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China's Troubled Frontier Regions



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An Intelligence Assessment

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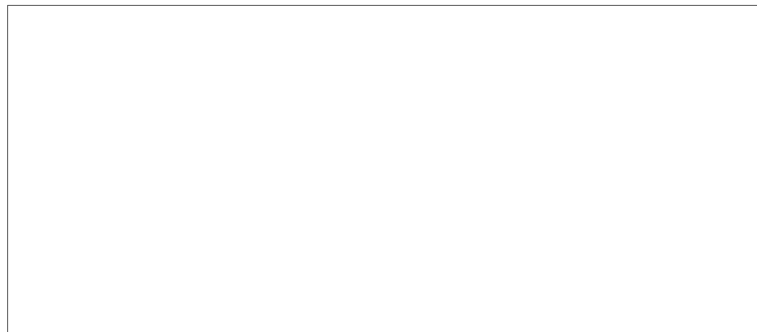
China's Troubled Frontier Regions



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An Intelligence Assessment

*Information available as of 27 March 1982
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China's Troubled Frontier Regions



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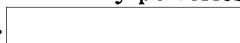
Key Judgments

Two years after its inception, Beijing's new minority policy appears to be stagnating. Chinese leaders have not, as they had hoped, been able to carry the policy far enough to overcome years of economic mismanagement, racial conflict, and leftist excesses, and thus to strengthen the security of China's border regions and contain local nationalism. Implementation has done little to integrate the minority areas more fully into the mainstream and reduce their drain on the national budget. The government believed that a moderate, constructive policy toward minorities could play an important role in improving relations with India and the moderate Arab countries, which have indeed been impressed with China's concessions to its Muslim minorities.



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The policy, announced in May 1980, granted minority regions a measure of increased autonomy, called for minority personnel to replace significant numbers of Chinese officials, and sought to spur economic development by increasing aid and implementing incentive systems. Beijing also loosened restrictions on minority cultures and appointed prominent minority members to prestigious, though relatively powerless, positions in the national and regional governments.



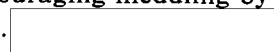
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The policy showed some initial success but now faces major obstacles. The ambitious economic program will almost certainly fall short of expectations because of the lack of infrastructure and the shortage of qualified personnel. The implacable hostility of most minorities toward the Chinese and the resilience of local nationalism make Beijing leery of permitting greater autonomy. In addition, ethnic Chinese and minority government officials and party cadre oppose the policy on a variety of grounds—including that of ideology—and they fear that their own positions will be weakened.



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Despite China's efforts, the border regions will remain areas of tension and a drain on the country's limited economic resources. The chronic and occasionally serious violence that has plagued the regions is certain to continue, undermining political security and encouraging meddling by China's neighbors, particularly the Soviet Union.



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Party Chairman Hu Yaobang is closely identified with minority policy. A lack of progress in minority affairs or an upsurge in violence could be used by his rivals as part of a larger campaign to discredit him.



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April 1982

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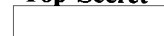
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Contents

	<i>Page</i>
Key Judgments	iii
Introduction	1
An Intractable Problem	1
The New Minority Policy	4
Implementation: The Case of Xizang	6
Economic Development	6
Regional Autonomy	7
The Situation in Other Minority Regions	9
Cadre Opposition	9
Security and Subversion	10
Outlook	13



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Figure 1
CHINA: Ethnolinguistic Groups



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China's Troubled Frontier Regions



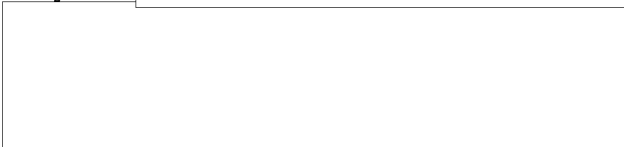
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Introduction

China's vast, sparsely populated minority areas are so important strategically and economically that they are a perennial source of concern for the government in Beijing. These regions contain important mineral reserves and sensitive military and intelligence facilities, including the Lop Nor nuclear test site. They share long borders with the Soviet Union and with its client states of Vietnam, Laos, Afghanistan, and Mongolia, as well as with its ally India. All Chinese regimes have been able to maintain only a tenuous grip on the border regions; the Communists are no exception. Beijing has failed to integrate these regions fully into the Chinese polity and economy. China does, however, strive to contain the tension so that hostile neighbors cannot exploit it.

