claims in Central Asia have by no means been forgotten.[10]

During the Republican era (1912–49) central control of Xinjiang was loosened and the populace was often at the mercy of warlords, both Han and Muslim. Efforts to establish a Republic of East Turkestan in 1933, 1944 and 1949 failed due to a combination of

9. Jack Gray, *Rebellions and Revolutions: China from the 1800s to the 1980s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 93.

10. In March 1992 a Chinese Ministry of State Security circular claimed both the independent state of Mongolia and the Mongol-inhabited region of Russia as Chinese territory (Reuter in Ulan Bator, "Beijing lays claim to entire Mongol Region," *The Guardian*, 30 April 1992).

internal division and Han Chinese armies.[11] In 1949 Nationalist General Tao Shiyue resisted a Soviet request that he declare the province independent, and surrendered peacefully to advancing Chinese Communist forces.[12] The province was designated an "autonomous region" in 1955.

That Han authority in Xinjiang has remained contested is well-known, although the extent of indigenous opposition since establishment of the People's Republic has yet to be documented. In 1962, following attempts to organize communes in Xinjiang, perhaps as many as 80,000 Uighurs and representatives of other nationalities fled the region after mass riots and sought refuge across the border in the Soviet Union. Since the mid-1980s resistance to Chinese authority has increased, a phenomenon reflected in more careful attention paid to Xinjiang by central Chinese authorities.

The Importance of Xinjiang

Why then, given China's tenuous historical hold over Xinjiang, does Beijing seem so determined to retain the troublesome province? The primary and most obvious answer lies in Xinjiang's geographical location. Xinjiang extends China's reach to the borders of the Middle East, and simultaneously serves as a security buffer to China proper. The region has historically shielded China from invasion from the Central Asian steppes and today provides areas of low population where military manoeuvres and nuclear testing can be conducted. Ironically, instability in the buffer zone itself has often drained China's resources or threatened China with contagion or conquest. But for over 2,000 years, control over the region has been perceived by the ruling powers of China as their "right," an assertion of sovereignty which is today every bit as emotion-ridden as the PRC's claim to Taiwan. This position illustrates Chinese self identity, another important ingredient in Xinjiang's importance to China.

Secondly, Central Asia has historically been a stage upon which the heirs of Confucian civilization have played out their image of themselves, an image of cultural superiority, benevolent rule and civilizing mission. A Han explanation for the broken Mandarin spoken by a young Uighur merchant in Turpan is that he is "of low

11. Essential reading for anyone seeking a grounding in the history of modern Xinjiang includes A. Doak Barnett, *China on the Eve of Communist Takeover* (New York: Praeger, 1963), ch. 17; Allen S. Whiting and Sheng Shih-ts'ai, *Sinkiang: Pawn or Pivot?* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1958); and Owen Lattimore, *Pivot of Asia* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co), 1950. Among valuable recent studies are Linda Benson, *The Ili Rebellion: The Moslem Challenge to Chinese Authority in Xinjiang, 1944–1949* (Armont, NY: M.E. Sharpe 1990; Andrew Forbes, *Warlords and Muslims in Chinese Central Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); and Donald H. McMillan, *Chinese Communist Power and Policy in Xinjiang, 1949–1977* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1979).

12. Whiting and Sheng Shih-ts'ai, *Sinkiang*, pp. 117–18.

cultural level."[13] Suppression of ethnic languages and history in Xinjiang is not related to political expediency alone.

Thirdly, Xinjiang is a region of vast natural resource and immense agricultural potential. China's most important and as yet largely unexploited petroleum reserves lie in Xinjiang's Tarim Basin,[14] and the area's rich mineral wealth also includes large deposits of gas, iron and coal. This represents the fuel for continuation of China's ambitious modernization programmes – and the key to avoidance of future dependence on Middle East petroleum.

Xinjiang is also of major importance to China for population resettlement. In 1949 perhaps only 3–4,000 Han Chinese lived in Xinjiang, but since then some six million have immigrated to the province. Although they have usually been resettled unhappily or lured by better housing and other benefits generally unavailable to their colleagues in the major cities, there is no place now to which they could return. That they would seek to do so should widespread unrest erupt in Xinjiang is, however, extremely likely. Han Chinese hearts usually remain in a *laojia* far to the east and many of those transferred to the far north west profess dissatisfaction with what they continue to regard as a frontier, semi-civilized province. They take pride in economic development, but are for the most part regarded by indigenous peoples as imperialistic invaders. Recent incidents show that the Han are targets for reprisal when opportunity arises.

Finally, Xinjiang provides Beijing with a unique potential to assert its influence in Central Asia and the Middle East. The PRC's regional authority is greatly enhanced by its position as a Central Asian power and Beijing sees the breakup of the Soviet Union as opportunity to expand China's Central Asian leadership. Ethnic, family and religious ties to surrounding states are all regarded as vehicles to this end.

