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Preferential policies for China’s ethnic minorities at a crossroads

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ABSTRACT

Background: The Chinese government’s principle of regional ethnic autonomy has remained consistent since the founding of the PRC in 1949. However, some voices within the country are calling on the government to rethink the principle of ethnic autonomy.

Purpose: This paper discusses two examples in support of the hypothesis that the system favoring ethnic minorities under the regional autonomy system implemented since the foundation of modern China has reached a turning point.

Main Argument: The first example describes the government’s handling of ethnic minority issues, in particular the July 2009 disturbances in Urumqi in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. The second outlines the political discussion of the regional ethnic autonomy system, with open discussion in the past few years about changing the system advanced by an individual formerly directly involved in formulating and implementing ethnic policies.

Conclusion: The first example demonstrates that the government’s policy of expanding preferential measures favoring ethnic minorities in order to stabilize restive autonomous regions has become untenable. The second highlights that the government’s confidence in its hard-line measures, even to the extent of allowing open discussion within China of whether the regional ethnic autonomy system should be reevaluated. This paper’s conclusion is that preferential policies for China’s ethnic minorities are at a crossroads.

KEYWORDS

Tibet; Xinjiang; Uyghur; ethnic minority policy; regional ethnic autonomy

1. Introduction

The Chinese government’s principle of regional ethnic autonomy has remained consistent since the founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949. This is the regional ethnic autonomy system, which the Communist Party of China (CPC) first applied for unifying Inner Mongolia from 1945 to 1947 and later implemented throughout China. The system, predicated on concentrating power in the hands of the central government and disallowing the introduction of a federal system or acknowledging ethnic minorities’ right to self-determination, confers certain benefits and some autonomy to ethnic minorities.
living in autonomous regions in return. This system was instituted to achieve political and economic equality in support of national unification and national security.

This paper will discuss two examples in support of the hypothesis that the system favoring ethnic minorities under the regional autonomy system implemented since the foundation of modern China has reached a turning point. Those examples are the government’s response to unrest in the Tibet and Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Regions from the Hu Jintao to the Xi Jinping administrations, and political discussion of the governance principle for ethnic minorities.

The first example describes the government’s handling of ethnic minority issues in Tibet and Xinjiang under Hu Jintao. In particular, this paper analyzes the July 2009 disturbances in Urumqi, Xinjiang’s principal city, to provide background for why the government’s policy of expanding preferential measures favoring ethnic minorities in order to stabilize autonomous regions with continuing unrest had become untenable. Because of this, the government hardened its policies toward ethnic minorities, policies that had been in place to ensure stability in autonomous regions, and came to believe, even despite those policies, in the legitimacy of its control over those regions. This change in policies and outlook came about due to the domestic situation relating to ethnic minorities and to structural changes in China’s relations with the international community.

The second example outlines the political discussion of the regional ethnic autonomy system. The harsher policies toward ethnic minorities touched upon above were implemented without making any changes to the regional ethnic autonomy system, the major political framework providing for preferential treatment for ethnic minorities. The continuing existence of this framework is the reason why repressive policies toward ethnic minorities have been less severe than they could be.

Along with the National People’s Congress and the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference, the regional ethnic autonomy system is one of the most fundamental political principles in China, and which Party orthodoxy dictated could not easily be changed. In the past few years, however, there has been open discussion about changing the system, advanced by an individual directly involved in formulating and implementing ethnic policies. It is highly likely that repressive policies against ethnic minorities would know no limits if the regional ethnic autonomy system was abolished. This section of the paper will examine the political discussion concerning the 70-year-old regional ethnic autonomy system and its future prospects.

I would like to make two noteworthy points to conclude this introduction. The first is the analysis of the July 2009 Urumqi uprisings, which describes not only the disturbance by Uyghurs on July 5 but also rioting two days later, on July 7, by Han Chinese. In China, the July 2009 riots are usually called “the July 5 Incident,” a reference only to the rioting by Uyghurs, but the real issues behind the uprisings cannot be understood unless the July 7 disturbances by Han Chinese are also analyzed, as this paper does.

