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ISLAMIC UNREST IN THE XINJIANG UIGHUR AUTONOMOUS REGION

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Introduction

Beijing's central authority has been under increasing challenge from Muslim separatists in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region of western China in recent years. Although less well known than the anti-Chinese struggle in Tibet, the low-key conflict which has been simmering in Xinjiang since the late 1980s has resulted in significant loss of life and reliably documented human rights violations. In April 1990, for example, Chinese government forces reportedly killed some 50 protestors in putting down a five-day uprising by religious extremists in the Baren district south of Kashgar.

The Baren incident was followed by several other outbreaks of unrest throughout Xinjiang and the authorities, for the first time, admitted that independence activists were responsible. Since then, there have been steady reports of bombings and assassinations in urban centres in Xinjiang, as well as three separate bomb attacks in Beijing in the spring of 1997 which were attributed to Muslim separatists. The Beijing bombings are significant in that they marked an expansion of the violent campaign for independence in Xinjiang into the Han Chinese heartland. Attacks against Chinese soldiers and officials, as well as against perceived pro-Beijing Muslim sympathizers, continued in Xinjiang throughout

1997 amidst reports of widespread street fighting and the mass arrest of suspected separatists.

Thus far, the independence movement in Xinjiang has failed to generate widespread support and remains too fractured to present a

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meaningful threat to Beijing's rule. There are indications however, that the increasingly savage suppression of Muslim protests is generating unprecedented unity within the various separatist groups in Xinjiang and greater coordination is quickly developing. The stakes are potentially high and Beijing is undoubtedly concerned that separatist activities hold the prospect of becoming a significant threat to China's long-term political stability. The ethnic problems the central government faces in China's peripheral regions are widespread, serious and growing. In particular, separatism in Xinjiang lends support to the active independence movement in Tibet and influences nascent ethnic unrest closer to Beijing in Inner Mongolia. Moreover, economic factors are of equal significance. Hopes are that Xinjiang contains major oil deposits which, if proven, will be of enormous benefit to China's economic development prospects. It has been estimated that China will need to import 21 million tons of oil by 2010 if it is to maintain its present economic growth rate, and energy security is a major consideration in Beijing's policy towards the region.

The importance the Chinese leadership gives to developments in Xinjiang is evidenced by the increasingly hard-line response to any sign of unrest. Although it is impossible to come up with precise

numbers, Amnesty International has reported an unusually high proportion of executions in Xinjiang in response to separatist activities. These executions have reportedly triggered further anti-régime violence, heightening the prospect that the Xinjiang crisis will continue to grow in a vicious circle of repression and violent resistance.

Whereas the domestic implications of the crisis in Xinjiang are clearly serious for China, Beijing's management of the situation could have more profound ramifications for regional and international security in the future. Xinjiang is the nexus between China, the Middle East and Russia; it also lies at the cultural crossroads between the Islamic world and the Han Chinese heartland. More importantly, since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the vast energy supplies of the former Soviet Central Asian republics are becoming a focus of geopolitical attention as regional and extra-regional states seek to secure access to new sources of oil. These factors combine to make the outcome of the separatist struggle in Xinjiang of growing international strategic importance and will influence developments in the region. This paper considers the origins and extent of the Muslim separatist movement in Xinjiang and assesses its potential impact from the perspective of Canada's wider economic and security interests in the region.

Background

Xinjiang is a vast, largely desert area which contains many valuable resources including oil, lead, zinc and gold. The central Tarim basin is believed to hold enormous oil deposits but, despite intensive exploration efforts, this potential has yet to be realised. However, even if current exploration efforts fail to discover the hoped-for oil in the Tarim basin, Xinjiang will remain vital to China's long-term energy requirements because of its location next to the proven oil reservoirs in the neighbouring Central Asian republics. A logical exploitation of the energy resources of Kazakhstan would include construction of a pipeline to carry the region's oil to the major industrial markets in China and Japan. Such a transportation system would require a stable and cooperative Xinjiang.

The Xinjiang region is remote from Beijing but centrally located in one of the most important areas of the world in terms of China's traditional security concerns. The steppes of its westernmost province were China's bulwark against the military threat it perceived from the Soviet Union for most of the last 40 years. In the post-Soviet era, Xinjiang remains an indispensable strategic outpost if Beijing is to be able to monitor the potentially turbulent economic and political development of the Central Asian republics to its west.

