



## **Countering Internal Security Challenges in Xinjiang: Rise of Surveillance State?**

**Speaker:** K. Warikoo, Mahesh Ranjan Debata, Shagun Sharma, Debashish Chaudhari

**Chair:** Amb. Ashok K. Kantha,

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The seminar commenced with opening remarks from the chair, Ambassador Ashok K. Kantha, Director of Institute of Chinese Studies (ICS). He began by making remarks on the ‘Tibet-factor’ in India-China relations which gets paramount importance but ‘turmoil’ in Xinjiang gets ignored. The relevance of the topic at hand was noted by highlighting the flurry of recent reports that suggest a series of violent incidents and unrest in Xinjiang. Xinjiang has been described by observers as a ‘police’, ‘security’, or ‘surveillance’ state. This refers to the diverse security approaches implemented by the Chinese authority against the Uyghur ethnic minority. The floor was subsequently handed to the panel.

Prof. K. Warikoo began the discussion by pointing out the crude tactics utilised by the Chinese government to suppress the Uyghur ethnic minority. The state has targeted the theoretical and ritualistic manifestation of religion. 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, restrictions on keeping long beard, observance of Ramadan and setting up of re-education camps to assimilate them. He then reflected on importance of Xinjiang in China’s history by asserting that Xinjiang remained under the effective control of Imperial China, for intermittent period for five centuries. Xinjiang gained an autonomous status whenever the governance in centre was not strong enough to exercise its control. He stressed that China has always recognised the importance of Xinjiang for furthering its influence in Central Asia. China has also been conscious of the threat to its sovereignty in Xinjiang by interference from neighbouring states, thus undermining the stability of the region. In the face of Separatist outbreak in

the region, China declared Xinjiang to be of 'core strategic interest' to the country. While facing International pressure to acknowledge human rights violation in the region, China insisted that it brooks no interference in its internal affairs. The Speaker emphasized that China has time-and-again asserted that it sees 'Separatism, Religious-Extremism, Terrorism' as a main challenge to its security and has a firm resolve to maintain its territorial integrity, using both its security forces and diplomatic-economic measures to retain its position in Xinjiang.

He observes that China has influenced countries like Iran, Pakistan and Central Asian Republics to support China's position on Xinjiang. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) was initially established as a means to prevent "foreign jihadists" from instigating violence in the Xinjiang region, and has helped secure assurances from Central Asian governments that they will never support "militant separatists" on the basis of religious and ethnic commonalities.

He remarked that since 2014, China has been in the midst of an unprecedented series of terrorist attacks attributed to Uyghur separatists. Facing these challenge, Chinese President Xi Jinping called for China to step up its fight against terrorism. Doubtless, China has stepped up its security measures but it also has realised that the security measures would only go just so far. Beijing adopted a 'renewed Xinjiang policy' of two-pronged strategy. First, the central government unleashed a severe crackdown on terrorist activities, resulting in mass arrests and trials. Second, Beijing doubled down on its previous strategy of promoting economic and infrastructure development in the region as a way of addressing ethnic tensions and quell the separatist fervour.

The speaker pointed out that China consolidated its position in Xinjiang by establishing elaborate network of communication, right from 1949, it started infrastructure development to bring Xinjiang close to Mainland. In fact China opened the first leg of a new high-speed railway that will eventually connect Urumqi, Xinjiang's capital, with Lanzhou, the capital of neighbouring Gansu province. And it's not only Xinjiang's infrastructure that is garnering government-encouraged investment. Beijing and the provincial government have an ambitious plan to boost Xinjiang's manufacturing, tourism, and even financial services industries. This is to promote Xinjiang's new role as

the gateway between China and Central Asia. The central government recognizes that unemployment and poverty among Uyghurs is a major driver of discontent. In particular, Xi Jinping emphasized that investment in the region should have an immediate impact on local people's lives by providing employment and higher incomes and would help in de-radicalisation of the Uyghurs.