No Chinese leadership could voluntarily relinquish China's sovereignty over Xinjiang and expect to remain in power. Beijing is currently emphasizing economic ties as a means to work towards regional stability and, hopefully, bring the new Central Asian republics, and the peoples of Xinjiang, closer to China's worldview. But should Central Asian economies self-destruct, as has already

13. Comment by official of Xinjiang Academy of Social Sciences, Urumqi, April 1992. The Chinese assault on indigenous history and literature in Xinjiang has been thorough. After visiting Xinjiang in September 1990, William Peters observed: "In Xinjiang around Khotan apart from a few monuments and ruined cities all traces of the Buddhist ascendancy described by Fa-Xian in the 4th century, or of the kingdoms of Yutian and Kustana, or of the Karoshthi and Sanskrit literatures, or of the links with the Scythian kingdoms or the Kushans have been obliterated; little hint remains of different religions, languages, peoples, to ask about them invites rebuff" (William Peters, "Central Asia and the Minority question," *Asian Affairs* (U.K.), June 1991, p. 155).

14. See for example, "Report on development of Xinjiang energy industry," in FBIS–CHI (Beijing Xinhua), 11 February 1992, p. 39 and "Oil exploration boosts Xinjiang ethnic economy," in FBIS–CHI (Beijing Xinhua), 19 February 1992, p. 67.

occurred in Tajikistan and is well under way in Uzbekistan, the Chinese leadership will, in self defence, have to reconsider its policies.

A Turbulent Region

Tensions in Xinjiang between Chinese authorities and indigenous ethnic groups have been particularly high during the past decade and can be attributed in part to increased freedom of expression and contact with the outside world – Central Asia and the Middle East in particular – which followed Deng Xiaoping's return to power in 1978. A 1980 policy announced by Hu Yaobang, then Chairman of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, to promote "six points" for greater autonomy in both Tibet and Xinjiang failed, apparently due to opposition from local Han cadres. Since 1989 security has deteriorated and although the situation today is not as explosive as in Tibet, widespread unrest could easily erupt.

Donald McMillen's article on Chinese rule in Xinjiang, published in 1984, pointed out serious difficulties which revolve around race, religion, economics, rusticated youth, unstable leadership, and military cadres versus civilians. He reported a confrontation involving resettled Han youth, minority nationals and troops at Aksu in April 1980 in which several hundred civilians and soldiers were killed or wounded, followed by outbreaks of "racial incidents" in Kashi the following October.[15] Serious environmental pollution as a result of 20 years testing of nuclear weapons in the Turfan-Kuerla region and contamination of Lake Bositeng, China's third largest lake, has become yet another cause for indigenous resentment and protest against Chinese authority.[16]

Opposition to central authority accelerated following the events of June 1989. In early 1990 Premier Li Peng warned a National Conference on Nationalities Affairs against foreign "reactionary and splittist forces" which "carry out their infiltration activities while hoisting the nationality banner and donning religious outer garments."[17]

In April 1990, during an incident in Baren township near Aksu, perhaps 50 pro-independence Uighur and Kirghiz rioters were killed by police gunfire. (The official Chinese figure was less than 30.) This was described by Chinese authorities as a "counter-revolutionary rebellion" apparently begun by members of the Kirghiz nationality,

15. Donald H. McMillen, "Xinjiang and Wang Enmao: new directions in power, policy and integration?" *The China Quarterly*, No. 99 (September 1984), pp. 575–76 and 581.

16. See articles by Professor Yin Ding in *Pai Sing Semi-Monthly*, Hong Kong, 1 November 1991 (quoted in "Central Asia and China's borderlands: a new world trouble spot?" *China Insight* April/May 1992); and "Nuclear pollution and human rights violations in Xinjiang," in *Minzhu Zhongguo*, February 1992 (in JPRS–CAR, 11 June 1992, p. 81).

17. "Li Peng addresses national conference on nationalities affairs," Xinhua home service, 20 February 1990 in SWB FE/0696, 23 February 1990, p. B2/1.

some of whom were said to have been secretly training for a "holy war" against the Han Chinese using weapons obtained from fellow Kirghiz in Pakistan.[18] Sporadic violence continued until June, resulting in an unknown number of casualties and precipitating sympathy demonstrations by the Uighur.

