



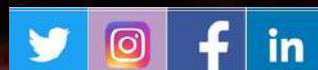
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XINJIANG, TIBET, AND THE ETHNIC MINORITY QUESTION

DR ABHIGYA LANGEH

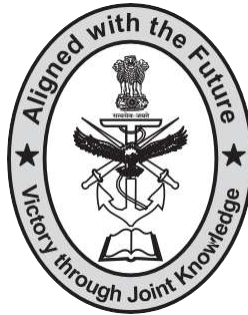
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XINJIANG, TIBET, AND THE ETHNIC MINORITY QUESTION

CONTENTS

Title	Page No
Historical and Ideological Foundations	6
Governance in Practice: Xinjiang, Tibet, and Inner Mongolia	8
International Response and Beijing's Counter-Narrative	12
Conclusion: Authoritarian State-Building at the Periphery	14
References	16

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Xinjiang, Tibet, and the Ethnic Minority Question



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Few dimensions of contemporary Chinese governance attract as much international scrutiny or reveal as much about the internal architecture of the Chinese party-state as its management of ethnic minority regions. Xinjiang and Tibet occupy a distinctive place in Beijing's political geography: both are officially designated "autonomous regions", both sit astride sensitive international borders, both host non-Han populations with independent linguistic, religious, and historical identities, and both have become synonymous in Western policy discourse with mass surveillance, cultural restructuring, and human rights violations on a scale that has drawn condemnation from the United Nations, the United States, the European Parliament, and a broad coalition of human rights organisations. A third case, Inner Mongolia, offers an instructive comparative lens because it lacks the separatist violence. Beijing cites it to justify its Xinjiang policies, yet it has still experienced a comparable linguistic and cultural assimilation trajectory, which

bears directly on how convincingly the counter-terrorism justification can explain the pattern as a whole.

This chapter examines the governance logic underpinning Beijing's approach to its minority periphery; the specific policy instruments deployed in Xinjiang, Tibet, and, comparatively, Inner Mongolia; the institutional and technological architecture through which these policies are implemented; the scale, substance, and internal contestation of international condemnation; Beijing's counter-narrative and the domestic legitimization functions this policy area performs; and, finally, what the accumulated evidence reveals about the methods and limits of authoritarian state-building at the edges of a rising power. The central argument is that Xinjiang and Tibet are not aberrations within an otherwise conventional system of subnational governance; they are the clearest and most intensively resourced expression of a governing philosophy in which ethnic and religious difference is treated as a security variable to be measured, monitored, and, where judged necessary, engineered into alignment with the political and cultural centre. This philosophy has continuities with earlier periods of Chinese state-building but has been substantially intensified, centralised, and technologically transformed under the Xi Jinping leadership since 2012, to the point that it now constitutes a distinct policy regime rather than an extension of earlier practice.

Historical and Ideological Foundations

The People's Republic of China formally recognises fifty-six ethnic groups (*minzu*), of which the Han constitute roughly ninety-one percent of the population. The remaining fifty-five "minority nationalities" (*shaoshu minzu*) are concentrated disproportionately in China's border regions, Xinjiang, Tibet, Inner Mongolia, Guangxi, and Yunnan, among them, a demographic pattern that has, since the founding of the PRC in 1949, tied questions of ethnic policy directly to questions of territorial security and frontier defence. The PRC's early institutional framework for handling this diversity borrowed heavily from the Soviet model of ethno-territorial federalism: a formal system of "autonomous regions", "autonomous prefectures", and "autonomous counties" nested within a unitary state, administered under the 1952 General Program for Regional Ethnic Autonomy and later

codified in the 1984 Law on Regional Ethnic Autonomy. This framework promised limited self-governance, language rights, proportional minority representation in local government, and cultural protections, while reserving ultimate political authority to the Chinese Communist Party through parallel party structures that shadow and outrank nominally autonomous government bodies at every administrative level. In practice, autonomy was always bounded by the *Leninist principle of democratic centralism*, under which formal representative structures coexist with, and are subordinate to, an unelected party apparatus that alone determines substantive policy.

