China’s Counterinsurgency Strategy in Tibet and Xinjiang
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China’s counterinsurgency strategy in Tibet and Xinjiang relies heavily on hard power and imposition. Well-functioning vertical coordination in the security sector of China’s political system and assimilationist nationality dynamics combine to favour the use of force against ethnic groups that do not accept the political legitimacy of China’s Communist Party. Transnational links contribute to China’s difficulties with implementing counterinsurgency in Tibet and helps China implement its strategy in Xinjiang. Development strategies aimed at improving living standards are crowded out due to a lack of horizontal coordination between civilian and security agencies and a bias towards unitary nation-building in Chinese nationalism.

It is often argued that economic development and market economic structures minimize violent conflict and the use of force. Nevertheless, violent social unrest has become a widespread phenomenon in China. Ethnic unrest in Tibet and Xinjiang form part of this challenge to the Chinese Communist Party’s rule. This article addresses the issue of China’s counterinsurgency strategy. This approach parts company with the literature that sees ethnic domestic unrest in Tibet and Xinjiang as the illegitimate use of force by government agencies against ethnic minorities.  

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We view ethnic domestic uprisings in China from the perspective of the Chinese government, as emerging from insurgents with political objectives involving regime change by means of subversion, political activity, insurrection, armed conflict and terrorism.\(^4\) We take this perspective to investigate the reasons for and the consequences of the Chinese governments’ approach to ethnic uprisings in Tibet and Xinjiang. This perspective contrasts with the conventional approach which addresses ethnic uprisings in these areas from the perspective of ethnic minorities, arguing that popular protests and riots that do not entail the organized use of subversion and violence is countered by the Chinese authorities’ systematic use of force.\(^5\) These analyses imply that hard power counterinsurgency measures are used against popular protests that do not qualify as insurgencies. We are not arguing that these analyses are wrong. However, we focus on explaining why China is using counterinsurgency strategies to counter Tibetan and Uyghur ethnic uprisings even if these do not constitute insurgencies.

We analyze to what extent China’s political structure, national identity and transnational links influence the objectives and instruments of Chinese counterinsurgency.\(^6\) We argue that China focuses on both hard and soft power methods of counterinsurgency. However, China’s political structure and national identity sustains a bias towards using force to deal with problems of ethnic unrest. Two incidents illustrate this point.

On 10 March 2008, the anniversary of the Tibetan uprisings against Chinese Communist Party rule in 1959, peaceful demonstrations took place in Lhasa, the capital city of the Tibet Autonomous Region in China. The demonstrations turned into violent riots by 14 March involving attacks on civilians, primarily on Han and Hui immigrants, and the looting and destruction of property. Political tension, socio-economic inequality issues and disturbance of the demonstrations of Tibetan monks contributed to the insurgency. The insurgency erupted at the same time as the National People’s Congress took place in Beijing and in the run-up to the Olympics in August 2008. As a consequence, the insurgency attracted considerable domestic and international attention. The Chinese authorities dealt with the insurgency by using force to re-establish stability and physical security.


\(^6\) The analysis is based on authors’ interviews with anonymous sources and observations of the local population and government officials in the armed and police forces and in think tanks and universities.
On 5 July 2009, protests broke out in Urumqi, the capital city of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in China. The protests involved at least 1000 Uyghurs, the largest minority group in Xinjiang. Over the course of a few days, the protests turned violent. The insurgency resulted in approximately 200 Han and non-Han Chinese casualties and 2000 injured according to official Chinese statistics. It also involved the looting and destruction of property. Political tension, socio-economic inequality issues and the killing of two Uyghurs in riots in southern China several days earlier contributed to the insurgency. The Chinese authorities handled the insurgency by using force to re-establish stability and physical security.

The incidents encouraged revisions in the procedures for how to respond to insurgencies, increasing the efficiency of force deployment and coordination between units with a view to enhancing the ability to swiftly re-establish stability and physical security. In addition, revised social and institutional reforms were introduced in the attempt to permanently deal with the problems of insurgency. These reforms have focused on educating local authorities in using peaceful instruments to deal with popular dissatisfaction and on promoting cooperation between provincial authorities to use the most efficient instruments available to address popular dissatisfaction.7

Ethnic uprisings in Tibet and Xinjiang highlight that China appears to rely heavily on the use of force to maintain stability and has been successful in improving the procedures for this type of counterinsurgency measures to maintain stability in the short term. However, China seems to be less successful with socio-economic reforms that are meant to ensure the legitimacy of Chinese governance over non-Han populations in Tibet and Xinjiang. This article revisits the concept of counterinsurgency to assess the advantages and drawbacks of China’s strategy for addressing ethnic uprisings in the two regions.

The article first outlines the central elements of counterinsurgency and their relevance for governments’ management of social uprisings. Second, we analyze Chinese counterinsurgency in Tibet and Xinjiang, using dynamics of political structures, nationalism and transnational links as explanations to the Chinese approach to counterinsurgency. Third, Chinese counterinsurgency is compared with counterinsurgency strategies in neighbouring states. Indonesia, India and the Philippines are Asian countries with democratic rather than

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authoritarian political structures, nationalism traits that stress diversity rather than unity and stronger transnational links with Western countries compared to China. A tentative comparison of similarities and differences between their counterinsurgency strategies and that of China helps clarify to what extent China’s practice constitute a special case. Fourth, we conclude by discussing the strengths and weaknesses of China’s counterinsurgency strategy.

Counterinsurgency as a strategy for dealing with ethnic uprisings

This section first discusses the development of the concept of counterinsurgency. The structure of the political system, national identity and transnational links are defined and related to our definition of counterinsurgency as central explanations for the ability of governments to successfully use counterinsurgency as a strategy for managing social uprisings.

Counterinsurgency refers to a government using its powers and resources to counter what is defined as an opposing insurgent force. An insurgency can be defined as “organized use of subversion and violence by a group or movement that seeks to overthrow or force change of a governing authority. Insurgency can also refer to the group itself”. Counterinsurgency is a comprehensive strategy concerned with governmental control with population groups challenging governmental authority within territory under its effective control. Today, counterinsurgency often change in time and space back and forth between war against local fighters in a traditional fight and non-state actors using transnational means of fighting that involves socio-economic instruments as well as force. A new kind of hybrid war exists that emerges from modern forms of popular uprisings obtaining power and legitimacy due to popular grievances against governmental policies.

