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Main battle tanks of the Chinese People's Liberation Army on parade in Tian'anmen Square, Beijing.

'New Wars' in Contemporary China?

by Kunal Mukherjee

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Introduction

The post Cold War period has witnessed the rise of a new group of conflicts, which well known academics such as Mary Kaldor has called 'New Wars'¹ to differentiate the current group of conflicts from earlier wars that are in keeping with the classical definition of warfare. Kaldor's thesis, although originally formulated in an East European context at an earlier period, has considerable explanatory power and it is without doubt that the theory still travels far and wide. Scholars have had a tendency to use the 'New War' argument within the context of Eastern Europe, the Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa. It is the aim of this article to go beyond these conventional case studies and use the 'New War' theory to understand conflicts in different parts of contemporary China, and to see to what extent this 'New War' theory fits in with the Chinese context and helps us to understand those conflicts. Thus, this article introduces a new set of case studies: Xinjiang and Tibet.

Conflicts that are classified as 'new' or 'post-Cold War' are not really 'post-Cold War/post-1990s' in the strict sense of the term, since there are always short term factors and long term factors that lead to the outbreak of a conflict, and some of the long term factors can actually be traced back to pre-Cold War, or even earlier times. Thus, the case studies chosen for this article are 'new' or 'post Cold War' conflicts in the sense that the levels of violence in some cases have escalated more than ever in the post-1990s phase, although the long term causes can be traced back to earlier times. In Tibet, for instance, we saw a huge uprising that took place in the year 2008. In relation to Xinjiang, Dr. Michael Clarke, a China expert and an Associate Professor of Political Science and International Relations at the National Security College, ANU College of Asia and the Pacific, writes, 'China became more concerned regarding the security of Xinjiang with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.'² Furthermore, these conflicts have gone on to acquire the characteristic features of what Kaldor calls 'New Wars'. This article is not so much interested in looking at the intricate details of the individual conflicts, but to what extent does the Kaldor thesis fit in within the Asian context. In this article, I have placed an emphasis on China's contested borderland regions, Xinjiang and Tibet. Also, I have chosen China as my chief case study because it is one of the two new rising economic giants on

the Asiatic mainland, the other one being India. After the Asian Tiger economies reached near industrialised/miracle status, much attention has shifted to the mainland of Asia, with a special focus on China. In a world of increasing interconnectedness, developments in a rising Asia will invariably affect our lives in the west in one way or another. Thus, in an era of globalisation, the problems in Inner Asia or what may seem to be a remote part of Asia could have a profound impact upon our lives in the western world.

'New Wars' and Kaldor

Kaldor's New War theory is most certainly a powerful argument, and it travels far and wide to explain most present day conflicts, including some of the conflicts in inner Asia. The early chapters of the book, 'Old and New Wars,' look at some of the characteristic features of what Kaldor calls 'New Wars.' 'New Wars,' according to Kaldor, refer to those conflicts that started to take place in the 1990s and to a new form of political violence which must be distinguished from old wars. In these new wars, she argues, it has become difficult to differentiate between the 'global' and the 'local,' the 'political' and the 'non-political,' acts of aggression, or external attacks and acts of repression, or internal attacks. These wars need to be understood and analysed within the broader framework of globalisation. Kaldor argues, "New Wars are the wars of the era of globalisation."³ We notice

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pronounced identity politics in these wars and the participation of the diaspora, or dispersed persons. The presence of the armed forces and paramilitary is also strong in these new wars. We see that these new group of wars are funded differently from the way older wars were funded. For example, the diaspora might provide

these conflicts with the necessary funding. In earlier times, wars tended to be funded through state revenue. In these conflicts, we see the presence of both 'global' and 'local' actors. The 'global' refers to UN peace-keeping missions, humanitarian or liberal intervention, the presence of international NGOs, and the presence of the specialised agencies of the United Nations. The 'local' refers to indigenous actors, such as war lords, local political actors, Islamists, and so on. These are some of the characteristic features of what Kaldor calls 'New Wars.' Kaldor also talks about the sharp economic divide between 'the global' and 'the local.'

These 'New War' conflict zones are also prone to human rights abuses. 'New Wars involve a blurring of the distinctions between war, organised crime, and large scale violations of human rights. Although these wars are localised, they involve myriad transnational connections. New wars also arise in the context of the erosion of state autonomy, in other words, disintegration of the state. New wars occur in situations in which state revenues decline because of the decline of the economy and polity and also amidst criminality, corruption, and the inefficiency of failed or collapsed states.



