

China's ethnic policies short on evidence

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Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leaders are showing increasing interest in research and evidence as a basis for public policy making. Leading universities have been beefing up their public policy schools and think tanks are multiplying. Government departments from the centre to the counties are setting up research units to evaluate policy impacts across a variety of sectors. But when it comes to public policies in Uyghur and Tibetan regions officials' thirst for research and evidence dries up.

Over the past decade and a half the Chinese government has invested hundreds of billions of dollars in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (Xinjiang) and in Tibetan areas, which together account for about 30 per cent of China's territory. More funds have been invested in this region in the past 15 years than in the preceding four decades. During this time the region's GDP has stayed in the double digits and incomes have been steadily rising. There are new roads, bridges, railway lines, better quality housing and shops full of affordable consumer goods. And yet, in the past few years, the region has experienced some of the most serious ethnic unrest since the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC).

Within China there has been almost no investigation into why parts of Xinjiang and the Tibetan Plateau have become so restive despite such large-scale public investments. The reasons for this inaction are political. The CCP elite has been unwilling to acknowledge failure in their strenuous efforts to hasten the integration of the western provinces with the rest of China. Instead, CCP leaders have blamed outbreaks of ethnic unrest on external meddling by hostile forces — that is, independence-minded exile groups and their foreign supporters.

But there is very little hard evidence to suggest that the recent wave of ethnic unrest in Tibet and Xinjiang is the result of external meddling. In the street protests that began in 2008–9, and that involved tens of thousands of people, the available evidence suggests that local grievances are the cause of unrest. Protestors' placards and shouts highlight frustration over social, economic and cultural policies. Notes left by self-immolators express despair at how cultural and religious policies are impacting local communities (131 Tibetan protestors have set themselves on fire since 2009). Only a very small minority of protestors appears to have been motivated by an anti-PRC agenda.

The exception is the recent spate of terror attacks perpetrated by Islamic radicals. But such tragic events lie at the fringe of ethnic unrest in the region. There are no such terror groups in Tibetan areas, and the overwhelming majority of Uyghurs find it abhorrent that such acts are associated with their ethnonym.

The CCP's insistence that enemies abroad are responsible for all Tibetan and Uyghur unrest is harming the party's interests and its ability to govern its ethnic regions. It stands as a 'political great wall' against intelligent inquiry into the sources of ethnic minority grievances and the extent to which public policies can exacerbate or ameliorate those grievances.

Local government officials at the coalface of policy implementation are prevented from making inquiries lest they be accused of sympathising with 'hostile forces'. Scholars too are prevented from conducting serious research into ethnic unrest. Those who have attempted to do so have lost funding and academic positions. Some have ended up in jail. Tibetan and Uyghur scholars are particularly vulnerable as their political loyalties are more likely to be questioned. But even Han Chinese scholars find it near impossible to examine sensitive issues in Tibet and Xinjiang because local officials refuse to provide them with the necessary access.

If the CCP is ever to succeed in winning the hearts and minds of the country's Tibetan and Uyghur populations, it needs to open its policies in these regions to greater scrutiny. The new CCP leadership should demand to know why public spending programs have achieved such poor results. There are hundreds of highly trained and qualified scholars in China able to research these questions if given the opportunity.

The CCP should grant researchers access and funding as a first step toward building an evidence base for more informed debate on public policies in these regions. Only in this way can policies be improved to make China's Tibetan and Uyghur populations feel more secure about their futures.

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