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Abstract
Communist Party of China General Secretary Xi Jinping led a central delegation to Urumqi on 23-25 September 2025 for the 70th anniversary celebrations of the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region. Analyzing his speeches and deliberations during this three-day trip, this Issue Brief identifies three key aspects: cultural enrichment to ensure a sense of community and nation, economic development, and promoting 'new quality productive forces' in local conditions. It argues that these three components are all equally important in charting what in the Party's view is a balanced and more rounded governance in Xinjiang, and by extension, in the country's border regions.

Keywords: culture; uniformity; infrastructural development; connectivity; paired assistance; data centres; clean energy

Communist Party of China (CPC) General Secretary Xi Jinping visited Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region (XUAR) from 23-25 September to attend a series of events marking the 70th anniversary of the regional administration's establishment. Xi's delegation included CPC Politburo Standing Committee members, Wang Huning and Cai Qi – holding the positions of Chairman of National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference and Director, General Office of CPC Central Committee, respectively.

Xi's itinerary was packed during his three-day trip (*Xinhua* 2025d) – he attended sessions of the Xinjiang CPC regional committee and XUAR regional government listening to their work reports, visited an exhibition on the 70th anniversary, attended an evening gala, and joined a grand celebratory gathering in Urumqi on 25 September. He met people from diverse sectors – ranging from officials from the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (XPCC) and party cadres assigned from other parts of China to people from ethnic groups and military officials stationed in Urumqi (*Xinhua* 2025g).

This was Xi's fourth visit to the region since taking the helm of the country in 2012. It is worth noting that this visit came after a similar trip to Tibet in August this year (for more, see Kumar 2025). Taken together, both the visits highlight the importance accorded by the Party-state to the country's two frontier provinces with respect to stability, governance and development. After listening to the work reports, Xi underscored the importance of social stability and cultural integration in building a socialist, modern Xinjiang (*Xinhua* 2025h). The achievement of this objective hinges on forging ethnic unity by integrating minorities into a broader Chinese national identity.

Sense of Community and Nation – On the Foundations of Culture

Xi Jinping has been vociferous in demanding the prioritization of community aligned to the larger national cause over individual ethnic minority identities. His formulation, concretized at the CPC Politburo's 9th Study Session in September 2023, called for the cultivation of awareness among all ethnicities that they belonged to same community who 'share weal and woe, honor and disgrace, life and death, and destiny' (Xi 2023). This framing is an extension of his 'Five Identifications' (*wu ge rentong*) (Hong and Han 2019), initially proposed at the 6th Tibet Work Forum in August 2015 (*People's Daily* 2015): i) with the

Great Motherland; ii) with the Chinese nation; iii) with Chinese culture; iv) with the CPC; and v) with Socialism with Chinese characteristics. The Marxist formulation of the essence of man being the sum total of all social relations was extended to the relationship between the individual and the nation, and between the individual and their ethnic group. This means, 'people of all ethnic groups have a common homeland, which is China; a common identity, which is the Chinese nation; a common name, which is Chinese; and a common dream, which is the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation' (Wang 2025). Strengthening Chinese national identity would eliminate 'distorted perceptions, and clear away distracting factors', and allow people to abandon the narrow perspective of only viewing diversity without recognizing unity (Altay Saiken 2018). This then, is a repudiation of Western theories on ethnicity, and rooting it within what Xi calls 'fine traditional Chinese culture'.

Xi also reiterated the need for continued efforts to Sinicize religions in the country, and strengthening cultural enrichment in Xinjiang in his speech to the regional party and government officials. Culture, thus, becomes a foundational component in the advancement of China's goals of 'national rejuvenation' and building a 'modern Chinese civilization', especially in frontier governance (Yang 2025). The argument being made is that historically, the more effective the central governance of Xinjiang was, the more stable its society was, and smoother the exchange and integration between Xinjiang's ethnic cultures and those of the Central Plains (Yang 2025).