Following the abortive Soviet coup in August 1991, anti-Communist and nationalist demonstrations occurred in several areas of Xinjiang, including Tacheng, Bole, Altai and Aksu. It was reported in September 1991 that guns were being smuggled into Xinjiang from Afghanistan, Pakistan and elsewhere, prompting a warning from the late Vice-President Wang Zhen that any attempt at separatism would be crushed. President Yang Shangkun, who visited Xinjiang in December 1991, gave "urgent directives to restore order, rally the minorities under Party rule, strengthen combat readiness and pluck by the root the shoots of ethnic disunity and rebellion."[19]

1992 brought further problems. In early January Wang Enmao, former leader of Xinjiang and now Vice-Chairman of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, issued a call for erection of "a great iron wall" to protect Xinjiang against agents of hostile external forces.[20] Nevertheless, the next major publicized incident occurred in February 1992 when at least six people died in a bus bombing in Urumchi. Shortly thereafter Uighur nationalists who had fled to Kazakhstan in the early years of the PRC threatened to launch cross border operations into Xinjiang on behalf of "The Front for the Liberation of Uighurstan."[21]

The official Chinese response to recent ethnic unrest in Xinjiang has been: first, to blame external factors, including unspecified "Western forces"; secondly, to place greater restrictions on contacts between Muslims in Xinjiang and co-religionists abroad as well as on Islamic education and mosque construction at home; thirdly, to admit that independence in Central Asia has stimulated instability in Xinjiang; fourthly, to claim that separatist activities are carried out by only a "handful" of counter-revolutionaries; and finally, to point to economic development and "opening" to the outside world as the key to stability and national unity. Security concerns are reflected in the checking of passports and other identification on entry to Xinjiang, in the numbers of military vehicles on the streets of Urumqi and in the armed guards who accompany dignitaries on visits outside the capital.

The Chairman of the Xinjiang Autonomous Region people's government, Tomur Dawamat, has charged that Xinjiang's stability has been influenced by the independence of the neighbouring Muslim republics. In March 1992 he declared: "The changeable international

18. Peters, "Central Asia and the minority question," p. 153.
19. *Zhengming* (Hong Kong), February 1992, p. 27.
20. "Une nouvelle 'Grande Muraille' pour proteger le Xinjiang." *Le Monde,* 12 January 1992.
21. Jasper Becker, "Separatists step up struggle for motherland," *The Times*, 3 March 1992.

situation has affected and is still affecting Xinjiang's social stability. Hostile forces, both at home and abroad, have stepped up their infiltration, subversion and sabotage."[22] In his report a few days later to the regional people's congress, Tomur Dawamat said that "the most important task this year is safeguarding political and social stability."[23]

Though none of the accused was charged with insurrection, in January 1992 the *Xinjiang Legal Daily* reported the largest number of death sentences (15) passed in a single day since 1983 by the Xinjiang intermediate court in Urumqi.[24] During a February Standing Committee meeting of the Xinjiang Autonomous Regional CPC Committee, Party Secretary Song and other officials condemned the "sinners" who are "flaunting the banner of pan-Islam" and called for "a resolute struggle against a handful of national splittists."[25]

Religion, Politics and Nationalist Separatism

Internal divisions run through Chinese Islamic history and contributed to Muslim failure to wrest vast areas from Han Chinese rule over the past 150 years. Disunity continues to favour central control. Ten of the 56 groups designated as Chinese "national minorities" are Muslim, but they are divided by cultural, ethic, historical and linguistic differences.[26] All ten groups are represented in Xinjiang, with the more than eight million Uighurs by far in the majority.

During the 1950s and again after the Cultural Revolution, China sought to enlist Islam in the service of its foreign policy. By sending Chinese Muslim delegations to the Islamic world and hosting religious dignitaries in return, the PRC hoped to demonstrate its benign rule over its Muslim minorities and its goodwill towards Islamic nations. Islam has also been used, albeit not very successfully, as a bridge for development of economic relations. Islamic provinces such as Xinjiang, Qinghai and Ningxia have found little to trade with Arab states such as Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Egypt.

22. "Xinjiang chairman cites activities of 'splittists'," FBIS–CHI, 9 March 1992, p. 77 (Urumqi Xinjiang Television Network, 6 March 1992).

23. "Tomur Dawamat urges crackdown on separatism," FBIS–CHI, 18 March 1992, p. 59 (Hong Kong Zhongguo tongxun she, 17 March 1992).

24. "Fifteen reportedly executed in Urumqi," FBIS–CHI, 7 February, 1992, p. 56 (Hong Kong AFP, 6 February 1992, quoting *Xinjiang Legal Daily*, 25 January 1992).

25. "Song Hanliang attends meeting on ethnic work," FBIS–CHI, 14 February 1992, p. 51 (Urumqi Xinjiang Television Network, 13 February 1992).

26. There is controversy about the number of Muslims in China. According to the official 1990 census there were only 17,597,370. (See *BR* of 24–30 December 1990). However, a 1949 total of 20 million Chinese Muslims has been broadly accepted as a reasonable estimate though it was not substantiated by census figures. Basing his argument on a mid-1950s claim of 40,000 mosques by the Chinese Islamic Association, Clyde-Ahmad Winters argued in the late 1970s that there could not be less than 40 million Muslims in China (Clyde-Ahmad Winters, *Mao or Muhammad: Islam in the People's Republic of China* (Hong Kong: Asian Research Service, 1979). Others, including Chinese and Middle Eastern Muslims, claim even higher figures.

