

Confronting Terrorism and Other Evils in China: All Quiet on the Western Front?

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ABSTRACT

Despite the predictions of many observers, and reports of occasional arrests of political activists, China's hitherto restive western regions heavily populated by non-Han Chinese ethnic minorities have been relatively quiet for a number of years. However, disturbances by ethnic minorities can recur with little forewarning. If or to what extent they do clearly depends on three major set of factors: PRC minority policies, foreign attention, and minorities' grievances.

Keywords • Xinjiang • Tibet • terrorism • China • separatism • PRC minority policies

According to the official Xinjiang Daily, the number of people arrested in the Xinjiang Autonomous Region of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 2005 for endangering state security, which could be anything from terrorism to talking with western reporters, was 18227.¹ In 2002, a Tibetan lama and ex-monk were respectively given death and life sentences in western Sichuan for setting off five bombs that killed one person and injured twelve others in the provincial capital of Chengdu.² Yet, despite the predictions of many observers, and reports of occasional arrests of political activists, China's hitherto restive western regions heavily populated by non-Han Chinese ethnic minorities have been relatively quiet for a number of years. This near-absence of organized violent protests or bombing incidents is particularly marked when compared to the period between 1987 and 1997. Thus one is tempted to ask, as of the proverbial dog that did not bark, what happened to China's supposed vulnerability to, and war on, terrorism?

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¹ "18,000 Uyghurs Arrested for 'Security Threats' Last Year," *South China Morning Post*, January 21 2006.

² Erik Eckholm, "China Court Rejects Appeal of Tibetan Monk Sentenced to Death for Separatism," *New York Times*, January 27 2003; "China Justifies Death to Tibetan Monk," *Press Trust of India*, November 5 2004.

The Past and Presence of Terrorism in China

Terrorism is a difficult term to define in any context. It seems even more vague and broad when applied to circumstances in China, where any premeditated and violent criminal act against any person or property with the intent of spreading fear or causing harm for a political purpose, whether executed individually or by a group of people, would count as terrorism. The PRC government is working on an Anti-Terrorism Law, which when promulgated, might provide an exact definition of terrorism. In any case, terrorism in China is usually identified with the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) and other Uighur separatist cells in Xinjiang, and to a lesser extent, militant members of the Tibetan Buddhist clergy agitating for independence. Beijing is understandably concerned that a volatile Xinjiang would threaten import of oil and gas through pipelines from Kazakhstan in Central Asia across Xinjiang to the Chinese coast, a restless Tibet would stoke the issue of legitimacy of Chinese rule, and a twitchy Inner Mongolia might damage China's relations with Mongolia.

In the aftermath of the events of September 11, 2001, the PRC authorities treated the global "war on terror" essentially as a foreign relations exercise, to protect its relations with the United States, and as an excuse to crackdown on what it deemed to be terrorist activities on Chinese soil and uncover foreign linkages to the perpetrators. Washington has since become more sympathetic to Beijing's charge of terrorists fomenting "splittist" or separatist violence and its "Strike Hard" (*yan da*) campaign against them, most notably by placing the little-known ETIM on the U.S. list of terrorist organizations in August 2002. The PRC authorities have made much of 12 Uighur "terrorists" who joined the Taliban and are detained by the U.S. at its facilities at Guantanamo Bay.³ They have also accused another Uighur "terrorist" group, the East Turkistan Liberation Organization, of killing a Chinese embassy diplomat in Kyrgyzstan's Bishkek in 2002 and nineteen Chinese passengers in a China-bound Kyrgyz bus in 2003.⁴ Occasional reports have surfaced of Uighur separatists operating with the Al-Qaeda, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), Hizb-ut-Tahrir, Chechens, and other groups in Central Asia that use violence to pursue their aims, and even an IMU cell established in Xinjiang, but there has so far been no concrete proof.