Particularly from the late 1950s, economic mismanagement and political excesses, culminating in a campaign for total assimilation, led to heightened tensions between minority peoples and ethnic Chinese. Frequent and occasionally large-scale armed clashes aroused leadership concern about political stability in the minority areas, particularly in the wake of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. The issue assumed sufficient importance that senior party leaders, including Vice Chairman Deng Xiaoping, party Secretary Hu Yaobang, and Politburo member Wang Zhen, made troubleshooting trips to such areas.

Xinjiang and Xizang (Tibet) are the largest and most important minority areas, and Beijing's problems seem more acute there than in Inner Mongolia, Ningxia, Guangxi, and Yunnan—other provinces with large minority populations. This paper concentrates on Xinjiang and Xizang because they are testing grounds for a minority policy announced in May 1980



An Intractable Problem

Beijing's relations with its ethnic minorities would be difficult and complex under the best of circumstances. Whereas the heartland is populated by sedentary, relatively homogeneous, ethnic Chinese, the border areas contain an extraordinarily diverse and predominantly non-Chinese population. China has some 56 different minority groups practicing a variety of religions and speaking a number of non-Chinese languages. Yunnan alone has over 22 minority groups and Xinjiang has 13, predominantly Moslem, Turkic peoples with varying traditions as traders, farmers, or nomadic herdsmen.

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China's minority areas are backward and, for the most part, abysmally poor. In Yunnan local tribesmen still practice primitive, slash-and-burn agriculture, and the Chinese press reports that the basic literacy rate is less than 20 percent for adults. Even in the more developed areas of the northwest, the average annual per capita income of minorities is well below that of the interior; moreover, the social capital and economic infrastructure required for modernization are lacking.

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Beijing's relations with its minority areas are complicated by the overwhelming influence of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in frontier areas, especially in the far west, the most troubled area. Military officials have generally been less sympathetic than civilian leaders to minority sensitivities, fearing that loosening control could undermine Chinese security. The Army has played the major role in managing and developing the economy of Xinjiang and Xizang, including opening state farms, setting up industries, building cities,

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¹ Peasants in the largely Uighur minority areas of southern Xinjiang, for example, have an average annual per capita income of 70 yuan (excluding income from private plots and sideline production), as compared to 107 yuan for the overall rural provincial average. Urban factory workers in Xinjiang, most of whom are Chinese and receive generous government subsidies in addition to their salaries, average 904 yuan per year. Embassy reporting, Chinese press reports, and the statements of Chinese leaders reinforce the fact that the minority areas are among the poorest in the country.