Moreover, although Xinjiang's contacts with the Islamic world expanded enormously after Deng Xiaoping returned to power in 1978, China's policy towards its Islamic citizens has been curiously contradictory. Muslims – including the Hui, who essentially resemble the Han in all but religion – are encouraged to express their "ethnic" identity, and greater freedoms have been permitted for religious expression and for "autonomy" within designated Islamic areas.[27] In 1980 the Xinjiang Islamic Association was allowed to reintroduce Arabic script for the Uighur and Kazakh languages. On the other hand, assimilation to correct "spiritual civilization" (*jingshen wenming*) is stoutly encouraged by penalties for failure to comply. Religious believers are excluded by law (though not always in practice) from Communist Party membership and there is widespread pressure on religious practitioners to abandon their "superstitious" behaviour and beliefs.[28]

By this policy of give and take, divide and subjugate, Han authorities retain a broad degree of control. Nevertheless, the greater freedom of religious expression allowed after 1978 provided Muslims a legitimate voice which has been used to economic advantage and in calls for social justice,[29] while increased exposure to Muslims abroad has whetted appetites for greater religious freedom at home. Chinese authorities are well aware that the logical next step is political assertiveness.

During the past decade China's "opening" to the world has been used by Muslims outside China to improve the situation of those within. Foreign funds, in particular from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Iran, have been used to reopen or establish mosques, found theological schools, fund scholarships and import religious materials such as Korans. Many thousand Chinese citizens, including Xinjiang Muslims, have undertaken the *hajj* since it was reallowed in the late 1970s, and have been able to travel on business to Turkey, Egypt, the Gulf, Pakistan and Central Asia. Increased manifestations of nationalism in Xinjiang over the past three years often refer to Islam as a unit of common identity or seek to use religion as a rallying point for desired economic co-operation.

Fears of rampant Islam infuse the Chinese response. A report issued by the Xinjiang Academy of Social Sciences in Urumqi in February 1991 accused Muslim separatists of infiltrating Xinjiang by means of literature, videos and radio broadcasts, using Koranic schools as a

27. Though all Xinjiang is classified an "autonomous" region, the province is subdivided into various other prefectures and autonomous prefectures such as the "Bayangol Mongol Autonomous Prefecture" which borders Qinghai, the Turpan Prefecture south of Urumqi, the Changji Hui Autonomous Prefecture on the Monglian frontier and Kashi Prefecture in the far west.

28. For the response to an internal document issued in late 1991 ordering a general crackdown on those making use of "nationality or religious issues," see Chu Che, "CPC's ironhanded policy toward nationality and religion," *Zhengming* (Hong Kong), 1 January 1992, pp. 12–13, in FBIS–CHI, 9 January 1992, p. 25.

29. See, for example, Dru Gladney, *Muslim Chinese: Ethnic Nationalism in the People's Republic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 3.

cover for political indoctrination on separatism and establishing reactionary organizations which seek opportuity for "counter-revolutionary insurrection."[30] An examination in late 1991 of some 25,000 "professional religious personnel" in Xinjiang resulted in the purge of 10 per cent of the clerics from their posts.[31]

Beginning in 1989 a series of regulations have been promulgated which greatly curtail contacts between Muslims in Xinjiang and the broader Islamic world. New restrictions (not always applied) forbid meetings between Muslim clerics and foreigners and prohibit the teaching of sensitive subjects such as Uighur history and the doctrine of *jihad* ("holy war"). Even Han academics and professional researchers in Xinjiang must operate under significantly greater restrictions and lack of foreign access than do their counterparts in eastern cities such as Beijing and Shanghai. No Arab teachers are allowed to work at the Xinjiang Theological Seminary in Urumqi which opened with Saudi funding in 1987 but has admitted no new students since 1988. Only *hajj* applicants aged 50 and older are allowed to go to Mecca and no Chinese citizens are given permission to study in either Iran or Pakistan. Seminary officials emphasize that although they have two instructors who are graduates of Egypt's Al Azhar University, no Al Azhar books, professors or ties are permitted.[32]

The popularity elsewhere in Central Asia of the Saudi-funded Wahabbist sect, particularly in the Ferghana Valley, may account for the Chinese clampdown on the Urumqi seminary. Conflict between the politically-active Wahabbists and long-entrenched Sufis, as in the Central Asian republics, is to be avoided in Xinjiang. The Sufis are today known as mystical and tolerant, but they have been politically active in Xinjiang in the past and conflict with the Wahabbists could stimulate them to greater assertiveness. Arab history, of which the Chinese are no longer ignorant, reveals the Sufis as the driving force behind Libyan efforts to attain independence from Italy in the 1930s.