Thus 9/11 should not be read as a demarcation or signpost in China's "war on terror," but should instead be recognized as an ongoing domestic affair reaching back years. Violent demonstrations for democracy and

³ "Guantanamo Prison: Uygur Inmates are Unwilling to be Extradited to China," *Epoch Times*, March 8 2006.

⁴ James Millward, *Violent Separatism in Xinjiang: A Critical Assessment* (Washington, DC: East-West Center Washington, 2004), 21-22.

independence in Inner Mongolia in 1989 and 1990 were handled by armed police units, resulting in several fatalities.⁵ China's counter-terrorist efforts started in Xinjiang with a confrontation between the police and armed rioters at Baren County in 1990, followed by violent events such as bombings of buses and public buildings, and gun attacks on policemen and officials, with the most fatalities occurring in a clash between soldiers and protestors in Yining City in 1997.⁶ PRC authorities have admitted to very few incidents in Xinjiang since the turn of 1997 and 1998, after the introduction of *yan da*, which started as a nationwide campaign to strike at skyrocketing crime, but has targeted separatism and illegal religious activities in Xinjiang principally but also in Tibet. Major round of demonstrations by protesting monks and nuns in Tibet started in 1987, but the last of them was dispersed by the authorities in 1993. This was shortly after the appointment of the uncompromising Chen Kuiyuan as Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Secretary for Tibet, who banned all displays of the images of the self-exiled Dalai Lama, head of the Tibetan Buddhist hierarchy, after Beijing replaced his choice of the number two Panchen Lama with its own candidate in 1995. There have been occasional small-scale bombings since then – a bomb exploded outside a Lhasa police building in 1998 injured four people and one in 2000 went off beside a Lhasa courthouse – but no mass risings.⁷

Terrorism and the “Three Evils”: A Fine Balancing Act

Terrorist or violent political acts are a manifestation of root causes that suppression alone does not adequately deal with. Also, as with elsewhere, terrorism in China cannot be understood in isolation. It has to be seen in the wider context, since the term “terrorist” is usually applied to separatist and unofficial religious groups in the ethnic autonomous regions of Xinjiang, Tibet, and to a lesser extent, Inner Mongolia. In Beijing's parlance, terrorism constitutes one of “three evils,” together with separatism and religious fundamentalism, which, in its view, are all inter-connected threats to China's national security and regional stability. This is because Beijing sees terrorism as a violent expression of the aim of ethnic separatism and the result of zealous religiosity on the part of minorities that threaten to displace the state as an object of adulation. As such, separatist-cum-religious terrorism is closely associated with the fears, grievances and aspirations of certain, though by no means most, ethnic minorities in China. The presence of the “three evils” also means that the root causes of terrorism - religious freedom, cultural autonomy,

⁵ June Teufel Dreyer, “China's Vulnerability to Minority Separatism,” *Asian Affairs: An American Review* 32, 2 (Summer 2005): 72.

⁶ Millward, *Violent Separatism in Xinjiang: A Critical Assessment*, p. 14-18.

⁷ Barry Sautman, “China's Strategic Vulnerability to Minority Separatism in Tibet,” *Asian Affairs: An American Review* 32, 2 (Summer 2005): 99.

living standards, and political rights of ethnic minorities - are not addressed directly or earnestly enough by the Chinese authorities. Indeed, an unstated source of ethnic discontent is the discriminatory practices in the execution of minority policies of the PRC government, even assuming the purest intent.

For all their collective malfeasance, it must be admitted that the “three evils” offer rather good mass media propaganda for the PRC government to keep ethnic demands on the defensive, dismiss foreign scrutiny, encouragement or support for the causes of Chinese minorities, and perhaps most importantly, sustain the unity of China’s dominant Han Chinese ethnicity. The last aspect is shaping up to be of increasing salience to China’s leadership, in the face of the end of the state’s socialist ideology and the homogenizing, materialistic and individualistic effects of globalization, to prevent the emergence of centrifugal southern, provincial or coastal nationalisms that would challenge, or at least weaken, the present hegemonic state constructed around the ruling CCP, patriotic state-nationalism and a principal ethnic group.