Successive policy phases have shifted the balance between accommodation and assimilation. The relatively pluralistic approach of the 1980s, associated with reformist leaders such as Hu Yaobang, who in 1980 apologised publicly to Tibetans for excesses of earlier Maoist policy and proposed a substantial withdrawal of Han cadres from the region, gave way after the 1989 Tiananmen crisis and the 1990s to a more security-oriented framework, particularly following ethnic unrest in Tibet in 1987–89 and the rise of separatist and, in some instances, violent extremist activity associated with Xinjiang in the late 1990s and 2000s. A recurring theme in internal Chinese Communist Party analysis of minority policy through this period is the disintegration of the Soviet Union along ethno-federal lines in 1991, which Chinese party theorists and security scholars have studied intensively as a cautionary example of how formally recognised ethnic autonomy, combined with economic strain and weakened central authority, can catalyse territorial fragmentation. This anxiety, layered onto the CCP's foundational "Century of Humiliation" narrative regarding nineteenth- and twentieth-century territorial losses to foreign powers, supplies much of the ideological energy behind the decisive shift that followed.

That shift crystallised under Xi Jinping. At the Second Central Ethnic Work Conferenceⁱ in 2014 and subsequent party forums, the leadership articulated what has come to be known as the "second-generation ethnic policy", formalised through the doctrine of forging a "sense of community for the Chinese nation" (*Zhonghua minzu gongtongti yishi*), written into the CCP constitution in 2017. This doctrine de-emphasises the earlier Soviet-influenced model of recognising distinct national minorities with protected group rights

and instead promotes a civic-nationalist framework in which ethnic particularism is subordinated to a unified Chinese national identity centred substantially on Han cultural, linguistic, and political norms. President Xi's own formulation that religions in China must undergo "Sinicization" (*Zhongguohua*) to be compatible with socialism has provided the ideological umbrella under which both the Xinjiang and Tibet policies of the past decade have been organised and under which comparable, if less internationally visible, policies have been extended to Inner Mongolia and to Hui Muslim communities elsewhere. The shift matters analytically because it reframes minority governance from a project of managed pluralism into a project of engineered convergence: where earlier policy tolerated, even celebrated in folkloric and touristic registers, visible markers of ethnic difference, the post-2014 framework treats persistent religious, linguistic, and cultural distinctiveness as a latent security risk requiring active correction, administered through an expanding toolkit of surveillance, education, resettlement, and religious-affairs regulation.

Governance in Practice: Xinjiang, Tibet, and Inner Mongolia

Xinjiang's contemporary policy trajectory cannot be separated from a sequence of violent incidents beginning in the late 1990s and intensifying after 2009, including inter-ethnic riots in Urumqi that killed roughly two hundred people, and a series of subsequent attacks, including a 2013 vehicle attack in Tiananmen Squareⁱⁱ and a 2014 knife attackⁱⁱⁱ at Kunming railway station, attributed by Chinese authorities to Uyghur separatist and, in some cases, transnationally linked extremist networks. Beijing's official narrative frames the region's subsequent policies as a proportionate counterterrorism and counter-extremism response, codified domestically through the 2015 Counter-Terrorism Law and the 2017 Xinjiang Regulation on De-extremification, which enumerated behavioural indicators of "extremism", including growing an "abnormal" beard, wearing a veil in public, refusing to watch state television, and possessing unauthorised religious materials. Under the leadership of Xinjiang party secretary Chen Quanguo^{iv}, who was transferred to the post in 2016, having pioneered comparable security techniques in Tibet, the region underwent a rapid and centrally coordinated escalation of what the Chinese state has termed "Vocational Education and Training Centres" (VETCs). Independent researchers,

journalists, and leaked internal Chinese government documents, including the 2019 "China Cables," a set of classified internal directives obtained by the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists, and the 2022 "Xinjiang Police Files," a cache of internal police databases and directives analysed by a media and academic consortium, have provided extensive documentation of a network of extrajudicial internment facilities in which credible estimates suggest more than one million Uyghurs, Kazakhs, and other predominantly Muslim minorities were arbitrarily detained beginning around 2017. Leaked directives specified operational protocols, including instructions that detainees be prevented from escaping, that political and ideological transformation be treated as the primary metric of "graduation", and that family visitation be barred for extended periods, details that substantially undercut the government's characterisation of the facilities as voluntary vocational institutions.