Hybrid wars call for the application of a mixture of socio-economic instruments and means of violence. To promote political objectives, insurgents as well as governments make use of a broad range of resources and instruments that used to be the prerogative of governments. Today, advanced weaponry is easily available, shortages of governmental resources for social welfare such as education and health are widespread, and specialized labour form part of

11 Kilcullen, The Accidental Guerilla, pp. 300-301.
market economic dynamics which allows insurgents as well as governments access. For example, al Qaeda sponsors insurgents with weaponry, economic resources and education and has obtained know-how on weapons of mass destruction from specialists from the former Soviet Union to promote the establishment of a Middle Eastern Caliphate.\textsuperscript{12} Equally, governments make use of economic resources and instruments such as the establishment of transnational economic zones to promote cross-border trade among geographically remote population groups with transnational links. The establishment of interstate highways, railways and commercial sea transportation links is intended to promote trade and encourage economic growth and discourage discontent that may give rise to insurgencies. For example, in the Greater Mekong special economic zones and infrastructure projects have been created to promote development in continental Southeast Asian countries such as Vietnam, Cambodia, Myanmar and Thailand. Regional integration has become central to national economic development strategies and it is used by governments to facilitate transnational cooperation that prevent insurgents among dissatisfied population groups from establishing a foothold in remote areas.\textsuperscript{13} Thus, socio-economic mechanisms form an integrated part of the activities of insurgents as well as counterinsurgency agents.

Counterinsurgency can be difficult to distinguish from riot control and anti-terrorism. A riot is typically caused by a specific incident such as the killing of individuals from an ethnic minority group. The incident quickly evolves into civilian uprisings which disturbs stability. Civilian uprisings may be demonstrations or disobedience that might evolve into widespread violent demonstrations. Terrorists and insurgents may join riots that they did not themselves instigate, using them to legitimize their cause.\textsuperscript{14} Terrorism is the older phenomenon that was addressed by means of force. Terrorism may originate from political grievances. It aims to create fear by means of violence. These characteristics meant that counterterrorism was developed within the security arm of governments. The modern phenomenon of insurgency has political objectives in that it aims for strategic long-term results such as regime change by means of subversion, political activity, social welfare provision, insurrection, armed conflict

\textsuperscript{12} Kilcullen, ‘Countering Global Insurgency’, p. 604.
\textsuperscript{14} An example is the so-called Arabic Spring in 2011. It started in Tunisia with demonstrations following the self-immolation of a street vendor. He had his wares confiscated by government officials because he did not have a vendor’s permit and the money to bribe officials in order to obtain a permit. The protest evolved into riots in several Arab countries such as Yemen and insurgencies in Syria and Libya.
and terrorism.\textsuperscript{15} To match this broad set of instruments, counterinsurgency involves a wide range of socio-economic and institutional instruments as well as traditional security measures.

The terms riot control and anti-terrorism are preferred by governments to characterize their response to popular uprisings rather than counterinsurgency because this term suggest the existence of political opposition to governments with potentially legitimate grievances such as socio-economic inequality.\textsuperscript{16} Governments are looking for simple and manageable designations that will delegitimize popular uprisings and allow political authorities to demonstrate resolve and produce quantifiable and quick results. Often, these requirements entail the use of force to obtain popular legitimacy and allow governments leeway to implement comprehensive measures to address uprisings, attempting to match the broad range of violent and socio-economic means used by insurgents.

To analyze the means and motives applied by the Chinese Government when conducting counterinsurgency in Tibet and Xinjiang, we focus on three explanations of China’s counterinsurgency strategy. The explanations are political structure, nationalism and transnational dynamics.

\textit{Political structure explanations} define the alternative strategies available to the Chinese government toward the insurgents. From the central level of government down to the provincial level governmental agencies apply hard and soft power instruments to reach strategic objectives of protecting the population and eliminating insurgencies.\textsuperscript{17} Counterinsurgency arises from a military line of thinking that involves the use of hard power instruments on the basis of vertical top-down control with the state apparatus. The counterinsurgency objectives from this military setting have then been expanded, adding social and economic elements to the counterinsurgency agenda. The organization of military and non-military sectors of government involved in counterinsurgency has a bearing on the extent to which the strategies involve hard power instruments and methods of imposition and soft power instruments and methods of persuasion. Consequently, one factor to be assessed

\textsuperscript{15} Kilcullen, ‘Countering Global Insurgency’, p. 603.
\textsuperscript{17} John Mackinlay, \textit{The Insurgent Archipelago}, pp. 227-228.
when addressing the origins of counterinsurgency strategies is the influence of political structures on planning and implementation.

In China, ministries and the security agencies forming part of government are organized in a vertical top-down manner. This type of political structure gives rise to constraints and possibilities that define the types of actions that can be taken by governmental agencies toward insurgency. These constraints and possibilities include the type of resources allocated and their use. In addition, the political structure determines the level of cooperation between various types of agencies and governmental institutions, the character and extent of popular feedback concerning governmental performance, and the distribution of labour and decision-making power between agencies involved in counterinsurgency. The political structure also determines if the strategy focuses on changing the context in which insurgency takes place, targets the insurgents more directly, or combines these two approaches. By analyzing the political structure, we assess the origins of the type of strategy applied and to what extent coordination of governmental and popular levels contributes to its implementation.