Although there is now little prospect of confrontation with Russia, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) still maintains large ground and air forces and most of its nuclear ballistic missiles in Xinjiang. China's nuclear weapons tests are also conducted at Lop Nor in Xinjiang's Taklamakan desert. China conducted some 45 nuclear test explosions at Lop Nor starting in 1964; the last two occurred in 1996. The environmental devastation, atmospheric pollution and groundwater contamination caused by these tests is a major factor contributing to local hostility to the Chinese presence.

Current Muslim extremism in Xinjiang has clearly been inspired by the enormous changes that have reshaped Central Asia in the last decade. The independence of neighbouring Muslim republics in Central Asia since the collapse of the Soviet Union has undoubtedly raised the aspirations of Xinjiang's would-be separatists that they too can achieve autonomy. At the same time, the ignominious withdrawal of Soviet occupying forces from Afghanistan demonstrated that armed struggle against even the strongest and most ruthless opponent was a viable option. These factors, whilst clearly relevant to the contemporary situation in Xinjiang, are only part of a more complex conjunction of economic, geopolitical and strategic developments which have given

impetus to the separatist movement. Underlying all of these issues, however, are the cultural, ethnic and religious characteristics of Xinjiang and its historical place in the greater Chinese "nation".

Xinjiang is situated in northwest China, some 4000 km from Beijing, and represents the eastern extremity of the larger Turkic cultural community, which extends from Turkey in the west through post-Soviet Central Asia and Afghanistan. The region is known locally as East Turkestan, signifying its historical and cultural distinctiveness from China. The indigenous population of Xinjiang is predominantly Turkic or Indo-European in origin and the main languages have Turkic or Mongolian roots. The most important Turkic groups are the Uighurs, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz and Uzbeks. The Tajiks, the other significant Muslim minority, are linked linguistically to modern Iran through their Indo-Persian language. All of these ethnic groups have much in common with their brethren in the newly independent Central Asian republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. The Sunni branch of Islam has been the dominant cultural and religious force in Xinjiang since the 10th century.

History records many unsuccessful attempts by the Chinese to conquer East Turkestan since at least the

second century B.C. It was not until the Manchu dynasty invaded in 1759 that the Chinese finally gained control of the territory, ruling it until 1862 despite more than forty major revolts. A major Turkic uprising then drove the Chinese out and the region briefly enjoyed independence. This, however, was the period during which Tsarist Russian expansion into Central Asia was perceived as threatening to British colonial interests in India. In what is known as "The Great Game", the British sought to check Russian ambitions through a series of alliances and military assistance to friendly powers. Because they were concerned that Russia would move into East Turkestan, the British financed the Manchu dynasty's reconquest of East Turkestan in 1876. East Turkestan was renamed Xinjiang and formally annexed to the Manchu Empire in 1884. Relations with Beijing have been fractious ever since. The reason is simple: the native population of Xinjiang has no cultural, ethnic, linguistic or religious connection to China, which, in essence, is a "foreign" occupying power. In fact, the very name "Xinjiang", which means "New Frontier" in Mandarin, emphasizes the region's place at the periphery of the Han Chinese empire.

Islam In China

According to the 1990 census, China has more than 17 million Muslims but this figure is believed to understate the

actual numbers by as much as 50 percent. Even with uncertain population data, there is no doubt that China is a major Islamic state. The Hui are the largest officially recognised Muslim group at about 8.6 million and are ethnically and linguistically Chinese. Hui minority populations are found throughout China and they do not have a traditional territorial homeland. There are, however, significant concentrations of Hui in their own autonomous region, Ningxia, as well as in Gansu and Qinghai provinces, which lie to the east of Xinjiang in central China. Conversely, Turkic Islam in China is clearly associated with the territory of Xinjiang.

The Uighurs are the most important Muslims of Turkic origin and are the dominant ethnic group in Xinjiang, numbering about 7.2 million out of a total population of some 15 million. The Hui and the Turkic Muslims have different relationships with the Han Chinese and the two groups are not natural allies. The former are frequently referred to as "Chinese Muslims" and are culturally closer to the mainstream Chinese community. The Hui have no inherent connection with the Turkic-origin Islamic groups but have often served as a bridge between them and Beijing. Even so, the Hui have also suffered discrimination at the hands of the Chinese and have demonstrated their desire for greater cultural and religious freedom on numerous occasions.

They lack, however, the sense of group identity that sustains the Uighur separatist movement. The Hui have not been implicated in the anti-Chinese violence in Xinjiang.