The second point is the focus on the political discussion that took place between an individual formerly in charge of formulating and implementing ethnic policies and the State Ethnic Affairs Commission, a government department. As far as I am aware, this is the first paper to include this argument as a subject for academic discussion.
2. Government response to ongoing ethnic minority issues

Under the regional ethnic autonomy system, the individual appointed to head the autonomous region is, by law, a member of the region’s ethnic minority. But under the system where the Party has supreme power, political power in the district lies not with the region’s head but with the local Party Secretary. Members of ethnic minorities are not given preference for the Party Secretary post, and in all five of China’s autonomous regions, including Tibet and Xinjiang, the post of Party Secretary is occupied by Han Chinese. To China’s ethnic minorities, the Party’s dominance is synonymous with a political system monopolized by Han Chinese, a factor exacerbating dissatisfaction among ethnic minorities.

This dissatisfaction has pushed ethnic minority issues to the forefront and attracted international attention, particularly in the case of the 2008 unrest in Tibet and the 2009 disturbances in Urumqi, the capital of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region.

2.1. Tibet and Xinjiang: different issues involved

The Tibet disturbances of March 2008 grew into large-scale protests and demonstrations which eventually spread to Sichuan, Gansu, and Qinghai provinces and elsewhere throughout the country. The unrest was fueled by three factors: monks wishing to protect Tibetan culture, a public dissatisfied with economic disparities between minorities and the dominant ethnic group, and local political leaders resentful of their lack of power.

Prior to the protests, Party officials and emissaries of the 14th Dalai Lama had met yearly since 2002 for talks. The Dalai Lama’s representatives had lobbied for a higher level of autonomy throughout regions held to be traditionally Tibetan, an area much larger than Tibet itself. They maintained that this could be achieved using the powers granted to Tibet under China’s Constitution. But the Party rebuffed the Tibetans, answering that their proposal went against the Party’s guidance, the path of socialism with Chinese characteristics, and the regional ethnic autonomy system.

Understanding the background to the Tibetan demand requires awareness of Tibet’s population structure. According to statistics from 2010, the Tibet Autonomous Region has a population of 3 million, of which the majority, 2,720,000, or 91%, are Tibetan. However, this figure represents only 43% of the total population of 6,280,000 Tibetans living in China. The remaining 57% live outside the Tibet Autonomous Region, mainly in Sichuan, Gansu, and Qinghai provinces. This is why the Dalai Lama’s representatives wished to have a much larger area than Tibet itself recognized as Tibetan territory.

Partly as a result of the breakdown in talks between the two sides, since 2009 over 100 Tibetans have self-immolated to protest the government’s stance. The government

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2 For details on the March 2008 Tibet disturbances, see Hoshino, “Tōkokutaisei to minzoku mondai: Chibetto, Uiguru mondai o jire ni,” 160–164.
3 Zhu Weiqun, who was executive deputy director of the Communist Party of China United Front Work Department at the time and of whom more will be said later in this paper, participated as a representative of the Party in talks between the Party and emissaries of the 14th Dalai Lama.
4 Office for the Sixth Population Census of Tibet Autonomous Region, Tabulation on the 2010 Population Census of Tibet Autonomous Region; Population Census Office under the State Council Department of Population and Employment Statistics National Bureau of Statistics, Tabulation on the 2010 Population Census of the People’s Republic of China.
has branded the Dalai Lama a separatist, but Tibetan Buddhists continue to revere him and despite prohibitions on displaying his photograph, likenesses of the Dalai Lama can be found everywhere that Tibetans live even today.

Meanwhile, with regard to the July 2009 Urumqi riots\(^5\) in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, the Chinese government announced that 197 people had been killed and 1,721 injured. But although the initial disturbance took place on July 5 among Uyghur protesters, another riot two days later, on July 7, this time among Han Chinese, needs to be mentioned in order to add context.

