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Tibet and Xinjiang: Their fourfold value to China

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Abstract
Tibet and Xinjiang are two of the five administrative divisions known as 'autonomous regions' within the People's Republic of China (PRC, China) that are allocated for national minorities. Unlike the other three - Inner Mongolia, Guangxi and Ningxia - Tibet and Xinjiang are well known to the wider world which associates them with national independence movements. Tibet in particular has received major media attention with the prominence of its charismatic leader and Nobel Peace Prize recipient, the 14th Dalai Lama. The run-up to the 2008 Beijing Olympics was also a driver for continued awareness of the pro-independence issue and criticism of China's human rights record in these regions.

However, this article is less concerned with providing yet another critique of Beijing's policy towards Tibet and Xinjiang and more interested in exploring the value of these two regions to China. Their importance can be analysed under four areas: 1) territorial unity; 2) history and development; 3) resource security; and 4) geopolitics. To begin with, a brief overview of the two regions is needed.

Keywords
Tibet, Xinjiang, fourfold value, China

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Tibet and Xinjiang: Their Fourfold Value to China[1]

By Franziska Elmer

Tibet and Xinjiang are two of the five administrative divisions known as 'autonomous regions' within the People's Republic of China (PRC, China) that are allocated for national minorities. Unlike the other three - Inner Mongolia, Guangxi and Ningxia - Tibet and Xinjiang are well known to the wider world which associates them with national independence movements. Tibet in particular has received major media attention with the prominence of its charismatic leader and Nobel Peace Prize recipient, the 14th Dalai Lama. The run-up to the 2008 Beijing Olympics was also a driver for continued awareness of the pro-independence issue and criticism of China's human rights record in these regions.

However, this article is less concerned with providing yet another critique of Beijing's policy towards Tibet and Xinjiang and more interested in exploring the value of these two regions to China. Their importance can be analysed under four areas: 1) territorial unity; 2) history and development; 3) resource security; and 4) geopolitics. To begin with, a brief overview of the two regions is needed.

Overview of Tibet and Xinjiang

1. Tibet

The Tibet Autonomous Region (Tibet) is located in the southwest of China and is the country's second-largest region by area, spanning over 1.2 square kilometres. With a population size of just around 3 million, Tibet is the least populated region within China. Buddhism was introduced to Tibet in the seventh century. One of the earliest contacts between China and Tibet was during the

[1] The views in *The Culture Mandala* are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views, position or policies of the Centre for East-West Cultural and Economic Studies (Bond University). Bearing in mind the controversial debates now occurring in International Relations and East-West studies, the editors endeavour to publish a range of diverse, critical and dissenting views.

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Tang Dynasty (618-907), when King Songtsen Gampo unified Tibet and married a Chinese princess. China and Tibet both came under Mongol rule in what became known as China's Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368); however, it was not until the Qing Dynasty under the Manchus (1644-1911) that China made a substantial effort to expand its administrative control over Tibetan territory. It brought several Tibetan border regions, which were inhabited by Tibetans, under its jurisdiction and thus created a distinction between 'Political Tibet' and 'Ethnographic Tibet' (Jian 2006: 55).

The Qing policy toward the Tibetan region tried to strengthen the relationship between China proper and the Tibet. This reinforced the idea that Tibet was part of China. During the 18th century Tibet was under attack from Nepalese Gurkhas and in need for assistance from Chinese troops. Due to internal unrest in Tibet at that time, a Chinese garrison was sent to Tibet along with the installation of civilian officials representing the Qing court. But with the decline of the Qing Dynasty in the 19th century, Tibet enjoyed increasing autonomy. This process reduced Chinese suzerainty to mere symbolic value. Tibet remained a protectorate until the 1911 Chinese revolution resulted in the collapse of the Qing Dynasty.

The beginning of the 20th century saw an increasing influence of imperial Russia and Britain in Tibet. Qing China tried strengthening its suzerain claim over the area by increasing its military presence. However, during the 1911 revolution there were armed conflicts between Tibetans and Chinese. The Chinese were eventually driven out of Tibet with the aid of Nepal (Dillion 2010; Heberer 1989; Jian 2006). The 13th Dalai Lama then declared Tibet independent form Chinese influence. The newly established Republic of China (ROC, 1912-1949) was too weak and too focused on other issues to pay attention to Tibet. Consequently, Tibet enjoyed the status of an independent polity until 1949 when the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) emerged victorious from the Chinese Civil War.