Nationality dynamics are analyzed to measure the cohesiveness of Chinese society. This dynamic explains Chinese identity and the possibilities and constraints this dynamic creates for dealing with ethnic insurgencies. Counterinsurgency encompasses the establishment of basic security in the sense of freedom from wide-spread violence and stabilisation of basic societal structures so as to ensure that people can go about their daily social, economic and political practices without challenging governmental authority. Counterinsurgency targets both insurgents and the population at large. This implies not merely eradicating the insurgents by the use of force. It also entails strengthening civil society by institutional reform such as the building of schools to ensure education, the construction of power installations to improve the infrastructure necessary to increase living standards, and separating insurgents from civilians. Reintegration and reconciliation by improving the attractions of the society from where the insurgents are recruited form part of the long-term methods of counterinsurgency. However, counterinsurgency remains a stick and carrot approach. Counterinsurgency also entails using force to fight insurgents that remain opponents of governmental authority and continue to engage in social uprisings. As the insurgents try to adopt similar strategies aimed

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at winning the hearts and minds of local populations, the result is often a popularity contest between the government and the insurgents. Insurgencies challenge the unity of the nation-state by trying to undermine legitimacy from the existing regime. Consequently, one element in the assessment of the origins of counterinsurgency strategies is how national identity shapes planning and implementation.

Nationality dynamics define to what extent ethnically based insurgencies result in attempts to exclude or include the ethnic minority in the majority nationality group. Nationality dynamics also contribute to determining to what extent hard and soft power instruments are considered effective counterinsurgency instruments. They are a key element in determining if incidents are defined as acts of terrorism or as comprehensive acts of insurgency calling for a wide range of soft and hard power instruments. The analysis of nationality dynamics allows us to assess to what extent popular images of self and other influence the objectives and instruments of counterinsurgency strategies.

Finally, we analyze transnational dynamics. This dynamic defines the constraints and possibilities derived from the transnational links of governments and insurgents. Counterinsurgency is not limited to actions from a legitimate government within its own borders. Even if a government successfully applies counterinsurgency on its territory, insurgents from other continents or neighbouring states can destabilize this country or even the region by their actions within another country.

Counterinsurgency has yet to be developed to address transnational insurgencies adequately. However, governments try to match the transnational links of insurgents by establishing bilateral and multilateral cooperation. For example, Washington has cooperated with the UN and NATO to implement counterinsurgency in Afghanistan. Transnational links play a large role for insurgents as well as those fighting them. Consequently, one element in assessing the origins of counterinsurgency strategies is the influence of transnational links on the strategies of insurgents and on governments fighting insurgents.

Ideational and material links across borders of governments and insurgents influence the prospects of stability. The surge in transnational links has altered the equation between

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state and non-state actors, with some benefitting from these dynamics, whereas others lose out compared to the more compartmentalized and confined world of national counterinsurgency. Transnational links may allow insurgents to create safe havens outside governmental reach in other countries, to attract material and popular support, and to involve other state and non-state actors in the conflict to strengthen their cause. Transnational links may allow governments to cooperate with other states and international organizations in fighting insurgents, to obtain international legitimacy for their counterinsurgency strategy, and to cooperate on learning lessons concerning the conditions for successful counterinsurgency operations. The analysis of transnational dynamics allows us to assess to what extent external links of insurgents and governments influence the objectives and instruments of counterinsurgency strategies.

In the following section, we analyze China’s counterinsurgency strategy for managing ethnic uprisings in Tibet and Xinjiang. We focus on dynamics of political structure, nationalism and transnational links as explanations of China’s concept of counterinsurgency. We then address the counterinsurgency strategies of Indonesia, India and the Philippines to discuss differences and similarities between countries with different political structures, nationalisms and transnational links compared to China.

The political structures of Chinese counterinsurgency strategy

The central level of government

In China, the Chinese Communist Party is responsible for the security arm of government. The security arm covers the entire spectrum of the official Chinese civilian police, government security forces, and military forces. The People’s Liberation Army (PLA) is a military force responsible for defending China from external threats. In addition, the government can call on the PLA to assist in domestic security operations in exceptional circumstances. The PLA is under the unitary command of the Central Military Commission (CMC) and has its own military intelligence and counterintelligence system. The People’s Armed Police (PAP) is a paramilitary organization whose primary mission is domestic security. The militia forces are paramilitary with the primary duty of external defence. The PAP and the militias are under the dual command of the CMC and the administrative Chinese government arm the State Council through the Ministry of Public Security. The Ministry of

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National Defence is also under the dual command of the CMC and the State Council. The Ministry of State Security and the Ministry of Public Security under the State Council each have a powerful intelligence system and is responsible for police forces. These two ministries are responsible for suppressing political opposition against the party-state.24

Ethnic uprisings defined as threats to China’s sovereignty, territorial integrity and national unity such as those taking place in Tibet and Xinjiang are considered a core national security interest. According to State Councilor Dai Bingguo this interest is only secondary to preserving the CCP leadership.25 In November 2009, the People’s Daily, the official news outlet of the CCP, announced that China’s core interests cover China’s sovereignty claims over Taiwan, Xinjiang and Tibet.26 In February 2012 at a visit to Washington, DC, then Chinese Vice President Xi Jinping stressed the need for demonstrating respect for each other’s core interests, referring among other issues to Tibet. The principal instrument to protect these core interests is to maintain stability by a combination of traditional hard power use of force and non-traditional socio-economic development.27

The 2008 Tibet incident and the 2009 Xinjiang incident sparked reform measures in November 2010, allowing a wider margin for using force without permission. These measures are intended to ensure that violence and disruptions to stability are stopped before they become armed uprisings that require more extensive use of force. When the 2009 Xinjiang riots were getting out of hand and local police proved unable to maintain stability, forces on the ground waited for days for permission to use all means of force to eradicate insurgents. The stalemate took place because the CMC was unable to make a decision in the absence of its then chairman Hu Jintao until he abandoned the G8 Summit in Italy to attend to the riots.28 The CMC adopted Regulations on Emergency Command in Handling Emergencies by the Armed Forces. These clarified the division of labour between central strategic planning and the implementing agencies at provincial level regarding the use of force. The regulations also enhanced the possibilities for using force in the event of riots.29

27 Authors’ interviews with anonymous Chinese authorities, Beijing, May 2011. 
28 ibid. 
29 ibid.
To this end, regulations of the armed forces are detailed concerning their organization, command, force deployment, integrated support and civil-military coordination when they carry out missions with the purpose of maintaining social stability and handle emergencies.\textsuperscript{30} The regulations constitute a detailed guide for the lines of command from the central level of government down to the local provincial and regional level and detailed instructions on how to maintain stability when armed uprisings occur. At the local level, approval has been given to local governments for the unrestricted use of force in the event of local riots, involving small numbers and violence but not yet an armed uprising. In addition, intelligence is placed at the centre of decision-making, linking external and internal problems of insurgency so as to ensure cooperation from neighbouring states in addressing these issues.

