



China's Xinjiang policy: The imperative for India

Himanshi Lohmore

Department of Centre for Inner Asian Studies (CIAS), School of International Studies (SIS), Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), New Delhi, India

Abstract

China's policy in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) represents a significant challenge for India, encompassing geopolitical, security, and ethical dimensions. Beijing's repressive measures against the Uyghur Muslim population—including mass surveillance, forced labor, and cultural assimilation—are framed as a counter-terrorism effort but are widely condemned as human rights violations. For India, this situation is not a distant humanitarian issue but a direct security concern. Xinjiang's strategic location, bordering India's disputed territories, makes it a critical area for China's military and infrastructural buildup. The development of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK) links Xinjiang directly to the Indian subcontinent, bypassing India's sovereignty claims and increasing the potential for military collusion between China and Pakistan. Moreover, China's narrative of fighting "extremism" in Xinjiang resonates with some of India's own domestic policies, creating a diplomatic dilemma. India's official silence on the human rights abuses is a calculated diplomatic stance, balancing the need to avoid antagonizing a powerful neighbor with the ethical imperative to uphold its democratic values. However, this neutrality comes at a cost, potentially undermining India's credibility as a regional leader and human rights advocate. Therefore, New Delhi must craft a nuanced and firm policy that protects its national interests while not ceding its moral authority.

Keywords: Xinjiang, india, china, geopolitics, uyghurs, CPEC, national security, human rights

Introduction

The Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) is a cornerstone of China's geopolitical and economic strategy, but it is also the site of one of the world's most severe human rights crises. Located in China's far west, Xinjiang borders eight countries, including India, and is vital for the success of Beijing's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). For China, securing this region is paramount to its national security and economic prosperity. The Chinese government frames its policies—which involve mass surveillance, internment camps, and forced assimilation—as a necessary "counter-terrorism" campaign to combat separatism, religious extremism, and violence. However, a growing body of evidence from international organizations, journalists, and former detainees' points to systematic human rights abuses, including forced labor, forced sterilization of women, and the eradication of Uyghur culture.

For India, this crisis is not just a moral or humanitarian issue; it is a complex strategic and security imperative. New Delhi's response to the situation in Xinjiang must navigate a precarious balance between its national interests and its long-standing democratic values. The geographical proximity of Xinjiang, its role in China's strategic initiatives, and the broader implications for regional stability make it an area of critical concern for India.

The primary security challenge for India stems from Xinjiang's strategic location and its role in the China-Pakistan axis. Xinjiang is the starting point for the Karakoram Highway, which is the main artery of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). This massive infrastructure project, part of the BRI, passes through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK) and is a direct violation of India's sovereignty. The CPEC strengthens China's military and economic presence in a territory that India

claims, effectively linking China's western military command with the Indian subcontinent. This development poses a direct threat to India's security by enabling faster troop and equipment deployment for both China and Pakistan and creating a potential two-front military challenge.

Furthermore, China's policies in Xinjiang have wider geopolitical implications that affect India. The use of "counter-terrorism" as a justification for repression sets a dangerous precedent, especially in a region with numerous ethnic and religious tensions. China's narrative mirrors some of India's own security concerns, particularly regarding separatism and extremism. This overlap makes it difficult for India to openly criticize Beijing's actions without inviting similar scrutiny of its own domestic policies, particularly in disputed territories like Jammu and Kashmir. The shared discourse on combating "terrorism" and "separatism" can be used by China to justify its alliance with Pakistan and its opposition to India's stance on certain international issues, such as blacklisting Pakistani militants. This has been seen in China's diplomatic support for Pakistan at various international forums.

India's diplomatic response has been cautious and largely silent, opting for a policy of non-interference. While this approach seeks to avoid provoking China and escalating already tense bilateral relations, it has come under scrutiny. By remaining silent, India risks appearing to condone the human rights abuses, which could undermine its moral standing as a democracy and a leader in the Global South. It also creates a potential weakness that China and Pakistan could exploit to gain a propaganda advantage among Islamic nations. A more proactive stance, however, could risk Chinese retaliation, including heightened military presence along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) and increased support for Pakistan.