Beijing has systematically sought to manage and control religious activities throughout China, allegedly to safeguard national unity and stability. In Xinjiang, because Islam is essentially indistinguishable from local cultural and national identity, Beijing perceives a particular threat to its rule. As a result, mosques and religious schools in Xinjiang, which are regarded as hot-beds of anti-régime sentiment, have periodically been closed and religious activists arrested and harassed.

Xinjiang's Colonial Legacy

Beijing's crackdown on Muslim unrest in Xinjiang is ostensibly a response to a perceived threat to the stability of a region deemed to be of vital strategic significance. Xinjiang is an important strategic region both in its location and in its resource potential; it is also an area where the native population's desire for cultural, linguistic and religious autonomy is stymied by a rigid colonial tradition.

A small part of northern Xinjiang enjoyed a brief period of independence in 1944 when a Muslim republic of East Turkestan was proclaimed out of the chaos of China's war with

Japan. Following Mao Tse Tung's victory over the Nationalist forces in 1949, Xinjiang was brought back into the Chinese fold through a combination of political duplicity and military force. Despite the position of the Chinese communist party during the civil war that ethnic groups in regions such as Mongolia, Tibet and Xinjiang would be free to choose their own future, Mao Tse Tung repudiated self-determination as an option when he took power and rejected any prospect of dividing China into federated republics. Instead, Mao created the concept of "autonomous regions, provinces and districts" within which the various ethnic groups were promised "equality" with the Chinese majority. Most of Xinjiang's inhabitants were thus persuaded to rejoin greater China, and the People's Liberation Army quickly crushed any opposition. The Uighur Autonomous Region was proclaimed in 1955. In fact, as the most westerly outpost of the Chinese empire, Xinjiang has always been treated in a typical colonial fashion by whichever faction ruled in Beijing - Feudalists, Nationalists and Communists - since the Manchu dynasty.

Most of the senior administrators, and all of the military commanders in Xinjiang, are Han Chinese appointed by Beijing. Typically, Han Chinese control the major industries in Xinjiang, and its economic production is

expressly geared to the requirements of the centre. The Muslims largely remain in traditional agricultural and livestock occupations and have few opportunities for advancement in other sectors. Most of the region's resources are exported unprocessed to China proper and are reimported as manufactured goods at high prices. Furthermore, Xinjiang has become a dumping ground for Beijing's social and internal security problems with thousands of criminal and political prison camps giving justification to the region's reputation as China's Siberia.

The Turkic Muslims obviously represent only a fraction of China's overall population of more than a billion people but given their concentration in a remote border area of vital strategic concern, their power to threaten Beijing's interests is disproportionate to their numbers. The importance of the region to Beijing in terms of its economic and strategic potential perhaps explains the harshness of the government's response to any unrest in Xinjiang. However, frequent reports of religious nationalists being executed by the authorities in Xinjiang suggests a deeper concern for the potential impact that the Islamic resurgence might have for China's long-term stability. To counter this threat, the Chinese authorities have pursued a deliberate strategy designed to change the demographics of Xinjiang, the

effect of which will be to create a Muslim minority population.

When Mao Tse Tung seized power in China, the Uighurs constituted some 80 percent of the population of Xinjiang. In the 50 years since then, the Han Chinese population in the province has grown from about 10 percent to perhaps 50 percent today. The Han are heavily concentrated in the northern part of Xinjiang, in and around the capital Urumqi. The southern, less habitable, part of Xinjiang remains dominated by native groups with the Uighurs being the most important of these. The growth of the Han Chinese population of Xinjiang has been achieved by flooding the region with massive numbers of Chinese immigrants. Initially, from the 1950s, Han Chinese migration to Xinjiang was officially encouraged to support agricultural development and to promote security with respect to the putative Soviet threat to the lightly populated territory. Since the 1980s, official support for migration has been toned down, possibly in response to increasing tensions with the local populace, but immigration to Xinjiang has proceeded apace. In part, this reflects the same kinds of pressures being experienced elsewhere in China as millions of people flood out of the rural areas to seek work in the growing manufacturing economy. This trend is mirrored in the case of the flow of Chinese to Xinjiang by the demand for skilled workers to

fill positions in resource-based extractive industries to supply the raw materials to support China's booming economic expansion.