At the same time, the central planners in China have acknowledged that economic growth and positive ethnic discrimination must be supplemented with social aspects of governance such as equality and fairness.\textsuperscript{31} Enhanced investment in poor inland areas and more efficient exploitation of their natural resources by means of direct state investments and investment incentives directed at Chinese and foreign companies have proved insufficient to address ethnically based insurgencies considered sources of threats towards China’s core interests of sovereignty, integrity and unity.\textsuperscript{32} Similarly, policies that are seen as favouring ethnic minorities such as the building of mosques and temples and the establishment of schools using ethnic minority languages such as Tibetan or Turkish have not dampened ethnically based grievances. In March 2011, China’s five-year plan directly addressed experiences of ethnically based unequal treatment by establishing national conferences. These meetings bring together provinces and regions to address problems of social inequality. The approach signals that social inequality is a top priority at all levels of government. Measures such as public diplomacy in the regions explaining how the Chinese government addresses ethnic grievances by means of the media and by educating local Communist party officials are seen as central instruments. The measures are to be used to address the alleged lack of understanding of China’s strategy for addressing grievances among the ethnic groups targeted.\textsuperscript{33} This approach entails a shift in focus from expanding and refining the economic and social capacities of ethnic minorities to better communication between ethnic minorities


\textsuperscript{31} Author’s interviews with anonymous Chinese academics and think tank personnel, Beijing, May 2011.


\textsuperscript{33} Authors’ interviews with anonymous Chinese think tank personnel, Beijing, May 2011.
and local government officials on the basis of better instructions to the latter group from central levels of Chinese authority.

*The Chinese security agencies*

Functional agencies with specialized knowledge about social and economic development and military, police, and intelligence issues influence the methods and instruments developed and allocated to achieve national security objectives. Chinese authorities responsible for managing ethnic uprisings tend to consider the Tibet and Xinjiang issues as a form of social protest rooted in economic conflicts engendered by China’s painful 20-year reform process.\(^{34}\) Socio-economic development is seen as a source of inequality, contributing to large unemployment rates among non-Han Chinese manual labour in rural areas. They have not experienced rising living standards and the government is not perceived as involved in addressing their grievances. Malfunctioning communication channels between governmental agencies and ethnic population groups discourage dialogue about grievances and encourage illegitimate protests that at times turn into riots.\(^{35}\) The failure to address socio-economic grievances among Tibetans and Uyghurs combined with the availability of instruments of force for addressing core national security interests imply that hard power instruments end up dominating strategies for how to manage ethnic protests that get out of hand.

Chinese security specialists distinguish between four levels of popular uprisings that may turn into insurgencies.\(^{36}\) One level is disturbance in society. At this stage, civilians engage in criminal acts. They merely pursue unsystematic activities that disturb law and order. Local police is equipped to deal with this type of instability. The second level is violence, which involves persons threatening to use violence. The third level is armed uprisings, encompassing large-scale violent actions. The fourth level is terrorism, which can either take the form of explosions, hijacking or attack.\(^{37}\) From the second level upwards, political objectives may be involved, such as secession, regime change and religious transformation of social and political structures. The situations in Tibet and Xinjiang involve all these political


\(^{37}\) Authors’ interviews with anonymous Chinese authorities, Beijing, May 2011.
objectives, which make them core national security issues as defined by China’s political authorities. The security arm of government has authority on how to manage them because its principal task is security management.

When an issue is defined as a core national security issue, agencies focusing on hard power take over command of the allocation and appliance of methods and instruments. One advantage of this unitary authority structure is that swift adjustments to changes on the ground or in strategic guidance at the central level of government can be made in the balance between hard and soft power. One disadvantage is that the agencies in command have an inherent preference for hard power instruments.

*The local level of government*

Ethnic uprisings in Tibet and Xinjiang are considered core national security interests. This definition entails that ethnic issues even at the preventive level of patrolling at the local level of government is dominated by hard power rather than socio-economic instruments of counterinsurgency. The patrolling of areas on suspicion that ethnic inhabitants host insurgents appear to be defined as elements in a larger insurgency theatre requiring involvement of police on a regular basis. In the event of violence, the PAP or even the PLA is called upon to assist in de-escalation efforts. In the 2008 Xinjiang incident, local government called upon the PAP and put the area under martial law. The role of the PAP became that of running check points. PAP personnel came in from other provinces, and they are rotated biannually. In the 2009 Tibet incident, monks were ordered to stay in the monasteries. They tried to escape, while police tried to hold them back. Groups of Tibetans began attacking Han Chinese. The PLA was authorized to set up road blocks and check points, supporting police forces logistically. This organizational structure implies that local personnel outside of the security arm of government with a soft power focus and knowledge of changes in popular demands, interests, and loyalties has little involvement in and little information on how insurgencies in their area of operation is handled. Recurring incidents of armed uprisings such as those taking place in 2008 in Tibet and in 2009 in Xinjiang have convinced the centre that hard power security forces commanded by the centre such as the PAP and the PLA are back-ups for local government in managing ethnic uprisings that may engender the use of

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38 Authors’ interviews with anonymous Chinese think tank personnel, Beijing, May 2011.
39 Authors’ interviews with anonymous Chinese academics, Beijing, May 2011.
40 Author’s interviews with anonymous Chinese think tank personnel, Beijing, May 2011.
41 Authors’ interviews with anonymous Chinese academics, Beijing, May 2011.
violence. This causes some resentment among those local government officials focusing on soft power measures such as the building of mosques, improving living standards and encouraging Han Chinese migration into Tibet and Xinjiang. Consequently, security forces using hard power receive very scant information about popular demands, interests and loyalties in the local communities.

