

China's Ethnic Policies and Challenges

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Dramatic developments in Tibet and Xinjiang since 2008 have highlighted the challenges to China's ethnic policies. The pillar of China's ethnic policies is regional autonomy for ethnic minorities. Ethnic areas enjoy limited administrative autonomy and have witnessed faster economic growth than the country as a whole. However, China still adheres to a "unitary multiethnic state" and has responded firmly to recent riots in Tibet and violence in Xinjiang.

DEVELOPMENTS IN TIBET and Xinjiang since 2008 have again cast the spotlight on China's ethnic policies, highlighting their significance and challenges. In March 2008, riots broke out in Tibetan-inhabited areas in western China over the course of two weeks. The Chinese crackdown led to protests against the Beijing Olympic torch relay in London, Paris, San Francisco, Tokyo, Seoul and New Delhi. In July 2009 riots initiated by angry Uyghurs and subsequent retaliation by Han residents in Urumqi, the capital of Xinjiang, led to deaths of 197, most of whom were Han.

These events signified challenges to Beijing's ethnic policy. Many in the West usually blame Beijing for frequently violating the rights of Tibetans and Uyghurs. To better understand Beijing's ethnic policies, a proper and balanced perspective is needed. This

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article gives an overview and assessment of the pillar of Beijing's policies towards ethnic minorities, i.e., regional autonomy for ethnic minorities (RAEM). It also looks at the recent development of ethnic issues and ethnic policy in China.

Context and Evolution of China's Ethnic Policies

There are 55 officially recognised ethnic minorities in China, accounting for 8.4% of the population. Ten of them have a population of between two and 16 million, while the remaining 45 ethnic minorities a population of between 2,900 and 1.9 million. Ethnic minorities are concentrated in 12 western provinces, especially the five autonomous provinces. A number of ethnic groups are spread variously throughout the provinces. For example, the Hui (sinicised Muslims) live in 19 provinces.

The ethnic issue has broad ramification for China's national unity and security. Although relatively small in population, ethnic minorities inhabit 64% of the area of China, most of which is at the borders. In recent decades, separatist and ethnic riots have broken out in Xinjiang and Tibetan areas. To satisfy ethnic aspiration while ensuring national unity, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) practises regional autonomy (*qiyu zizhi*) in areas where 20 percent or more of the population comprises ethnic minorities. RAEM was inspired by the Soviet ethnic policy, imperial China's practice towards ethnic groups and the CCP's competition with the Nationalists in winning over ethnic minorities in the 1930s and 1940s. The policy was instituted in the 1950s to introduce a balance between integration and co-existence of ethnic minorities with the majority Han race. However, from the late 1950s to the late 1970s, RAEM was undermined by Mao's radicalism and forceful integration. RAEM was reinstated in the late 1970s. In the 1980s, the state laid more emphasis on co-existence of ethnic groups, but shifted increasingly to economic and cultural integration after the mid 1990s.

Main Ethnic Political Policies

China's ethnic policies are spelled out mainly in the *Regional Ethnic Autonomy Law*. First promulgated in 1984, it was amended in 2001. It allows the setting up of ethnic autonomous areas (Article 12) of regions (provinces), prefectures and counties if one or more minorities live there in concentrated communities. By the end of 2000 the PRC had 154 ethnic autonomous localities, including five provincial-level autonomous regions (*zizhiqu*) (Table 1), 30 autonomous prefectures (*zizhizhou*) and 119 autonomous counties or leagues (*zizhixian* or *zizhiqi*). In addition, there were 1,256 ethnic townships (*minzu xiang*). Forty-four of the 55 ethnic minorities have set up their own autonomous areas. Three quarters of ethnic minorities reside in autonomous areas which together account for 64% of the national territory.