Both the PRC authorities and émigré Uighur and Tibetan independence advocacy groups are carefully crafting a fine balance between playing up and playing down the threat of separatist violence. For Beijing, playing up the issue would discourage foreign trade and investments in Xinjiang or Tibet, but playing it down would deprive the authorities of excuses to initiate actions against separatists and religious radicals. For the émigré activists, the problem is either discrediting their cause by associating it with terrorism, or demonstrating their hopeless lack of influence in rousing their fellow minorities in China. However, even if the true state of separatist violence or terrorism is between an exaggeration and an understatement for both parties, it is far from being a phantom menace. China’s western front has been mostly quiet for at least the past eight years now, but disturbances by ethnic minorities can recur with little forewarning. If or to what extent they do clearly depends on three major set of factors: PRC minority policies, foreign attention, and minorities’ grievances.

The Four Aspects of China’s Minority Policies

The policies or strategies adopted by the PRC government in handling ethnic minority issues are particularly related to forestalling or suppressing separatism-inspired ethnic disturbances or violence, though not exclusively so. Securing border control and maximizing mineral extraction in the western regions are also major purposes for the government. There is often talk of a “carrot and stick” or “hard and soft” strategy that is supposedly pursued by the Chinese authorities to deal with minorities’ grievances – hard measures to clamp down on dissidents

advocating independence or self-determination through elections, and soft measures to win over support, or at least acquiescence, of the minorities for CCP rule and its minority policies. In fact, there are four major aspects of this strategy – crushing separatism, promoting economic development, disaggregating issues by distinguishing non-separatist from separatist demands, and expanding personal liberties - all of which have their hard and soft qualities.

To crush separatism, the government has extended the “Strike Hard” campaign to Tibet and Xinjiang since at least 1997, through tightly observing religious activities and festivals, monitoring Muslims who have returned from studying in the madrassahs (Islamic schools) of Pakistan or the Middle East, arresting and executing suspected terrorists, indicting known separatists, weapons and subversive literature at the border, establishing a number of anti-terrorist surveillance centers and quick reaction units in sensitive regions since September 11 2001,⁸ strengthening overall military preparedness, reinvigorating the system of informants, and, it should be mentioned, promoting reliable and capable minority cadres to fill up party and government positions in autonomous regions, prefectures and counties. At least in the above aspects, the government’s campaign to crush separatism appears to have been relatively successful so far.

The Chinese government has realized that poverty breeds discontent. To promote economic development in Xinjiang, which in 2004 ranked thirteenth in per capital Gross Domestic Product (GDP) amongst China’s thirty-one provincial-level units, and Tibet, which ranked twenty-fifth,⁹ Beijing has allocated vast sums of money to build up basic infrastructure in these regions, promoted culture-related commercial items such as tourism, handicrafts, and folk medicines, and retained affirmative action programs in college enrolment and government jobs for ethnic minorities. Since the first Central Ethnic Work Conference jointly organized by the State Council and CCP Central Committee in 1992 unveiled plans to accelerate economic development in minority areas, the PRC has adopted a “dumbbell” strategy of economic development, which emphasizes equally on both cross-border and domestic trade and investment for China’s western regions. The “Prosperous Border Rich People” (*xingbian fumin*) part of the “Great Western Development” (*xibu*

⁸ Martin Andrew, “Terrorism, Riots and the Olympics: New Missions and Challenges for China’s Special Forces,” *China Brief* 5, 19 (September 13 2005)
<www.jamestown.org/publications_details.php?volume_id=408&issue_id=3453&article_id=2370204> (April 30 2006); You Ji, “China’s Post 9/11 Terrorism Strategy,” *China Brief* 4, 8 (April 15 2004)
<www.jamestown.org/publications_details.php?volume_id=395&issue_id=2935&article_id=236613> (April 30 2006).