This detention system sits atop a dense technological surveillance architecture that has made Xinjiang a proving ground for tools subsequently marketed by Chinese firms internationally. The "Physicals for All" campaign, launched in 2017, involved the mandatory collection of biometric data, facial scans, DNA samples, voiceprints, and iris scans from the entire adult population under the framing of a public health initiative. The Integrated Joint Operations Platform (IJOP) aggregates data from checkpoints, mosque attendance records, travel patterns, utility usage, and personal relationship networks to generate automated risk scores; researchers who reverse-engineered the application found it flagged individuals for behaviours as mundane as owning multiple SIM cards or having relatives living abroad. A dense network of checkpoints, positioned in some urban areas at intervals of a few hundred meters, subjects residents to continuous facial-recognition verification for routine movement, while grid-management policing embeds Han cadres in Uyghur households under "pair-up" and "becoming family" programs that researchers and former participants describe as functioning to monitor religious observance and political loyalty within the domestic sphere itself. Beyond detention and surveillance, large-scale labour transfer programs have relocated Uyghur workers into factories supplying global apparel, electronics, and solar-panel supply chains under conditions UN experts and multiple governments regard as potentially amounting to

forced labour, the evidentiary basis for the U.S. Uyghur Forced Labour Prevention Act of 2021, which created a rebuttable legal presumption barring goods linked to Xinjiang from import absent clear contrary evidence. ^vDemographic researchers, most prominently Adrian Zenz, have documented birth-rate declines in Uyghur-majority prefectures between 2015 and 2018 substantially exceeding the national trend, correlated with official regional health statistics showing increased IUD insertion and sterilisation procedures, alongside the progressive replacement of Uyghur-medium schooling with Mandarin-only instruction ^{vi}.

Tibet's incorporation into the PRC followed the 1950 military entry and the 1951 Seventeen-Point Agreement, an arrangement that collapsed with the 1959 uprising and the Dalai Lama's flight into exile, after which Beijing dissolved the Tibetan local government and established direct administrative control, formalised through the creation of the Tibet Autonomous Region in 1965. The Cultural Revolution produced extensive destruction of Tibetan monasteries, a period the reform-era 1980s relaxation partly reversed before renewed tightening followed unrest in Lhasa in 1987–89 and the widespread 2008 uprisings preceding the Beijing Olympics. Chen Quanguo's tenure as TAR party secretary from 2011 to 2016 pioneered the grid-management and surveillance techniques later exported to Xinjiang and saw a rapid expansion of local police convenience posts and enhanced monastery monitoring following a wave of Tibetan self-immolation protests that peaked between 2011 and 2013, in which more than one hundred and fifty Tibetans, predominantly monks, nuns, and young laypeople, self-immolated in protest against Chinese rule ^{vii}. Tibetan Buddhism's institutional reliance on reincarnate succession (*tulkus*) makes religious authority itself a governance target: Beijing's 1995 installation of a government-recognised Panchen Lama, Gyaltsen Norbu, in place of the six-year-old child identified by the Dalai Lama according to traditional procedure, reflects a determination to control the institutional reproduction of Tibetan religious authority rather than merely its outward practice. That child, Gedhun Choekyi Nyima, has not been seen publicly since his 1995 disappearance. This precedent bears directly on the succession of the fourteenth Dalai Lama, now in his nineties: Beijing has stated it will insist on approving his reincarnation through a state-controlled process, while

the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan government-in-exile have indicated any successor will be identified through traditional religious procedure outside PRC territory, a looming dispute widely expected to produce competing recognised Dalai Lamas and a significant test of Beijing's capacity to control an authority that operates, by definition, beyond its administrative reach.

The most internationally prominent recent Tibet policy is the residential school system. UN human rights experts estimated in 2023 that approximately one million Tibetan children, by some non-governmental estimates roughly three-quarters of the school-age Tibetan population, attend state-run boarding schools where instruction occurs overwhelmingly in Mandarin, curricular content centres on Han cultural experience, and children are separated from families beginning, in some documented cases, as young as four. Attendance, while nominally voluntary, functions as compulsory in practice, since families who decline enrolment risk loss of government benefits or employment opportunities. The UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, reviewing China's compliance record in early 2023, characterised the system as part of a campaign "to eradicate Tibetan culture and language" and formally urged Beijing to abolish it and permit private Tibetan schools. Tibetan sociologist Gyal Lo, who studied the system before fleeing into exile, has argued the schools overwhelm home-language^{viii} acquisition at a developmentally critical age, producing a generational rupture in which grandparents and grandchildren increasingly lack a shared functional language. Alongside education, large-scale resettlement of Tibetan nomadic herders and rural farmers, estimated by advocacy organisations at up to two million people over two decades, has been justified through poverty-alleviation and ecological-protection framing, while critics argue it disrupts pastoral livelihoods and facilitates closer state monitoring of a historically dispersed population^{ix}.