Dr. Mahesh Ranjan Debata carried forward the discussion on the panel by highlighting the involvements of Uyghurs in jihadi activities and China's responses to it. He established that the 'Uyghurs' are ethnically Turkic, they speak Uyghur and most practice Sufi Islam. The Uyghurs briefly achieved statehood twice after the fall of the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911)—once from 1931 to 1934, and again from 1944 to 1949, when the communists took power and brought the region under their complete control. In 1955, Xinjiang became classified as an "autonomous region" of the People's Republic of China, although many Uyghurs complain of forced assimilation. The Speaker noted that there is no unified Uyghur agenda. While some Uyghurs seek a separate state, others prefer to maintain a cultural distinction and autonomous rapport with China. Some are also content with integration into the Chinese system. However, The East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) a Muslim separatist group founded by militant Uyghurs, have compounded Chinese concerns about the rising threat of terrorism within the country. The speaker pointed that the ETIM was founded by Hasan Mahsum, a Uyghur from Xinjiang's Kashgar region. It seeks an independent state called East Turkestan that would cover an area including parts of Turkey, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR). After Mahsum's assassination by Pakistani troops in 2003 during a raid on a suspected al-Qaeda hideout near the Afghanistan border, the group was led by Abdul Haq, who was reportedly killed in Pakistan in 2010.

The speaker noted that Beijing fears that China could splinter if regional separatist movements gain ground and has long called ETIM 'a terrorist group'. After September 11, 2001, China warned the Bush administration that ETIM had ties to al-Qaeda and bin Laden. Since 2002, the People's Liberation Army has conducted military exercises in Xinjiang with Central Asian countries, as well as Russia, to

combat what China calls “East Turkestan terrorists”. There have also been reports that the ETIM had received money, weapons, and support from the terrorist organization (al-Qaeda). He also observed that China’s ongoing security crackdown in Xinjiang has forced most militant Uyghur separatists into volatile neighbouring countries, such as Pakistan, where they have forged strategic alliances with jihadist factions affiliated with al-Qaeda and the Taliban. While experts agree that hundreds of Uyghurs joined al-Qaeda and its Taliban hosts in Afghanistan in the past, some doubt that ETIM continues to have significant ties to bin Laden’s former network. Since September 11, 2001, China has repeatedly tried to paint its campaign against Uyghur separatists in Xinjiang as a flank of the U.S.-led war on terrorism and has tried to convince Washington to drop its long-standing protests over Chinese human rights abuses in its crackdowns in Xinjiang. The speaker observed that Beijing has utilised heavy handed policies toward the Uyghur separatists. A burgeoning security presence, marked by a proliferation of campaigns in which suspected nationalists are rounded up, has also sought to limit the spread of radicalism.

**Dr. Shagun Sharma**, spoke on Chinese policies of assimilation of Uyghurs in Xinjiang. She elaborated on the official and unofficial state policies and strict religious monitoring adopted by the Chinese government to erase the ethnic consciousness of the Uyghurs. Despite economic development campaigns, massive securitization operations, policies and intensive ideological educational programs, the Chinese government has failed in Xinjiang and Han-Uyghur ethnic conflicts have surged. This questions the suitability of regional policies imposed by Beijing. 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 sentiments of selective economic deprivation among the Uyghurs. The government established the security apparatus by implementing biometric profiling of residents for monitoring purposes, subjecting the Uyghur minority to indoctrination, torture, solitary confinement and other forms of abuse. She noted that the Chinese government abandoned its initial moderate approach, known as *gradualism*, which characterized China’s ethnic minority policies in the early years of the ‘reform and opening up’ (1980s). This period is significant for the moderate

approach that the Chinese government adopted towards the ethnic minorities, which stands in stark contrast to the present context. The background for this moderation lies in the Communist Party of China's efforts to restore its credibility among Uyghurs and other Muslim ethnic groups following the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). Throughout the upheaval of this period, hundreds of mosques were closed, Qurans and other Islamic books were burnt, the Uyghur language was suppressed, and thousands of ethnic minority cadres, religious figures or intellectuals were purged. Then, Beijing had prioritised the integration of the ethnic minorities over their assimilation, and the economic pragmatism over the ideological imperative. She maintained that while displacing *gradualism*, the Chinese authorities framed Islam as a vehicle for separatism and a source of instability for Xinjiang.