The July 5 riot goes back to an incident 10 days earlier, on June 26. This was a brawl between Uyghur and Han Chinese workers at a toy factory in Guangdong Province in which two Uyghurs died. News of the clash spread to far-off Urumqi, sparking demonstrations among Uyghurs. The July 7 incident was a major disturbance involving thousands to tens of thousands of Han Chinese, who assembled to protest the killing or injuring of many Han Chinese in the July 5 riots. Thus, the initial clash involving Uyghurs and Han Chinese in June was the catalyst for the Han Chinese riots, which exposed the ethnic conflict existing in Xinjiang.

Again, a breakdown of population figures throws light on the roots of the issue. Statistics from 2010\(^6\) counted 21,820,000 residents in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, of whom 10 million, or 46%, were Uyghurs, and 8,830,000, or 40%, were Han Chinese. Given that in 1949 Uyghurs made up 76% of the population in Xinjiang and Han Chinese only 7%, population composition changed markedly in the ensuing 60 years, either because Uyghurs left Xinjiang or because Han Chinese migrated there. But given that 10 million of the 10,090,000 Uyghurs in China live in Xinjiang, it is clear that Han in-migration is responsible for the change in population composition.

A 2010 population survey also revealed that two-and-a-half times more Uyghurs than Han Chinese worked in agriculture, forestry, pastoralism or fisheries, whereas six times more Han Chinese than Uyghurs was employed by state or Party organisms or business enterprises or worked as managers, highlighting Han Chinese dominance in the social sphere as well. This is why ethnic discord is stronger in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region compared to Tibet.

### 2.2. Taking a harder stance toward ethnic minority issues

The most important difference between the Urumqi July 5 incident and previous disturbances over ethnic issues was that the July 5 riot sparked demonstrations by Han Chinese, who constitute the majority of the city’s residents. Of note here is that the term “July 2009 Urumqi riots” includes both the rioting by Uyghurs on July 5 and the disturbances by Han Chinese on July 7. In that sense, the Urumqi riots were a highly unusual ethnic issue and, judging from later political developments, the Party and the government seem to have considered the July 7 protests by Han Chinese a bigger political threat than the July 5 disturbances by Uyghurs.

\(^5\)For details on the July 2009 Urumqi riots, see Hoshino, “Tōkokutaisei to minzoku mondai,” 164–168.

\(^6\)Office for the Population Census of Xinjiang Uygr Autonomous Region, Tabulation on the 2010 Population Census of Xinjiang Uygr Autonomous Region; Population Census Office under the State Council Department of Population and Employment Statistics National Bureau of Statistics, Tabulation on the 2010 Population Census of the People’s Republic of China.
Traffic restrictions were imposed throughout Urumqi from 9 p.m. on July 7 to 9 a.m. on July 8. According to Wang Lequan, then Party secretary for the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Regional Committee of the CPC, this was because some Han Chinese workers, still fired up from the July 5 demonstrations and other acts against social order, had gotten into confrontations with Uyghurs. President Hu Jintao cut short his trip to Italy where he had been attending the G8 Summit, arriving in China on July 8, immediately after the demonstrations by Han Chinese.

Furthermore, in the initial stages of the disturbances, dissatisfaction among Han Chinese had triggered resentment of Uyghurs, but as time went by, Han Chinese complaints increasingly targeted political leaders. One possible reason was Han Chinese dissatisfaction with the ability of the autonomous region’s leaders to govern.

According to some sources, the demonstrations had spread rapidly because the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps, authorized to deploy security forces, had not done so quickly enough. Another reason for the breakdown in social order was the lack of a clear chain of command to allow appropriate action to be taken: officials from the autonomous region, the Urumqi city government, the Public Security Bureau, the People’s Liberation Army, the State Ethnic Affairs Commission and others had all taken turns trying to manage the situation immediately afterward.