Inner Mongolia offers a critical comparative test of Beijing's counter-terrorism justification, since the region has no history of separatist violence comparable to Xinjiang's, yet underwent a closely analogous linguistic assimilation trajectory. In August 2020, education authorities announced, with minimal notice, that Mandarin would replace Mongolian as the medium of instruction for three core subjects, alongside the

replacement of regionally produced Mongolian-script textbooks with nationally unified Mandarin editions; leaked directives indicated the order originated centrally in Beijing, and officials reportedly required teachers to sign non-disclosure commitments before public announcement, anticipating resistance. The announcement triggered the most significant ethnic minority protests in China since the 2008 Tibetan uprising, a region-wide school boycott from August 31, 2020, involving thousands of parents, students, and teachers, accompanied by sympathy protests outside China's embassy in Ulaanbaatar and documented detentions of hundreds for "rumour-mongering". By October 2023, Mongolian-medium instruction had been phased out of the core curriculum entirely and reduced even in dedicated language classes from seven weekly periods to three, with Mongolian eliminated from kindergarten instruction altogether^x. The case's significance is twofold: it demonstrates that assimilation policy is not solely a function of documented security threats, since the protest movement was peaceful and explicitly non-separatist; and the uniformity of central origin, timeline, and enforcement posture across Xinjiang, Tibet, and Inner Mongolia, despite starkly different local histories of unrest, supports reading these policies as flowing from a single, centrally coordinated ideological programme rather than regionally tailored security responses.

International Response and Beijing's Counternarrative

The most consequential international documentation came in August 2022, when the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), following a multi-year review and a widely scrutinised May 2022 visit to the region by then, High Commissioner Michelle Bachelet, released its assessment of the situation in Xinjiang. Based on a review of China's own laws, policies, and official data alongside witness testimony and satellite imagery, and following requested dialogue with Chinese authorities, the assessment concluded that patterns of arbitrary and discriminatory detention, alongside broader restrictions on religious, cultural, and reproductive rights, "may constitute international crimes, in particular crimes against humanity". The report was released in the final minutes of Bachelet's term, timing that itself became controversial amid allegations that publication had been repeatedly delayed under Chinese diplomatic pressure. Independent UN special procedures mandate holders subsequently endorsed the

findings and called for a special Human Rights Council session that has not materialised; an October 2022 procedural motion to hold a Council debate on Xinjiang narrowly failed, nineteen votes to seventeen with eleven abstentions, reflecting the Council's divided composition and the effectiveness of Chinese diplomatic engagement, particularly across Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia.

The United States has been the most consistent state actor translating documentation into policy. In January 2021, outgoing Secretary of State Mike Pompeo formally designated Beijing's Xinjiang policies as "genocide and crimes against humanity," a determination Secretary Antony Blinken affirmed during confirmation testimony, and that has remained U.S. policy since. This determination remains legally contested: the 1948 Genocide Convention requires demonstrated specific intent to destroy a group "in whole or in part", a threshold some international law specialists argue the documented evidence centred on cultural, religious, and reproductive restrictions alongside mass detention, more readily satisfies under the Convention's "crimes against humanity" framing than under its narrower genocide-intent standard, even while agreeing the underlying conduct constitutes a grave systematic violation. This terminological divide explains why the United States, Canada's House of Commons, and the UK Parliament have adopted genocide language via legislative motions, while the UN assessment itself and most EU governments have confined themselves to "serious human rights violations" or "crimes against humanity". Washington's Uyghur Forced Labour Prevention Act (2021) and Global Magnitsky sanctions on officials including Chen Quanguo, the first sanctions imposed on a sitting Politburo member, followed, alongside export restrictions on surveillance firms Hikvision and SenseTime.^{xi} On Tibet, the State Department has documented Sinicisation policies annually and announced visa restrictions in August 2023 on officials linked to the boarding school system, following the Tibetan Policy and Support Act (2020)^{xii} and the Resolve Tibet Act (2024), which formally rejected China's characterisation of Tibet's historical status. The European Parliament passed a December 2023 resolution condemning the Tibetan boarding schools as "abduction and forced assimilation", explicitly linking Tibet and Xinjiang as parallel instances of "systemic human rights violations" and calling for targeted sanctions^{xiii}.