Political and religious authorities in the Arab and Central Asian worlds have made few public responses to the Chinese crackdown on religious freedom in Xinjiang, although Middle Eastern interest is significant, as reflected in often distorted Arab newspaper accounts of Muslims living under Chinese Communism. This lack of response probably stems mainly from indifference to people seen as far removed, and from official Arab desire to maintain good relations with China for the purposes of arms purchases and possible support at the UN on Third World issues. But there is also the legacy of historical separation which manifests itself in an element of suspicion that the Chinese may not be "true" Muslims.

Indeed, despite the evident desire of Chinese Muslims to be known,

30. "Central Asia and China's borderlands," p. 3.
31. Lincoln Kaye, "China feels the chill," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 9 January 1992, p. 14.
32. Interview with members of administration and faculty, Xinjiang Theological Seminary, Urumqi, April 1992.

the outside world knows very little about either religious practice or the state of organization among Muslims in Xinjiang. Chinese investigation of the state of affairs is, however, well under way. An Institute of Religion was established at the Xinjiang Academy of Social Sciences in 1979, and in mid-1992 researchers from the China Institute of Contemporary International Relations, a Beijing-based organization closely connected to government intelligence, spent a month in Xinjiang studying Islam, following which one member was sent on a six-month study tour based at Cairo University.

Indications are that Islam in Xinjiang remains factionalized and politically disorganized. Though some – or even many – may want political independence in Xinjiang, it is doubtful that there is at present a way. As elsewhere in the Islamic world, resurgence of religious practice does not necessarily mean commitment to use of religion as a political weapon. John Obert Voll has argued that it may be possible for Islam to survive in a minority situation without resort to the traditional choice of either *hijra* (emigration) or *jihad* (warfare to take over the state).[33] Others, such as Raphael Israeli, contend that Islam can never discard the political imperative.[34] Nevertheless, caution is necessary in applying the term "holy war" to events in Xinjiang. The term is misleading and tends to place the blame for ethnic activism and political resistance on religious "extremists" who are usually depicted by the Chinese authorities as few in number. In reality, religion is a major ingredient in Central Asian politics, but is frequently used by even the essentially non-religious to rally public opinion against outsiders. More specifically, *jihad* cannot easily be proclaimed and certainly not by anyone but a qualified religious authority – which Xinjiang, from the controlled circumstances of its Islamic establishment, may now lack by the normal criteria of orthodox Islam.

It is difficult to assess the future of politically-oriented Islam in Xinjiang. There are few outward signs of active religious revivalism, though in early 1992 there were over 200 open mosques in Urumqi. But Xinjiang mosques have probably begun to serve covertly as centres for political expression, as they did elsewhere in Central Asia under Communism – and indeed still do since Islamic parties remain illegal in all the Central Asian republics except Tajikstan.

China's New Policy

Beijing's efforts to maintain control in Xinjiang over the past century have almost invariably been heavy-handed. To the military

33. John Obert Voll, "Soviet Central Asia and China: integration or isolation of Muslim societies," in John L. Esposito (ed.), *Islam in Asia: Religion, Politics, and Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 131.

34. Raphael Israeli, "Muslims in China: Islam's incompatibility with the Chinese order," in Raphael Israeli and Anthony H. Johns (eds.), *Islam in Asia* Vol. II: Southeast and East Asia (Jerusalem: The Hebrew University, 1984), pp. 275–304.

force of the dynastic and Republican eras were added the Han immigrants, commualization and enhanced economic exploitation by the Communists. Not until the Deng era have the Chinese begun to look for different means to win Xinjiang's loyalty. These have recently included a reduction in the degree to which Xinjiang is economically exploited by the centre. Stringent internal security and intense "political work" continue in Xinjiang, but, for the first time, central Chinese authorities appear to recognize that if they want something from Xinjiang, they must be prepared to give something in return.

Beijing has decided on economic measures as the key to stability in Xinjiang. Economic advancement is now listed as the government's highest priority, and, in tandem with vigorous efforts to raise the standard of living in Xinjiang, China is bent upon strengthening its economic ties to Central Asia. This, Chinese authorities hope, will involve promotion of stability in both directions through economic development and assertion of China's influence. In this way China intends to find markets for its consumer goods and to promote "modernization" within Xinjiang, thus raising living standards and lowering levels of discontent. Additional benefits hoped for are a strengthening of the secular-minded governments of Central Asia against those groups which favour Islamic rule, and keeping the republics from returning to their previous economic dependence on Russia or, worse still, succumbing to the allure of pan-Turanianism.