Vertical and central government biases in China’s counterinsurgency strategy

In China, dynamics of political structure encourages counterinsurgency strategies relying on hard power instruments and imposition by central government and security agencies such as police forces, the PAP, and even the PLA as back-up force. The strong bias towards vertical rather than horizontal decision-making structures combined with the confinement of core national security issues to the control of central government and hard power security agencies targeting the insurgents directly crowd out local agents of soft power.

Nationality dynamics in Chinese counterinsurgency strategy

Unitary Chinese nationalism

Chinese nationalism is characterized by a unitary national identity within China’s borders which encourages an assimilationist attitude towards ethnic minorities. Modern Chinese nationalism is rooted in the identity dynamics developed during the Qing dynasty ruling China from 1636 to 1911. It defines the Chinese nation as those living within Chinese borders. To be Chinese is thus not to be some inherent form of Han. It is a unitary identity based on a cluster of cultural markers adopted from the Han, Manchu, the cultural heritage of frontier peoples, etc. Because Chinese national identity is unitary, the peoples that have accepted the social superiority and political control of China have in many cases become sinicized. In the process, assimilated non-Han peoples such as the Manchu and the Jews within Chinese territory have changed the character of Chinese identity to encompass elements of these ethnic cultures. An example of this process of identity development is the relationship between Chinese and Tibetan Buddhism, which was characterized by the incorporation of Tibetan Buddhist culture into the educational and political institutions of

42 Authors’ interviews with anonymous Chinese think tanks, Beijing, May 2011.  
China. The idea of Buddhism as a shared religion between Chinese and Tibetans has been used in the attempt to incorporate Tibet as part of the modern Chinese nation.\textsuperscript{45} The geographical remoteness of Tibet and Xinjiang, the late inclusion of these regions into development processes and the transnational link between peoples in frontier regions have contributed to the survival of separate Tibetan and Uyghur identities. The migration policies of the 2000s that began with the so-called Great Development of the West campaign was an attempt at eliminating ethnic dissent and separatist tension in Tibet and Xinjiang by promoting Han migration.\textsuperscript{46} The Chinese regime thought that accelerated integration would help turn the entire country into one big unified market and in turn increase the centripetal and cohesive forces of each nationality towards the greater “Chinese” nation.\textsuperscript{47} Continued Tibetan and Uyghur uprisings despite policies that favour ethnic minorities such as easier access to higher education institutions give rise to growing resentment against what is seen as ungrateful rebels. Improvements in procedures for using force and prioritization of communication efforts have taken centre stage. This priority emerges from the idea that a precondition for incorporating Tibetans and Uyghurs into the Chinese nation is to inform them about the efforts and rationale behind Chinese nationality policies. Those that remain willing to pursue ethnic uprisings despite these information campaigns are targeted by the use of force.\textsuperscript{48}

\textit{Socio-economic nationality dynamics}

China has undertaken major investment projects in Tibet and Xinjiang that involve hiring skilled Han Chinese labour migrating to these regions. Tibet holds approximately 40 per cent of China’s mineral resources, including coal, gold, lithium and copper, and the world’s allegedly largest uranium deposits. In addition, the Tibetan plateau, which includes the Tibetan Autonomous Region, is the source of most of Asia’s major river systems, encompassing the Yellow, Yangtze, Mekong, Salween, Brahmaputra, Ganges, and Indus


\textsuperscript{47} Millward, \textit{Eurasian Crossroads}, pp. 308-309.

\textsuperscript{48} Authors’ interviews with anonymous Chinese academics, Beijing, May 2011.
rivers.\textsuperscript{49} Xinjiang has considerable energy resources such as oil and gas. Moreover, Xinjiang is the gateway to Central Asian energy resources.\textsuperscript{50}

China’s central government transfers financial resources to support major development projects in Tibet and Xinjiang. Special economic zones intended to spearhead regional economic development have been established. However, construction contracts, top administrative positions and new housing are predominantly allocated to Han Chinese. Migration of Han Chinese into Tibet and Xinjiang has changed the demographics of these provinces. In Tibet, Tibetans remain the majority population group. However, two thirds of the capital city Lhasa’s inhabitants are Han Chinese. In Xinjiang, Han Chinese has superseded the previously dominant Uyghurs.\textsuperscript{51} The gradual outnumbering of Tibetan and Uyghurs contributes to ethnic tension and decreasing loyalty towards China.\textsuperscript{52}

Economic development has engendered the emergence of ethnic groups without direct connections to the insurgency and with primary interests in economic opportunities. However, these small groups of Tibetans or Uyghurs with vested interests in the existing regime have not bridged the gap between Han Chinese and ethnic minorities. This ethnic middle class form a minority of beneficiaries of economic reforms that are used as symbols of an alleged unitary Chinese national identity. Their ethnic kin tends to see them as servants of the CCP that contribute to ethnic disparity by establishing an image of equal opportunity that does not reflect the living conditions of the majority of Tibetans and Uyghurs.\textsuperscript{53} In addition, the nascent ethnic minority middle class complain that they are treated as inferior by the Han Chinese and have comparatively limited opportunities of social mobility.\textsuperscript{54} This enlightened group of ethnic minorities is alienated from the Chinese as well as their ethnic kin. Consequently, they may become a major future source of popular uprising.

\textit{Ethno-political nationality dynamics}

\textsuperscript{52} Authors’ interviews with anonymous local inhabitants, Lhasa, August 2011 and observations in Urumqi, Xinjiang, May 2011.
\textsuperscript{53} Authors’ interviews with anonymous Chinese think tank personnel, Beijing, May 2011.
\textsuperscript{54} Authors’ interviews with anonymous local inhabitants, Lhasa, August 2011.
Below the regional government level, a so-called fangzu\textsuperscript{55} system of local government outside of CCP control is in place. Fangzu is a structure of managing ethnic minority communities in the countryside. Fangzu handles the daily unofficial administrative concerns of Tibetans and Uyghurs at village level. The Chinese government does not recognize the fangzu system. Instead, it attempts to coopt the clan leaders within Chinese structures of government. The fangzu constitutes a small middle class of Tibetans and Uyghurs who works for the government and are beneficiaries of economic reform. Usually, they only reach modest levels of responsibility in the Chinese administration.