Han Chinese colonization of Xinjiang has been forcefully led by the pseudo-military Bin Tuan organization, formally known as the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (XPCC). The Bin Tuan was formed in the 1950s when some of the troops used to suppress Muslim resistance to Chinese rule were relieved of combat duties and drafted into agricultural development projects. It was disbanded in 1975 but reestablished in 1981 and retains a sham military designation as the Xth Agricultural Division. The XPCC numbers about 2.28 million people, including about 1 million workers. Despite its alleged non-combat status, the XPCC has served as an effective arm of the PLA in suppressing Muslim unrest in Xinjiang over the years and played a key role in ending the 1990 Baren uprising. One of its major functions is to manage the "Chinese Gulag" and the XPCC has overall responsibility for the hundreds of thousands of criminal and political prisoners deported to Xinjiang. Many of these exiles subsequently become permanent residents, working on land run by the XPCC from which Uighurs and other native groups have been displaced.

The World Bank became embroiled in a major

controversy over the XPCC in 1996 when the leading Chinese dissident, Harry Wu, testified before the United States Senate Foreign Relations Committee that the organization was running 14 forced labor camps, or Laogai, in Xinjiang under Bank supported development projects. The World Bank loans had been aimed at helping the Uighurs but, according to testimony from two Uighur former officials from the XPCC, had actually strengthened government control over the region and facilitated a crackdown against anti-Chinese dissidents. As a result of these revelations, the US Treasury withdrew its support for World Bank projects with the XPCC until a clearer line could be drawn between the organization's civilian and military functions.

Discriminatory policies favouring the Han Chinese over the locals in access to jobs, education, health care and other services, combined with Beijing's insensitivity to traditional cultural and religious mores in Xinjiang, have compounded Muslim resentment at being treated as second-class citizens in their homeland. For example, the Communists banned the traditional Arabic script that had been used in the region for more than a thousand years and destroyed thousands of historical books. In order to take advantage of any economic opportunities, the native population is obliged to learn Chinese. Meanwhile, very few

Chinese bother to learn the local languages. The cultural, linguistic and religious distance between the two peoples is not closing and social interaction remains negligible.

China's assimilation policies are particularly offensive to traditional values. For example, financial rewards are given to Han Chinese who intermarry with Muslim ethnics but any offspring are registered only as Chinese. In what is perhaps the ultimate attempt at ethnic dilution, China's strict one-child policy has been waived for Han Chinese willing to move to Xinjiang; they are allowed to have two children, a fringe benefit which encourages further immigration. In effect, there has been a systematic policy to reduce the Muslim heritage of Xinjiang.

Anti-Chinese unrest in Xinjiang therefore stems from the twin assaults of cultural/religious repression and demographic manipulation. Beijing's rigorous attempts to assimilate the Uighurs through the repression of religion, assembly and language, as well as through the systematic introduction of Han Chinese immigrants into the region, have fomented deep-rooted anti-régime sentiment. It is of little surprise that there have been periodical uprisings against Chinese domination.

The Question Of Fundamentalism

Whereas there has clearly been heightened awareness of their ethno-religious roots amongst the Muslims of Xinjiang in recent years, it is not apparent that this can be equated with the beginning of an Islamic fundamentalist movement. In fact, with some exceptions, Uighurs are not generally considered to be fundamentalists and the organised lethal combination of religion and violence seen in the Islamic world from Algeria to Afghanistan is so far missing in Xinjiang. What is most troubling to the Chinese authorities is that the rise of Islamic awareness in Xinjiang might lead to the kind of terrorist extremism seen, for example, in Hizbullah actions against Israel. In particular, a presumed connection between veterans of the Afghan war and separatists in Xinjiang has raised concern that the independence movement is being armed and influenced by outside powers.

The Afghan war should not be underestimated in terms of the impact it has had on disaffected Islamic youth from Algeria to Kashmir. As an ideological event, the Afghan conflict clearly had a powerful effect on those who now seek to create an Islamic state in East Turkestan. A number of Xinjiang Muslims are known to have fought alongside the Mujahideen in Afghanistan together with other committed

revolutionaries from a number of Islamic states. It is feasible that some of the Xinjiang Muslims who fought in Afghanistan have returned to take up arms against the Chinese. Certainly, radical Islamic international contacts were consolidated in Afghanistan and the end of that conflict has created a pool of well-trained, religiously motivated, fighters and a vast amount of surplus weapons. There is a virtually uncontrollable trade in weapons from Afghanistan to the border regions of Pakistan, Kashmir, Tajikistan and to criminal elements elsewhere in the region. Smuggling of all kinds of contraband is endemic throughout the area and centuries-old tribal connections make it unreasonable to dismiss the influence of "outsiders" in the Xinjiang conflict.