According to Li Weihuan, the architect of RAEM, the core of regional ethnic autonomy is administrative autonomy. According to the Law, in the ethnic autonomous areas, the administrative chief (including the chairman of an autonomous region, the prefect of an autonomous prefecture or the head of an autonomous county), as well as the chairman or vice chairman of the standing committee of the legislature (people's congress) shall be a citizen of the ethnic group exercising regional autonomy (Article 17). As of 1998,

Name	Set-up	Capital	Area (1000 sq km)	Population (million)	Population of Ethnic Minorities	Percentage of Ethnic Minorities (%)
Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region	1 May 1947	Hohhot	1,183	23.9	5.2	21.6
Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region	1 Oct 1955	Urumqi	1,650	20.1	12.1	60.4
Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region	15 Mar 1958	Nanning	236	49.25	19.0	38.54
Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region	25 Oct 1958	Yinchuan	66.4	5.96	2.1	35.98
Tibet Autonomous Region	1 Sep 1965	Lhasa	1,228	2.76	2.6	93.48

Sources: Wang and Chen, Minzu qiuyu zizhuzhidu de fazhan, p. 227; China Statistical Yearbook 2006, Beijing: China Statistical Press, 2006, p. 45.

the top legislative and administrative leaders of 154 autonomous regions and areas in the reform era were ethnic minorities.

The state also allows ethnic minorities to have a higher representation in legislature and at various levels of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference than their shares in population. Compared to the 1954-59 period, an era of moderate ethnic policies, the share of ethnic minorities as national legislators initially increased from a low of 9.4% in 1975 to around 14.8% in 1988 and 1993. It was around a respectable 13.8% in 2003 and 2008 (Table 2). This was much higher than the 8.4% share of ethnic minorities in the population.

The Party devotes considerable resources to the training and grooming of cadres of ethnic minorities. According to official statistics, in 1998, there were 2.7 million cadres of ethnic minorities, accounting for 6.9% of cadres nationwide, 54 times that in the early years of the PRC. The share of ethnic minorities in the cadre corps was 73.9% in Tibet, 47% in Xinjiang, 34% in Guangxi, 23.4% in Inner Mongolia and 17.5% in Ningxia. In 2002, there were 4.1 million ethnic CCP members, equivalent to 6.2% of the total membership of 66.4 million, a noticeable increase from 2.8 million or 5.7% in 1990.

The Law leaves it to the ethnic autonomous regions to decide on the implementation of regulations and policies from higher authorities. The decision, however, is subject to the approval of the higher authorities who are given 60 days to respond (Article 20). In practice there are indications that the higher authority sometimes sits on the request without giving a timely reply. The Law also empowers autonomous areas with the right to enact self-governing regulations and separate regulations tailored to local and ethnic conditions. Again, these regulations need to be submitted to the legislature of the next higher level for approval (Article 19). Autonomous areas can also organise local public security forces for local need and with national approval (Article 24).

TABLE 2 NUMBER OF ETHNIC MINORITIES IN THE NATIONAL PEOPLE'S CONGRESS

NPC	Year	Total Deputies	Deputies of Ethnic Minorities	Percentage of the Total	Number of Minorities Represented
First	1954	1266	178	14.5	30
Third	1964	3040	372	12.2	53
Fourth	1975	2885	270	9.4	54
Fifth	1978	3497	381	10.9	54
Sixth	1983	2978	405	13.6	55
Eight	1993	2977	493	14.8	55
Tenth	2003	2985	415	13.9	55
Eleventh	2008	2987	411	13.8	55

Sources: Wang, *Xinshiqi minzu zhengce de lilun yu shijian*, p. 68; "Shijie quanguo renda daibiao mingdan gongbu" (*The Name List of the Deputies of the Tenth National People's Congress Is Publicised*), posted at http://news.xinhuanet.com/ziliao/2003-03/02/content_752650.htm; "Shiyijie quanguo renda 2987ming daibiao zige queren quanbu youxiao" (*Qualifications of 2987 Deputies of the Eleventh National People's Congress Have All Been Confirmed*), posted at <http://news.sina.com.cn/c/2008-02-28/214015040922.shtml>, accessed on April 14, 2008.

Social and Economic Privileges for Minorities

Other than limited regional autonomy, the RAEM also entails affirmative action for ethnic minorities, as well as fiscal benefits and economic and cultural support from the state for ethnic areas.

Ethnic minorities in China enjoy favourable social treatment comparable to affirmative actions enjoyed by minorities in the US. They are under lax restrictions in birth control and are subject to relaxed requirements in admission to schools, colleges, universities and employment in state or public institutions.