In 1950, the Chinese People Liberation Army (PLA), the military arm of the CCP, marched into Tibet and declared that Tibet was and will be part of China. In 1951, a treaty between China and Tibet was signed guaranteeing the rights of the Dalai Lama and Tibetan autonomy (Dillion 2010; Heberer 1989).

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However, there was increasing resistance to Chinese authority during the 1950s and in 1959 major riots broke out. This was the year the current 14th Dalai Lama fled Tibet to India after the anti-Chinese protests failed and set up a government in exile. Both the 'liberation' of Tibet in 1951 and the 'serf emancipation' in 1959 are celebrated in China to this day (Asia 2010: 40). Tibet was declared an autonomous region of the PRC in 1965. Many Tibetan monasteries were destroyed during the infamous Cultural Revolution (1966-76). However, reforms in the post-Mao era under Deng Xiaoping meant China eased pressure on Tibet during the 1980s and introduced reforms to bring about development and investment. This did not mean an end to unrest. In 1987, a renewed series of demonstrations by Tibetan monks sparked a revival for Tibetan independence. The protests continued until a police crackdown in 1989. This was also the year of the death of the 10th Panchen Lama[2]; the search for his reincarnation resulted in yet another crisis. Even though China's sovereignty over Tibet is widely accepted as a fait accompli, rioting flared up again in 2008, with violence occurring between Tibetans and ethnic Han Chinese. Beijing reacted swiftly by imposing curfews and limiting access to Tibet.

As this overview shows, Tibet and China are interlocked in their history and affect one another unto the present. China has exercised varying levels of influence over the region. While Tibet is accepted today by most states as part of China, ruling it is still not easy.

2. **Xinjiang**

The Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (Xinjiang) lies in China's northwest and stretches over 1.6 million square kilometers. The region accounts for one sixth of the Chinese territory and borders eight countries. As a main conduit and hub for economic and cultural exchange between East and West, Xinjiang became an important section of the Silk Road. The coexistence of a number of religions is emphasized by the Chinese government along with the region having been part of the larger multi-ethnic Chinese nation, since the Western Han Dynasty of 206 BC – 24 AD (Chinese Government White Paper 2003). Today,

[2] In the Tibetan spiritual hierarchy the Panchen Lama is second to the Dalai Lama and some Buddhists even place him above the Dalai Lama. In the 20th century the Panchen Lamas have tended to be closer to the Chinese government (Dillion 2010: 372).

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Xinjiang is home to around 20 million people coming from thirteen different ethnic groups with the largest being the Uyghur. This group is for the majority Muslim and has ethnic ties in Central Asia.

Like Tibet, Xinjiang felt the expansion of European imperial powers into Central Asia. The Russian Empire's influence increased along China's northern frontiers during the 19th century. The Qing Dynasty brought the region under its control and established Xinjiang as an official Chinese province in 1884 (BBC 2010; Dillion 2010; Mackerras 2006). The military administration stationed in Xinjiang was faced with constant resistance, mainly from allied Islamic forces from surrounding areas, but managed to contain these. However, in the second half of the 19th century, when Qing China faced the Opium Wars and rebellions in the East, it could not maintain a strong military presence in Xinjiang. Like Tibet, the fall of the Qing Dynasty in 1911 impacted on Chinese control over Xinjiang.

The collapse of the Qing Dynasty provided an opportunity for political forces within Xinjiang to make a move for independence, although the Provisional Constitution of 1912 stated that Xinjiang should be included within the Republic of China. However, the Republic was not able to control all the provinces within 'China Proper', let alone the frontier regions, such as Tibet and Xinjiang, with a majority of non-Han population (Dillion 2010: 164). As these border regions had enjoyed some degree of independence before being brought into the Chinese empire during the Qing Dynasty, the collapse of the dynasty was seen as a pathway to independence.

In 1933 the Islamic Republic of East Turkestan was declared by Turkic rebels (Bhattacharji 2009). However, the year after the declaration of the Republic, China absorbed Xinjiang. In 1944, parts of Xinjiang again declared independence from the Republic of China with the support of the Soviet Union until 1949, when the CCP once again absorbed the region and declared it a Chinese province. Shortly after the absorption of the region a program to encourage Han immigration into the area was announced. The Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region was then established in 1955 (Limin 2011). The increasing number of Han Chinese settling in Xinjiang led to widespread rioting in the region during the 1990s (Beckley 1997: 4). To some Uyghurs, PRC control of their region is a form of imperialism; hence calls for independence. Beijing has

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countered these movements by further promoting the migration of Han Chinese to the region and by strengthening its economic ties with the area. Moreover, the PRC tried to decrease the influence from outside states that are ethnically linked with the Uyghurs believing that their support might further ignite separatism (Bhattacharji 2009). From the 1990s this was partly done via improved bilateral interstate relations, and by the support of China for the emergence of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) as a regional grouping that supports recognized borders and existing patterns of sovereignty. Similar to Tibet, Xinjiang has shared a tumultuous history with China with different levels of Chinese influence over the region.