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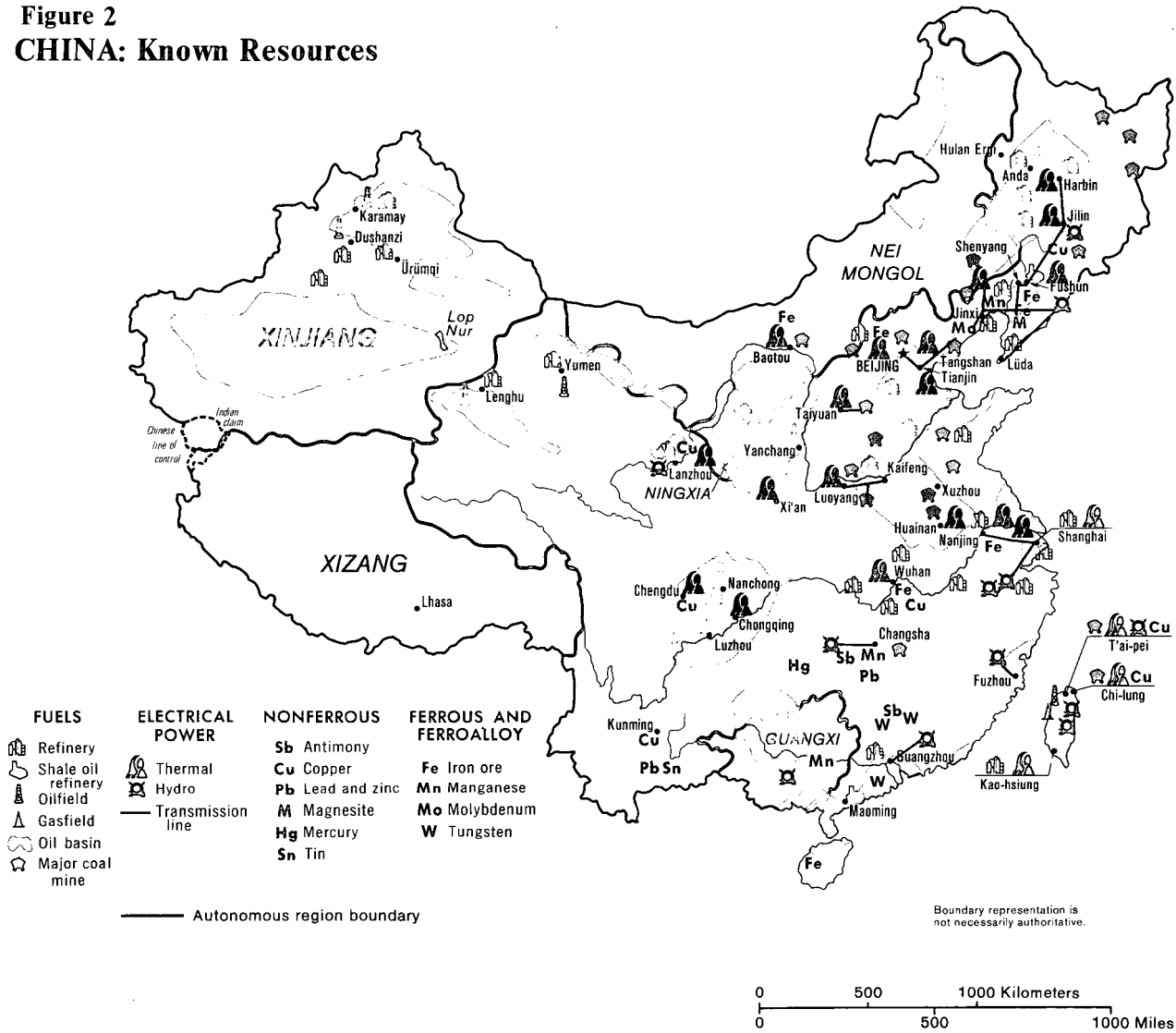
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Figure 2
CHINA: Known Resources



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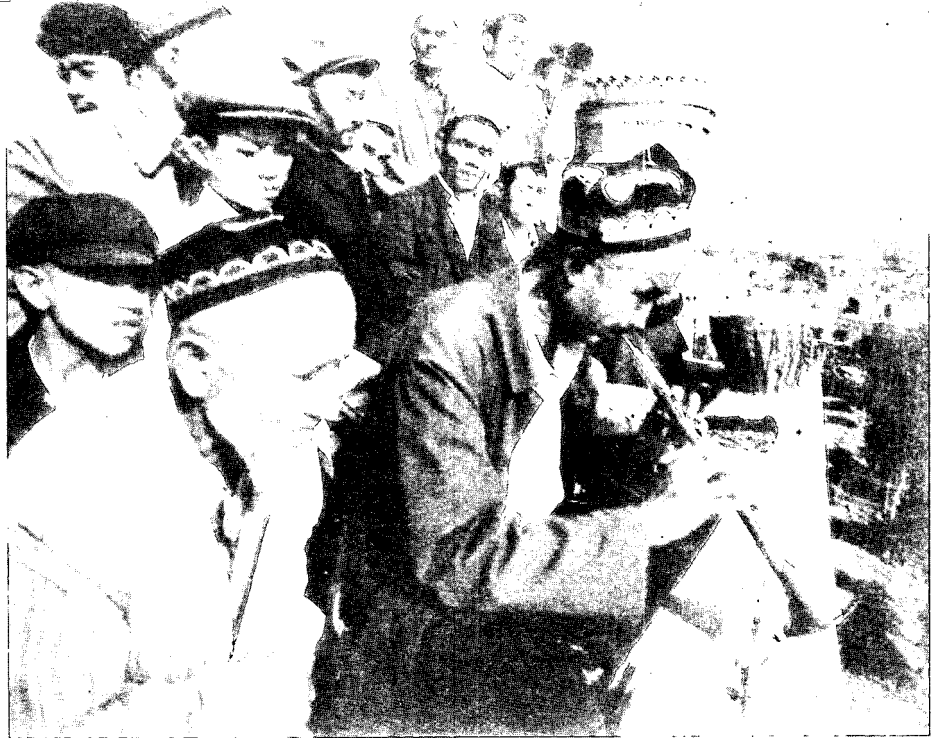
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Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang.