Ethnic minorities even enjoy the state's favourable treatment in judicial and civil disputes involving the Han. In addition, ethnic minorities have cultural privileges such as using ethnic minority's languages at schools and receiving support from the state in preserving ethnic culture and heritages.

Ethnic areas also receive relatively generous fiscal subsidies from the central government, and economic aid from developed coastal provinces. In the 1990s, autonomous areas suffered from limited fiscal support from the state. The state focussed on coastal development and drastically scaled down its subsidies and financial support for the ethnic autonomous regions. This led to growing fiscal deficits and declining national economic standing of these areas.

To address growing discontent of cadres and population from these regions (including unrest in Tibet and Xinjiang in the 1990s), Beijing introduced the western developmental programme in 2000. In 2005, Beijing launched a social-economic developmental programme in the ethnic areas coined "flourishing borders and prosperous people". Since the mid 1990s, economic growth in five ethnic provinces has accelerated.

TABLE 3 ECONOMIC INDICATORS OF ETHNIC AUTONOMOUS REGIONS COMPARED TO THOSE OF THE NATION

	Ethnic Minority Autonomous Regions				National			
	1996-2006	2001-06			1979-2006	1996-2006	2001-2006	
GDP Annual Growth (%)	10.7	12.2			9.7	9.2	9.8	
Ethnic Regions' Edge over the Nation in Growth (%)	1.5	2.4						
	1995	2000	2005	2006	1995	2000	2005	2006
GDP Per Capita (Yuan)	3,055	4,451	8,991	10,554	4,828	7,828	14,062	16,042
Gap Between Ethnic Regions and the Nation (Yuan)	-1,773	-3,377	-5,071	-5,488				
Gap/GDP Per Capita of Ethnic Regions	-58%	-76%	-56%	-52%				

Sources: The author's compilation and computation using data from China Statistical Yearbook 2007, 26-33; 46-49; 60; China Statistical Yearbook 2002, 22-29.

China as a “Unitary Multiethnic State”

There are limits to rights bestowed on China's ethnic minorities. First, according to the Law, the PRC is a “unitary multiethnic state”, whereby separation of any territorial units from the nation is strictly prohibited, ethnic unity is preserved, and separatist activities are severely punished.

Second, as the ruling party, the CCP wields supreme power over all levels of governments and localities in China. Ethnic autonomous regions are no exception. The post of administrative chief (governors, mayors, magistrates, etc) in the ethnic autonomous areas that is held by ethnic minorities is the No. 2 office. In most ethnic autonomous areas the Party Secretary, the No. 1 power holder, is usually a Han. This led some observers to view regional autonomy as a mere political facade to disguise Han's dominance.

Third, cadre corps of ethnic minorities have been trained to dutifully implement the Party's line and refrain from making ostensible demands for their ethnic groups, especially political ones. Fourth, the actual utilisation of the legal prerogatives of not implementing policies from above in ethnic areas is quite rare.

Achievements of China's Ethnic Policies

In terms of economic development, Beijing has developed ethnic areas at a faster rate than that of the nation as a whole in the last 12 years. By doing so, Beijing has narrowed the economic gaps between ethnic areas and the nation. This does help to partially take the steam out of ethnic discontent. Ethnic autonomous regions grew by

1.5% a year, much more rapid than that of the nation as a whole from 1996-2006 and by 2.4% a year from 2001-2006 (Table 3). Moreover, the central and local governments have provided comparable medical services to ethnic areas. From 1995 to 2006 there were 2.3 to 2.4 hospital beds per 1,000 residents in the ethnic regions, almost the same as the range of 2.3-2.5 for the nation (Table 4).

Similar changes have taken place in southern Xinjiang. In the past, rural Uyghurs drank untreated water from small ponds right outside their run-down houses. In recent years, many of them have access to sanitary water. As a result, some Uyghurs even cooperated with the local authority in reporting and arresting violent Uyghur extremists in recent years.