Xinjiang Party Secretary Song Hanliang has described economic construction as the Party's central task for the 1990s, including opening up "a new situation in trade and economic and technological co-operation with various Central Asian countries."[35] China was quick off the mark. In December 1991 Foreign Trade Minister Li Lanqing led the first high-ranking foreign government delegation to visit Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Kirghizia and several other new states formed after dissolution of the Soviet Union, and the PRC has signed trade agreements and sought constructive relationships with all five Central Asian republics.

Since early 1992 China's ties to Central Asia have expanded rapidly with the greatest volume of China's Central Asian trade going to Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. In February 1992 the Prime Minister of Kazakhstan, Boris Terechtchenko, signed nine co-operation accords with China, the first between China and the new Central Asian states. By September 1992 Xinjiang had signed agreements for economic and technological co-operation on 18 projects with Central Asian states for a total investment of over US$40 million.[36] Early in 1992 the Chinese government conferred upon Urumqi the same rights to conduct preferential trade policies enjoyed by coastal regions. A rail link between Urumqi and Kazakhstan, opened in 1990, has been followed by inauguration of flights between Urumqi and Alma Ata;

35. "Song Hanliang reports on Party tasks for 1990s," FBIS–CHI, 30 March 1992, p. 70.

36. "Northwest to revise Silk Road," *BR*, 14–20 September 1992, p. 7.

eight "ports" (rivers, airports and railheads) are now open and Yining, Tacheng and Bole have been approved as "border open cities."

Both government-sponsored and private businesses are expanding: by spring 1992 at least 600 Chinese contract workers were employed in Kazakhstan. China barters food products, light consumer goods, technology, equipment, raw materials and construction expertise for Central Asian raw materials, and the Ministry of Foreign Economic Relations and Trade announced in early 1992 that hinterland provinces and cities conducting barter trade with the CIS would be exempted from 50 per cent of customs duties.[37] Joint ventures for basic consumer goods have been set up in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, trade organizations established in most of Xinjiang's 33 border counties and cities, and the first annual international trade fair was held in Urumqi in September 1992. Tourism is being promoted and some 85,000 foreign visitors, many from Central Asia, visited Xinjiang in the first half of 1992. In March 1992 the Ministry of Commerce, which owns a massive network of processing industries and is also responsible for purchasing industrial and agricultural goods for transmission to retailers and exporters, was working against a tight schedule to promote economic ties with the new republics and beat out competition from other Asian states.[38] The same month, it was announced that Xinjiang had established economic and trade ties with more than 50 countries and regions.[39]

Official Chinese trade figures claimed total exports of $239 million from Xinjiang during the first half of 1992, an increase of 55 per cent over the same period in the previous year, and total imports of $84.8 million, an increase of 120 per cent.[40] More than half of this amount was attributed to border trade.

China makes claims about Xinjiang's "geographical, human and cultural advantages for opening up to the West and developing its border trade" and states that the province "also possesses complementary resources and markets with these neighbours."[41] However, the economic compatibility of Xinjiang and the Central Asian republics – both under-developed regions – remains to be proved. One Chinese economist claimed that what China wants most from Central Asia – steel and fertilizer – is frequently sold elsewhere for a higher price, and complained of a trade imbalance, although official figures claim the opposite.[42]

37. '"Ministry of Foreign Economic Relations and Trade spells out new measures on trade with CIS," *Ching Chi Tao Pao* (Hong Kong), No. 11, 23 March 1992, p. 20, in FBIS–CHI, 3 April 1992, p. 7.

38. Liu Hong, "Ministry forges ties with former Soviet republics," *China Daily Business Weekly*, 22–28 March 1992, p. 1.

39. "Xinjiang benefits from opening up to outside," Beijing Xinhua in English, in FBIS–CHI, 9 March 1992, p. 78.

40. "Xinjiang releases statistics on economic growth," FBIS–CHI, 21 July 1992, p. 61 (Urumqi Xinjiang Television Network, 17 July 1992).

41. "Thriving west China border trade," *BR*, 1–7 June 1992, p. 30.

42. Interview with trade official, Urumqi, April 1992.

The Chinese have not set about their new policy of economic interdependence without misgivings. A political analyst in Beijing expressed his pessimism: "Either way we lose. If the Central Asian states fall apart, chaos spreads to China. If they manage to survive, Chinese minorities say, 'Look, it works there. Why can't we, too, have a state of our own?'"[43]

The Future of China, Central Asia and the Islamic World

The success of China's present policy will certainly depend to a great extent upon the degree of tranquillity which prevails in Central Asia as well as in Xinjiang itself. Meanwhile, several developments merit attention.

China's policy towards Central Asia creates long-term potential conflict with its two traditional regional rivals, Turkey and Russia. Russian diplomats, however, speak favourably of Turkish efforts to stabilize the region though the Economic Co-operation Organization (ECO) and by a more than $1 billion Ex-Im Bank package of credits, guarantees and soft loans to the new republics. But the ECO, established in February 1992 by Turkey, Pakistan and Iran and subscribed to by Azerbaijan and all the Central Asian states except Tajikistan, is regarded by China with suspicion.