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constructing roads and railroads, and overseeing the settlement en masse of demobilized Chinese troops and down-to-the-countryside youth. PLA cadre also established and staffed the party organization in both areas during the 1950s, and leading PLA commanders with longstanding ties to the border areas—such as Politburo troubleshooter Wang Zhen—continue to play an important role in local politics.

Beijing's erratic and often harsh minority policies during the 1950s and 1960s left ill will and suspicion that cannot be eradicated. During the Great Leap Forward (1958-60) and the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), advocates of a moderate policy that attempted to strike a balance between the interests of the party and those of the local peoples lost out to those favoring total assimilation. Minority cultures were viewed as subversive and antisocialist, and minority leaders were labeled as class enemies. China's leftists sought to impose the Maoist vision completely and to rout the "special characteristics" of the minority areas. Collectivization was imposed on sedentary

and nomadic peoples alike, Islam and Buddhism were suppressed as "feudal vestiges," and thousands of mosques and temples were destroyed.

Maoist policies devastated the already weak economies of the border areas. Economic mismanagement was aggravated by Chinese insensitivity. In Xizang, for instance, the radicals, insisting that "grain is the key link," forced the planting of wheat, which caused shortages of barley—the traditional Tibetan staple. Ideologically motivated crackdowns on private trade brought local commerce to a halt; yet the state proved incapable of providing needed goods and services.

The human cost of leftist policies was severe both in personal suffering and the loss of potential administrative and technical personnel. Many minority intellectuals in Xinjiang, for example, were accused of having ties to the Soviet Union or of being "local

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Oroqen hunters, northeast China.

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A Mongolian wrestler, Inner Mongolia.

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nationalists” and were imprisoned, some for more than 20 years. Several generations of some of the best educated and most respected families were wiped out. Inner Mongolia illustrates the scale of the persecution.

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The New Minority Policy

After the purge of the Gang of Four in 1976, party leaders gradually began to modify the leftist policy of total assimilation. By 1980 Beijing was convinced that a massive new program was needed. The leadership was particularly alarmed by the continued intensity of anti-Chinese feeling as evidenced by the increase in minority-Chinese incidents and by the emotional reception given the Dalai Lama’s elder brother during a visit to Xizang in 1979. Chinese leaders also seemed concerned that the upsurge in Muslim fundamentalism in Iran and Pakistan might spill over into Xinjiang, Ningxia, and Xizang. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan intensified fears regarding the vulnerability of the frontier regions.

Although chiefly motivated by domestic political and security concerns, Beijing also saw possible diplomatic benefits from better relations with its minorities.

Beijing hoped to enhance its standing with Islamic states and to create a climate conducive to improved relations with India. Accordingly, China began encouraging visits by religious delegations from Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Iran, and Morocco, among others, and promoting stronger “people to people” ties between Chinese Muslims and the Islamic world. Moroccan Prime Minister Bouabid, who visited Xian in early 1982, became the first leader from a Muslim country to attend public prayers in a Chinese mosque

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A Naxi couple registering their marriage, Sichuan-Yunnan area. 




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since 1949. The Chinese have reportedly permitted the Saudis and others to make large donations to individual mosques and to the Chinese Islamic Association. Muslim associations from China now attend international Islamic meetings. 

- A “policy of recuperation” and economic development to revive the traditional economy—specifically the handicraft industry and animal husbandry. This included an exemption from taxes and state purchase quotas for two years and an increase in central payments for five years.


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In 1980 China was also attempting to improve relations with India and to make progress on the border issue. New Delhi has viewed Beijing’s actions in Xizang—where Chinese treatment of its Tibetan minority has been an irritant in Chinese-Indian relations—as a gauge of its sincerity. A change in policy was clearly indicated. 

- Replacement of Chinese officials by minority officials, with minorities to hold roughly two-thirds of all positions at the upper levels of administration and almost all posts at grass-roots levels. Those guilty of abuses during leftist periods were to be removed.

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In May 1980 the new minority policy was announced amid great fanfare by Hu Yaobang, who was Party General Secretary at the time, during a trip to Xizang. The points made in his speech, which included specific proposals for Xizang, became the heart of Central Directive 31 of 1980. Beijing promised:

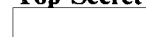
- Revival of traditional culture, including freedom of religion, provided that a fundamentally socialist orientation is maintained. 