⁹ Calculated from National Bureau of Statistics, *China Statistical Yearbook 2005* (Beijing: China Statistics Press, 2005), 58, 96.

dakaifa), announced in 2000, mandated the state to spend 60% of its capital investments in the west where 80% of China's minorities live,¹⁰ in order to create an ethnic merchant middle-class that is, if not pro-Chinese, at least not willing to tolerate instability in the region.

In disaggregating issues, the authorities have tried to separate actions that threaten state security and national unity from non-separatist demands, by dealing with the latter through legal means and government fiat. These include banning books or articles that have courted charges of being insulting to minorities' customs and religious beliefs; taking steps to conserve minorities' natural living environment by answering their calls for reforestation, the return of cultivated lands to pasture, or more studies to be conducted before constructing dams; excluding minorities from China's official one-child policy; and allowing the right of religious belief for all citizens except those under eighteen and CCP members,¹¹ targeted for official atheism, secular modernization, and Hanification (Sinicization). Although China has come very far from the Cultural Revolution years when religious practices were outright forbidden, the religious proscription for party members and discouragement of fasting for Muslims during the month of Ramadan make the CCP look decidedly less liberal and far more unreasonable than either the Cuban Communist Party or the Vietnam Communist Party, which are arguably more communistic than the CCP, yet allow party members to hold religious beliefs and join religious organizations.

The authorities have allowed for the gradual expansion of individual liberties in many spheres of a person's economic, social and religious life, while maintaining strict monitoring and socialization over the religious establishments, vernacular schools, and cultural or literary associations of ethnic minorities, which constitute the markers and standard-bearers of their identities. All imams in mosques are state employees and graduates of a single state-run Islamic Seminary in China, there are party committees in monasteries, and sermons are well-attended by informers and plain clothes policemen, in spite of the fact that Lamaist Buddhism and the dominant Xinjiang version of Islam – Sufism – have a mystical bend and are by and large tolerant religious denominations.

Foreign Attention on Ethnic Causes and PRC Counter-Measures

Concern and attention on the part of foreigners for the rights and welfare of China's ethnic minorities is another major determinant of whether

¹⁰ Barry Sautman, "Resolving the Tibet Question: Problems and Prospects," *Journal of Contemporary China* 11, 30 (2002): 99.

¹¹ Igor Rotar, "The Growing Problem of Uighur Separatism," *China Brief* 4, 8 (April 15 2004)

<www.jamestown.org/publications_details.php?volume_id=395&issue_id=2935&article_id=236612> (April 30 2006).

large-scale minority disturbances recur. Foreign interest in, and advocacy of, ethnic minority causes in China are crucial moral and material pillars of support, especially for émigré activists keeping alive the cause of independence or genuine autonomy for Tibet, Xinjiang or Inner Mongolia, and their contacts within China.

Unfortunately for the activists, foreign attention on China's treatment of its ethnic minorities has diminished over the last eight to nine years, reflecting a classic syndrome of "out of sight, out of mind." This is a major by-product of the *yan da* campaign, which through tough policing, roundups and detentions of suspected separatists, terrorists or participants in illegal religious or other gatherings, and mass media denunciations of the "three evils," the PRC authorities have effectively succeeded in forcing the issue out of foreign eyes.

Perhaps more frustrating for the minorities is the fact that foreign criticisms of the PRC government's treatment of its ethnic minorities and dissidents, at least at the official level, are more often than not a direct function of the state of relations between foreign governments and Beijing – more likely if the foreign government wishes to vent discontent with China over trade disputes or charges of spying, and less so if it believes it requires the assistance, or at least understanding, of its Chinese counterpart, such as in combating world terrorism or preventing the spread of nuclear weapons

