

Hazardous journey of Islamic terrorism Muslim uprising in China's Xinjiang province

The Muslim of Xinjiang want an independent Muslim state. But it is difficult for Beijing rulers to concede their demand. It should have been in the fitness of things of that Washington stops aiding Pakistan and enhancing its military capacities.

By G L Jalali

Initially sponsored and financed by Saudi Arabia, Islamic terrorism has had hazardous journey from the sandy terrain of the Arabian countries to the rugged mountainous terrain of China. It had its echo in India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Indonesia, Malaysia, Bangladesh and some European countries. It has now travelled over the Hindukush and found a strong foothold in the central Asian countries which once formed a part of Soviet Union.

Our neighbouring country the Islamic Republic of Pakistan has become its launching pad. These days Pakistan is the main feeder of this new kind of religious terror that is posing as severe threat to the world peace. Our country India has been held in this maelstrom for the last three decades. Lakhs of Indians have become the victims of this violence which does not show any sign of letup, not withstanding the fact our political masters take this unprecedented communal violence very lightly for the sole benefit of their vote bank politics.

Xinjiang was once known as East Turkistan. Today it is a part of China. This Muslim dominated province of China is very close to the Ladakh district of Jammu and Kashmir state. During medieval times East Turkistan (Xinjiang) had close commercial ties with Ladakh and traders from either side would exchange commodities. The ancient trade route linking India to the fabled Silk Route (now called SHAH-RAI-ABRES HAM in Pakistan) ran from Leh, the capital of Ladakh, to Kashgar and Khotan through historic Karakorum Pass. "This was the route on which mule trains brought valuable Pashm (Pashmina in Urdu) into India to be woven into the fine shawls in Kashmir valley. These Kashmiri Shawls acquired world fame as the finest specimens of Kashmiri handicraft. The rulers of Ladakh "extracted rich levies from these traders" and ensured that they were not harmed in any way while travelling on the desolate Silk Route. It was during the time of Ladakh's renowned king Sengge Namghyal that the Pashmina trade received a great setback. Ladakhi kings "intention was to economically weaken Kashmir after picking up a dispute with his Kashmiri overlord". He imposed a blockade of all trades, particularly Pashmina trade, emanating from the valley". In the valley the Shawl trade was little crippled. "The traders then discovered an alternative route that linked Punjab with Tibet and Xinjiang through Shipki La (now in Himachal Pradesh). Thus, the Shawl trade was again put on track.

India was inordinately connected with this part of China (Xinjiang) which is on boil these days. Immediately after annexing Xinjiang which was an independent country predominantly populated by Muslims China snapped all these commercial ties with India. It came close in the wake of annexing Tibet which had troubled relationship with Beijing. China had nominal suzerainty over Tibet which enjoyed internal autonomy under Dalai Lama. Chinese dominance-one could say-"waxed and waned with the ebbs and tides of imperial power in Beijing". In 1912 Sun Yat Sen, the founder of the nationalist Kuomintang party, assumed political power in China. He proclaimed China a republic. By now both Tibet and Xinjiang assumed complete independence. Local leadership succeeded in regaining full authority and snapped all ties with the central authority. After Sun Yat Sen, his successor Chiang Kai Shek tried his utmost to assert the authority of KMT

regime over these two estranged parts of China, but largely failed to do so. While Tibet remained largely a theocratic state under Dalai Lama, the situation in Xinjiang remained different. It came under the sway of warlords (like Afghanistan) till 1941. A renegade KMT general-turned-warlord named Sheng Tsi established "a Soviet republic under the close guidance of comintern in Moscow". It virtually turned it into a Soviet colony. These developments had consequences over India which is very close to Xinjiang from J&K side. The army had to keep close watch on the northern border, checking the Russian expansionist designs.

In 1949 Stalin handed over Xinjiang to newly established People's Republic of China governed by Mao Zedong by way of a friendly gesture from the communist country to its brethren communist country. In 1949 before Xinjiang became formally a part of China Uighurs formed the bulk of the population. They had close links with Turkey. All of them professed Islam and practised their religion very rigidly as we see in some of the Muslim countries these days. Hans Chinese formed only six per cent of the population. They had migrated to Xinjiang from different parts China. The Chinese rulers had encouraged them to migrate to Xinjiang mainly for political and economic reasons. "Thanks to a continuous migration sanctioned and blessed by the authorities in Beijing that proportion has now gone upto almost forty eight per cent. They are concentrated in Urumqi, Xinjiang's capital, which is over eighty per cent Han," remarks Mohan Guruswamy in the Tribune, July 22,09.

