



Second Xinjiang Work Forum: Old Policies in New Language

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A series of violent incidents rocked Xinjiang and other parts of China throughout 2013 and in the first few months of 2014. These include the car crash on the Tiananmen Square in Beijing in October 2013, knife attacks at the Kunming Railway Station in Yunnan in March 2014, explosions and knife attacks on Urumqi Railway station in late April, and the terrorist act of explosions in a busy market place in Urumqi in late May 2014. These are clear indications of rising violence involving the Uyghur separatists. The common people are the main targets of attacks in these incidents. In terms of magnitude, frequency, innovation and unpredictability, these attacks are clearly different from another set of incidents which took place in summer 2013 in the remote areas of Xinjiang like Salibuya (Bachu county, Kashgar), Lukqun (Shanshan county, Turfan), Ghorachol (Awat county, Aksu) and Hanrike (Hotan county, Khotan), where the clashes were mainly between local people and security forces and the issues were basically rooted in the local disputes (Chaudhuri 2013). Irrespective of the nature and scale of the violence, however, official reports usually label these incidents as terrorism and suggest the involvement of

transnational terrorist forces (*Huanqiu Shibao* 2013; *Xinjiang Ribao* 2013).¹

As early as 2002, Dru C. Gladney, a well-known scholar of Chinese Islam warned that ‘...if China does not explore other options besides repression, restriction, and investment, millions of Uyghur Muslims might become increasingly marginalized and disenfranchised, encouraging some to look to the intifada...’ and a West Bank type situation would emerge in the region (Gladney 2002). The comparison with the West Bank, prima facie, is ludicrous to say the least, because violence is part of everyday life in this Palestinian territory and the

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¹ Foreign scholars as well as liberal Chinese intellectuals often argue that the official media reports on terrorism in Xinjiang, conceal the real situation in the region. In 2013, Hu Ping, an activist in the Beijing Democracy Wall Movement in 1979 and former president of the Chinese Alliance for Democracy strongly critiqued the official news of the 23 April Bachu incident that alleged the involvement of an individual, two of his sons and their guests (Hu 2013).

situation there is unique in the history of ethno-national movements in the world. Gladney's main contention however, was that Xinjiang was heading towards long-term instability and unbridgeable ethnic cleavages between the Uyghur and Han communities. His forewarning about the situation in Xinjiang needs to be understood in the context of the escalation of violence in the past few years.

Backdrop of Instability and Violence

For a long time the central as well as regional leadership took rapid economic development as a panacea to resolve violent separatism in the region. In response to the deadliest riots in Urumqi, the capital of Xinjiang in July 2009, a Xinjiang Work Forum (新疆工作座谈会 *Xinjiang gongzuo zuotanhui*) was conducted in May 2010 for the first time in the history of Xinjiang under the PRC. By setting its objectives to promote leapfrog development to ensure lasting political stability (跨越式发展和长治久安, *kuayueshi fazhan he changzhijiu'an*), the Work Forum basically reemphasized an economic solution to the Xinjiang problem. It is however evident from the steady escalation of tensions and increasing frequency of incidents of violence in the region and beyond perpetrated by Uyghur separatists, that a greater dose of economic development is not an effective remedy to the problem. Furthermore, the basic emphasis on the maintenance of stability, new leap-frog development measures and the unrestricted entry of other provinces into remote areas of the region under the pretext of the 'rescue Xinjiang' strategy since 2010, has further damaged inter-ethnic relations.

Four years later, the Second Xinjiang Work Forum was conducted in Urumqi from 28-29 May 2014. It is interesting to note that the Second Work Forum was held within a week of a deadly explosion in a morning market in Urumqi that killed 31 people and injured 94.

The objective stated in the latest Forum is to maintain social and long-lasting political stability (社会稳定和长治久安, *shehui wending he changzhijiu'an*). The question is whether this shift of emphasis will improve the political situation in the region.

Emphasis on Social and Political Stability

Since the 18th Party Congress in November 2013, the CPC Central Committee has been positioning itself in and around a series of new ideas and new assumptions vis-à-vis the task of building a stable and prosperous Xinjiang (稳疆兴疆 *wenjiang xingjiang*) in the face of new challenges. The general understanding among the leadership under Xi Jinping is that Xinjiang has 'entered a key phase for fast-track development' and a new principle and plan of action has been evolved as regards administering Xinjiang (治疆 *zhijiang*) (*People's Daily* 2014).