The value of Tibet and Xinjiang to China

1. Territorial unity

There is a strong perception within China that the country is strong when it is unified, but weak when it is fragmented. The territory of the PRC today is largely the result of conquests made during the Manchu-derived Qing Dynasty (1644-1911). During the Qing, the territory more than doubled by including non-Han areas, for instance Tibet, Xinjiang and Manchuria (Tubilewicz 2006: 10). In the mid-19th century, as noted above, the Qing Dynasty was facing external challenges to its territorial unity. Beginning with the First Opium War (1839 - 1842) with Britain, which led to the cession of Hong Kong and the opening of five ports to trade, China faced several defeats against foreign powers. These conflicts resulted in the Qing having to cede parts of their empire to other powers and limit their sovereign influence in major trade ports by allowing foreigners rights that exempted them from Chinese laws. The process of disintegration of Chinese territory continued after the fall of the Qing Dynasty in 1911 and the declaration of the Republic of China in 1912. Both Mongolia and Tibet declared their independence, supported by Russia and Britain, respectively. Tibetan sovereignty was not recognized and the republican regime kept a minimal control over the province, while Mongolia's independence was not recognized until 1945 (Tubilewicz 2006: 11).

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In Xinjiang, Chinese territorial control was weak too. It was not until the 1940s that the Chinese regained most the territories lost. As noted, a unified China is seen as a strong China. The unification of China was first achieved with the establishment of the first dynasty, the Qin, in 221 BC after the Warring States period. It was only due to the weakness of the last dynasty, the Qing, and the increasing pressure of outside powers that China lost some of its influence on Tibet and Xinjiang.

Today, territorial unity is a major concern of the PRC government and it is accompanied by the view that all the peoples living in the territory of today's China are part of the Chinese people. However, the possibility of territorial fragmentation remains within minority nationality areas. Mackerras (2006: 185) argues that the "potentially separatist ethnic movements" in Tibet and Xinjiang still challenge China's territorial unity. By trying to secede from China, Tibet and Xinjiang pose a possible challenge to the idea of Chinese national unity through ethnic minority regionalism (ibid.). In Tibet demonstrations were most virulent earlier on, from 1959 to 1989, becoming more peaceful since the early 1990s; whereas in Xinjiang, the intensity of protests began to increase during the 1990s. However, "given China's emphasis on national unity, it is not surprising that central Chinese governments have always been hostile to any secessionist behaviour" (Mackerras 2006: 185). So, within the PRC, the enduring idea that periods of unity have been more productive and led to greater development, than periods of division, prevails. Hence the emphasis on territorial unity.

2. History and Development

The role of history as well as the economic development of Tibet and Xinjiang ties into the notion of territorial unity. Tibet and Xinjiang had enjoyed varying degrees of independence before being included into the Chinese empire during the Qing Dynasty. As noted, the collapse of dynastic China in 1911 provided an opportunity for the pursuit of independence by these groups. However, this aspect of Chinese history is as highly contested as are the status of Tibet and Xinjiang. Whereas, Tibet and Xinjiang believe that the independence they achieved after the revolution of 1911 is a legitimate aim, China does not acknowledge that these regions were at any time not under the influence and

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control of the Chinese empire (Bhattacharji 2009; Dillion 2010). Because history is such an important factor in Chinese culture, no leadership can afford to lose territories that are seen as part of China - especially with the emphasis on territorial unity:

> I would not for a moment discount the force of history as the Chinese see it. The past century of Chinese history – the century leading up to 1950 … was a disaster for China, and many of the areas that it had traditionally thought it had influence in or a degree of control over were taken from it by the European powers, by Japan, by Russia, by others. And there was a sense that Tibet might fall into the hands of either the British or the Russians, to the great strategic detriment of China. (Van Slyke 2009)

The century leading up to the territorial losses was seen as a century of humiliation. Hence, the Chinese leadership will do anything to prevent such a process from occurring again. The PRC today is still in the process of nation-building and history has been deployed to assist the process. The Chinese idea of unity refers to the unity of the territory, unity of the nation, and unity of the ideology (Kallio 2011: 16). Unity within itself can be seen as an ideology of the PRC today, as it is the most important prerequisite for the legitimacy of the ruler in Chinese tradition.