Still the Uighurs are still in majority in the region below the Kashgar and the Khotan line. This region is very close to our borders. In recent years the government of India has been very active in laying out a network of motorable roads for defence purposes. Though the motorable road Leh, the capital of Ladakh, is linked via Nubra with the far-flung Daulat Beg Oldi, our last military post on the Ladakh border. Even a small airport has been built for small planes to land. This step has been taken in view of our defence needs after China occupied big chunks of the Indian territory in 1962 India China war. Chinese authorities in Urumqi are busy in modernising Xinjiang by developing its economy. This part of China is rich in mineral wealth. The gas and oil finds in this region "have given a significant impetus to the economic development of this area which was once regarded as economically the most backward area of the central Asia. The Uighurs are not economically as prosperous as the Hans Chinese are. While Hans speak in the mandarin language the Uighurs mostly speak Urdu and Turkish languages. So there is clear divide between the two communities on the basis of their language and religion. They belong to two different ethnic groups.

Despite China's efforts to bridge the gap between these two ethnic groups, Muslims in Xinjiang feel themselves alienated. That is the main reason why they are coming under the influence of Muslim terrorist groups. Xinjiang has been on the boil for the last three years, though any news from this Muslim majority province is deliberately suppressed by the Beijing authorities. Last month there occurred unprecedented violence in Xinjiang. The violence left more than 200 persons dead. The Chinese President Hu Jintao had to cut short his trip to Italy where he had to participate in G-8 summit.

Thousands of Chinese soldiers were deputed to contain the violence. It was by and large the Muslim revolt against the federal government of China. In all its manifestation this ethnic violence in China's Muslim majority province was less short of Islamic terrorism. So Islamic terrorism has travelled a long way from Pakistan to China. Beijing has now blamed the Muslim separatists of Xinjiang for this bloody outburst which has ushered in a new chapter in the history of Islamic terrorism. According to media reports Pak-based terrorist outfits like Hafiz Mohammad Sayed's Lashkar e-Toiba and the Jamat-ul-Dawa have trained more than one million Muslim Uighurs in terrorist training camps located in Pakistan and Pak-occupied Kashmir (PoK). After the construction of the Karakoram highway that connects Xinjiang with China. Islamists from Pakistan could easily infiltrate into Xinjiang. The ISI connection with these outfits is beyond any shadow of doubt. They motivate the Uighurs to launch Jihad against the Chinese occupation of Xinjiang. There is growing apprehension that these Uighurs Jihadis (militants) pose a severe threat to Beijing. "The Chinese are now seeking to link the Uighur rebels with Al-Qaeda. If what the Chinese claims about Al-Qaeda is true, then just it is the case of the birds coming home to roost," says Mohan Guruswamy (The Tribune, July 22, 2009).

Muslim fundamentalism is spreading fast even in China. In some parts of China, where Muslims are found in majority there has been the upsurge of mosque-construction. This upsurge, as we see in India and elsewhere, has given way to radical Islam called Wahhabism. Xinjiang is no exception. After the collapse of Soviet Union in Central Asian countries which were constituent part of Soviet Russia, the radicalisation of Islam has taken a new turn.

These days we are witnessing the revival of religion in these Muslim-countries with Pakistan taking the lead. Xinjiang cannot remain immuned when such transformation is taking place in its neighbouring countries. Beijing is trying its utmost to suppress these radical elements as we saw how the Uighurs Muslim revolt was crushed with iron hand by the Chinese troops. So long as Beijing continues to support Pakistan in her evil designs against India there is remote possibility that such radical elements can be curbed, for Pakistan has been the epicenter of Islamic terrorism for the last two decades. The revolt by the Uighur Muslims is basically "ethnic problem." Resentment of Beijing's rule among Uighurs has risen steadily in recent years, fuelled in rapid economic development which seems to benefit the Han more than the Uighurs. There are tensions elsewhere in China too. In the many Muslim autonomous regions of Ningxia in the

north-west, there is conflict between local ethnic groups and the Han Chinese immigrants who have been encouraged by the government to migrate there" (The Daily Telegraph) quoted in the Sunday Pioneer).

It is possible that Beijing may change its policy towards Xinjiang Muslims and treat them at par with Han Chinese immigrants. But now this ethnic problem has snowballed into a religious problem. In the final analysis it has emerged into what may be termed as "Islamic terrorism".

The Muslims of Xinjiang want an independent Muslim state. But it is difficult for Beijing rulers to concede to their demand. It should have been in the fitness of things as well in the interests of the Chinese rulers if they stop aiding Pakistan militarily and economically for Islamabad is the backbone of Islamic terrorism.