A notable feature of the international response has been the comparative institutional silence of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation and most Muslim-majority governments on Xinjiang. In contrast to vocal civil society criticism within many of these same countries, several, including Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt, have signed statements explicitly endorsing Beijing's characterisation of its policies, reflecting how economic dependency through Belt and Road financing and trade has constrained governments with genuine religious affinity to Xinjiang's population from translating that affinity into policy criticism.

Beijing's own justification operates on distinct external and internal registers. Externally, officials frame Xinjiang policy as a legitimate counter-terrorism response analogous to Western counter-extremism programmes after 2001; describe VETCs as vocational institutions since closed or converted, pointing to regional GDP growth of roughly seven percent and disposable-income increases of eight to 10.8 percent as evidence of stability and development; characterise boarding schools as a standard rural-development tool common to dispersed populations globally; and frame international criticism as geopolitical containment rather than genuine rights concern, invoking the UN Charter's non-interference principle. Domestically, state media emphasise the security threat pre-2017 Xinjiang genuinely posed, generating broad Han public acceptance of the policy framework, a narrative sustained largely because of the state's near-total control over domestic information channels regarding the region. This counternarrative should not be dismissed as propaganda without analytical value: it reflects a coherent governing philosophy rooted in genuine historical anxiety about territorial fragmentation, discussed above. Where it becomes most contestable is in the extension of preventive security reasoning from a narrow counter-terrorism target population to an entire ethno-religious group's cultural, linguistic, and reproductive practices, the conflation of security risk with cultural distinctiveness itself that runs through every case examined in this chapter.

Conclusion: Authoritarian State-Building at the Periphery

Several broader conclusions about the methods and limits of authoritarian governance at the periphery emerge from this comparative examination. Policy innovation at the

periphery precedes and informs governance at the centre. The transfer of Chen Quanguo's techniques from Tibet to Xinjiang demonstrates that China's minority regions function as testing grounds for coercive-administrative models that may subsequently generalise into Han-majority areas. The fusion of security and cultural policy is a defining feature of the post-2014 approach. It distinguishes from earlier periods in which security enforcement and cultural administration were substantially separated, further explaining both the intensity of international response and the difficulty Beijing faces in credibly distinguishing counterterrorism. It's justification from what critics characterise as cultural and demographic engineering, particularly given that Inner Mongolia exhibits a closely analogous trajectory absent any comparable security predicate. The near-identical structure, timing, and enforcement posture of policy across three regions with starkly different security histories supports reading these policies as centrally directed ideology rather than regionally responsive governance.

The limits of authoritarian state-building are less visible in domestic resistance, substantially suppressed in Xinjiang and rapidly contained in Inner Mongolia, than in the diplomatic and reputational costs generated externally, costs that have nonetheless proven insufficient, on their own, to alter the underlying policy trajectory in any of the three regions. And these cases illustrate the CCP's preference for engineered convergence over managed pluralism as the terminal objective of ethnic governance. A shift whose long-term implications will be tested most directly by the unresolved question of His Holiness the Dalai Lama's succession. This will become a case of religious authority that, by its transnational and spiritually grounded nature, sits partly beyond the reach of even the most technologically sophisticated domestic surveillance and administrative apparatus.

For India and other regional actors observing China's frontier governance, Xinjiang, Tibet, and Inner Mongolia together offer an instructive, if cautionary, comparative case. They demonstrate both the coercive capacity of a well-resourced, technologically sophisticated authoritarian state to bring to bear on peripheral integration and the durable reputational costs. Such methods generate even for a state otherwise adept at managing its

international image costs that documentation and condemnation alone have thus far failed to convert into meaningful policy change.

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