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- Greater autonomy for minority areas and modification of central directives to fit the “special characteristics” of each region.

Beijing took a number of immediate steps to demonstrate its sincerity and to right old wrongs. It appointed prominent minority figures to prestigious, although largely symbolic, positions in the central and local governments. The Panchen Lama, second only to the

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Miao girls in ceremonial dress, Guizhou.

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As a corollary to economic development, Beijing has ordered greater attention to improving the educational system in minority areas. The goal is universal elementary education by the end of the decade, with a lesser effort on the development of middle and technical schools. Beijing has also announced plans to create more universities in the minority regions and to give minorities preferential admission quotas.

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**Implementation:
The Case of Xizang**

Xizang provides an excellent case study of the difficulties the government has encountered in implementing its new policy. Beijing considered Xizang a showcase for the new program, and authorities acted quickly to institute the promised reforms. This, plus better and more complete source material, means the experience in Xizang is also better documented than that of other minority regions.

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Economic Development. Conditions have improved marginally in Xizang in the last two years, but progress is uneven.

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Dalai Lama in Tibet's religio-political order, for instance, was appointed to the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress. Beijing released scores of minority prisoners, including those condemned as "local nationalists" in the 1950s, and Moslem and Tibetan dissidents whom the Chinese believed had participated in underground independence movements. Perhaps the most dramatic gesture was Beijing's invitation to the Dalai Lama and his followers to return from exile in India. Beijing gave permission for four groups of the Dalai Lama's senior advisers and followers to tour Tibet during 1980. The Dalai Lama, however, refused to visit the region.

Beijing claims peasant income has risen, although significantly more for those in the pastoral than for those in the agricultural sector. More consumer goods are available in the cities, and the free market appears to be flourishing.

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The heart of the new minority policy is an ambitious economic recovery program whose announced goals include significantly improving the economies of "poor and backward" minority areas within two or three years, surpassing the best post-1949 showing within five or six years, and achieving "affluence" within a decade. The plan permits more use of private plots, traditional crops, barter, and a greater reliance on material incentives. In Xizang, traditional cross-border trade with Nepal, Bhutan, and Sikkim has been reopened.

Other sectors of the economy have not fared as well. Beijing has begun projects designed to develop Xizang's infrastructure and has assumed complete control over the region's budget. It is funding new roads, power plants, and agrarian projects. Because of the central government's recent budget cuts, allocations for these projects are far below the level expected. In fact, much of the planned rebuilding has stopped, and the reorganization or closure of factories and mines has added to unemployment and has lowered productivity. The *Xizang Daily* announced in late June that industry did not fulfill the state plan and that production costs had risen significantly.

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Hu Yaobang and Wan Li meeting Tibetan women, May 1980.



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Regional Autonomy. Beijing began to transfer ethnic Chinese and appoint Tibetans to government and party positions soon after Hu Yaobang announced the new policy. Party First Secretary Ren Rong, a military man closely identified with the leftist period, was replaced with Yin Fatang, who, although an ethnic Chinese, is a Tibetan speaker with long experience in minority affairs. The Tibetan press also reports that leftists at lower levels are slowly being removed.



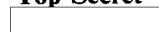
Most of the appointments have been in the rural areas, although some local notables were named to senior government positions including that of Vice Chairman of the prestigious Standing Committee of the Xizang People's Congress. The lowest levels of rural administration now appear to be dominated by Tibetans.