The CCP has tried to incorporate fangzu in local street committees in urban areas, making them responsible for people’s actions within their jurisdiction.\textsuperscript{56} The CCP encourages co-optation of unofficial authorities into party structures to prevent the fangzu from identifying with separatist elements among ethnic minorities. Instead, the Chinese authorities have attempted to establish the fangzu as links between the local ethnic population and the insurgents who can provide them with information about developments and sentiments among their ethnic kin.

Fangzu are mainly used by Chinese authorities in rural areas of Tibet and Xinjiang. The Chinese authorities do not trust the loyalty of the fangzu and accuse them of helping coordinate insurgents. At the same time, their own ethnic kin sees them as loyal to the Han Chinese. This sentiment is strengthened by the fact that the Chinese authorities designate rules for dispute settlement according to Han Chinese traditions rather than the customs of ethnic minorities. The local committees of which the fangzu form part are therefore looked upon with suspicion by both Han Chinese and by ethnic minorities. In addition, numerous ethnic minorities settle disputes outside of the official governmental system according to their own customs. The fangzu are not trusted by any of their reference groups and as such they contribute to interethnic tension in Tibet and Xinjiang.\textsuperscript{57}

\textit{The centrifugal forces of nationalism}

The unitary and assimilationist characteristics of Chinese nationalism leave Chinese authorities with a blind spot with regard to the need to invest minority groups with substantial

\textsuperscript{55} Fangzu is a Mandarin word for the clan system of Han, Tibetans, Uyghurs, and other people in primarily rural areas. Fangzu is a group of people within the same ethnic kin group. The clan system is used to reinforce village coherence by settling disputes and managing the distribution of benefits.

\textsuperscript{56} Authors’ interviews with anonymous Chinese authorities, Beijing, May 2011.

\textsuperscript{57} Authors’ interviews with anonymous Chinese academics, Beijing, May 2011 and with local inhabitants, August 2011.
measures of socio-economic opportunity and political authority. Consequently, counterinsurgency measures are unlikely to be successful. The focus on information and communication rather than tangible socio-economic improvement in living conditions, contributes to the alienation of ethnic minorities from loyalty towards the Chinese nation.

**Transnational dynamics in Chinese counterinsurgency strategy**

**Minority diasporas**

Tibetan transnational links potentially jeopardize China’s counterinsurgency strategy. The Tibetan diaspora is well-educated and politically astute. As such, it has been able to join forces with the US Buddhist community in lobbying on behalf of Tibetan separatism. This transnational community has successfully manifested an image of Tibetan Buddhism as a Shangri-La of peaceful religious practice. This image has greatly increased support for Tibetan separatism in the Western hemisphere. This trend strengthens the distinctiveness of Tibetan cultural practices rather than engendering their inclusion in a unitary Chinese concept of the nation.

The territorial platform of the Tibetan diaspora is the political structure in exile built up in neighbouring Dharamsala since 1959. Following China’s annexation of Tibet in 1951, the religious and political leader of the Gelug branch of Tibetan Buddhism, the Dalai Lama, obtained political asylum in India. The Dalai Lama supports autonomy for Tibetan people in Tibet within China. In addition, the Tibetan independence movement has developed into a strong lobby group in India and the US. China’s growing concern over the internationalization of the Tibet issue is one reason for rising Chinese-Indian tension levels in recent years. The Chinese concern is related to the Chinese-Indian border dispute and Beijing’s suspicious attitude towards cross-border Tibetan relations. India is subject to a growing number of Chinese intrusions into Arunachal Pradesh across the north-eastern part of the disputed border towards Tibet. In April 2013, the latest incident of PLA intrusion into disputed territory in Ladakh was reported. The PLA’s move was a reaction to India’s construction of bunkers in the area that overlook disputed and sovereign Chinese territory. The border conflict with India is a thorn in the side of Beijing, complicating its objective to incorporate Tibetans as part of the Chinese nation.

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58 Authors’ interviews with anonymous local inhabitants and observations in Tibet, Lhasa, August 2011.
The Uyghur insurgency issue is linked to neighbouring Central and South Asia, which hosts their ethnic kin.\textsuperscript{60} Uyghurs have popular memories of their political significance.\textsuperscript{61} These date back to the proclamations of the East Turkestan Republic in Kashgar in 1933 and another in Yining in 1944. These attempts at self-rule did little to bridge competing political, religious and regional differences among the Turkic Muslim people, and they ended in violent social disorder. Nevertheless, this political history causes many modern Uyghurs to call for an independent Uyghuristan.\textsuperscript{62} However, Uyghur political aspirations differ. Some support the pan-Islamic ideas manifested in the East Turkestan Islamic Movement. Others support a pan-Turkish future exemplified by the East Turkestan Liberation Organization. Finally, some favour an independent Uyghuristan state manifested in the East Turkestan Independence Movement. The many factions competing for political support among Uyghurs combined with concern about the links between transnational terrorism and pan-Islamic elements among Muslim communities implies that international support for Uyghur separatism is modest both regionally and globally.

The weak support for Uyghur separatism has helped China obtain support for its counter-insurgency operations in Xinjiang, including cooperation on the use of force to eradicate insurgents.\textsuperscript{63} China’s support for the 2001 US-led war on terrorism, including the anti-Taliban operations in Afghanistan and Washington’s recognition in 2002 of the East Turkestan Islamic Movement as a terrorist group, contributes to emphasizing common US-Chinese interest in combatting militant transnational Islamic movements.\textsuperscript{64} This common interest discourages the US from overt criticism of Chinese counterinsurgency operations in Xinjiang.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) is a source of support and cooperation on counterinsurgency operations against Uyghur insurgents. The SCO includes China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. The organization was founded in June 2001 at Beijing’s initiative. At present, the basic mission of the SCO is to combat terrorism,

\textsuperscript{60} The Uyghurs live primarily in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in China. Outside of China, significant diasporas live in Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Smaller communities live in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Turkey.