If foreign support of the causes of China's ethnic minorities is mostly a reflection of instrumental reasoning, depending on the economic opportunities or military threats emanating from China, with the degrees of cooperation or confrontation dictated by prospective gains or losses from the country's relationship with China, perhaps it is not surprising then that external espousal for the minorities' causes have all but disappeared. The rise or development of China has made foreign governments more cautious about offending Beijing over ethnic issues, particularly since this is a very sensitive matter with China that could fetch no credit for any foreign party bringing it up. Since the late 1990s, both U.S. President Bill Clinton and the government of British Prime Minister Tony Blair have expressed recognition of Chinese sovereignty over Tibet.¹² While the U.S. Congress and the European Parliament have passed resolutions calling Tibet an occupied country and telling the Chinese to leave,¹³ these are mostly for the consumption of the domestic constituents of the Congressmen and Parliamentarians, who can afford to

¹² "Jiang, Clinton Have Frank Exchanges of Views at Press Conference," *Xinhua News Agency*, June 27 1998; "Britain Wants China to Grant Tibet Freedoms," *Reuters*, October 20 1999.

¹³ "Dalai Lama Grateful for 'Occupied' Label," *Washington Times*, September 12 1995; "European Parliament Backs Negotiations on Future of Tibet," *Agence France-Presse*, March 14 1997.

assuage their own conscience, and that of the public at large, without having to display much concern for foreign affairs or defend their countries' foreign interests, as national leaders have to.

The émigré organizations of ethnic minorities from China are no less active now than before. The Tibetan Government in Exile (TGIE) has functioned in India's Dharmasala since 1959, and has organized elections to the Tibetan Assembly among its diasporic community since 1990.¹⁴ The 14th Dalai Lama, who heads the TGIE, is still traveling to many parts of the world to promote human rights and cultural autonomy in Tibet, despite being already 71 years of age. In 2004, an umbrella organization known as the World Uyghur Congress (WUC) was formed to unite many small, weak and fractious diasporic Uighur nationalist groups. Yet, realistically speaking, arguments on conscience, rights and human dignity, persuasive though they may be, and groups that advance them, can do little by themselves to further the causes of China's minorities. Involving foreign governments and multinational corporations to put pressure on the Chinese authorities may work better, but as noted, these actors often have their own interest calculations that may not be in tandem with those of the activists.

Since 1998, the Dalai Lama no longer describes Tibet as an occupied country or calls for its independence by right, and the younger generation of western-educated Uighur diaspora groups now uses the language of democracy and free elections in Xinjiang. All this is calculated to sound more appealing to western audiences and less confrontational to the Chinese authorities, and hold out the chances of achieving some negotiated settlement with Beijing that is short of independence but would permit greater autonomy to the native inhabitants of Tibet and Xinjiang. One should not be overly-optimistic about Beijing's receptiveness to these conciliatory overtures, given no indication on its part so far to alter the political arrangements governing its autonomous regions.

The Chinese government, for its part, has not been remiss in adopting various means of dealing with unwanted foreign attention. As mentioned, the authorities have taken active security measures to remove as many immediate causes of ethnic grievances as possible, or at least reduce the number of incidents in which such grievances are openly aired. They have also been engaging in image-building activities with good propaganda value, by welcoming students from the Middle East or allowing large scale Buddhist gatherings or festivals to take place. Since 2002, after a nineteen-year hiatus, PRC officials have to date held five rounds of dialogue with representatives of the Dalai Lama. The Chinese seems to have calculated that it is in their interest, or at least of no harm

¹⁴ The Government of Tibet in Exile, "Democratization of the Tibetan Government-in-Exile," <www.tibet.com/Govt/demo.html> (April 1 2006).

to them, to have the talks dragged out or intermittently restarted without achieving any concrete results until the Tibetans lose the most potent symbol of their cause with the Dalai Lama's passing. The rudderless TGIE will then most likely become defunct, or taken over by powerful segments in the Tibet Youth Congress opposed to the Dalai Lama's non-violent approach to the Tibet issue, which in either way will crumble foreign sympathy and support for its cause. Meanwhile, Beijing has been careful not to attack the words or actions of Tibetan or Uighur diasporic organizations in order not to raise their profile or accord them any importance.