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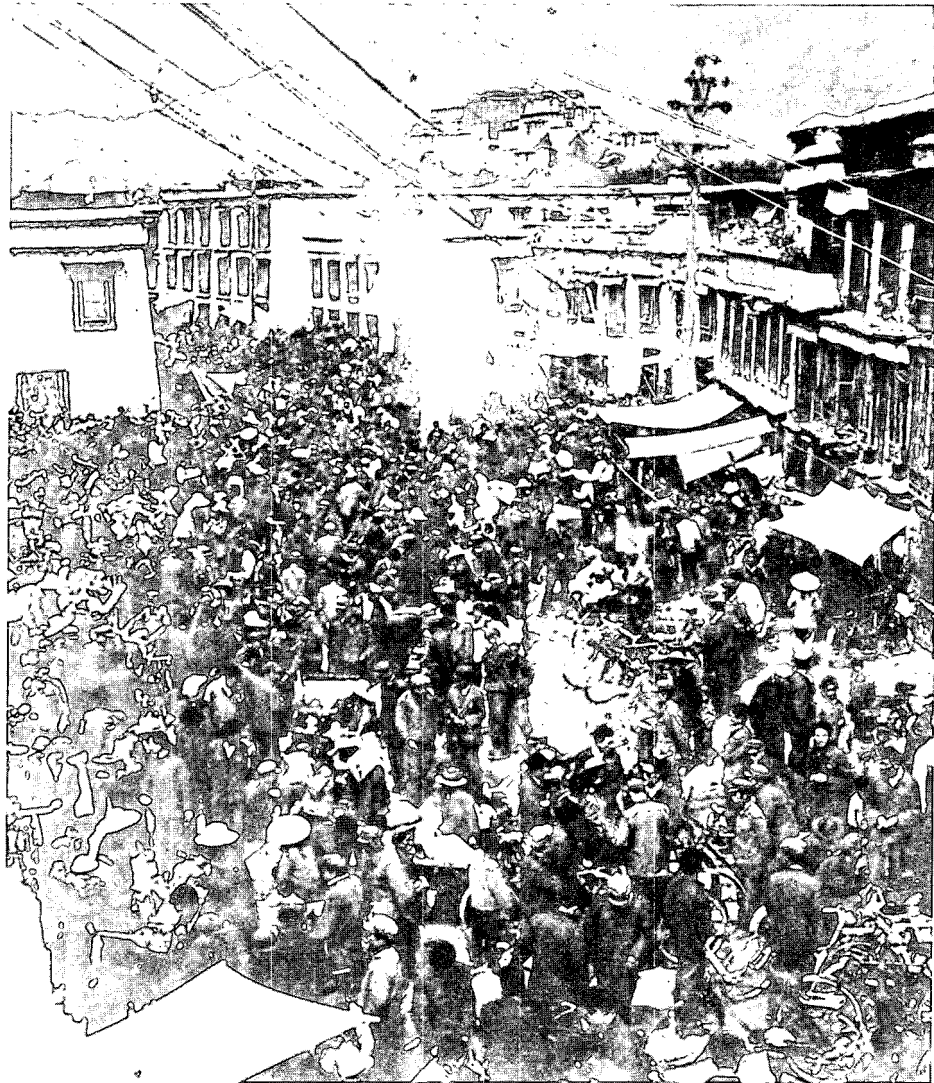
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A Lhasa fair.

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Faces of China ©

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Beijing made some concessions to Tibetan nationalism by loosening restrictions on language, custom, costume, and social practices but has moved cautiously in the area of religion. The regime has permitted monasteries to reopen and encouraged pilgrims to visit holy sites in Xizang, but Beijing has not encouraged the revival of a priesthood to serve those sites.

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[Redacted]

Continuing deep concern about local nationalism is likely to preclude additional concessions to the Tibetans. These concerns were reinforced by the mass demonstrations that occurred in Lhasa in the summer of 1980 during visits by delegations representing the Dalai Lama. Beijing abruptly closed Xizang to outsiders and subsequently, in cooperation with Tibetan authorities, has sought to strengthen public order and to harness nationalist sentiments.

The economic portions of the policy, by contrast, still remain largely unfulfilled. Two years after the policy was announced, a party work team sent to the region to assess conditions concluded that the standard of living remained far below that in the Mongolian People's Republic and in most Chinese provinces, and that Mongols were worse off than their Chinese neighbors. Chinese leaders believe living conditions in Inner Mongolia must eventually surpass those in the Mongolian People's Republic. Although admittedly a long-term goal, Beijing remains committed to developing the area as rapidly as possible.

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[Redacted]

[Redacted]

Beijing has deemphasized regional autonomy when discussing minority policy, and it apparently believes it has gone about as far as it can on this issue.

steps are being taken to reduce restrictions on the traditional economy. The lack of infrastructure and national budget constraints, however, make it very unlikely that the goal will be achieved.

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[Redacted]

As in Xizang and Inner Mongolia, Beijing has made more progress in Xinjiang with cultural than with economic matters. Probably because of the long border with the Soviet Union and the history of racial violence, Beijing has moved more cautiously. Fewer minority officials have been appointed although Beijing has promised to begin withdrawing ethnic Chinese officials within three years. We have no evidence that large numbers of Chinese have been transferred so far. Beijing has allowed the mosques and bazaars to reopen, bolstered minority education, permitted the use of local languages, and, as a major concession to Muslim sensibilities, allowed use of the revered Arabic script.

