

UN in dialogue with China to visit Xinjiang

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Several governments have pressed China to allow UN rights inspectors to visit Xinjiang after raising allegations of “appalling” human rights abuses against the Uighur minority people.

In news: U.K. urges China to grant UN access to Xinjiang

Placing it in syllabus: Foreign Affairs

Dimensions

- Map of Xinjiang Province
- Ethnic Problem
- Importance of the region for China
- Chinese initiatives in the region
- Problems with the Chinese policies and the UN’s position in it
- India and the Xinjiang Problem

Content:

Map of Xinjiang Province:

- Xinjiang, officially Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region (XUAR), is an autonomous region of the People’s Republic of China (PRC).
- It is located in the northwest of the country close to Central Asia.
- It is the largest province-level division of China and the 8th-largest country subdivision in the world,

Borders:

- Xinjiang borders the countries of Mongolia, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan,

Pakistan and India.

- The rugged **Karakoram, Kunlun and Tian Shan mountain ranges** occupy much of Xinjiang's borders, as well as its western and southern regions.
- The **Aksai Chin region**, administered by China, is claimed by India.
- Xinjiang also borders the Tibet Autonomous Region and the provinces of Gansu and Qinghai.
- The most well-known route of the **historic Silk Road ran through the territory** from the east to its northwestern border.



Ethnic Problem:

- Xinjiang is home to a number of ethnic groups, including the Turkic Uyghur, Kazakhs and Kyrgyz, the Han, Tibetans, Hui, Tajiks, Mongols, Russians and Sibe.
- Xinjiang has seen a history of ethnic tensions between the native Uighur Muslims and majority Han Chinese migrants.
- The Xinjiang conflict also known as the Uyghur–Chinese conflict, is an ongoing ethnic conflict in China's far-northwest autonomous region of Xinjiang.
- It is centred around the Uyghurs, a Turkic minority ethnic group who constitute the majority of the region's population.
- Since the incorporation of the region into the People's Republic of China, factors such as the mass state-

sponsored migration of Han Chinese from the 1950s to the 1970s, government policies promoting Chinese cultural unity and punishing certain expressions of Uyghur identity, and harsh responses to separatism have contributed to tension between the Uyghurs, and state police and Han Chinese.

- This has taken the form of both terrorist attacks and wider public unrest.
- In general, Uyghurs and the mostly Han government disagree on which group has greater historical claim to the Xinjiang region.
- Uyghurs believe their ancestors were indigenous to the area, whereas government policy considers present-day Xinjiang to have belonged to China since around 200 BC during Han Dynasty.
- According to Chinese policy, Uyghurs are classified as a National Minority; they are considered to be no more indigenous to Xinjiang than the Han, and have no special rights to the land under the law.

Importance of the region for China

- the northwestern region Xinjiang assumes a crucial geopolitical strategic importance for China.
- Xinjiang, a predominantly desert region rich in energy resources, comprises 17% of the Chinese territory and is one of the poorest administrative entities in China, but with a high economic development.
- Xinjiang has assumed significant importance due its natural resources, its borders with central Asian states extremely rich in natural resources and China's new Grand Strategy focusing on the West.
- For the Chinese national interest, the region is essential for three reasons:
 - it is rich in energy resources;
 - acts as a northwestern buffer to protect the geopolitical core of China, close to the coast;

- it is the country's gateway to Central Asia and the Middle East and therefore represents an essential junction of the terrestrial branches of the new silk routes (Belt and Road Initiative) directed towards Europe.

Natural Resources:

- There are nearly 17 major Oil & Gas fields in Xinjiang with the prominent ones concentrated in Karamay, Tarim Basin, and Turfan Basin.
- The oil fields at Karamay are among the largest in China along with extensive deposits of coal, silver, copper, lead, nitrates, gold, and zinc.

Connectivity to West and Central Asia:

- Silk Road Economic Belt (SERB) project aimed at connecting China with Central Asia and Europe through a number of infrastructures and communication network building. Xinjiang is strategically important for China because it should be the hub of trade with Central Asian and the success of SREB is directly linked to its stability.
- Xinjiang is playing an important role in Eurasian Corridor because six out of eight Sino-European railways originate from this region.

Chinese initiatives in the region:

- Xinjiang not only provides critical energy resources but also acts as a transport corridor from Central Asia through the Chinese mainland to its industrial centers on the East Pacific coast. China has thus laid a network of pipelines connecting Central Asia to the Chinese coast through Xinjiang.
- It has laid out the ambitious East-West pipeline starting from the Lunanan Oilfields in Xinjiang's Tarim Basin; spanning across the mainland and ending in

Shanghai.

- China has also been engaged in building the Central Asian China Gas Pipeline (CACGP) that starts from Gedaim on the Turkmen-Uzbek border running through Central Uzbekistan and Southern Kazakhstan before ending in Horgos in Xinjiang.
- The CACGP transports natural gas from Central Asia to Xinjiang and further connects with the Chinese mainland through the East-West pipeline.
- These pipeline projects are critical for China to reduce its dependence on Coal and Oil as energy

Recent Chinese Policy:

- In recent years, Chinese government policy has been marked by mass surveillance and the incarceration without trial of over one million Uyghurs and other Muslim minority ethnic groups in internment camps.
- Numerous reports have stated that many of these minorities have been used for prison labour in a seeming return to the “re-education through labour” program, which was supposedly abolished in 2013.
- International observers have labelled the Sinicization campaign to be an instance of cultural genocide.

Problems with the Chinese policies and the UN’s position in it

In July 2019, 22 countries issued a joint letter to the 41st session of the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC), condemning China’s mass detention of Uyghurs and other minorities, calling upon China to “refrain from the arbitrary detention and restrictions on freedom of movement of Uyghurs, and other Muslim and minority communities in Xinjiang”.

In the same UNHRC session, 50 countries issued a joint letter supporting China’s Xinjiang policies, criticising the practice of “politicizing human rights issues”. The letter stated,

“China has invited a number of diplomats, international organizations officials and journalists to Xinjiang” and that “what they saw and heard in Xinjiang completely contradicted what was reported in the media.”

In October 2019, 23 countries issued a joint statement at the UN urging China to “uphold its national and international obligations and commitments to respect human rights”.

India and the Xinjiang Problem

- The Sino-Indian border dispute is an ongoing territorial dispute over the sovereignty of relatively large, and several smaller pieces of territory between China and India.
- Aksai Chin, is claimed by China as part of the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region and Tibet Autonomous Region and claimed by India as part of the union territory of Ladakh.
- It is a virtually uninhabited high-altitude wasteland in the larger regions of Kashmir and Tibet and is crossed by the Xinjiang-Tibet Highway.

Mould your thought: Xinjiang is strategically important for China. Critically evaluate the policy of the Chinese in these circumstances and its relevance for India .

Approach to the answer:

- Introduction
- Discuss the geopolitical factors that make Xinjiang Strategically important
- Discuss the Uyghur Ethnic tensions and recent Chinese policy
- Discuss Border issues with India
- Conclusion