Cultural enrichment is seen by the CPC as the 'fortification of the Great Wall of Thought', to resist the infiltration and subversion of various extremist and separatist ideologies (Yang 2025). The use of unified state-compiled textbooks and promotion of standard spoken and written Chinese language are critical components in promoting commonality, enhancing unity, and deepening integration (Xi 2023). The themed exhibition that Xi and other members of the delegation visited during their visit further illustrated the cultural dimension – the exhibit showcased images of ethnic unity and historical footage, along with achievements in poverty alleviation and infrastructural development (*Xinhua* 2025i).[i] The overt emphasis on culture signifies the need for the Party-state to cultivate additional modes of social and political control besides coercive legal interventions – such as a new law on ethnic unity that is in the works (National People's Congress 2025) and disciplinary mechanisms (Leibold 2020; Roche and Leibold 2022).

In July this year, Chen Xiaojiang was appointed as the Party Secretary of XUAR (*The Standard* 2025). Prior to this, he served as the head of the National Ethnic Affairs Commission (NEAC) (*Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo Guojia Minzu Shiwu Weiyuanhui*) from 2020 (Lew 2020). Since 1954, those occupying the leadership position of the NEAC have belonged to one of the ethnic minorities. The appointment of a Han to the top position underscored the shift away from ethnic regional autonomy to assimilation with the Chinese nation. The United Front Work Department – through an administrative overhaul in 2018 – manages the NEAC, thus bringing the institution more directly under the CPC. Chen had also cut his teeth as an official in the propaganda department of the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI), which is the main body driving Xi Jinping's anti-corruption campaign. He can, therefore, be expected to use his experience in his role as Xinjiang's party secretary to further normalize the discourse of ethnic integration without ethnic autonomy.

Enhancing Governance and Economic Development – 'Five Strategic Positions'

The CPC's narrative for social stability and durable peace in the region also lies in invigorating economic development through effective governance. The Party-state's governance strategy for Xinjiang emerges from a strategic perspective, given the region's location as an important node to Central Asia and Europe. The key formulation in this regard

is the 'Five Strategic Positions' (*wu da zhanlüe dingwei*) (*Tianshan Net* 2025) for Xinjiang that has been in the political discourse in the last two years. It first emerged in Xi's previous inspection tour to the region in August 2023, when he called for 'firmly grasping the strategic positioning of Xinjiang in the overall national situation and better building a beautiful Xinjiang in the process of pursuing Chinese modernization' (*Xinhua* 2023). The term then started appearing in regional deliberations (*Xinjiang Daily* 2024) until it was properly formulated and assigned by the CPC Central Committee.

The 'Five Strategic Positions' are: i) Eurasian Continental Bridge [vital gateway to the West]; ii) pivot in a new development paradigm [the region being identified as a hub for the dual-circulation concept bringing together domestic and international connectivity]; iii) national base for energy and resource security [given the availability of vital energy reserves in oil, gas, coal, solar, and wind sources in the region]; iv) a national supply base of agricultural and pastoral products [especially fruits, cotton, and livestock]; and v) a strategic barrier for national security and territorial integrity [owing to the locational advantage of neighbouring eight countries and development as a buffer zone].

A White Paper released by the Party-state on 20 September 2025 (State Council Information Office 2025)[ii] has laid out the different initiatives and measures undertaken under the Five Positions over the last decade. There has been expansion of road, rail and air networks (State Council Information Office 2025; *People's Daily* 2025) along with building up of different trade zones and transportation corridors (Mao and Zhang 2023). The establishment of Xinjiang Tibet Railway Company (Wang 2025) – a subsidiary of the China State Railway Corporation – to build a new railway line between Hotan, Shigatse and Lhasa while seeking to elevate China's regional connectivity and project its engineering capacity, is also a signal to India on Beijing's determination to secure China's borders. Promotion of investments (*Xinhua* 2025f) and local industrial enterprises (*Xinhua* 2025a), acceleration of energy production sources (*Xinjiang Daily* 2025), and construction of storage as well as transmission capacities have also been prioritized (Xinjiang Energy Regulatory Office 2025).