The Situation in Other Minority Regions

Implementation of the new minority policy seems most advanced in Inner Mongolia. Mongols, who constitute just 11 percent of the population of the region, now hold a disproportionately large share of both senior and lower level government positions. Ethnic Chinese, however, still dominate the local party organization. As in Xizang, the regime has made concessions on culture and language, and Mongols make up approximately 40 percent of this year's freshman class at Inner Mongolia University. The sensitivities of the large ethnic Chinese population will probably prevent many additional concessions.

Cadre Opposition

Several groups have an interest in seeing Beijing's new policy fail. Leftists generally oppose greater autonomy for minorities and object to the economic reforms on ideological grounds. Leftist sentiment is particularly strong in Xinjiang. Last August, 2,000 to 3,000 wallposters reportedly appeared in Urumqi denouncing Deng Xiaoping and demanding the reinstatement of Hua Guofeng as party Chairman. The Xizang press indicates that entrenched leftists are causing problems for the provincial leadership there as well.

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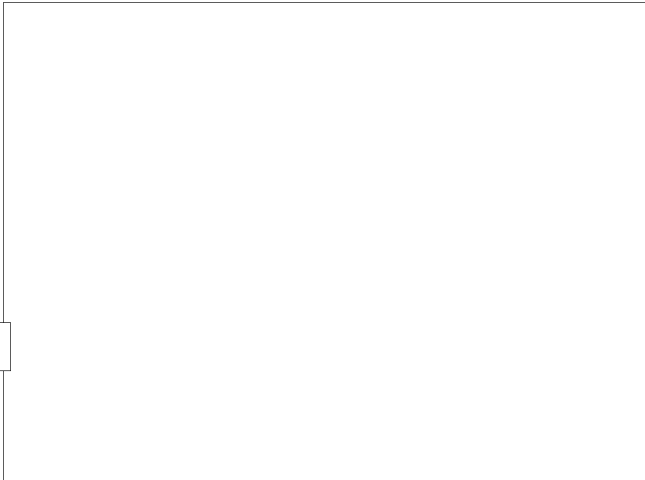
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Many ethnic Chinese officials, regardless of their political biases, fear that increased recruitment of minority officials and their own consequent transfer out of the province will mean losing special privileges and hardship bonuses. Minority officials who have collaborated with the Chinese fear the consequences of a reduced Chinese presence. Tibetan officials in particular seem to believe that increased autonomy will lead to an upsurge of nationalist feeling that would not only undermine the stability of the region but threaten them personally.



Security and Subversion

Available evidence indicates that the military fears a reduced ethnic Chinese presence could jeopardize public order in minority areas and invite Soviet meddling. Some military leaders distrust Beijing's efforts to entice the Dalai Lama back to Tibet; they believe that the Soviets have undue influence in the Dalai Lama's camp and support Tibetan demands for independence.

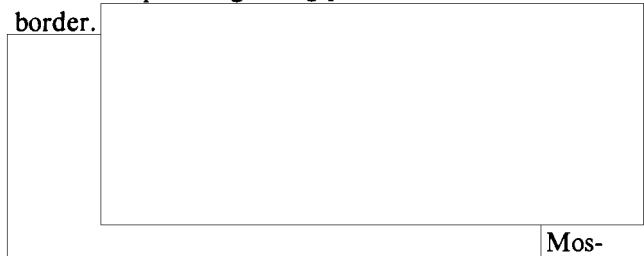
Chinese officials, particularly military leaders, blame the Soviet Union, at least partly, for the disturbances in Xinjiang. Soviet propaganda efforts increased over the past year, with daily radiobroadcasts in Uighur and in other Turkic dialects. The Soviets seek to fan minority fears of extinction and of forced intermarriage with the Chinese. They also broadcast reports alleging the repression of minorities in other areas of China and paint a glowing picture of life across the border.

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Military concerns about the impact of the policy on political tranquillity in the minority areas seem well founded. Since the introduction of the program, Chinese-minority tensions have increased in some areas.