More generally, Beijing has been providing economic benefits to foreign countries and companies, such as by opening the Chinese market to foreign products, encouraging Chinese investment overseas, promising more financial assistance for international aid agencies and developing nations, and signing free trade agreements with major trading partners. It has also tried to decrease security fears of its rising military strength by joining more international strategic conferences like the ASEAN Regional Forum and the Six-Party Talks for North Korean nuclear disarmament, publishing defense white papers more regularly, and conducting more joint military, anti-terrorist, anti-piracy or anti-smuggling exercises with neighboring countries. It has extended limited help to the U.S. in its global war on terrorism, by monitoring questionable financial activities in Chinese and Hong Kong banks and passing on intelligence on suspected terrorist organizations to the American government. It has discussed border controls with Muslim Pakistan, China's traditional friend, and has been developing good relations with both India and Nepal, which are hosting more than a hundred thousand Tibetan refugees, to diminish any sympathies both governments may have for TGIE activities in their countries. It has cooperated in fighting terrorism, religious extremism, and separatism with Russia and countries in Central Asia, which have their own problems with elements of the "three evils," within the rubric of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. On China's initiative, a joint anti-terrorist center was established by the organization in 2003 to exchange intelligence and plan regional anti-terrorist operations.¹⁵

Beijing has also been quick to admonish defiance of its position on the ethnic minority question. The PRC government has now and then demanded that the authorities of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan clamp down on what it considers to be separatist cells among the 350,000-strong Uighur émigré community in both countries, and extradite suspected Uighur separatists, terrorists or fugitives back to China.¹⁶ When the

¹⁵ You Ji, "China's Post 9/11 Terrorism Strategy," *China Brief* 4, 8 (April 15 2004).

¹⁶ Graham E. Fuller and Jonathan N. Lipman, "Islam in Xinjiang," in S. Frederick Starr Ed. *Xinjiang: China's Muslim Borderland* (Armonk, NY: ME Sharpe, 2004), 348.

authorities of Mongolia allowed the Dalai Lama to visit that country in 2002 after a seven-year absence, the Chinese promptly stopped train traffic between Mongolia and China for two days.¹⁷

Ethnic Minority Grievances: “End Game” for Real Autonomy?

Observers to Xinjiang and Tibet have noted a rise in tension between the local ethnic groups and the Han Chinese. This heightened state of unease is the result of two principal factors: Han immigration, which has led to clashes in lifestyles and values; and increasing market-orientation of the regions' economies, which has resulted in growing wealth disparities.

Unlike before, immigration of Han Chinese into ethnic minority regions for the past twenty years has been the result of the lure of economic opportunities rather than one of state-sponsored population transfer. Still, the government has been promoting an unstated but deliberate policy of ethnic encirclement by authorizing Han settlements in neighborhoods separate from, but close to, Uighur and Tibetan quarters. The Han Chinese populations in Xinjiang and Tibet's capital of Lhasa are at least half the total,¹⁸ if businesspeople, itinerants, soldiers, cadres, and residing members of their families are counted.

Although there is an increasing wealth gap within both the Han Chinese and ethnic groups themselves, minorities, perhaps naturally, tend to focus on a strong pattern of wealth disparities associated with ethnicity. There is no evidence of systemic partiality in public investment in favor of Han Chinese in minority areas, whether long-time residents, or fresh-off-the-train immigrants, and minorities still benefit from official affirmative action programs that many Han Chinese find discriminatory against them. Yet, it is undoubted that informal discriminations like skill requirements, an urban bias, and individual prejudices of prospective government and private employers tend to work against ethnic minorities, since many more of them have fewer years of schooling and reside in small towns and rural areas than do the Han Chinese. Job prospects are particularly poor for non-Chinese speakers. Although employment has been created directly and indirectly in the energy and mining industries, and through Beijing's disbursement for infrastructure development, widespread perception amongst minorities has been that the Han Chinese has disproportionately commandeered preferred jobs and higher positions in state and collective units.¹⁹ The

¹⁷ “China Says Rail Traffic with Mongolia Held Up For ‘Technical Reasons’,” *World Tibet News Network*, November 7 2002, <www.tibet.ca/en/wtnarchive/2002/11/7_5.html> (April 1 2006).