\textsuperscript{61} Authors’ interviews with anonymous local people and observations, Urumqi, Xinjiang, May 2011.


\textsuperscript{63} Authors’ interviews with anonymous Chinese academics, Beijing, May 2011.

drugs and transnational organized crime. In 2009, the SCO agreed with the observer state Afghanistan to take joint action to combat terrorism. Similar agreements were made in 2009 with the observer states Pakistan, Iran, India and Mongolia. The SCO counterterrorist mission and US listing of ETIM as a terrorist group invest Beijing’s effort with greater efficiency and contribute to sealing off the Uyghurs in Xinjiang from the Uyghur diaspora.

**Cross-border integration**

China has attempted to establish border trade agreements and infrastructure with neighbouring countries to facilitate regional economic development and access to key energy and mineral resources in neighbouring areas. A 2003 Memorandum on Expanding Border Trade between New Delhi and Beijing is intended to boost economic development in the Indian and Chinese Himalayas. The agreement recognized Nathu La as the third point for border trade between India and China, the other two being Lipulekh pass in Uttarakhand and Shipka La in Himachal Pradesh. Nathu La is a mountain pass that connects the Indian state of Sikkim with Tibet. Sikkim is also claimed by China, forming part of the unresolved border dispute between China and India. The Bhutias, which constitute approximately ten per cent of Sikkim’s population, originally emigrated from Tibet and speaks a dialect of the Tibetan language. In July 2006, the local traders of Sikkim and Tibet Autonomous Region formally started trade through Nathu La, thus reviving a historic link that used to be part of the so-called Silk Road. China and its long-standing strategic partner Pakistan opened the Karakoram highway in 1982, connecting Pakistani Abbottabad with Kashgar in Xinjiang with the purpose of fostering trade, popular interaction and military assistance between China and Pakistan.

China is concerned about the effects of cross-border integration on ethno-political integration. China has prevented uncontrolled access between Sikkim and Tibet, obstructing border trade since the Tibetan uprising in 2008. In June 2011, China defied the Delhi-Beijing border trade deal by demanding customs duty from the Indian traders for their products to enter Tibet. In addition, the border trade in 2010 involved no import from China to India. According to local traders, the fifteen items that China has identified for duty-free import were obsolete. Products like yak tail, goat skin, yak hair and sheep skin has no demand on the Indian side of

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Beijing argues that the Karakoram highway is used to transport weapons, insurgents and separatist ideas to China. These issues have encouraged China to enforce repeated closures of the Karakoram highway. To ameliorate Chinese concerns, Pakistan has adopted a strict counterinsurgency policy vis-à-vis the Uyghurs to placate Chinese concerns about the spread of militant Islam from South Asia into China.

Transnational security cooperation

Efforts at countering transnational insurgency dynamics are planned and controlled by the security arm of China’s government. The PLA, the PAP, intelligence and police forces and their lines of command are involved in these efforts without horizontal coordination between these lines of command. They conduct multilevel exercises in remote areas where insurgents operate both inside China and in neighbouring states. Initially, the exercises were small-scale and aimed at coordinating efforts to stop riots and eradicate terrorists. Over time, they have been turned into high-level small to medium scale exercises emphasizing the participation of special forces from several states. However, they remain country-focused rather than genuine multinational exercises because the willingness to expose strengths and weaknesses when exercising and to exchange information is minimal.

India and China have held joint antiterrorist exercises to promote a rapprochement between the armed forces of the two countries in 2007 and 2008. The exercises, which involved approximately 100 troops, encompassed a scenario where the joint forces had to eliminate terrorists that had set up a training base, attacked a trade post, and taken hostages on the Indian-Chinese border. The theme reflected Chinese concerns about the possibility of alleged Tibetan extremists from the diaspora staging cross-border raids into Tibet. Pakistan and China participate in joint antiterrorist exercises in Xinjiang. The first of these were held in 2004 and involved approximately 400 troops. In addition, from 2002 onwards a number of joint antiterrorist exercises have been carried out by SCO member states. In 2003, the exercises took place in Xinjiang with approximately 1300 participating troops. In 2007, all SCO member states participated in joint antiterrorist exercises. These started in Urumqi, the capital city of Xinjiang and then transferred to Chelyabinsk in Russia, which was the central

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66 Authors’ interviews with anonymous local people, Lhasa, August 2011.
67 Authors’ interviews with anonymous Chinese authorities, Beijing, May 2011.
setting of the exercises. More than 7500 troops participated. In 2011, Xinjiang again hosted a joint antiterrorist SCO exercise organized by Chinese intelligence in the Tianshan Mountains. This area provides safe havens for Uyghur insurgents. The observer states India, Pakistan and Mongolia watched the drills.70 In 2013, the Snow Leopard Commandoes, an elite anti-terrorism force under PAP are taking part in exercises with Russia in Beijing, marking the first PAP invitation of its foreign counterparts to conduct joint exercises in China.71

The exercises are shows of force, intimidating insurgents and the local population from supporting the insurgency. In addition, the exercises have created opportunities for states to undertake support operations in the event of ethnic unrest in neighbouring countries. The value of the joint exercises remains limited because the coordination and synchronization of armed forces from different countries is limited due to mistrust between neighbouring states.

*The mixed blessings of transnational dynamics*

Diaspora dynamics works to the advantage of Tibetan separatists, but to the disadvantage of Uyghur separatists. Cross-border integration may ameliorate border conflicts, but also help insurgents establish transnational links. Transnational security cooperation may improve the efficiency of counterinsurgency operations, but efforts are hampered by mistrust between states. Transnational links is thus a mixed blessing for China’s counterinsurgency efforts.