The most striking example is Xinjiang, where a wave of minority unrest swept through the largely Uighur oases along the southern rim of the Tarim Basin as well as in Aksu and Urumqi in the north following the inception of the minority policy. Minor incidents quickly grew into rioting, armed assaults on local officials and Chinese settlers, and occupation of party and army offices. In October and November 1981, for instance, communal violence between Chinese settlers and native Uighurs escalated, forcing the authorities to close the southwestern oasis city of Kashgar, 80 miles from the Soviet border.

Moscow's ally, Vietnam, also uses radiobroadcasts in efforts to stir up trouble between ethnic Chinese residents and minority peoples along the Sino-Vietnamese border.

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In November 1981, minority villagers had beaten local officials attempting to bring more modern ways to Yunnan, had destroyed schools, and had generally worked against the regime's attempts to improve their condition.

Soviet propaganda probably falls on receptive ears, especially in Xinjiang. The Muslim peoples of western China are of the same ethnic, cultural, and linguistic group as the Turkic nationalities in the Soviet Union. Living conditions are generally better on the Soviet side of the border, and many older intellectuals were trained and educated in Soviet schools. Chinese officials claim that Soviet propaganda is responsible for

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Figure 4
CHINA: Xinjiang Autonomous Region



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the continuing emigration of Uighurs, Kazakhs, and other minorities across the border. Although there has been no large emigration since 60,000 Kazakhs fled from Ili into the USSR in 1962, the Chinese are concerned about the continuous trickle of Uighur emigres. The 1979 Soviet census officially gives the number of Uighurs in the USSR as 211,000, but

the true figure is perhaps closer to 600,000. The Soviets support an anti-Chinese "Free Turkestan Movement" and its "Liberation Army," led by the aged Gen. Zunun Taipov, which has headquarters in Alma Ata. Chinese officials believe that the Soviets are able to exploit the extensive

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family ties between Muslims in China and those in the Soviet Union to gather intelligence and interfere in Chinese internal affairs. [redacted]

Despite a lack of firm evidence to document Soviet activities in the border areas, Chinese suspicions are at least partly justified. The Russians were always deeply involved in the Byzantine and sometimes cut-throat minority politics of China's northwestern border regions, and there is every reason to assume that the present Soviet regime continues the practice. Chinese accusations that the Soviets are the primary cause of minority unrest, however, overstate the case. Improving relations with Moscow might relieve some of the stress, but the minority problem in the northwest, as well as in other minority areas, is based on grievances that are deep and longstanding. [redacted]

Outlook

Two years after its inauguration, the new minority policy appears to be stagnating. Beijing has honored some of the promises made in 1980—loosening restrictions on minority peoples, making symbolic appointments of minority personages to senior government positions, and granting concessions to local interests. These have improved life marginally in the border areas, but no significant progress has been achieved in the more difficult task of rebuilding the economies. An enormous task in itself, the revitalization of the minority areas is further complicated by the lack of economic infrastructure, by a desperate shortage of qualified personnel, and by continued Chinese-minority tensions. Although minority areas receive a greater percentage of the total national budget than before, overall economic retrenchment means that the allocated funds will be far below the level expected when the policy was announced. [redacted]

The border areas, with the possible exception of Inner Mongolia, are likely to remain areas of tension and a drain on Beijing. The strategic importance of the border regions and the resilience of local nationalism make it impossible for Beijing to loosen its grip much more than it already has. Chronic and occasionally violent incidents such as those that erupted in Xinjiang during the last two years will continue. Regardless of its good intentions, Beijing is unlikely ever to win over the minority groups, whose hostility toward the Chinese is, in most cases, implacable. [redacted]

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A resurgence of Chinese-minority violence in the border areas could complicate China's foreign relations. China is already competing with some of its neighbors for the allegiance of minorities. An outbreak of serious violence in the northwest or in the south could exacerbate already tense relations with the Soviet Union or Vietnam. Similarly, a new crack-down in Tibet would become an issue in relations with India, as such crackdowns have in the past. Any highly publicized incidents involving the Turkic peoples could set back efforts to win friends in the Middle East. Moderate Arab states, however, seem impressed by the lifting of restrictions on religion, and Beijing has used representatives of its Muslim minorities as ambassadors of good will. [redacted]

The minority problem could also become a factor in the leadership succession, especially after Deng leaves the scene and jockeying for influence intensifies. Hu and his supporters are closely identified with the new policy. Opponents, particularly in the military, might use the lack of progress or continuing violence—especially if it occurred in conjunction with other policy setbacks—to criticize Hu and thus question his qualifications for leadership. [redacted]

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