Moreover, many ethnic groups in China want to ride on the nation's rapid economic progress and prosperity. Mastering the Chinese language seems to be the most viable option. Many ethnic parents want their children to speak Mandarin to fare well in the job market, and this helps in the economic and cultural integration of China.

Internationally, two factors have aided Beijing. First, the September 11 attacks and the West's war on terror have undermined the legitimacy of radical and violent movements for independence in Tibet and Xinjiang around the world. Second, a rising China has given ethnic groups the incentive to identify themselves with the Chinese nation.

Finally, despite the real limits of regional ethnic autonomy, only two out of the 55 ethnic minorities, i.e., Tibetans and Uyghurs, have registered strong and persistent protests. Other ethnic groups have been relatively silent.

Internal and External Challenges to China's Ethnic Policies

China's ethnic policies face practical challenges in economic and social terms. Despite rapid growth, the gap in GDP per capita between ethnic regions and the nation as a whole is enlarging, even though the ratio of the gap to GDP per capita is declining. The gap in GDP per capita between ethnic regions and the nation steadily increased from 1,773 *yuan* in 1995 to 5,488 *yuan* in 2006 while the ratio of the gap to ethnic GDP per capita has been declining from the peak of 76% in 2000 down to 52% in 2006 (Table 3). Adult literacy is also comparatively lower in ethnic areas which also register serious fiscal deficit. The weak capacity for local revenue generation, reflected in lower local fiscal expenditure per capita than nationwide, has hindered the provision of public services in ethnic areas (Table 4).

The most serious challenge to China's ethnic policies comes from Tibetans and Uyghurs. In general, language, religion, geopolitics and the late integration with China all play a part in their political separatist tendency. Most of the 55 ethnic minorities are not proficient in their own ethnic language. Even the most populous ethnic groups, such as the Zhuang, Manchus, Hui and Mongolians, use Mandarin. Most of them have been integrated into China for centuries and are therefore highly sinicised.

Though more Tibetans and Uyghurs can speak Mandarin, they still retain the use of their own language, their ethnic cultural identity as well as their strong religious belief. Both provinces were integrated into China at a rather late point in history. They became

TABLE 4 FISCAL AND SOCIAL INDICATORS OF ETHNIC AREAS COMPARED TO THOSE OF THE NATION

	Ethnic Minority Autonomous Regions				National			
	1995	2000	2005	2006	1995	2000	2005	2006
Hospital Beds Per 1000 Residents	2.4	2.3	2.3	2.4	2.3	2.3	2.4	2.5
Adult Literacy (%)		86.9				92.7		
Local Government Revenue Per Capita (Yuan)	155	283	588	724	246	505	1155	1392
Local Government Expenditure Per Capita (Yuan)	371	697	1746	2112	563	1253	2595	3075
Fiscal Deficits/ Fiscal Revenue (local)	-1.40	-1.47	-1.97	-1.92	-1.29	-1.48	-1.25	-1.21

Sources: The author's compilation and computation using data from China Statistical Yearbook 2007, 26-33; 46-49; China Statistical Yearbook 2002, 22-29; Zhongguo Minzu Tongji Nianjian 2007 (China's Ethnic Statistical Yearbook 2007), Beijing: Minzu Chubanshe, 2008, 644.1.1

a standard sub-national unit of China during the Qing Dynasty. Both provinces are also far away from the power centre of Beijing. It takes about five hours of flight from Beijing to reach Lhasa and four hours to reach Urumqi.

Finally, both provinces are backed by external forces and influences. The Dalai Lama in exile has become the spiritual and appealing leader for the Tibetan movement while the Uyghurs are inspired by radical Islam, Turkic nationalism, independence of the former Soviet republics in Central Asia, and the once-successful Uyghur attempt at setting up their own republic in the early 20th century.

Internationally, the riots have the sympathies of the West. The crackdown on demonstrators has been heavily criticised by the West. Beijing has much to do to improve its public image. It should be more open and less sensitive on its ethnic issues. Its ban on foreign journalists' coverage of ethnic violence during the Tibetan riots only deepens Western bias against Beijing.

Much could also be done to ease the resentment of the more competitive Han and Hui by unemployed and underperforming Tibetans and Uyghurs. Some of the attacks (such as arson in Tibetan areas and riots in Urumqi) targeted shops and stores owned by the Han (and in the case of Tibetan riots, also the Hui).