The issue of Xinjiang also has a socio-cultural dimension for India. India has historically provided refuge to minorities fleeing persecution, most notably Tibetans. The presence of Uyghur refugees in India, albeit in smaller numbers, highlights the ethical dilemma of a country that prides itself on being a pluralistic democracy but is hesitant to extend the same welcome to Uyghurs that it did to Tibetans. This selective approach, influenced by the geopolitical rivalry with China, can be a source of internal debate and external criticism.

Ultimately, India's challenge is to develop a coherent and assertive policy that protects its strategic interests while upholding its core values. This requires a multi-pronged approach: strengthening its own border infrastructure, building alliances with like-minded countries to create a united front against Chinese assertiveness, and subtly but firmly advocating for human rights in multilateral forums without sacrificing diplomatic ties. Navigating this complex landscape is not just a matter of foreign policy but a fundamental test of India's strategic autonomy and its commitment to a rules-based international order.

Methods

The analysis of China's Xinjiang policy and its imperative for India requires a multi-methodological approach that integrates geopolitical analysis, security studies, human rights research, and foreign policy evaluation. A comprehensive understanding cannot be achieved by focusing on a single discipline, as the issue is deeply layered and interconnected.

1. **Geopolitical and Strategic Analysis:** This method involves studying the geographical and political factors influencing the relationship between China, India, and Pakistan. It includes an in-depth examination of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The research will analyze official Chinese and Pakistani documents, satellite imagery of infrastructure projects, and strategic assessments from think tanks and military journals. The focus will be on understanding the military and economic implications of CPEC's route through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK) and how it alters the power balance in South Asia. This includes assessing the logistical advantages CPEC provides to China's military in a potential conflict with India.
2. **Security Studies:** This method will evaluate the direct and indirect security threats posed to India. It involves analyzing intelligence reports and open-source data on the military buildup in Xinjiang and along the Line of Actual Control (LAC). It also looks into the potential for increased military cooperation and interoperability between China and Pakistan, including joint exercises and arms transfers. Furthermore, this method explores the link between China's "counter-terrorism" narrative in Xinjiang and its potential use to justify a stronger military presence in the region, which could be a pretext for future actions against India.
3. **Human Rights and Ethical Framework Analysis**
This method involves a critical examination of the human rights situation in Xinjiang. It relies on a review of reports from international organizations like the United Nations, Amnesty International, and Human Rights Watch, as well as testimonies from Uyghur

refugees and ex-detainees. The analysis will also draw on academic research and journalistic investigations that document mass surveillance, forced labor, and cultural repression. The goal is to understand the nature and scale of the abuses, and how they challenge India's democratic and humanitarian values. This method also involves analyzing the diplomatic and ethical dilemma this presents to India, a country that has historically championed human rights and the rights of ethnic minorities.

4. **Foreign Policy and Diplomatic Evaluation:** This method focuses on analyzing India's official stance and diplomatic responses. It will review official statements from the Ministry of External Affairs, speeches by Indian leaders, and India's voting record in international forums like the UN Human Rights Council. The research will compare India's position with that of other countries, particularly Western nations, to understand the nuances of its diplomatic strategy. This includes an assessment of the "strategic autonomy" doctrine and how India balances its economic relationship with China and its security concerns. The method will also evaluate the long-term credibility costs of remaining silent on the issue.
5. **Comparative Analysis:** This method will be used to compare China's policies in Xinjiang with its actions in Tibet and Hong Kong to identify patterns of state repression and control. It will also compare India's response to the Xinjiang issue with its historical reactions to other geopolitical crises, such as the Tibet issue. This comparison provides a historical context and helps in predicting potential future diplomatic and security maneuvers. The comparative approach also helps in understanding the broader Chinese strategy of using economic leverage to mute international criticism.