Enhancement of either Russian or Turkish influence in Central Asia is directly opposed by the Chinese who fear that Turkey is operating under American direction and assert that "Turkey plans to dominate the regional economy by occupying the Central Asian market."[44] Some two-thirds of the 60 million peoples of Central Asia are Turkic-speaking Muslims, the former head of the failed 1949 "East Turkestan Republic" lives in exile in Istanbul, and China is deeply disturbed by statements such as that of Prime Minister Suleyman Demirel during his May 1992 visit to the Central Asian republics that "nobody can now deny that there is a Turkic world stretching from the shores of the Adriatic to the walls of China."

The Chinese response has been to move closer to those regional states which oppose Turkey, as was emphasized by President Yang Shangkun's visit to Tehran and Islamabad in late 1991. Beijing now finds itself in the curious position of opposing Turkey and Russia whose objectives for regional stability parallel its own, and siding with Iran and Pakistan whose policies promote the very Islamic revivalism Beijing sees as a threat both to the new republics and to its own authority in Xinjiang.

This arrangement is complicated by a growing strategic relationship between Israel and Turkey, a NATO member, which includes provision of weapons and miliary training to Azerbaijan in its war

43. Interview at Institute of World Economics and Politics, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Beijing, March 1992.

44. Zhang Xiaodong, "Central Asia on the rise," *BR*, 3–9 August 1992, pp. 12–13.

with Armenia over Nagorno-Karabagh. By early 1992 Israel had established diplomatic relations with China, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan and was vigorously promoting economic ventures, mainly involving agricultural and communications technology, wherever possible in Central Asia. The Israelis have long-standing, if frequently clandestine, ties to Pakistan and Iran and if a non-Arab but largely Muslim grouping were to emerge on the Middle East's northern tier, they would certainly hope to assert an influence.

China's West Asian focus has shifted from the Middle East to Central Asia, after the breakup of the Soviet Union eliminated the former as a key area of United States–Soviet contention. The Gulf War showed China the vulnerability of its Middle East economic investments and underscored the enormous differences in Chinese and Arab interests and objectives. Formalization of diplomatic ties with Israel in January 1992 and participation in the Middle East Peace Conference further modified China's previously pro-Arab Middle East stance. Although China claims no change in its support for the Palestinians, privately an influential political analyst admits that as a result of Soviet collapse, "we see now that not every small group or nationality can have its own country."[45]

The collapse of the Soviet Union provides Third World leaders with an incentive to co-operate in the face of the single remaining superpower. But China does not trust Third World states, especially as it is they, including the Saudis (with whom China established diplomatic relations in mid-1990), which are contending in Central Asia. Thus although China hopes that consolidation of its influence in Central Asia will enhance its aspirations to international influence, it is unlikely to use the opportunity to try out a more active role as a Third World leader. Moreover, vigorous suppression of indigenous aspirations in Xinjiang could damage China's relations with the Arabs, Iran and Pakistan as well as with the new republics. Likewise, Chinese competition with Central Asia for World Bank and Asian Development Fund grants would adversely affect China's position as a leader of the developing world.

The Jao Pai Wild Card?

Relatively little is known by outsiders about Chinese Islamic brotherhoods, the *jao pai*, especially those outside the Hui nationality. Even less is known of ties between Islamic brotherhoods or Sufi orders in China, Central Asia and the Middle East. History gives confused answers on whether the brotherhoods would co-operate against central Chinese authority, or even become politically involved. But the *jao pai* are pervasive in Hui Muslim communities and Dru Gladney comments on "the importance and extensiveness of these

45. Interview at China Institute of Contemporary International Relations, Beijing, March 1992.

Sufi orders for uniting disparate Hui communities across China."[46] The political potential of such groupings, even if their efforts remain poorly organized in Xinjiang, would seem to be significant.

The *jao pai* are feared by Chinese authorities, as secret societies have always been. An Israeli diplomat in Beijing, referring to the Syrian regime's massacre of its opponents in 1984, said that if the Chinese authorities thought the *jao pai* constituted a threat, "they would come down on them like Asad."[47] Indications are that in instances such as the 1958 resistance in Ningxia they already have. In Xinjiang the usual official response is to deny that the *jao pai* exist. Nevertheless, it is probable that contacts with the Middle East over the past decade have strengthened ties between Chinese and Middle East members of organizations such as the Muslim Brotherhood and the Jahriyya.

Conclusion

China has reverted to the dynastic policy of managing Central Asian "barbarians" by economic means – the essence of the tribute system. The PRC prefers a passive political role in Central Asia, one which will promote its economy, stabilize the region and avoid straining its ties to the West and the Middle East over the issue of human rights. Hitherto this policy has worked reasonably well and may continue to do so unless Central Asian instability spreads across Xinjiang's borders. In that event, China's present policy will be inadequate to maintain stability in Xinjiang.