The riots were also apparently targeted at Beijing's ethnic policies. In 1992, the Dalai Lama withdrew his previous demands for autonomy of Tibet (and even a greater Tibet) like that enjoyed by Hong Kong. Instead, he demanded for "meaningful autonomy". Recently, he reaffirmed his position, declared his concern for "religious harmony", "human values" and "the well-being of the Tibetan people". He referred to the elections of Tibetan representatives and wanted the Tibetan issue to be resolved through "international norms".

Uyghurs rioters might have been motivated by unemployment, low income and discrimination by the Han. Many Uyghurs see Xinjiang as their own land and resent the

inflow of ethnicities, especially a large number of Han people. Many of these demands, especially the political and anti-migration ones, go far beyond Beijing's principle of limited autonomy, with some falling under Beijing's category of "splitting up the motherland", a serious political crime.

China's Responses to the Challenges

In the reform era, top Chinese leaders have attached great significance to regional autonomy for the minorities. In 1987, Deng once remarked that Mao was right in not copying Soviet federalism of allowing for secession of provinces, thus maintaining China's unity. His successor, the then State President Jiang Zemin proclaimed regional ethnic autonomy as one of the three fundamental political institutions of the state. In 2003,

Jiang's successor, Hu Jintao, expounded the "three insists" – adherence to socialism, the CCP leadership and RAEM. This stance was reaffirmed in 2006 by the Politburo of the CCP.

The 2008 riots seem to have only resulted in a tougher political response from Beijing and local ethnic cadres. Take Tibet for an example. In July 2008, in its dialogue with envoys of the Dalai Lama, Beijing reaffirmed the "three insists" principles in its Tibet policy. In January 2009, the legislature of the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) which was dominated by Tibetan cadres who were former serfs and offsprings of former serfs passed a resolution by an overwhelming majority to set March 28 as the Serfs' Emancipation Day. This was a harden response by Tibetan cadres to political movements led by the Dalai and riots supported by liberal Tibetans that took place in 2008. It was also reported that

prior to the emancipation in 1955 by the CCP, over 90 percent of the Tibetans were serfs and subject to sale, transfer and even cruel penalties such as amputation, destruction of organs and torture. It was also reported that the United Front Department of the CCP halted its dialogue with the Dalai Lama. On 28 March 2009 a mass rally of over 10,000 was held in Lhasa to commemorate the Serfs' Emancipation Day. At the rally, Zhang Qingli, the Party Secretary of the TAR, declared that the government would strike hard against separatist movements and would not return to the theocracy led by

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the Dalai. About the same time, the 19-year old 11th Panchen Lama delivered a speech at the Second International Buddhist Forum in Wuxi, Jiangsu, criticising subtly the Dalai Lama's hunger for power. In March 2009, under Beijing influence, South Africa refused to invite the Dalai Lama for an international peace conference for world leaders, setting back his international campaign.

Meanwhile, Beijing is providing more generous aid to improve the material life of the Tibetans, modernise the society and improve the region's infrastructure. This is an attempt to close the economic gap between the Tibetans and the Hans. The national government also increased the medical subsidy for rural Tibetans to 140 *yuan* per person in 2008 from 100 *yuan* in 2007. Altogether, it had spent more than 1.8 billion *yuan* in the past 30 years on developing health care in Tibet. In 2009, the TAR government will spend six billion *yuan* (about US\$857 million) on building highways. Much has already been achieved in this area even before this initiative. By 2008, highways reached 51,000 km, and together with roads, they reached 95 percent of the 682 counties and 80 percent of the 5,261 villages.

It seems certain that RAEM will remain a pillar of China's ethnic policies in the foreseeable future. The riots in March 2008 have invited a strong backlash in Chinese leaders and cadres as well as Chinese public opinion, especially among the Han, against the Dalai and his supporters and a liberal ethnic policy in China. Therefore, it is unlikely that Beijing will allow Tibet and Xinjiang to have the political and administrative autonomy like Hong Kong, not to mention independence. ■