Xinjiang's mineral wealth adds to China's dominance in the field of critical minerals (Tang 2018; SFA Oxford 2025). Around 154 minerals have been identified in Xinjiang with close to 100 confirmed reserves (China Mining Association 2025). Leveraging this, the XUAR's Department of Natural Resources has expanded the exploration of strategic mineral resources to new sites under the 14th Five-Year Plan (Department of Natural Resources 2025). Further, events like the annual China Xinjiang International Mining Expo are organized to showcase the wide range of mining activities, new technology in operations and to build partnerships with Central Asian countries to make the region a hub in transcontinental mining logistics and supply chains (International Mining Expo Xinjiang 2025).

Xi's remarks during the 70th anniversary also touched upon the role of the 'paired assistance' (*duikou yuanjiang*) programme in Xinjiang's economic and social development (*Xinhua* 2025d). The programme, which commenced in 1997, involves the transfer of financial, technical expertise and talented personnel to the region from rest of the country – especially, the more developed regions. The programme comprises of central party and government departments, state-owned enterprises and designated provinces as well as municipalities from rest of the country, since 1997 (Song et. al 2019). The Party-state claims to have allocated over 200 billion yuan (US$20 billion) in paired assistance funds to the region since 2012 (*Xinhua* 2025d). In combination with the rural surplus labour transfer programme (*nongcun fuyu laodongli zhuanyi jiuye*) (Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security 2019), the paired assistance programme has been the key driver of the Party-state's hands-on poverty alleviation campaign in Xinjiang (Ji 2025). China has normalized the relocation of surplus labour in Xinjiang for imparting vocational skills, increasing incomes and enhancing employability (State Council Information Office 2020), attempting to fit the effort

within the larger frame of de-radicalization and ethnic unity. However, the counter-narrative of coercive re-education and disciplining of labour has also gained traction (Zenz 2021; Zenz 2023) – extending now to the critical minerals sector (Global Rights Compliance 2025) and casting in poor light the ethical practices also of Western companies operating in the region.

New Quality Productive Forces: The Way Forward?

The third important focus area that emerged from Xi Jinping's visit was the need to develop 'new quality productive forces' (*xin zhi shengchanli*) based on local conditions. This new development philosophy (*xin fazhan linian*) (Council for Foreign Relations 2025) propounded by Xi requires economic development to be 'innovative, coordinated, green, open and inclusive'. In this formulation, scientific and technological innovation are key components to achieve high-quality development (Xi 2021). In addition to innovation, priority is accorded to digital technologies, and green and sustainable models, with reliance on highly-skilled labour, and emphasis on quality as well as efficiency.

Xinjiang has, in the last year or so, joined other inland provinces in setting up Data Centres (DCs) which are critical for AI and big data applications (Ha et.al 2025; Lin et.al 2025). The establishment of DCs are thus an important measure in developing national data infrastructure and to boost the growth of the digital economy. The turn towards inland provinces – and later to the western regions – came after the launch of the Eastern Data Western Compute (EDWC, *dongshu xisuan*) plan in 2020 (National Development and Reform Commission et.al 2021). The EDWC was initially intended to optimize China's cloud computing infrastructure by channelling investment across 10 DC hubs which would be connected to 10 data clusters of Western and Chinese companies – from Apple, Amazon and Microsoft, to Alibaba Cloud, China Telecom, Chin Unicom and Huawei. While some of the clusters were located close to major cities like Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou, the rest were in interior regions such as Ulanqaab and Horinger in Inner Mongolia, Qinyang in Gansu and Zhongwei in Ningxia (Stokols 2024).

The logic behind this plan was to 'resolve coastal energy bottlenecks and rebalance regional development' (Kollar and Stokols 2025), thus building further on the Western Region Development (*xibu da kaifa*) programme launched in 1999. DCs consume significant energy, and therefore, some of the energy-rich interior regions provide the associated infrastructure for their durable sustenance. The availability of surplus land and cheaper rents combined with local governments goals of infrastructural and digital development are added factors in this coordinated and integrated plan.[iii] The abundant renewable energy resources in Xinjiang – solar and wind power – and its high power generation capacity – of 201 million kilowatts – enabled it to seize opportunities in the EDWC plan (Wang 2025). This combined with the region's relatively cooler climate has been a shot in the arm for the Karamay Cloud Computing Industrial Park which has six DCs with a total storage capacity of 6,200 petabytes and houses digital infrastructure of companies like China Mobile (Zou 2025).