The emergence of a massive surveillance apparatus in Xinjiang, erected under the banner of fighting 'terrorism' and 'religious extremism', is associated with the post 9/11 Chinese state's framing of Xinjiang as a domestic front in the 'global war on terror'. A new Uyghur Human Rights Project (UHRP) report, "The Mass Internment of Uyghurs" documents that the Uyghurs are being rounded up on an unprecedented scale. Detainees are forced to repeat slogans praising Xi Jinping and the Communist Party, to denounce Islam, and to spend hours in Chinese language classes, with threats of further punishment if they do not succeed in speaking and reading it. The speaker notes that this carrot and stick approach by the CPC attempts to dilute Uyghurs political as well as religious identity. China's campaign can be seen a way of 'Sinization' of the Uyghurs into Han way of life. China's repression of the Uyghurs is not only a serious human rights emergency, but a clear warning about how the Chinese state chooses to wield power.

Dr. Debasish Chaudhuri, the final panellist focused on the De-radicalisation and surveillance system in Xinjiang and related issues. He pointed that Xinjiang has recently been in the international spotlight due to the advent of what observers in the media and scholarly communities have described as a 'security', 'police', or 'surveillance' state. This refers to a conglomerate of security practices implemented by the Chinese authorities and mainly aimed at the Uyghur ethnic minority. These practices include the recruitment of tens of thousands of security forces to police the region, the biometric profiling of residents for monitoring purposes, and the establishment of camps where

hundreds of thousands of Uyghur and other Turkic Muslim ethnic minorities, like the Kazakhs, have been secluded and subjected to indoctrination, torture, solitary confinement, and other forms of abuse. He remarked that the De-radicalization or De-Extremisation policies are inherently different than the 'counter-terrorism policies'. China is determined to get rid of 3 evil forces of "Religious Extremism, Separatism and Terrorism", mentioned in *Document No.7*. He pointed that in under the title *Chinese Communist Party Central Committee Document No. 7.*, released in 1996, China addressed the situation in Xinjiang, and elevated 'national separatism and illegal religious activity' to the category of 'main threats to the stability'. This set of instructions established a new security agenda for Xinjiang that defined the contours of much of the practices now observed in the region. The surveillance structure that infiltrates the lives of Uyghurs is the quasi-causal, natural evolution of these developments. It reveals an established decades-long pattern in the Chinese security agenda for Xinjiang aimed at intervening, disciplining, and re-engineering the Uyghur ethnic identity along assimilationist and secularising lines. The directive called for the 'severe' control of mosques, the closure of 'underground religious schools', a higher scrutiny of religious students, and the exclusive management of religious activities by 'patriotic religious leaders'. To this aim, the circular ordered the establishment of a covert 'sensitive information network' in southern Xinjiang. The new stage of fight against terrorism is to remove or disinfect unwanted or malignant parts of social order and keeping an eye on the activities of the ordinary people in align with the 'de-radicalisation policies' and 'social management'. Most of the innovative social management techniques utilised in Xinjiang are experimented in other parts of China. The much talked about 'social-management system' developed first in Tucheng district in 2004 and was introduced in Xinjiang in 2007. This system enhanced the urban management capabilities, public governance and administration. It integrates high-speed internet, high capacity computer, large data bases, remote sensors and wireless sensors and has helped the Beijing to collect data and report on any dissident activities. China is developing state of art 'surveillance system' to vigilate the activities of its people.

The Speaker noted that it is imperative to take into account the political culture under 'Xi Jinping's' regime, which promulgates 'strongman' leadership to resolve outstanding issues. The heavy-handed approach to deal with the radicalisation has become even

more prominent under the Xi Jinping governance. The speaker remarked that the attempts to obliterate ethnic identity of Uyghur's draws parallel with the radical politics of Mao era. In his final remarks the speaker noted while analysing 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 target of terrorist organizations abroad. In short, the cure might prove to be worse than the disease.

The discussion concluded with the remarks that China has adopted an aggressive approach towards the Uyghurs. In addition to unlawfully detaining Uyghur individuals who may be recognized as potential threats to the Chinese Communist Party ,Chinese authorities have made Xinjiang a place full of security checkpoints and cameras to closely watch citizens living in the region.

*Report prepared by Navreet Kaur Kullar, Research Intern, Institute of Chinese Studies*

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