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Tian Chi (Heaven Lake), Xinjiang Province, China



Protesters of the Islamic Uyghur ethnic group of China's Xinjiang Province demonstrate outside the White House as a Chinese delegation arrives to meet US President Barack Obama during the US-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue, 28 July 2009.

Let us now see how this thesis fits in with the Chinese context. The 'New War' argument is a multi-faceted argument, and some of these facets fit in with the Chinese case.

Chinese Xinjiang

Geographically, Xinjiang is located in China's extreme far North West. It is China's largest province, and it has a massive border with the Islamic republics of Central Asia. "Currently, the region comprises 18 percent of modern China's territory."⁴ The ethnic composition of this province includes the predominantly Muslim Uyghur community, who claim to be a part of East Turkestan or Uyghuristan, and not a part of China.⁵ China's atheistic character did not go down well with the Uyghur community of Xinjiang, who believed in and still feel very strongly about their Islamic identity. "Formal education in Xinjiang before the Qing re-conquest of the 1870s was generally Islamic."⁶ Dr. Enze Han, another China expert and senior lecturer in Politics and International Studies at the University of London, writes, "The Uyghurs' cultural grievances mainly result from two factors: The first is the Chinese government's strict control of Islam in Xinjiang. The second factor is the chipping away of Uyghur-language education from the school curriculum in Xinjiang."⁷ For instance, originally, Uyghur pupils would start studying Mandarin Chinese from middle school, but in 1984, the language was pushed down to the third grade, and currently, they start studying it from the first grade.⁸ In addition to cultural grievances, Han

also addresses the political and economic grievances. "One commonly cited factor to which Uyghur's continual grievance is attributed is the repressive tactics employed by the Chinese state. Chinese state policies toward political dissent have always been harsh, particularly when ethnic separatism is involved. For example, at the end of April 1996, the Chinese government launched its first Strike Hard/Yanda campaign."⁹ From an economic standpoint, Xinjiang is estimated to contain 35.7 billion tons of oil and 22 trillion cubic metres of natural gas. China's current strategy is to "...ship oil and natural gas from Xinjiang to its eastern provinces."¹⁰ Xinjiang is rich in not just oil and gas, but also in cotton and other resources.¹¹

The Uyghurs have been quick to assert their differences from mainstream Han Chinese people, and this politics of difference has always unsettled officials in Beijing. "Rising Uyghur ethnic consciousness in the post-1978 era is believed to be related to tense Uyghur-Han (Han being the dominant racial group in China) relations and conflicts in Xinjiang."¹² Dr. Nimrod Baranovitch of the Department of Asian Studies, University of Haifa, writes, "...a large body of literature makes clear that although the state plays a dominant role in the definition and representation of ethnic identities in China, ethnicity is a negotiated process and minorities are active agents in the negotiation of their ethnic identities."¹³ The Chinese political establishment has tried to undermine the local identity of the Uyghur's by trying to 'Hanify' Xinjiang by sending more and more racial Han Chinese people to the region and to take up jobs there. It was argued that ethnic



Anjem Choudary delivers a speech as Muslims and Islamists protest in London's China Town, 22 November 2013.

minorities would not be able to develop without the assistance of the so called advanced Han nationality. Thus, Han determinism replaced self-determinism. Although China argues that this Han migration is being done for purposes of economic development and to raise the material standards of the local Uyghur people, substantial evidence shows that the economic benefits are going to the Han Chinese and are being concentrated in their hands, rather than trickling down to the local Uyghur community.¹⁴ This has exacerbated the situation and made the Uyghur community more fierce in asserting their Islamic identity and distinctiveness. For instance, "...posters of Mahmud Qashqari and Yusup Hajib, two historical figures that the Uyghur consider their cultural heroes, have been widely distributed in Xinjiang, which in obvious contrast to the official Chinese versions that stress Xinjiang has been an inseparable part of China since antiquity, these posters link the Uyghur's to a whole new world and to another history and civilisation."¹⁵ The Uyghur people, by and large, have been excluded from the decision making process with regard to development in Xinjiang, and yet they are expected to feel grateful to the Chinese for 'developing' their region. Well-known scholar and expert on China, Jackie Sheehan, argues that the colonial attitude¹⁶ that the Chinese from the heartland have towards the ethnic minorities of the peripheral borderland regions has galvanised the Uyghurs into action, asserting their distinct identity more than ever, thereby strengthening the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), and in the process, delegitimizing China's claim over Xinjiang. The Chinese have always viewed cultural differences, especially religious differences, with considerable suspicion. It was feared that religious differences might undermine state values,