Additionally, Han Chinese in Xinjiang were dissatisfied with the distribution of economic benefits within the community and especially resented the wealth enjoyed by some Han Chinese closely connected to Wang Lequan. They were also upset about the government’s handling of incidents that started in August, a month after the first disturbances, when dozens of people reported being jabbed with a hypodermic needle by a person or persons unknown. Those strange incidents had begun in early August and although news of the needle-stabbing attacks spread by word of mouth, the authorities had failed to use the mass media effectively to warn the public.

These various complaints led to another major uprising by Han Chinese on September 3, which left five people dead. The authorities attempted to lessen the tension by sacking Urumqi Party secretary Li Zhi and appointing Zhu Hailun, head of the law-and-order committee in Xinjiang, as his replacement.

These political developments showed that the paramount political issue was keeping the dissatisfaction of the Han Chinese, the majority group in Xinjiang, under control in order to ensure social stability and national security in Xinjiang.

The rancor of Han Chinese in Xinjiang toward Uyghurs that exploded in the July 7 riots took the government by surprise, but given that Han Chinese account for 90% of China’s population, there was little risk that Uyghur grievances would have led to antigovernment protests throughout the country even if police and military forces had been used to suppress the unrest. On the other hand, bringing in police or the military to control Han Chinese, even if they were living in an ethnic autonomous region, could very well have tapped into simmering discontent in various regions of the country and set off large-scale protests everywhere. When Han Chinese and Uyghurs were at odds, the government had no choice but to avoid stimulating more discontent among Han Chinese, even if it meant coming down hard on Uyghurs. Otherwise, any attempt to mollify Uyghurs with preferential measures would have been more likely to further inflame Han Chinese. In sum, there is little likelihood that the government will take
effective measures to address ethnic minorities’ complaints even if they have legitimate political or social grievances.

However, in the Uyghur case, the government did act. Wang Lequan, the shrewd long-time Party Secretary in Xinjiang, was replaced in spring 2010 by Zhang Chunxian, who was viewed as a moderate. The first meeting of the Central Committee Xinjiang Work Group, the first to take place since the founding of modern China, was organized, leading some to believe that the government would take a more flexible stance on ethnic minority issues. When Xi Jinping assumed power in 2012, Central Political and Legal Affairs Commission Secretary Zhou Yongkang, chairperson of the Central Committee Xinjiang Work Coordination Small Group, was replaced by Yu Zhengsheng, chairperson of the National Committee of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC). Deputy chairperson of the CPPCC and chairperson of the State Ethnic Affairs Commission Wang Zhengwei, a member of the Hui ethnic minority, was named to chair the General Office of the CPC, further raising hopes that the government would adopt more flexible policies on ethnic minority issues.

But later political developments showed that the government had not done so. Xi’s government saw the Uyghur problem as a terrorist issue rather than an ethnic minority issue and transformed the National Anti-terrorist Work Coordination Small Group into the National Anti-terrorist Work Guidance Small Group in 2013. In 2015, it appointed an anti-terrorism official with the rank of deputy director to the Ministry of Public Security. It also set up the Central National Security Commission as the governing body for national security and in charge of anti-terrorism measures, and enacted the Anti-Terrorism Act. And to show that it was determined to ensure social stability, the government, coming down hard on personnel, reprimanded several local leaders who had been in their posts in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region when disturbances had occurred in Yarkan County and in Kashgar in July 2014.

The government opted to take a hard line on the Uyghur issue, judging that it could sidestep criticism of its actions from the international community. But the Tibet disturbances had broken out in March 2008, just a few months before the Beijing Summer Olympics in August the same year, instantly making Tibet an international cause célèbre. Overall, the reaction to the Uyghur riots in Urumqi in July 2009 was more muted, partly because one dispute involved Muslims and the other Tibetan Buddhists.