¹⁸ Igor Rotar, “The Growing Problem of Uighur Separatism,” *China Brief* 4, 8 (April 15, 2004); Sautman, “Resolving the Tibet Question: Problems and Prospects,” p. 103.

¹⁹ Calla Wiemer, “The Economy of Xinjiang,” in S. Frederick Starr Ed., *Xinjiang: China's Muslim Borderland*, (Armonk, NY: ME Sharpe, 2004), 179-180.

Chinese government has been encouraging the development of a merchant middle-class in Xinjiang and Tibet, but it seems to have been easier for the business-minded Han Chinese or Hui (Han Muslims) resident than for the Uighur or Tibetan without strong entrepreneurial traditions.

A sense of disillusionment and resignation has overtaken many ethnic minorities in acquiescing to Han Chinese domination of their traditional homelands and control of the autonomous region party apparatus. Minority CCP cadres are often seen as lackeys of the Han Chinese for having to explain unpopular government policies or toe the party line in renouncing religious faith, which is the core of Uighur and Tibetan identity, and sometimes become the target of local attacks. Minorities are seeking refuge in their own culture and identity, and even ghettos, as special privileges have become essentially hollow in a market economy and as a result of Han Chinese competition. Han and locals are informally segregated – they live in different neighborhoods, shop in different stores, eat in different restaurants, and study in different schools – in which case it is easy for estrangement and alienation to deepen and boil over, as when racist taunts turn into gang fights and then riots.

Ethnic minorities obviously see Han immigration and economic competition as a threat to their numbers, welfare and identity. As such, ethnic minorities have sought as much as possible to preserve their culture, language and religion, and to some extent, they have been helped by the Chinese authorities anxious to maintain ethnic harmony. New mosques have been built, Tibetan lamaseries have been refurbished, and museums and monuments have been constructed to commemorate local celebrities like Ghenghis Khan, at government expenses. Yet, there are worries that the future of Xinjiang and Tibet may well resemble Inner Mongolia today, where the native Mongolians number no more than one-sixth of the total population, control is ceded to the Han Chinese, and the pastoral way of life – the essence of Mongol identity – is fast withering away.

The PRC authorities expect trouble from ethnic minority regions and actively prepare for it; witness the ongoing crackdowns against terrorists, extremists and separatists. However, officials are also confident that, given the measures they have taken or are prepared to take, large-scale protests or violent incidents involving ethnic minorities will decrease in frequency and intensity in the future.

The PRC's physical hold on Xinjiang and Tibet is becoming stronger as they are further incorporated into China proper through expanding networks of transportation, communication, and utilities, oil and gas pipelines, and changing demographics. The completion of the railway from Golmud to Lhasa in 2006 is expected to bring in a flood of Han

Chinese migrants into Tibet, as it did for Xinjiang after the completion of the Lanzhou-Urumqi railway in 1963. The structure of the economy in the minority regions are also changing to China's advantage, with the traditional oases, pastoral and subsistence local economies moving towards an industrial, market and knowledge-based economy oriented in the direction of the rest of China and the world, where the forces of urbanization, secularization, Hanification and globalization are hard to resist. Ethnic minorities are moving outside their traditional locales for study, work, marriage or migration overseas, thus slowly decreasing their composition of the population of their homelands.