Beijing has been particularly interested in developing ties with the authorities in neighbouring states to restrict the operations of Islamic separatist groups who maintain the independence campaign safe from Chinese intervention. In April 1996, Chinese President Jiang Zemin signed an agreement with counterparts from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan that included calls to oppose Islamic fundamentalism. The Central Asian republics will have to play a fine balancing act if they wish to accommodate Beijing without alienating their own radical populations but they are expected to cooperate, at least in

the short term, as they need Chinese support to offset continuing Russian pressure on their independence. Similarly, Beijing is believed to have pressured Pakistan to crack down on Muslim groups it suspects of arming fundamentalists in Xinjiang. However, no evidence has been presented that the separatist movement in Xinjiang is being managed or manipulated by foreigners. Even so, senior Chinese officials have frequently blamed outside forces for their troubles in Xinjiang, and have warned against United States and CIA involvement on occasion.

Nevertheless, China's increasingly harsh treatment of separatist groups in Xinjiang could quickly change the level and nature of external support, especially from Middle East states such as Saudi Arabia and Iran. The Saudis and the Iranians have the financial resources and ideological commitment to provide meaningful support to the Islamic cause although the Shiia-Sunni split will limit Iran's role. The potential Saudi connection poses perhaps the greatest threat to China's overall interests as it will need to maintain good relations with the Middle East Arab states in order to secure the oil supplies necessary to support its economic expansion. For now, external support for Muslim groups advocating independence for Xinjiang seems to be a marginal aspect of the threat to Chinese rule. Instead, the

resurgence of Islamic nationalism in Xinjiang has developed as China itself has become more open to outside economic and political influences since the death of Mao Tse Tung.

The Cultural Revolution was particularly hard for all religious groups in China, especially the Tibetan Buddhists and Muslims. In Xinjiang and throughout China, mosques were destroyed or closed and ancient religious sites desecrated. After Deng Xiao Ping took power, the situation improved rapidly for the Muslims and there was a return, of sorts, to religious tolerance. Mosques were rebuilt or reopened and greater interaction between China's Muslims and the wider Islamic community was permitted. Chinese Muslim participation in the annual Haj pilgrimage to Mecca grew steadily from the mid-1980s, exposing many ordinary people to international Islamic thought and political developments. Similarly, foreign Muslims were allowed to visit Islamic sites in China, creating a greater awareness of the wider Muslim community.

Very quickly, these openings generated renewed affinity with Islam in Xinjiang and created an intellectual climate conducive to thoughts of separatism and autonomy. Sensing a threat to its power, the Chinese government responded by restricting contacts between its Turkic Muslims and visitors from the Middle East. By the

early 1990s, mosque construction and renovation was severely curtailed, public broadcasting of sermons outside mosques was banned, religious education was proscribed, only religious material published by the state Religious Affairs Bureau was allowed, religious activists were purged from state positions and Haj pilgrimages were tightly controlled and limited to participants over 50 years of age. The first serious outbreaks of violence directed at the Chinese authorities occurred in response to the imposition of these restrictive measures and reflected the local communities' anger and frustration at Beijing's about-turn on greater religious freedom.

In short, the increase in Muslim unrest in Xinjiang is a function of the resentment that has grown as the community's aspirations for greater autonomy based on the conjunction of national identity and religious revivalism have been curtailed. The Islamic revival is not primarily an ideological reawakening; instead, the truncated interaction with the cultural heritage of the Islamic world made the religious element an important new focus of anti-Chinese unity.

The Erosion Of Central Authority In China

There has been a steady erosion of Beijing's traditional control over the lives of the Chinese population in recent years as the country's rapid

economic growth has triggered greater labour mobility and heightened expectations of greater financial opportunities. At the same time, the death of Deng Xiao Ping marked the end of an era of leadership whose roots lay firmly in the Chinese revolution and presented the prospect of a period of political instability and uncertain regime durability. If seen in this context, the uprisings in Xinjiang, as well as the continuing resistance to Chinese rule in Tibet and Inner Mongolia, are not atypical responses to the traditional ebb and flow of centre-periphery power relations in China. The history of China is replete with cyclical struggles manifested by the pursuit of independence in peripheral regions as central authority is perceived to weaken.