state definitions of nationalism, and 'patriotic' ideology. Identity politics is, thus, very pronounced in the context of Xinjiang, which is also one of the aspects of the 'New War' thesis. "Asymmetric economic development and neglect of identity issues seem to be the bane of Xinjiang province in China."¹⁷

Kaldor's theory discusses the strong presence of the paramilitary and armed forces in these conflicts. This aspect of the 'New War' theory fits in with the Xinjiang context in the sense that from time to time, the Chinese state has used the paramilitary and armed forces to crush the Uyghur uprisings. For instance, the people's militia was deployed to arrest insurgents and other subversive elements who were threatening to undermine the Chinese state and national patriotic ideology. "East Turkestan has been under military control by Communist China since 1949."¹⁸ The violent outbreaks in Xinjiang are sporadic. Thus, regional expert Dr. Elizabeth Van Wie Davis, writes, "A heavy police presence is a constant in Xinjiang."¹⁹

Another aspect of Kaldor's thesis is that these 'new' conflicts need to be studied within the broader context of globalisation. Furthermore, boundaries between nation states are increasingly becoming blurred, and although conflicts in this day and age may seem to be localised, there may be strong transnational connections and a strong role played by external actors. Uyghur nationalism has been inspired by certain central Asians. The ETIM, in particular, is believed to have been inspired by the political Islam of the AF Pak region, and to some extent by Iran. Uyghur militants have been spotted in the AF-PAK region. In an era of globalisation,

activists and insurgents also make use of technology. "International campaigns for Uyghur rights and possible independence have become increasingly vocal and well organised, especially on the internet."²⁰ Globalisation is affecting the development of Islam in China in a variety of ways. China is becoming part of the Islamic revival, which has become a global phenomenon over the last few decades. A certain kind of international Islam has become involved in strengthening Uyghur identity just as it has become enmeshed with ethno nationalist movements in various parts of the world. Dr. Stephen J. Blank, a Senior Fellow at the Strategic Studies Institute of the US Army War College writes, "...this increasing violence clearly stems from the globalisation of violence, including terrorism that pervades much of the Muslim world, and from the general growth in Xinjiang's global links of all kinds."²¹ It could be argued that some of the aspects of the 'New War' thesis intertwine with other aspects of the thesis. For instance, in this case, globalisation, which Kaldor mentions, intertwines with identity and identity politics, which Kaldor also discusses. Technology has been crucial in spreading awareness of the problem in Xinjiang. As a result of this awareness, Muslims from other parts of the Islamic world who feel strongly about their Islamic sense of collective identity, will come and join their Muslim Uyghur brothers to fight against Chinese oppression, or what is *perceived* as Chinese oppression. Globalisation has also increased the inequality of the Uyghur community and has therefore led to much polarisation within the Chinese context. The Hans

have benefitted from the process in comparison to the Uyghurs. Growing inter-connectedness often creates new animosities and conflicts, which can, in turn, fuel reactionary politics and deep seated xenophobia, which we see in the context of Xinjiang. The region is also rich in natural resources, which the Chinese mainland would like to exploit in its quest to become a global super power.

Kaldor discusses how these conflicts happen in a situation of erosion of state authority. This applies to Xinjiang, since the ETIM is essentially a secessionist movement.

She is correct in suggesting that in these new conflicts, it has become increasingly hard to distinguish between the 'external' and the 'internal.' With regard to the Xinjiang conflict, this is very much the case. Although from the Uyghur standpoint, the Han Chinese presence in Xinjiang is viewed as external because the Uyghurs do not see themselves as a part of China, but rather, as a distinct nation in their own right. From an outsiders point of view, this distinction cannot always be made easily,

since China sees Xinjiang as an 'integral' part of China, and has done everything it can to 'sinify' or 'hanify' the region, so that Xinjiang resembles China proper.

