



Islamisation of Xinjiang and the Need for De-radicalisation

Speaker: Bhavna Singh

Chair: Debashish Chaudhuri

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The seminar commenced with opening remarks from the Chair, Mr Debashish Chaudhuri, Adjunct Fellow, Institute of Chinese Studies (ICS). The relevance of the topic at hand was noted by highlighting the spotlight on the far-West province of Xinjiang in China due to advent of what observers have described as a ‘police’, ‘security’, or ‘surveillance’ state. This refers to the motley of security approaches implemented by the Chinese authority against the Uyghur ethnic minority. The floor was subsequently handed to the speaker.

The speaker focused on the political and religious corollaries that have influenced the Muslim minority (the Uyghurs) to embrace extremism. She also elaborated on the policies adopted by the Chinese to fight ‘separatism, extremism and terrorism’ through massive de-extremization and surveillance system. As Xinjiang is a landlocked province it has been subjected to interference by neighbouring states, thus undermining the stability of the region. Accordingly, the Chinese authority has opted for twin-pronged approach. The first approach is to counter external intervention and the second focuses on ways to quell the internal rebellion. The speaker pointed out that certain initiatives taken by the Chinese government have favoured the radicalisation of the Uyghurs. Attempts have been made by the state to dilute the Uyghur identity through the state-sponsored migration of Han Chinese in the region. The government also suppressed the religious expression of the Uyghurs and adopted discriminative policies for economic upliftment under its ‘western development campaign’, which further invoked the the sentiments of selective economic deprivation among the Uyghurs. She further observed that the Uyghur struggle as a part of a larger global jihad under East Turkestan Islamic Movement has invigorated the extremist tendencies in the

community. During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) most of the Uyghur artefacts and literature was destroyed, their language was suppressed and thousands of ethnic cadres, religious figures were purged, which damaged the Communist Party of China's (CPC) legitimacy amongst the ethnic minorities. Scholar Michael Clark has called this penetration into the lives of the Uyghurs a process of 'Palestinization' of the community.

A second key development is the issuing in 1996 of the directive 'Chinese Communist Party Central Committee Document No.7.' This set of instructions established a new security agenda for the Uyghurs that defined the contours of much of the practices now observed in the region. The state has targeted the theoretical and ritualistic manifestation of religion. It has framed Islam as a vehicle for separatism and a source of insecurity for Xinjiang region. Attempts have been made by the government to alienate the Uyghur from their religious identity through the official ban on the religious education of children. These draconian approaches have galvanised the Uyghurs and Uyghur diaspora elsewhere, to oppose the CPC.

The speaker highlighted that another prominent aspect of this issue has been the propaganda, both from the Uyghurs and the Chinese state. A Human Rights report titled as '*Trapped in a virtual cage Chinese state repression of Uyghurs online*' documents how the internet has been used for state propaganda and as a medium for rooting out peaceful opposition instead of catalysing change. Especially since the 2009 riots, the counter-narratives to the state have been stifled, most of the social media platforms have been scrutinised and censored. There have also been attempts by the state to manipulate the discourse of the Uyghur struggle by exploiting the remoteness of the region. The Chinese government also does not recognise the peaceful organisations, i.e. the World Uyghur Congress and the east Turkestan government in exile, representing the Uyghur cause. Thus, closing every avenue for rapprochement and dialogue with the representatives of the Uyghur community. The speaker also pointed out that it was Hu Yaobang and Wang Enmao, who advocated for the abandonment of the moderate approach of *gradualism* and adoption of a curt approach of securitisation of Xinjiang into a 'surveillance state'. Gradualism was the strategy of selected toleration and guarded liberalisation in Xinjiang adopted by the Chinese authority in the 1980s. The emergence of this surveillance apparatus is also associated with the post 9/11 Chinese state's framing of Xinjiang as a domestic front in the 'global war on terror'. The government established the apparatus by implementing biometric profiling of residents for monitoring purposes,

subjecting the Uyghur minority to indoctrination, torture, solitary confinement and other forms of abuse.

The speaker observed that the heavy-handed approach to deal with the radicalisation have become even more prominent under the Xi Jinping governance. He vetted the formation of a Special Committee on China's National Security Council to deal with security and counter-terrorism strategies. The speaker elaborated that the five basic principles proposed by Xi to govern Xinjiang are: a) to protect the legal religious activities, b) and to stop the illegal ones, c) deterring religious extremism, d) guarding against infiltration and; e) tracking crimes related to extremism. These developments reveal the decade-long pattern in Chinese security agenda for Xinjiang aimed at intervening, disciplining and re-engineering, the Uyghur identity along assimilationist and secularising lines.

In her final remarks the speaker analyses the Xinjiang situation from the perspective of Chinese interests, it is hard to see how China benefits from its massive repression of Muslim populations. There is a highly significant risk that these kinds of policies could exacerbate inter-ethnic resentment, separatism, and extremism at home, harm China's international image, and make China a target of terrorist organisations abroad.

About the Speaker

Bhavna Singh is Associate Fellow at the Center for Air Power Studies, New Delhi. She previously worked as a Senior Research Officer with the Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies (IPCS), New Delhi (2010-2013) and was later associated with the V-Dem project based at Gothenburg University Sweden. Her work focuses on Chinese Nationalism, sub-regionalism and China's foreign policy. She is particularly interested in separatist and sub-national tendencies in the regions of Xinjiang, Tibet, Taiwan and Inner Mongolia. She is the author of the book '*China's Discursive Nationalism: Contending in Softer Realms*' (Pentagon Press; New Delhi, 2012) and Co-editor for '*India, China and sub-regional connectivities in South Asia*' (SAGE 2015) and has written for several esteemed journals like the Economic and Political Weekly, Mainstream Weekly, Nam-today, World Focus, Epilogue and the China Daily and several web portals like the ISN-ETH Zurich. She was part of the youth exchange delegation between China and India in the year 2008, was nominated to the 'Taiwan Study Camp for Future leaders of South Asia' in 2010 and participated in the One Belt One Road Summit organised by the Shaanxi University in 2016.

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