Historically, a ruler was only believed to be legitimate if he showed the ability to rule the whole of China (ibid.). Mao and the CCP emphasised the importance of the maintenance of territorial unity in order to keep peace and achieve prosperity. Thus, the emphasis on unity is an important part of China's history and history in turn is a major factor for its policies. Tibet and Xinjiang are seen as part of the PRC based on their history, as perceived by China. Based on this emphasis on history and territorial unity, China has invested vastly in development in both Tibet and Xinjiang.

One problem China faces with its ethnic minorities is unequal regional development. Neither Tibet nor Xinjiang has a GDP per capita higher than the PRC average. In general, minority regions are less developed and are facing much higher absolute poverty than other areas (Tubilewicz 2006). However, China says that its rule brought development to the region, especially in health and the

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economy. The regions would be much worse off without China's investments in those areas (BBC News 2010). The Chinese Government's White Paper on Xinjiang in 2003 stated that industry in Xinjiang was underdeveloped without railways or major factories prior to the establishment of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in 1955; after that time, Xinjiang's socio-economic condition advanced "by leaps and bounds" (Chinese Government White Paper 2003). Whereas its economy was mainly based on agriculture, it is now based on the export of petrochemicals and natural resources. Van Slyke (2009) agrees with this notion in saying that although China is often criticized for its policies in Tibet and Xinjiang, "far more is invested there" than Beijing derives from "the mineral deposits or other tangible assets" that these regions possess.

The PRC applies the strategy of development for national unity. In both Tibet and Xinjiang, China feels that their economic development and improved infrastructure along with demographic shifts will ease ethnic tensions (Asia 2010: 40). In Tibet, for instance, the new railway link between the western Chinese province of Qinghai and the Tibetan capital, Lhasa, is said to boost the Tibetan economy (BBC News 2010). The Qing-Zang railway was established to bring Tibet closer to China and is said to be "an indispensable infrastructural project" for the future economic development of Tibet (Dillion 2010). Tourism is an important part of the Tibetan economy and more tourists equate with better economic conditions. So tourism represents China's business interest in Tibet. The number of visitors to Tibet has expanded rapidly since the introduction of the Qing-Zang railway in 2006 (Kezia 2011). China not only sees its longstanding history with Tibet and Xinjiang as legitimizing the claim for a national unity, but also its investments in socio-economic development over the years.

3. Resource Security

Another important value of Tibet and Xinjiang for China are the regions' rich resources. China has an increasing need for energy, especially for oil and natural gas, generated by its rapid economic growth. The oil fields at Karamay in Xinjiang are among the largest in China and the region has extensive deposits of coal, silver, copper, lead, nitrates, gold, and zinc (Rastogi 2008). Moreover, Xinjiang is China's largest natural-gas producing area and serves as an important

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trade and pipeline route into the Central Asian region and beyond. The PRC has invested in new mines as well as associated industry, such as refineries in Xinjiang.

Whilst providing vital resources for China, Xinjiang also plays an important role as the region through which outside resources are brought to China. Since 1993, China has become a net importer of oil with its major foreign source being the Persian Gulf States. These states – like the Uyghurs of Xinjiang - are Muslim. Chinese dependence on oil imports from foreign sources, especially the Muslim Arab world, is bound to increase in the future (Starr 2004: 115). So, the approximately 20 million Muslims within the PRC, the majority of them in the Xinjiang region, are of cultural value in its energy diplomacy. Beijing is therefore aware of the costs of mishandling its national Muslim problems. Not only are there serious implications for internal unity but also possible external consequences to its oil supplies (Starr 2004: 115). Moreover, China borders an Islamic neighborhood: the Central Asian states, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. Although, their governments oppose any Uyghur separatist movements, vocal parts of the population might become critical of the PRC's treatment of their coreligionists in Xinjiang (Starr 2004: 116). Thus, Xinjiang is not only important because of its resources, but also influential in foreign policy where religious culture and resources overlap.