Kaldor is also correct in her point with respect to the participation of the diaspora in 'new wars.' With regard to Xinjiang, Beijing has blamed the Uyghur diaspora for stirring up violence within China, especially in Xinjiang. In this connection,



Chinese soldiers patrol the streets of a Uyghur neighbourhood after an incident between ethnic Uyghurs and Chinese security forces along the streets in Urumqi, Xinjiang Province, 13 July 2009.



The Potala Palace in Lhasa, Tibet.



Hundreds of Tibetan exiles march through Taipei, Taiwan, 9 March 2008, to mark the 49th anniversary of Tibetans' uprising against China's invasion, and to demand independence for Tibet.

mention may be made of Rebiya Kadeer and her efforts to free Xinjiang. She is the leader of the Uyghur community and although based in the United States, she fiercely supports the movement for a free East Turkestan from exile.²²

Xinjiang is also prone to human rights violations,²³ which is also very much in keeping with the 'New War' thesis.

The Case of Tibet

The situation in Tibet is quite similar to the situation in Xinjiang. For starters, it is essentially a secessionist movement, and thus, happens in a context of China's state authority being eroded. This is in keeping with the 'New War' thesis, since Kaldor mentions that 'new wars' end to take place in a context where state authority is increasingly being weakened.

Tibet, like Xinjiang, is also a deeply religious province. "Monastery education dominated before 1951, and still exerts a strong influence."²⁴ The only difference is that whilst Xinjiang is predominantly Muslim, Tibet is predominantly Buddhist. The complicated situation in Tibet has occurred partly because the pronounced cultural differences, especially religious differences, do not go down well with the Chinese state. This is because cultural values distinct from mainland China are seen to be eroding mainstream state values, nationalism, and patriotic fervour. Religious groups in China have been strongly associated with secret societies and have been known for their underground activities in trying to topple the Chinese government throughout Chinese history.²⁵

The issue of Tibetan national identity involves the question, to what extent *is* Tibet or *was* Tibet a distinct nation? Tibetans have argued that they were always a distinct nation, but China, on the other hand, has denied this. China argues that Tibet is an integral part of China, and that China has exercised sovereign authority over Tibet for 700 years.²⁶ The Nationalities Affairs Commission was meant to pursue a policy of uniting the region with mainstream China, or China proper. "The trajectory of Chinese nationality policies is reflected in discrimination against minorities, the weakening of minority autonomous institutions in

the 1950's, the attack on minority cultures and autonomy during the cultural revolution in the sixties, and finally, the modernisation agenda featuring the centralising and assimilating power of education and propaganda systems since the 1980s."²⁷ The Dalai Lama's administration in Tibet had been abolished, and was replaced by the preparatory committee for the TAR [Tibetan Autonomous Region], as the official government of the region. After 1959, China launched a full campaign to integrate Tibet economically, politically, and militarily. The policy of Han migration also followed, which began to undermine local Tibetan Buddhist identity.²⁸ Dr. Abanti Bhattacharya, an Associate Professor in the Department of East Asian Studies at the University of Delhi, writes, "The Chinese state, which calls for submerging all minority identities within the predominant Han identity in the larger cause of national cohesion and security, has effectively precluded the possibility of Tibetan assertions of identity and political autonomy."²⁹ "For China's stability and prosperity, it is critical that all its nationalities identify with China."³⁰ A series of so-called patriotic campaigns were designed to encourage Tibetans, including the clergy, to support integration within China.³¹ Tibetans have feared in recent years that they will become a minority in their own land due to the Han migration and inter-racial marriages introduced and encouraged by the state. In other words, there is a strong fear among

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Chinese army soldiers patrol the Barkhor Square in front of Jokhang Temple in central Lhasa, Tibet.

local Tibetans that they will lose their distinct cultural identity. Like Xinjiang, it is the Hans who control the Tibetan economy and Tibetan administration. Tibetans cannot compete with the Han, who tend to be more skilled professionally. Tibetans, such as the Uyghur community in Xinjiang, have been excluded from the decision making process as far as development in the region is concerned. Development means different things to different people, and what it means to Tibetans is not what it means to the Chinese state. Furthermore, the development is unbalanced across localities.³² Despite protests, the Han migration or Han flood has continued, and that has paved the way for a new and formidable pro-China constituency in the region that has increased China's security in Tibet.³³ Thus, at the heart of the problem is identity and identity politics, which is one of the aspects of Kaldor's 'New War' thesis. Kendrick Kuo, a Ph D student in International Relations at George Washington University, writes, "...in public statements, China has grouped East Turkestan terrorists with Tibetan and Taiwanese independence advocates. Religious adherents are viewed monolithically so that when devotees use a religious group to push for political ends, all followers of that religion are treated as co-conspirators."³⁴