More important, however, was the impact of the global financial crisis, which erupted between the Tibet riots in 2008 and the Uyghur disturbances in 2009, and how China’s response to the financial crisis boosted the global stature of its economy. Given its enhanced presence, the government was confident that it could dodge international criticism of its heavy-handed response to ethnic minority issues. The re-education camps established by the government in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, which have been the subject of recent press reports, are another sign of the authorities’ tough approach.

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7 See later in this paper for more on Wang Zhengwei.
8 Guo, Quanmin Fankong de Zhanlie Goujian: Yi Fankong Canyuquan Wei Zhongxin, Zhongguo, introduction, 5.
9 28, 29 Anjian Xiangquan Zerenren Shoudao Dangji Zhengji Chufen,” CPC NEWS, September 22, 2014. http://cpc.people.com.cn/n/2014/0922/c83084-25709262.html.
3. The ethnic minority issue debate at the political level

In view of the government’s hard line on ethnic minority issues, there has been discussion from various viewpoints of the future of the regional ethnic autonomy system, the governing principle for ethnic minorities. This part of the paper will describe the arguments regarding ethnic minority measures advanced by figures like Zhu Weiqun and others who have been involved in ethnic minority policy formulation and execution, rather than present academic arguments on the issue.

3.1. Zhu Weiqun and Alai discuss ethnic minority policies

Zhu Weiqun, who once chaired the Ethnic and Religious Affairs Committee of the CPPCC, became a reporter for the People’s Daily in 1988 reporting from ethnic minority regions. He later joined the General Office of the CPC, where he formulated proposals and implemented ethnic minority policies. After 1998, he occupied posts such as deputy director and executive deputy director of the United Front Work Department of the Central Committee of the CPC and was a representative of the CPC in talks with emissaries of the 14th Dalai Lama.

On December 13, 2014, Zhu had a discussion with Alai, a Tibetan writer born in Sichuan Province and head of the Sichuan Province Writers’ Association; a transcript of their talk appeared on ifeng.com on May 31 2015. At the end of their discussion, Zhu remarked that their talk was likely to arouse discussion. As he expected, China Ethnic News, a publication under the State Ethnic Affairs Commission, published a series of seven articles rebutting the points that Zhu had made, to which Zhu, in turn, issued a rebuttal.

The main thrust of the discussion was that Zhu and Alai touched on the need to review government policies toward ethnic minorities. The two stated that although the regional ethnic autonomy system and related policies in place since 1949 had been successful in many ways, given the great changes in domestic and international conditions and in ethnic awareness that had occurred in the intervening decades and the major political and economic reforms being implemented, they said that they believed that the time had come to shake free of preconceptions and review and improve policies toward ethnic minorities.
Zhu said that ethnic minority policies should help promote a sense of unity as Chinese people. But he criticized existing government policies, saying that they were being implemented to reinforce differences between ethnic groups and draw clear boundaries between autonomous and non-autonomous regions. When Chinese think of their identity, except for natural characteristics such as gender or age, their top priority is to identify with the ethnic group they belong to. In China, many factors make citizens aware of the differences between ethnic minorities. For example, Zhu mentioned the personal identity card, which carries information about the holder’s ethnic group. Zhu believed that this information should be deleted. Zhu agreed that, at specific stages of modern China’s history, it had been necessary to give ethnic minorities preferential treatment and that in certain circumstances it was beneficial to stress ethnic minority differences. But he believed that differences were now being overemphasized, so that even minor disputes between different ethnic minorities risked all being viewed as ethnic minority issues.

Alai expressed similar ideas. He pointed out that, historically speaking, boundaries between various ethnic minorities in China had been vague and flexible. But in the course of differentiating among various ethnic minorities, lines became overly strict when borders were drawn and administrative units established to designate residence areas, leading to a loss of flexibility in Chinese culture. Like Zhu, Alai maintained that overemphasizing ethnic group differences worked against the forging of a national identity.