Results

The research, employing the methods outlined above, yields several key results that highlight the complex and multi-faceted nature of the Xinjiang issue for India. The findings confirm that China's policies are not merely an internal matter but a direct and significant challenge to India's national security, sovereignty, and foreign policy principles.

1. **CPEC as a Direct Security Threat:** The most tangible and immediate result of China's Xinjiang policy is the direct threat posed by the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The analysis of CPEC's route through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK) demonstrates that it bypasses India's territorial claims, thereby legitimizing Pakistan's control over the region in the eyes of the international community. CPEC's infrastructure, including highways and communication networks, provides China with a land bridge to the Arabian Sea, significantly reducing its reliance on the Malacca Strait. This improved connectivity enhances Beijing's ability to swiftly deploy military assets to its western front and support its "all-weather ally" Pakistan in any future conflict with India. The result is a more pronounced two-front security challenge for India, with the possibility of military collusion between the two nuclear-armed adversaries.

2. **Reinforcement of the China-Pakistan Strategic Axis:** China's growing investments and military presence in PoK, as a result of CPEC, solidify the strategic partnership with Pakistan. China has become Pakistan's largest arms supplier, providing advanced military platforms like the JF-17 fighter jet and naval vessels. Joint military exercises and the development of interoperable systems further cement this alliance. The results show that this is not merely an economic partnership but a strategic one designed to contain India's regional influence. China's economic leverage, tied to CPEC, also grants it significant political influence in Islamabad, effectively turning Pakistan into a client state and a proxy for Chinese interests in the region.
3. **The "Counter-Terrorism" Narrative as a Geopolitical Tool:** The research found that China's justification for its actions in Xinjiang—fighting "extremism" and "terrorism"—is a shrewd geopolitical tactic. This narrative resonates with certain security concerns of India, particularly regarding cross-border terrorism. However, the results show that China strategically uses this narrative to deflect international criticism and create a diplomatic schism between India and its Western partners, who are more vocal about the human rights abuses. By framing its actions as a security imperative, China gains a diplomatic shield, and its allies, including Pakistan, can use this narrative to justify their own repressive actions.
4. **India's Diplomatic Silence and Its Consequences:** The analysis of India's foreign policy reveals a calculated silence on the human rights crisis in Xinjiang. This diplomatic position is a direct result of India's complex relationship with China. New Delhi's primary concerns are the security threat posed by CPEC and the ongoing border tensions along the LAC. The results suggest that India fears that a strong condemnation of China's human rights record could provoke a harsher reaction from Beijing, potentially escalating border conflicts or increasing Chinese support for Pakistan. However, this silence comes at a significant cost. It undermines India's image as a moral leader and a champion of democratic values, potentially alienating it from its key strategic partners in the West, such as the United States, Australia, and Japan. It also creates a perception of diplomatic hypocrisy, as India has been vocal about the rights of other minorities in different contexts.
5. **Impact on Regional Stability and Human Rights Discourse:** The findings show that China's aggressive policies in Xinjiang, coupled with its increasing military and economic presence in the region, are destabilizing. The forced assimilation and repression of Uyghurs have led to a humanitarian crisis and a growing diaspora, some of whom have sought refuge in neighboring countries. The results indicate that this could create long-term instability on China's western border, with potential spillover effects for Central Asian countries and, by extension, India. The international community's fragmented response, with many Muslim-majority nations remaining silent due to economic

dependence on China, further isolates India and complicates its position. The Chinese model of state control and surveillance, refined in Xinjiang, is also being exported, posing a broader threat to democratic norms and human rights globally.

Discussion

India's approach to China's Xinjiang policy is defined by a deep-seated strategic conundrum, balancing immediate national security concerns with its long-term aspirations as a global power and a democratic state. The human rights crisis in Xinjiang, while an ethical and humanitarian issue, is not the sole factor driving India's response; rather, it is viewed through the prism of a multifaceted geopolitical rivalry with China.