The revival of Islamic identity throughout Central Asia has certainly contributed directly to the growth of anti-régime hostility in Xinjiang and raised concern in Beijing that religious nationalism poses the greatest threat to the stability of China. Official statements repeatedly refer to the danger of "splittism" along religious lines and it is clear that the government is not prepared to countenance greater ethno-religious autonomy at the risk of jeopardizing the control of the Communist Party. Beijing's efforts to quell "splittism" in Xinjiang have been couched within the framework of country-wide "strike hard" campaign against crime and corruption, introduced in April 1996. In Xinjiang and Tibet,

however, "strike hard" has always been targeted against separatists and thousands of people have been detained or imprisoned without due process.

Beijing's quandary is how to maintain its authority in Xinjiang whilst avoiding exacerbating the separatist crisis through measures that, inevitably, must accommodate the basic demands of the extremists for greater autonomy. Beijing appears to be in a no-win situation in Xinjiang. If it chooses to pursue more harmonious Chinese-Uighur relations through greater tolerance of cultural and religious freedom in Xinjiang, it risks increasing the separatists' exposure to the more fervent kinds of religious-nationalist sentiments sweeping Afghanistan and parts of Central Asia. However, if Beijing maintains, or increases, its repressive policies against the separatists, it will fuel the flames of unrest and, perhaps, alienate the regional Islamic states with whom it needs to cooperate in pursuit of its broader economic, political and security objectives.

At the same time, the Muslim separatists face uncertain prospects in their efforts to gain independence from China. The violent campaign for self-determination has thus far been confined to seemingly sporadic attacks against targets of opportunity. However, there seems to be growing coordination of the opposition to Chinese rule and

Beijing's uncompromising hard-line response plays into the hands of the extremists. Experience from other insurgencies around the world suggests that Beijing's policies will ultimately alienate the larger population of Uighurs not currently committed to an independent homeland. Nevertheless, the separatist movement currently lacks the international support that will be necessary if it is to move beyond isolated attacks against Chinese officials and consolidate the campaign for eventual independence.

Moreover, unlike the situation in Tibet, there is no Western constituency supportive of Xinjiang's freedom, nor do the separatists have an internationally renowned figurehead like the Dalai Lama to press their case. Perhaps most importantly, given the widespread fear of "Islamic Fundamentalism" in North America and Europe, an obscure Muslim independence movement in an important country like China seems an unlikely candidate for Western support. Even in its own environment, the independence movement is disorganized and ineffective. Although Uighur pan-Turkic nationalist groups have operated from Turkey since the 1950s, the movement still lacks even a rudimentary government in exile to focus its efforts.

Conclusion

Although there has always been opposition to Chinese rule in Xinjiang, the present pattern of unrest has developed along with dramatic changes in regional geopolitical dynamics and the transition to post-Deng Xiao Ping politics in China. The evolving economic, political and strategic environment surrounding developments in Xinjiang clearly presents Beijing with a serious policy challenge as it tries to address the current crisis. How it responds to the rising unrest against its rule in Xinjiang will quite possibly determine the future of centre-periphery relations in China and, by implication, the viability of the country's present territory. It is clear that President Jiang Zemin will strive to maintain long-standing Chinese policy and try to keep the distant border areas under Beijing's firm control. However, unrest in Xinjiang, along with Tibet and Inner Mongolia, seems likely to grow in intensity for the foreseeable future. For now, Beijing appears to hold the upper hand but only because it has not hesitated to use brutal measures to destroy all opposition.

The ultimate outcome of the struggle in Xinjiang is by no means certain. The resurgence of Islamic identity throughout Central Asia has added a new dimension to the conflict and repression will only give sustenance to the separatists as time passes. Region-wide

movements to reassert traditional cultural, religious and trade linkages compound Beijing's difficulty in controlling the situation. Moreover, the larger Islamic community already lends support, both material and moral, to the separatists in Xinjiang and this will inevitably increase in the future. Under these fluid conditions, the challenge for Beijing is not to crush the independence movement but to find a way to negate its influence through carefully structured measures designed to provide meaningful autonomy for the Muslims of Xinjiang within a more flexible Chinese polity.

Canada seems unlikely to be directly affected by the separatist struggle in Xinjiang. However, any increase in instability in China will have an important bearing on Canada's expanding trade and investment relationships in the country. Furthermore, continuing unrest in Xinjiang could ultimately result in refugee claimants seeking safe haven in Canada. More significantly, as political and religious links grow between Xinjiang, the Middle East and the new Muslim oil producing republics of Central Asia, the evolving situation will take on growing international importance from the perspective of the West's future energy security priorities.

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