

*Digging the “Ethnic Violence in China” Database: The Effects of Inter-Ethnic Inequality and Natural Resources Exploitation in Xinjiang**

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Abstract

Unrest in the Xinjiang region of China currently poses the most imminent threat to the internal security of China and to central government control over peripheral regions. Instability in Xinjiang, furthermore, has ramifications for the wider security environment in Central Asia as the conflict becomes linked with jihadist groups in other security hotspots, like Pakistan and Syria. However, our understanding of important potential factors affecting political instability in Xinjiang is limited by the lack of systematically collected event data of ethnic

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violence. In this article, we introduce the first effort to fill this gap in data collection, that is, the Ethnic Violence in China (EVC) Database: the Xinjiang Region. This is a geocoded database of yearly incidents of ethnic violence at the county level in Xinjiang from 1990 to 2005. Using the EVC database, we demonstrate some initial results modeling ethnic violence in Xinjiang. We find that ethnic violence is positively associated with interethnic inequality; resources such as oil and cotton, on the other hand, are unrelated to the likelihood of ethnic violence.

China is a prominent country on the world stage, and the status of its domestic stability has regional and global implications. A key factor affecting the internal security—and the political stability—of China is persistent political violence in the Xinjiang Autonomous Region in western China. This resource-rich but underdeveloped province is home to the Muslim Uyghur ethnic minority group. In the past several decades, Xinjiang has seen a large in-migration of Han Chinese and has been the site of acute ethnic violence, often in the form of Uyghur riots and anti-government terrorism perpetrated by Uyghur separatists.¹ Both the Chinese government and international communities, furthermore, worry about growing transnational ties between Uyghur militants in Xinjiang and al-Qaeda-affiliated terrorists in South and Central Asia and the Middle East. During a recent visit to China, former US National Security Advisor Susan Rice alleged that Chinese Uyghurs from Xinjiang had traveled to Iraq and Syria to fight in the ranks of the Islamic State (ISIS) terrorist insurgency.²

Unrest in this region currently poses the most imminent threat to internal security and to Chinese central government control over peripheral regions.³ Though no published study to date has provided comprehensive figures, we recorded 213 ethnic violent events between 1990 and 2005 in the Ethnic Violence in China (EVC) database. In a 2004 speech, former Chinese President Hu Jintao identified Uyghur “separatism, extremism and terrorism” as the paramount domestic security question facing contemporary China.⁴ The Chinese central government has implemented various policies to address violent unrest in Xinjiang, ranging from traditional policing and counterterrorism tactics such as those featured in the various “Strike Hard” campaigns to a recent move to send 200,000 civil servants to villages in Xinjiang to better provide local public goods.⁵ These strategies, however, have not successfully quelled the unrest or dampened tensions between ethnic minorities and the government.