In this context, the decisive and patronizing posture Xi Jinping adopted during his four-day visit to Xinjiang in April this year, is a good example. He visited an Uyghur family, spent time with primary school children in a village in south Xinjiang, exhorted people of both Han and Uyghur communities to learn each other's language and also met a cleric in a mosque. At the same time Xi visited a local police station in Kashgar, met high-level security officials in the region and issued anti-terror rhetoric like making terrorists 'as unpopular as rats crossing the street' (过街老鼠人人喊打 *guo jie laoshu renren han da*) (Xi 2014). Unfortunately, the visit ended on a discordant note because of coordinated bomb and knife attacks in a railway station in Urumqi on 30 April that left three people dead and 79 injured. The underlying message is that the locals are not happy with so-called 'the carrot and stick' approach of the central leadership. Li Lifan, a professor of Central Asian studies at the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences pointed out that hard-line measures against terrorism must be taken but

there was a need to reduce cultural tension by respecting the language and religion of the Uyghur people (cited in Ng and Chan 2014).

The Second Xinjiang Work Forum was held in this backdrop. The decision to emphasize social as well as long-term political stability at the Forum and the omission of fast-track development in its objectives appear to be a shift from growth-oriented development to people-oriented (以人为本 *yirenweiben*) development, which has already become the main guiding principle in managing economic affairs in other parts of China. Xi Jinping pointed out during his visit to the region earlier that ‘priority to social and long term political stability’ would facilitate the government in ‘grasping and utilizing the historical opportunity and create an excellent condition for accomplishing leap-frog development in Xinjiang’ (*Xinjingbao* 2014). This statement further endorses the view that the CPC has not deviated from its grand vision of integration and unification through rapid modernization and socioeconomic transformation of this restive region.

In contrast to Xi Jinping’s brainchild of the New Silk Road Economic Belt, first announced during his speech at the Nazarbayev University in Kazakhstan in September 2013 (Xi 2013) and other ambitious projects, the Second Work Forum’s decision appears to be much more sober, grounded and people-oriented. The Forum has decided to prioritize education with greater investments, employment generation to resolve livelihood problem, and ‘build up mutually embedded social structure comprising various ethnic groups’ (建立各民族相互嵌入式的社会机构 *jianli ge minzu xianghu qianrushu de shehui jiegou*).²

² It is not very clear from the text what is exactly meant by the Chinese expression ‘相互嵌入式的社会机构’ (*xianghu qianrushu de shehui jiegou*). One can only infer that the government will possibly design urban as well as rural planning in such a way that people of various communities have to live more closely and side-by-side in the same localities.

It is believed that this kind of social structure would ‘deepen understanding and promote fellow feeling’ (加深了解, 增进感情 *jiashen liaojie, zengjin ganqing*) among various communities. How exactly all this is supposed to work in practice has however, not been explained. Meanwhile, the responsibility of maintaining stability in Xinjiang is left to the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corp (XPCC), a predominately Han organization, which has been performing the task of defending the region since it was established in the early 1950s (*Xinjingbao* 2014). The ultimate aims of these soft power strategies are to bring the Uyghurs within the system and under state authority. But as the new CPC leadership rules Xinjiang with an iron hand, the intensity of Uyghur-led violence has also increased by leaps and bounds. Therefore, achieving reconciliation between Chinese state and the Uyghur community will not be an easy task.

Conclusion

The Second Work Forum reflects neither any change of attitude to Uyghur demands nor any indication of revising the definition of terrorism. The two sets of incidents mentioned at the beginning of this essay are definitely not similar except in the eyes of the Han-dominated regional and central authorities. The increase of mass incidents across the country clearly shows that the disadvantaged and marginalized groups among the Han population are the most restive section in today’s China. There is information available about terrorist incidents in Xinjiang, but there are hardly any reports of mass incidents or *weiquan* (维权 *weiquan* defending rights) movements coming out from the region. There is a need though, to accept that Xinjiang and its disadvantaged ethnic population also suffer from the fall-out and ill-effects of rapid modernization as their counterparts in Han areas elsewhere in China, and that several so-called terrorist incidents in

Xinjiang are not very much different from mass incidents happening everyday in other parts of country.

With more than 40 per cent of its population comprising Hans and with so many locals in Xinjiang whose lives have improved because of China's economic success, it is unlikely that inter-ethnic conflicts will be part of daily life in the province. Moreover, the concentration of the Uyghur population in some prefectures of south Xinjiang is another factor that could protect the region from possible inter-ethnic tensions. However, strong separatist sentiments, resentment towards government policies and ill-feeling against the Han immigrants will remain and a section of the Uyghur population will keep using violence indiscriminately.

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