Since the second Central Ethnic Work Conference in 1999, the word "nationality" is no longer used in the official context to refer to China's minorities. It is perhaps found to be too attached in meaning to the concepts of an ethnic domain or ethnic nationalism, and hence replaced with the term "ethnic." Yet, the ethnicity basis of the PRC as a state constituted by officially-designated ethnic groups may in time be replaced by a more self-selecting "cultural" categorization, as in multiculturalism or Han-ethnic biculturalism, and eventually the idea of common citizenship. Rights may in future be attached to cultural groups or citizenry, which would dampen the saliency of ethnicity, and consequently, ethnic-based violence.

The authorities also see a trend towards eventual convergence in values and interests among the material cosmopolitanism of global society, Han Chinese, and ethnic minorities, leading to what has been described as "*ningjuhua*" – coagulation, homogenization, or acculturation – between Han and minorities.²⁰ The ethnic minority elite appear well-socialized to the paramount ideology of Chinese state-nationalism and national unity, although they may only be pretending to subscribe to it in order to advance their careers. Also, the map of China today is accepted by both the Chinese government and most dissidents, who see a democratic Tibet or Xinjiang as part of a democratic China of the future.²¹ Indeed, in the minds of most Han Chinese, if the Miao or Hmong people of the ancient Chu culture in south-central China and the Malayo-Polynesian Yue or Viet people of the south China coast could eventually become acculturated into the Chinese family, why not the ethnic minorities of today?

²⁰ Li Dezhu, "Xibu da kaifa yu minzu wenti," ("The Opening of the West and China's ethnic problem," *Qiushi (Seeking Truth)*, June 1 2000, translated in FBIS, June 15 2000, 57.

²¹ Cao Chang-ching and James Seymour, *Tibet through Dissident Chinese Eyes: Essays on Self-determination* (Armonk, NY: ME Sharpe, 1998).

Wither China's Western Front?

What are the ultimate aims of the PRC authorities for its ethnic minority west? They include exercising undisputed control over the autonomous regions, which are considered too strategically important and too much a part of the nationalist narrative to be surrendered; winning minorities' acceptance of Chinese sovereignty over their regions; depriving recalcitrant minorities of foreign support; minimizing disturbances harmful to China's self-image as a responsible great power; preserving distinct cultural and religious communities as attractions to earn tourist dollars; and turning a blind eye to Han Chinese migrants moving into minority territories, for the purpose of diluting the less trusted local population and integrating these areas firmly into China proper.

Beijing has yet to acknowledge that closing legitimate channels for expressing grievances – even if they reflect unhappiness with the political status-quo – may force ordinary folks who are not separatists into pursuing violence and terrorism to express their dissatisfaction. The Chinese authorities are plainly worried that open criticisms of the practice of ethnic regional autonomy, Han immigration into minority areas, religious restrictions on minorities and the disparities in living standards among ethnic groups will lead to a torrent of discontent. This will undermine the legitimacy of Chinese rule over minority regions in the eyes of both minorities and foreigners, embolden other disgruntled sections of the population to assert their views, and threaten party control over the country. Communist parties are not famous for their willingness to devolve power. For the CCP, it fears that genuine local autonomy may lead to independent centers of interest and power, and develop into sources of opposition to its rule over autonomous ethnic areas, should the Beijing leadership divide openly over one or more major disagreements. This was an important lesson for the Chinese leadership from the breakup of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, and may be its basic problem in accommodating the demands of China's restive ethnic minorities.

One can only hope that the PRC authorities pay careful attention in addressing ethnic minorities' grievances, create economic opportunities for them, expand direct elections to village and township congresses in minorities' areas as provided for in the state constitution, enforce anti-discrimination laws, and pry as little as possible into the lives of individuals; and that foreign governments and companies still take an interest in the well-being of China's ethnic minorities without challenging its borders or encouraging such challenges. Although it is relatively quiet on China's western front right now, ethnic consciousness, once re-awakened, would be almost impossible to extinguish. Occasional violence or "terrorist acts" in the name of ethnic causes will have to be expected.