The primary driver of India's cautious policy is the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). As CPEC's main artery runs through Gilgit-Baltistan, a part of Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK) that India claims as its own territory, New Delhi perceives it as a direct challenge to its sovereignty. This has been a consistent and non-negotiable point of contention for India, leading it to refuse participation in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The development of this corridor significantly enhances China's strategic footprint in the Indian subcontinent. It provides a direct and shorter route for Chinese goods to reach the Arabian Sea, bypassing the Strait of Malacca, which is susceptible to interdiction. This new route also serves a crucial military purpose, enabling China to quickly move troops and military equipment to its western border and provide logistical support to Pakistan in a potential two-front conflict with India. The infrastructure built under CPEC, therefore, is not just economic; it is a dual-use asset that has significant military implications for India.

This security imperative explains India's reluctance to publicly and forcefully condemn China on the Xinjiang issue. From a Realpolitik perspective, antagonizing a powerful and unpredictable neighbor over a humanitarian issue, no matter how egregious, could lead to severe consequences. Heightened tensions along the Line of Actual Control (LAC), increased Chinese support for Pakistan, and economic retaliation are all credible threats that India must weigh. This has led to a policy of strategic silence, where India avoids joining Western-led condemnations at international forums like the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC). When faced with such resolutions, India has typically abstained, citing a preference for a "dialogue" on country-specific human rights issues. This position, while criticized by human rights advocates and some of India's democratic partners, is a calculated move to avoid ceding its diplomatic leverage and to prevent China from using India's position to its advantage in other disputes.

However, this silence comes with significant long-term costs. First, it undermines India's moral standing as a democratic and pluralistic nation. India has a long history of providing refuge to persecuted minorities, most notably Tibetans under the Dalai Lama. Its reticence on the Uyghur issue creates a perception of hypocrisy, suggesting that its human rights principles are secondary to geopolitical calculations. This could damage its credibility as a regional leader and a voice for the Global South. Second, it limits India's ability to build a coalition with like-minded democracies to counter China's growing influence. While

countries like the United States, Japan, and Australia have been vocal on Xinjiang, India's guarded position makes it difficult to forge a united front.

Moreover, China's "counter-terrorism" narrative presents a complex diplomatic trap for India. By framing its repression of the Uyghurs as a fight against extremism, China creates a parallel with some of India's own internal security concerns. This narrative can be exploited by China to justify its close military and economic ties with Pakistan, and to deflect criticism of its actions in other regions. It is a powerful tool that China uses to divide and conquer, preventing a cohesive international response.

The imperative for India, therefore, is to craft a more nuanced and proactive strategy. A shift from complete silence to a more subtle form of engagement is necessary. This could involve using back-channel diplomacy to raise concerns with Beijing, while also working with its partners in the Quad (India, Australia, Japan, and the U.S.) to address the broader security implications of China's actions. India can also use its position in forums like the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and the G20 to promote principles of human rights and cultural pluralism, without directly naming and shaming China. This strategy would allow India to uphold its values without directly provoking its powerful neighbor, while also positioning itself as a responsible and principled global power.

Conclusion

The situation in China's Xinjiang region is an urgent and critical issue that India cannot afford to ignore. While the human rights abuses against the Uyghurs are a moral concern, for India, they are inextricably linked to core national security interests. The development of CPEC through disputed territory, originating in Xinjiang, poses a direct and tangible military threat by strengthening the China-Pakistan strategic axis. India's policy of official silence, while understandable from a short-term security perspective, risks undermining its democratic credibility and limiting its ability to build a broad-based coalition against Chinese assertiveness. A new strategy is imperative, one that moves beyond mere reaction to proactive engagement. India must balance its security needs with its ethical responsibilities, finding ways to champion human rights in multilateral forums and with its strategic partners, without compromising its geopolitical position.

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