

Xinjiang Conflict and its Changing Nature

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Violence returned to Xinjiang immediately after the month of Ramadan as more than a hundred people were killed in violence spanning last ten days. Unofficial estimates put the number of deaths at 1000, making this perhaps the bloodiest episode in the contemporary history of Xinjiang. Extremists also killed Jume Tahir, the government appointed Imam of China's largest mosque. While the Xinjiang problem has been going on for a long time, 2014 has become one of the most violent years in the recent past as more than 250 people have been killed in various incidents of violent attacks. In 2013, according to official estimates, ethnic clashes had claimed 110 lives. These figures are contested arguing that China would not reveal the true scale of violence in Xinjiang to the outside world. 2014 has also had many other firsts as far as Xinjiang extremist violence is concerned. In an attack on a marketplace in the provincial capital Urumqi, 42 people were killed in what was the single largest death count in an incident of extremism inside China. Earlier in March this year, 29 people were killed in knife attacks targeting train travelers in the Kunming main railway station. In October there was an attack on Tiananmen Square that reportedly caused three deaths as suicide bombers crashed and exploded their SUV into a security barricade.

What's new about the violent incidents in the past two years is that ordinary citizens are being targeted unlike earlier when police stations and government offices were the primary targets of extremist violence. Chinese leadership seems clueless about the origins of these recent attacks since there is no core organisation behind these attack. The government in its desperation has even offered cash rewards to anyone giving information on guns and swords

seen in their neighbourhood. However, it has still not addressed the root cause of the problem of extremism in the region.

In 2009, Xinjiang saw riots caused by racial mistrusts prevailing in the Chinese society. Uighur residents of Xinjiang share more sociocultural similarities with people from across the border than with their Han compatriots. Secondly, Xinjiang's development has disproportionately benefitted the immigrants as against locals. In addition, Chinese state has been less sensitive to the religious practices of the Uighurs. For example, for last three years, offices in Xinjiang have issued directives to the workers and students fasting in the month of Ramadan to "eat well, stay healthy and work and study". In some places, village officials gifted the fasting families fruits and other edibles as a gesture towards their health. This sort of insensitive and controlling policy has not obviously gone down well with the people of the region. China has also detained one known Uighur academic working in Beijing for more than 6 months without any judicial process. Prof. Ilham Tohti, Professor of Economics at the Central Nationalities University, had earlier advocated a more sensitive approach by government to deal with the provincial unrest.

China needs peace in Xinjiang as much of its Central Asian and South Asian policy runs through Xinjiang. China also has stakes in Afghanistan and its mineral explorations activities depend crucially on Xinjiang to utilize the imports that will eventually arrive via the Karakoram Highway beginning in 2016. However, China also feels that this is also the route using which terrorists trained in Pakistan have started coming into Xinjiang. This was acknowledged for the first time in 2011 when China said that the terrorists captured had received their training as well as ammunition in Pakistan's tribal areas. The increased violence in the last two years will surely lead to China putting more pressure on Pakistan to address its concerns and close the links between the extremists in the two countries as soon as possible. On the other hand, China also fears that the Pakistan Army officials may not be able or willing to share the same sense of urgency on this matter.

Overall, the changing nature of violence in Xinjiang is a major concern for China. It is a clear sign that the country's assimilation policy is not working has increased racial inequalities along with a sense of deprivation among the minorities. It looks like the more Chinese leadership pushes for top down process of development, the harder the level of resistance it will face in Xinjiang.

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