The intertwined relationship of cloud computing and clean energy technology is notable in Xinjiang. The region has remained an important entity in the narrative on the country's energy transition. The commencement of the 800 kilowatt Ultra High Voltage direct power transmission between Hami in Xinjiang and Chongqing – the third such major project from the western province to the rest of China – solidifies the West-to-East electricity transmission programme (*xi dian dong song*), which was conceived to ensure balance in power distribution to eastern and central provinces as well as measures towards just transition (*Xinhua* 2025e). The Tarim Basin energy project has been touted as another achievement in powering irrigation systems by reducing diesel consumption (Bela 2025). The

dominance of photovoltaic technology is another apt illustration of Xi's emphasis on new quality productive forces aligning with local conditions (*Xinhua* 2025c).

Policy and infrastructural support from the Chinese central government has supported investment while the XUAR regional government pooled 10 billion yuan (US$1.4 billion) to create a talent fund to address workforce demands, incentivize white-collar migration to the region and promote development in science and technology (*Xinhua* 2025b). This coupled with loosening of *hukou* restrictions in late 2019 by the central government – complete elimination for cities with less than three million in population and some relaxations for cities having three to five million in population (Communist Party of China and State Council 2019) – are measures to attract skilled human resources into Xinjiang. Establishment of entities like the Urumqi-Changji-Shihezi national innovation demonstration zone are part of coordinated support by the central and regional governments to facilitate the ecosystem for high-quality development to the region. On the whole, these measures are part of efforts to address the 'principal contradiction' identified by the CPC in the 'New Era' – 'between unbalanced and inadequate development and ever-growing needs of the people for a better life' (Xi 2017).

Conclusion

Xi Jinping is the first leader of the CPC to attend any anniversary celebrations of the founding of XUAR or of the Tibet Autonomous Region. His presence and speeches at these events mark his personal interest in governance of these regions. His message to the rank and file of the Party-state in ethnic minority regions is to mobilize themselves behind different initiatives to ensure social stability and economic development. The high priority given to border regions by the central Party-state is clear. The objective is to integrate them with the rest of the country to resolve regional socio-economic disadvantages and to leverage their strategic locations for cross-border connectivity and geopolitical advantages. This perhaps then warrants a re-look at the ancient expression that 'heaven is high and the emperor is far away' (*tian gao huangdi yuan*) with regard to border regions even if provincial governments remain able to respond creatively and to innovate in response to political and governance challenges (see for example, the discussion on the development of *xiaokang* villages in Kaur et al. 2025).

Political and social control in combination with infrastructural development and resolution of livelihood issues is at the heart of the Party-state's top-down approach for governance coordinated by the central and local administrations. The mobilization of resources, finances, and personnel underlines the central Party-state's continued hands-on involvement in securing China's borders. The three components emerging from Xi's speeches and remarks during his Xinjiang trip – cultural enrichment to enable a greater sense of Chinese community and nation, economic development, and the promotion of 'new quality productive forces' in local conditions – are, therefore, all equally important to the Party-state's governance of Xinjiang and by extension, of other border regions.

ENDNOTES

[i] While Xinjiang and Tibet are the most significant in the CPC's espousal and practice of ethnic integration and cultural standardization, these measures are also visible in other parts of China. https://www.scmp.com/news/china/politics/article/3295239/guangzhou-noodle-shops-mandarin-tibet-focus-chinas-pushes-ethnic-integration?module=inline&pgtype=article

[ii] A total of 14 White Papers on Xinjiang have been released since 2003, and out of these, 12 have come out since Xi Jinping has been at the helm of affairs (State Council Information

Office 2025; University of British Columbia 2021).

[iii] The EDWC plan was jointly issued by National Development and Reform Commission, Central Cyberspace Affairs Commission, Ministry of Industry and Information Technology, and National Energy Administration.

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