**Chinese counterinsurgency strategy: A comparison with Asian states**

*Dynamics of political structure*

Counterinsurgency strategies in Asian countries such as Indonesia, India and the Philippines appear to have different origins and dynamics to those applied in China. A tentative comparison of the political structures of these states with those of China indicates that democratic structures allow ethnic minorities a political platform for insurgencies not available to Tibetans and Uyghurs. In Indonesia, an insurgency in the newly independent democracy Timor-Leste emerged in 2006. Perceptions of discrimination in allocating political and socio-economic resources to rural Timorese surfaced when they got a political platform from which to voice their criticism.72 In India, Maoist Naxalites’ use of media has allowed them a visibility they have used to expand their recruitment basis among socio-

70 Authors’ interviews with anonymous Chinese authorities, Beijing, May 2011.
economically deprived population groups.73 In the Philippines, the voicing of dissatisfaction with economic development projects among Muslims has enhanced the popularity of the Islamist insurgency.74 The cases imply that counterinsurgency in democracies is less efficient because it provides effective media platforms for insurgents to win popular support. Consequently, vertical coordination between central and local agencies is less efficient. However, socio-economic counterinsurgency dimensions also play a greater role due to the resilience of democracy as a platform for peaceful popular influence. The long-term ability of Indonesia, India and the Philippines in ameliorating ethnic grievances by addressing socio-economic inequality might be better than that of China.

Nationalist dynamics

The nationalisms of Indonesia, India and the Philippines tend to downplay assimilation and emphasize diversity. In Indonesia, democratization based on ethnic diversity and consensus decisions has intensified infighting among Jakarta elites. A distracted central government is unable to stem separatism and halt communal violence, allowing for a steadily growing Islamic insurgency.75 In India, centralization generated threats against regional identities and fertile ground for growing religiously exclusive Hindu nationalism. In the Philippines, recurring debates about Filipino identity reflect that coalition-building across the ruling strata rather than development of the country-side has been a main governmental concern, providing fertile ground for growing ethnic and religious separatism as the country’s economy is deteriorating.76 Compared to China, these cases entail greater elements of horizontal coordination to accommodate the demands of diverse ethnic groups forming part of common nation-building processes. However, national identity is less clearly defined because it is frequently renegotiated. Strategies of hard power and imposition are less efficient compared to China because they require clear lines of command.

Transnational dynamics

The transnational links of Indonesia, India and the Philippines have mixed effects on the preferred strategies. These states have close links to Western countries, allowing for Western

76 David G. Timberman, A Changeless Land: Continuity and Change in Philippine Politics (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1991).
influence on counterinsurgency. Indonesia endorsed the deployment of the Australian-led International Force East Timor (INTERFET), mandated by the UN to address the East Timorese insurgency 1999 to 2000. INTERFET successfully stabilized the environment, using a strategy of instantaneous suppression of disorder, violence and lawlessness and very active communication with the local population. India argues that the Nepalese Maoists, who is part of Nepal’s political system, oversee political and military training of Indian Naxalite insurgents. The Nepalese Maoists are developing close ties with China’s leaders. India sees external involvement as detrimental to the success of counterinsurgency, contributing to violence and to threats against the Indian regime and the population. Since 2001, the US has helped the Philippines acquire the tools and know-how required to decimate the Islamist Abu Sayyaf group with links to al-Qaeda. US-Philippine cooperation on counterinsurgency has stepped up efficient use of hard power, but persistent socio-economic inequality has caused the insurgency to continue. Thus, Western influence on Philippine counterinsurgency practices is a mixed blessing.

Compared to Indonesia, India and the Philippines, China wields more power internationally, allowing Beijing to ignore external pressures more easily. India comes closest to China in warding off external interference. In Indonesia, Western influence appears to have encouraged less use of force. In the Philippines, Western links appear to encourage more use of force. These dynamics imply that a pattern between external influence and the strategies used does not apply.

Conclusion: Hard power and imposition in Chinese counterinsurgency

This article has investigated China’s counterinsurgency strategies in Tibet and Xinjiang. The analysis has demonstrated that China’s political structure is inherently biased towards hard power and imposition. This tendency is exacerbated by the territorial and unitary Chinese national identity that encourages assimilation or exclusion by using force. Transnational links give rise to challenges as well as advantages regarding China’s ability to meet its objectives by means of hard power and imposition.

Well-functioning vertical coordination in the security sector and the territorial and unitary brand of Chinese nationalism combine to favour the use of force against ethnic groups that do not accept the legitimacy of Chinese rule. Similarly, the two-fold faces of security agencies responsible for hard and soft power instruments and the difficulties of addressing economic development interests and ethnic disparities at the same time contribute to the inherent bias in China towards short-term hard power strategies. The crowding out of long-term soft power strategies circumscribe the coordination and synchronization of socio-economic and politico-security strategies. As a result, the strategies do not take into account all aspects involved in ethnic uprisings. Chinese nationalism contributes to exacerbating this problem because it encourages exclusion in the event of non-compliance with the demands of China’s political authorities. Transnational links between insurgents also encourage Chinese authorities to prioritize hard power rather than economic development. Transnational links contribute to ethnic cleavages. Tibetans and Uyghurs estranged from China look externally for alternative political authorities such as the Dalai Lama in India and the East Turkestan movement in Central Asia. The Tibetan diaspora’s links to Tibetans within China hamper China’s counterinsurgency efforts. By contrast, widespread antipathy against political Islam outside Muslim communities and the links between Uyghur insurgents and external political Islamist movements help China implement counterinsurgency in Xinjiang.

The interplay between elements of force and development in Chinese counterinsurgency imply that security concerns shape development as much as development influence security concerns. The findings differ from the Asian democracies Indonesia, India and the Philippines. They struggle with inefficient vertical coordination of counterinsurgency efforts. External influence on counterinsurgency is a mixed blessing. Greater domestic freedom of speech and considerable emphasis on socio-economic development may contribute to long-term domestic peace and stabilization. However, media access combined with relative socio-economic deprivation of ethnic minorities enhances the popularity of insurgents. In China, government controlled development often favour politically influential groups instead of creating greater socio-economic inter-ethnic equality. Development becomes a rhetorical device justifying counterinsurgency strategies that remain biased towards vertical lines of command and instruments of hard power and imposition carried out by the security arm of government.

80 This point is made in Avery Goldstein and Edward D. Mansfield, ‘Peace & Prosperity in East Asia: When Fighting Ends’, Global Asia, 6(2), (2011), p. 15.