Tibet's economy, by comparison to Xinjiang, is still largely dependent on agriculture. However, the region is rich in forest and mineral resources. Tibet's forest reserves are among the oldest in Central Asia and with a coverage of 9.8 percent of the area Tibet is among the biggest forested regions in China (Kezia 2011). Chinese geologists have also discovered numerous new sites of copper, iron, lead, and zinc ore deposits in Tibet since 1999 (Kezia 2011), as well as existing deposits of uranium. But poor transportation has so far limited the exploitation of these resources. The introduction of the Qing-Zang railway is expected to facilitate access to these resources and hasten their extraction. Moreover, Tibet is extremely important to Beijing because of its large fresh water resources.

Fresh water is essential for the functioning of the Chinese society, for human survival, for agriculture and for industry. Control of the Tibetan plateau,

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which is a major source of rivers within Asia, provides China with leverage over the other countries in the region. The country in which a river originates can potentially control the flow of water, if needed (Chellaney 2007; Klare 2002). It also provides China with fresh water of which it is increasingly in need, since around a quarter of the Chinese surface water is too polluted to be fit for consumption (Stanway 2010). This is why China is looking to invest in inter-basin and inter-river transfers of water within the Tibetan plateau (Chellaney 2007). Additionally, the water of the Tibetan plateau can be used for hydro energy. Today, China is already producing 200 million kilowatts of natural hydro energy per year in Tibet (Kezia 2011). Thus both Tibet and Xinjiang are vital in their production of resources for China.

4. Geopolitics

Tibet and Xinjiang are also of strategic significance to China. The zones are China's first and second largest regions by area and serve as buffers between China, India, and Central Asia. Tibet is the Chinese anchor in the Himalayas. If that were to fall, along with Xinjiang, then the vast buffer zones between China and the rest of Eurasia would be lost (Friedmann 2008). The loss of Tibet could influence independence movements in Xinjiang and might eventually result in Beijing losing control over both these regions. However, China is in need of both territories to maintain strategic and military advantages, such as sovereignty over Tibet for access to the Himalayan mountain range (Rastogi 2008).

Moreover, Western China provides extended access to the Arabian Sea through Pakistan, and thence to the Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf. China wants control of this vast region to assure its access to Pakistan in order to hasten the transport of resources overland and avoid excessive dependence on vulnerable sea routes. Beijing has invested in high-speed rail and road links through Gilgit and Baltistan (Harrison 2010). Once these links are completed, China will be able to transport cargo from Eastern China to naval bases in Pakistan, in just 48 hours (Harrison 2010). Thus, Tibet and Xinjiang in Western China are not only important as buffer zones, but also for access to the Persian Gulf in the diversification of the global transportation of oil.

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Conclusion

Tibet and Xinjiang are of vital importance to China based on four major interests. Firstly, they are seen as an essential part of China's territorial unity, which is an important factor in Chinese politics. The regions are viewed as part of the PRC based on their historical ties with China, especially during the Qing Dynasty. China had lost its sovereignty over these two regions due to interference from outside powers and the collapse of the Qing Dynasty in 1911. Inclusion of Tibet and Xinjiang into China equates with the preeminent mission of restoring territorial unity. This unity was seen as essential in reclaiming the strength of China and was based on the assumption that China can only be strong if it is unified.

As history is of high importance to China's political culture, the claims over Tibet and Xinjiang are based on it. Now that they are part of the PRC, the leadership cannot afford to lose face by allowing the independence to these territories. Moreover, China has invested heavily in these regions, especially under Mao, and sees itself as a liberator of both Tibet and Xinjiang. However, the regions are not only important to China based on ideological reasons, but also for resources. Tibet and Xinjiang are well endowed with resources, such as oil, minerals and metals, forests, or fresh water - all essential to China. The future economic growth of China depends on additional energy resources, which is why Xinjiang's oil and gas reserves are important. Tibet, on the other hand, has vast fresh water reserves, which become increasingly important to China as the majority of its river systems and its fresh water are suffering from pollution due to industrialization.

Xinjiang is additionally important because of its Muslim community and hence serves as a foreign policy asset (or vulnerability, if China mishandles the Uyghur issue). Even if governments in Central Asia and the Middle East are sympathetic with Beijing's hardline approach to Muslim secessionists, popular sentiment might turn against Beijing and thus have some impact on diplomacy.

Finally, Tibet and Xinjiang are of geopolitical importance to China by serving as a vast buffer zone towards the rest of Eurasia, but also by making the Persian Gulf accessible through land routes. These advance the cause of China's resource importation and global trade. To conclude, Tibet and Xinjiang may be

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seen as vast buffer regions but their value - in terms of territorial unity, history and development, resource security, and geopolitics – makes them also a heartland.

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