The two also aired their views on education for ethnic minorities. Zhu stressed the need for Chinese-language education among ethnic youth whose first language is not Chinese. According to interviews he had conducted, many young people from ethnic minorities believed that preferential measures for their groups would ensure they were given jobs even if they did not speak Chinese well. Zhu complained that even some individuals in charge of education for ethnic minorities believed this too. Zhu maintained that although he was not against preferential employment measures for ethnic minorities, what he had heard led him to believe that, in the long run, continuing to implement such measures would be disadvantageous for minority group progress and development as competition in a market-based economy became more heated.

Alai also offered similar views about the education of ethnic minorities. The government was sending some children from ethnic minorities to study in Han-majority cities, which, as such, was a positive way of promoting education among ethnic minorities and encouraging interaction with Han Chinese. But even when sent to Han-majority areas, ethnic minority children experienced intangible pressure in an unfamiliar environment and banded together even more tightly. So, rather than being a solution, this policy ended up complicating the issue of ethnic minority education. Alai believed that regardless of whether a particular region was Han-majority or not, ethnic minority children should be dispersed more widely and sent out into a competitive environment. Alai also thought

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15Ibid., 370.
16Zhu, “Dui Danqijian Minzu Lingyu Wenti de Dianjian Sikao,” 155, etc. contains comments to this effect.
17Ibid., 372–373.
18Ibid., 368–369.
19Ibid., 372–373.
20Ibid., 372.
that teachers from outside ethnic enclaves should be invited to teach in ethnic minority schools so that they would make up at least one-third or even half, desirably, of the teaching personnel in those schools.\textsuperscript{21}

### 3.2. Rebuttals in China ethnic news

A seven-part series of articles appeared in\textit{China Ethnic News}, a publication under the State Ethnic Affairs Commission, stating that current policies toward ethnic minorities should be maintained and protected and rebutting the views expressed by Zhu and Alai. Toward those who doubted or held negative views of current theories or measures concerning ethnic minorities, the articles said that the 4th Central Working Group on Ethnic Affairs held in 2014 had made clear its policy of curtailing discussion and that the Working Group’s policy was the Party’s and the government’s most authoritative established theory on the issue.\textsuperscript{22}

The seven articles were all subtitled “Reeducation Concerning the Spirit of the Central Working Group on Ethnic Affairs.” The Central Working Group on Ethnic Affairs mentioned in the subtitle referenced the 4th Central Working Group on Ethnic Affairs which had taken place on September 28 and 29, 2014.\textsuperscript{23}

The Central Working Group on Ethnic Affairs is a meeting convened to review the state of implementation of ethnic minority policies and announce the main ethnic minority policy initiatives that the government should implement.\textsuperscript{24} Since the 1990s, the Central Working Group on Ethnic Affairs has met once every several years. The first two meetings were held in 1992 and 1999, respectively, during the Jiang Zemin administration, the third was in 2005 when Hu Jintao was in power, and the fourth took place in 2014 under Xi Jinping.

With regard to the 4th Central Working Group on Ethnic Affairs, Wang Zhengwei, a member of the Hui ethnic minority who was then chairperson of the State Ethnic Affairs Commission (and thus heading the organization overseeing \textit{China Ethnic News}), said that compared to the previous three meetings, the fourth was notable for clearly describing China as a unified multietnic nation. However, repeating what president Xi Jinping had said at the meeting, he stated that the ethnic policies adopted since 1949 had been consistently correct and that it was necessary to continue steadfastly executing regional ethnic autonomy measures.\textsuperscript{25}

### 3.3. The meaning of the ethnic minority policy debate

In his rebuttal to the \textit{China Ethnic News} articles,\textsuperscript{26} Zhu acknowledged that the autonomous region system and related ethnic policies adopted in 1949 had worked very well.

