



Xinjiang: China's Window to the Silk Road?

Speaker: Suhasini Haider

Chair: Ravi Bhoothalingam

Date: 8 August 2018

ICWA Conference Room

The floor was handed to the speaker following a crisp introduction by the Chair, Mr Ravi Bhoothalingam, Honorary Fellow, Institute of Chinese Studies (ICS). The speaker was part of a delegation of journalists, invited by the Chinese government, to take stock of the situation on the ground in the restive western province of Xinjiang. Alluding to the diversity manifest in the delegation - consisting of 20 foreign journalists - the speaker noted that she was the only member to hail from a country that was disagreeable to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as well as non-Islamic. In a disclaimer, the speaker confessed that her ground report is restricted by language barriers and state control over the delegations movement.

The speaker began her speech by supplying an overview of the Xinjiang province. A predominant artery of the ancient Silk Route since 2 BCE, Xinjiang is a melting pot of cultures with 47 ethnic groups, 45 percent of which are Uighur Muslims. Ethnic diversity apart, the region is also indispensable in terms of natural resource procurement; China sources 38 percent of its coal, 30 percent of its crude oil and 30 percent of its natural gas through the province. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has added to Xinjiang's importance, conferring upon it titles such as the 'Eye of the New Vitality of the Silk Road.'

The speaker noted that China's bid to strengthen control over Xinjiang - Muslim population has fallen from 90 to 45 percent while that of Han has risen to 41 percent - is likely linked to the need to reduce dependency on maritime transport. Nevertheless, China will likely not experience the same degree of success in quarantining Xinjiang as it did with Tibet. According to the speaker, China's endeavour to use Xinjiang as a gateway to foreign markets inherently contradicts its efforts to control its society. Indeed, Xinjiang's scarred relation with the mainland is evidenced by the riots in Urumqi - Xinjiang's capital - in 2009 and the

knifings in Kunming in 2014. Even so, according to the speaker, the intensity of security in Xinjiang far outstrips what the situation on the ground would justify. Having said that, the speaker addressed the panoply of instruments deployed by the Chinese state in subjugating Xinjiang by collapsing them into four broad headings.

Firstly, on the securitisation front, Chen Quanguo, a party official with experience handling dissent in Tibet, was appointed as the Governor of the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR) in 2016, whereafter the Tibet template of forceful suppression is said to have been replicated. Ubiquitous barricades, facial recognition systems, Police Convenience Stations designed to deter miscreants and strictly monitored movement and consumption are now commonplace in Xinjiang.

Secondly, China appears rather frank in its aim to evacuate religion from Xinjiang's social architecture. Children are prohibited from entering mosques and cannot openly practice religion until they are 18 years of age. Schools run by the state deride religious values in their curricula and foster nationalistic sentiments in the youth of Xinjiang. Although, the speaker came across an institute dedicated to the study of Islam, religion appears to be relegated to a matter of academic intrigue. The speaker claimed that although no evidence was obtained as to the existence of mass reeducation camps - where allegedly 800,000 Uighurs are interned - the degree of security and surveillance in Xinjiang strongly suggests a thrust to snuff out state woes.

Thirdly, the state has made efforts to mainstream Han culture in Xinjiang. Mandarin, as opposed to Uighur, is the mandatory language in primary schools. Impressive community centres meant to infuse Han culture into the province have proliferated. Farms and empty plots of land have been utilised to construct buildings meant to house Han and Uighur communities together. According to an official in the province, 90 percent of students in Xinjiang will move to the mainland for employment.

Lastly, and most importantly, development and infrastructure have been used as a means of enticing the people of Xinjiang to be pliant with the state's objectives. The BRI enables this; Xinjiang is home to 6 railway ports that have generated 500,000 jobs and connected the province to 34 European cities. As much as 50 billion USD in investments are planned for the province of Xinjiang. At this point, the speaker reiterated her previous statement alluding to

the difficulty to encourage business while exercising strict control; labour unrest and excessive security are salient woes of companies operating in the province. The speaker concluded her speech by stating that acquiring the support in the Xinjiang province is necessary for the success of the BRI on account of the fact that China's geoeconomic objectives and strategies are essentially domestically oriented. The floor was subsequently opened to questions.

When pressed for more specifics regarding the re-education campaign, the speaker denied having first hand knowledge of their existence but drew attention to the Chinese view that radicalisation, separatism and extremism were anathema to the spirit of the country. She stated that stability in the region is suspect since the China Pakistan Economic Corridor could very possibly transmit radicalism. A member of the audience identified the parallel between the situation in Xinjiang and Lee Kuan Yew's initiative to reclaim Singaporean fishing villages into the mainstream and the irrevocable disruption it caused in the social fabric of the region. He also questioned Chinese motives behind inviting a delegation of journalists to the province. To this, the speaker replied that China's actions in Xinjiang were legitimate in the eyes of the Chinese dispensation. She surmised that China's motivation in showcasing Xinjiang to others was part of their efforts to learn the ropes of global leadership by identifying how non-Chinese perceive minorities.

Amb. Ashok Kantha, Director, ICS drew attention to the alarming increase in securitisation that Xinjiang has been subject to by stating that the situation on the ground as late as 2015 was not as grave as the speaker's account. Responding to the Chair's question regarding the perceptions of the other members of the delegation, the speaker observed that, while the other members lamented the oppression being from nations steeped in Islamic values, they also expressed admiration for the resolve of the Chinese state in securing its interests. The speaker proffered a neutral perspective surrounding the situation of Xinjiang, one which incorporated, in its analysis, the rationale of the Chinese state, and attempted to mitigate the bias that democratic values can instill in one's perception towards China.

About the Speaker

Suhasini Haidar is the Diplomatic Editor of The Hindu, writing regularly on Indian foreign policy, the Subcontinent and conflict regions. Previously Suhasini was a Delhi based correspondent for CNN International and the Foreign Editor of CNN-IBN.

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