Chinese officials, scholars and political researchers all seem to reject any suggestion that the PRC would ever intervene militarily in Central Asia, even if invited to do so by neighbouring governments.[48] But would China be able to prevent violence spilling over into Xinjiang? There are over one million Kazakhs in Xinjiang and at least 185,000 Uighurs in Kazakhstan. Could China successfully close its doors to floods of refugees with family and ethnic ties to "Chinese Turkestan"?

Provision by China of logistics support to a Burmese campaign against Kachin rebels, reported for the first time in April 1992, illustrates that security concerns can induce China into active military co-operation with neighbouring states. More ominously for Central Asia, Chinese military action in 1988 and 1992 in the Spratly and Paracel Island groups of the South China Sea confirm Beijing's willingness to use force as an instrument of foreign policy. Uniquely

46. Gladney, *Muslim Chinese*, p. 52.
47. Interview with Israeli diplomat in Beijing, March 1992.
48. In March and April 1992 I persistently asked, during formal interviews and personal conversations in Beijing, Yinchuan, Xian and Xinjiang, whether my interlocutors could think of any circumstances under which China might take military action in Central Asia. The universal response was an almost horrified "no," which seemed to be primarily emotional.

since 1949, China does not today face a military threat to any of its borders. But those borders were arbitrarily set and remain disputed. Even loss of trade and other advantages would not be sufficient to deter China from a military response in the event of activation of territorial disputes in Central Asia.[49]

Historically Central Asia's major power has always asserted itself to fill a power vacuum. The vacuum may not yet be apparent, but – at the risk of writing off the Russians too soon – China is presently the only power in the region with the military might and the incentive to attempt to fill it should it occur. The Chinese government shows no signs of military adventurism in areas outside what it considers legitimate Chinese territory. But what might its response be if opportunity arose to take back those areas lost to Russia during the 19th century? And how aggressive might a post-Communist, possibly militarily-based, Chinese government be? One must ask as well who would benefit from a loosening of Beijing's grip on Xinjiang. Might a mass exodus of Han managers and technicians cause a catastrophic economic decline, as occurred in neighbouring Uzbekistan when thousands of Russians left? The national minorities of Xinjiang and of Central Asia more broadly are by no means united either in their aspirations or in their opposition to Chinese authority. There are no traditions of democracy in Central Asia and the Chinese assessment that "other ethnic groups fear that the majority Uzbeks will bully weaker minorities"[50] is probably correct.

Han Chinese democrats in exile recently appealed to the people of Xinjiang for support. An article by Yuan Ming, former deputy director of the CCP's Theoretical Research Office, published in the Paris-based *Minzhu Zhongguo* (*Democratic China*) claims that it is too late for autonomy in Xinjiang and "immediate independence" would lead only to "bloodshed and heavy losses." The only hope, he writes, is for the forces of freedom and democracy in Xinjiang and Tibet to "form a close union with the forces of freedom and democracy in all of China, creating a powerful anti-dictatorship alliance and putting an end to the Chinese Communist one-party dictatorship."[51] Whether or not this is a realistic suggestion, it does appear that a more positive political, rather than essentially economic, approach is now indicated in Xinjiang. Here perhaps the Middle East can help. At least China's Middle East specialists are looking to the region for greater understanding of how to deal with Islam as a political force.

Might it not benefit China to enter into discourse with Middle Eastern leaders and Muslim states, including Turkey, concerned to find a way forward through the political/religious/economic morass?

49. See Ronald N. Montaperto, "Whither China? Beijing's policies for the 1990s," *Strategic Review* (Summer 1992), p. 30.

50. Zhang Xiaodong, "Central Asia on the rise," p. 13.

51. Yuan Ming, "'Historic missed opportunity' recalled," *Minzhu Zhongguo* (*Democratic China*), February 1992 (JPRS–CAR, 11 June 1992, p. 81).

Centuries of effort reveal that force cannot achieve tranquillity in Xinjiang and official Chinese calls for an end to "greater Han chauvinism" show awareness of the ways in which Han policies and attitudes have fuelled opposition to Chinese rule in Xinjiang. For their part, the Middle Eastern states may have something to learn from China's emphasis on economic incentives to win over the religious and ethnic minorities. Unfortunately, constructive government-to-government consultations on the subject of Islamic revivalism will probably not occur. China remains extraordinarily sensitive to "outside interference" and the PRC's Communist ideology is abhorrent to most of the Middle East. Moreover, the future of Xinjiang and of China's relations with its Central Asian and other Islamic neighbours is inexorably tied to the uncertain stability of the Chinese political system itself.