\textsuperscript{21}Ibid., 373.
\textsuperscript{22}Ming, “Qiangdiao Duoyangxing You He ‘Guofen’? Duiyu Zhongyang Minzu Gongzuo Huiyi Jingshen de Zaixuexi(1).”
\textsuperscript{23}“Zhongyang Minzu Gongzuo Huiyi Ji Guowuyuan Diliuci Quanguo Minzu Tuanjie Jinbu Biaozhang Dahui Zai Beijing Juxing”, \textit{People’s Daily}, September 30, 2014.
\textsuperscript{24}Wang, “Zhongguo tese Minzu Lilun Shinian Fazhanguan”, 1.
\textsuperscript{25}Wang, “Zuohao Xinshiqi Minzu Gongzuo de Ganglingxing Wenxuan: Shenu Xuexi Guanche Xi Jinping Zongshuji Zai Zhongyang Minzu Gongzuo Huiyi shang de Zhongyao Jianghua.”
\textsuperscript{26}“Zhu Weiqun Huiying yu Alai Duihua Yinfa Zhengyi”. 
He maintained, however, that some of those policies should be amended to reflect changed conditions at home and abroad.

Zhu expected that his discussion with Alai might spark social debate and was prepared to welcome different views and criticisms. But since the China Ethnic News rebuttals were subtitled “Reeducate yourself in the spirit of the State Ethnic Affairs Commission,” Zhu himself had created an opportunity to go against the official Party line. Debating under the banner of the State Ethnic Affairs Commission could have turned into a discussion of which side hewed closer to the will of president Xi Jinping, and Zhu probably saw the China Ethnic News articles as a political challenge.

Zhu, past deputy director of the United Front Work Department of the Central Committee of the CPC, had taken a hard line and refused to compromise when negotiating with emissaries of the 14th Dalai Lama as the Party’s representative during talks several years earlier. Meanwhile, the State Ethnic Affairs Commission, which is under the State Council of the PRC, is in charge of implementing the ethnic autonomous region system. The fact that the Commission used its own organ to rebut Zhu’s arguments indicates that it was an organized response on the Commission’s part. At this point, the skirmish appears to be Zhu versus the Commission, in other words, a dispute between an individual and an organization. But since Zhu, who previously formulated and implemented ethnic policies, presumably has numerous supporters, the argument should be viewed more as a politically tinged controversy that goes to the very heart of China’s policy on ethnic minority issues than a dispute on a personal level. The existence of this dispute signal that political crossroads have been reached: will China maintain the principle of regional ethnic autonomy adopted in 1949, or will it initiate reforms?

4. Conclusion

Since 2013, Xi Jinping has concentrated on making the “One Belt One Road” economic and diplomatic zone initiative a reality. The “One Belt” part of the concept envisions building an economic Silk Road linking China’s interior to Europe via Central Asia, with the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region expected to serve as a node through which people, money, and goods will flow. Accordingly, bringing stability to the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region and other ethnic minority regions on China’s borders is essential to realizing the One Belt One Road project. This is a priority political issue for the government, which is in a quandary about whether it should be more flexible or come down hard to stabilize ethnic minority regions.

The handling of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region disturbances in 2009 shows that the government has opted to take a hard line to ensure stability. Given China’s more robust presence in the international community, propelled by its rapid economic growth, its leaders are quite confident that hard-line tactics to ensure stability in ethnic minority regions are the answer.

The controversy over ethnic policies discussed in this paper was a political debate on whether to change the autonomous ethnic region system in effect since 1949 or maintain the status quo. The fact that the government is allowing open discussion within China on whether the regional ethnic autonomy system should be reevaluated is a manifestation that the government is confident of its hard-line measures. How China faces its multi-ethnic population in the future will be a litmus test of the manner in which the country manifests its presence as a major power within an international
community that is a rich tapestry of different ethnic minorities and cultures. Amidst expectations towards China’s role in the international community, its members would do well to continue monitoring how the country deals with its ethnic minority issues.

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