In keeping with the Kaldor 'New War' thesis, we also see the participation of the diaspora who are actively trying to raise awareness of the Tibetan issue internationally. For instance, "The exiled Tibetans in India have led a vociferous campaign for a separation of Tibet from China and have been able to exploit China's dependency on foreign powers to promote their interests. The US has been receptive to exiled Tibetan propaganda, which has also been mixed up with a highly-loaded human rights crusade against China."³⁵

The region has also been subject to human rights abuses and police brutality. The strong presence of the armed forces and para-military in Tibet has paved the way for all sorts of human rights abuses and atrocities to occur. The PLA [People's Liberation Army] took over Tibet in 1950.³⁶ "Public Security departments have taken broad responsibility to enforce regulations controlling religious activities and have participated actively in suppression campaign."³⁷ Not only have many Tibetans lost their lives, but state policies have been introduced by which Tibetan language and resources are being systematically eroded.³⁸ Thus, we see two features of the 'New War' thesis, that is, presence of the armed forces and the para-military, and human rights abuses in the Tibetan context. These two features of the 'New War' thesis are intertwined, since the heavy militarisation of Tibet has paved the way for all manner of police brutality to take place. In March 2008, Tibetans rose up in the biggest challenge to Chinese authority since the 1950s. "The Tibetan Government in Exile and rights groups claim that 220 Tibetans were killed, 5600 were arrested or detained, 1294 injured, 290 sentenced and over 1000 disappeared in the ensuing crackdown."³⁹

Conclusion

It could be argued that Kaldor's 'New War' thesis still has considerable explanatory power. It travels far and wide, and although it was originally formulated in an East European context, and has been used as a theoretical framework to understand conflicts in the Middle East and Sub Saharan Africa, it can also be used to understand conflicts in contemporary China. Firstly, Kaldor's argument that these wars happen when state authority is being eroded in an atmosphere of corruption and criminality apply to the Chinese context. The very fact that both of these conflicts are essentially secessionist movements shows clearly that Chinese state authority is increasingly being undermined at the periphery, in its borderlands. Other aspects of the 'New War' thesis which can be found in the Chinese case include pronounced identity politics, the impact of globalisation, the heavy presence of the military and para-military, and human rights abuses. Sometimes, one aspect of the 'New War' thesis might intertwine with another aspect of the thesis. For instance in both cases, but more so with regard to Tibet, the heavy presence of the armed forces has paved the way for all manner of police brutality and human rights abuses to take place. Of course, there is an element of variation, and the thesis cannot be applied uniformly to both the case studies. The thesis seems to fit in better with the Xinjiang context than with Tibet. In other words, from the discussion above, we can find more of the features or aspects of the 'New War' thesis found in the context of Xinjiang than in Tibet.

"Since the conflicts in this article have been going on for decades and are still occurring in one form or another, it is important to give serious attention to deep prevention."

As a solution to the above conflicts, one needs to look at both the short term factors as well as the long term factors that have caused the conflict. Measures to prevent conflict can be divided into two categories: light prevention and deep prevention.⁴⁰ The practitioners of 'light prevention' do not necessarily concern themselves with the root causes of the conflict, but their aim is to "...prevent latent or threshold conflicts from becoming severe armed conflicts."⁴¹ Examples would include diplomatic interventions and private mediation efforts.

Deep prevention, in contrast aims to address the root causes of the conflict which may mean engaging with issues of development, democracy and community relations. Since the conflicts in this article have been going on for decades and are still occurring in one form or another, it is important to give serious attention to deep prevention. If we take the light prevention approach, the problem will continue to persist. Since economic, political and social realities have led to these conflicts, sound policies in these areas can also provide a solution. The situation in both the case studies is not broken beyond repair. Good governance, effective development, reducing arms, demilitarisation, increasing human rights, and reducing the economic gap which exists between the different ethnic groups of these two provinces is most certainly the way forward.





On 14 March 2015, protesters participated in a European rally in Paris marking a failed 1959 Tibet uprising against China, and claim for a free Tibet.

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