

ARCID
CHINA
POLICY
BRIEF

Volume 1, No. 2 September - October 2018

**THE UIGHUR ISSUE
IN
THAI-CHINA RELATIONS**

by

Bilveer Singh



Asian Research Center for International Development (ARCID)
Mae Fah Luang University, Thailand

ARCID CHINA POLICY BRIEF VOLUME 1, NO. 2 SEPTEMBER - OCTOBER 2018
THE UIGHUR ISSUE IN THAI-CHINA RELATIONS

© **All Rights Reserved**

Author : Bilveer Singh

ISSN: 2630-0877

First published in 2018 by

ASIAN RESEARCH CENTER FOR INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT (ARCID)

School of Social Innovation, Mae Fah Luang University

333 Moo1, Thasud, Muang, Chiang Rai 57100, Thailand

Tel : +66 5391 7137 Fax : +66 5391 6685

Email : arcid.social-innovation.school@mfu.ac.th

Website : chinawatch.today, social-innovation.mfu.ac.th/arcid.php

Facebook page : www.facebook.com/ARCIDTHAILAND

www.facebook.com/chinawatch.arcid

Printed by

TECHNO PRINTING CENTER

643 Utharakit Road, Wiang, Muang, Chiang Rai 57000, Thailand

Tel/ Fax : +66 5371 8841

Email : tpccri@gmail.com

Preface

With economic reforms and the opening up of the People's Republic of China (PRC) to the outside world by Deng Xiaoping and post-Deng leaders, China is now the largest economy (on a purchasing power parity basis). All indications show that China will be a superpower. The meteoric rise of China in the 21st century signals the successful comeback of China in regaining its respectful place in regional and international affairs. It also means challenges as well as opportunities for other parts of the world, especially for countries in the Asia Pacific region.

For many of us, the big question is: how should we deal with such a rising superpower? Other questions may include the following:

Is China's rise going to be sustained? What are the new directions mapped out by Xi Jinping to develop China? What sort of developmental challenges will it face? Is China a threat according to some analysts? How can we promote a win-win relationship with China? How can we manage our problems, if any, with China in order to preserve peace and development?

To answer these questions, the Asian Research Center for International Development (ARCID) of the School of Social Innovation at Mae Fah Luang University has launched the China Watch Project with a grant from the Thailand Research Fund (TRF). We would like to express our thanks to the TRF for its funding support and suggestions in improving the project proposal.

As part and parcel of the China Watch Project, ARCID has established a Monitor and Analysis (M & A) Unit surveying and analyzing major developments in China. Located in Northern Thailand, ARCID would like to take advantage of its geography and focus its research more on the Mekong region and its relations with East Asia, including China. We hope this strategy could help a young research center to establish a niche in the academic, intellectual and policy community. In this regard, *the ARCID China Policy Brief* is produced by the M & A Unit to examine policy issues on ASEAN-China relations in general and Thailand-China relations in particular. Inaugurated in August 2018, *the ARCID China Policy Brief* is published a few times a year. Finally, it has to be understood that the views expressed are those of the authors.

Lee Lai To, Ph.D.
Senior Professor and Director
ARCID

About the Author:

Bilveer Singh teaches at the Department of Political Science, National University of Singapore. Concurrently, he is also an Adjunct Senior Fellow, Centre of Excellence for National Security, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University. Dr. Singh specialises in regional security issues, including Islamist terrorism and extremism in Southeast Asia, great power relations in Southeast Asia and issues relating to the political and foreign policy of ASEAN, especially Indonesia and Singapore. He has published widely on regional security issues, and on developments in Indonesia and Singapore.

The Uighur Issue in Thai-China Relations

Bilveer Singh

Introduction

On the surface, it would appear puzzling that the Uighurs who reside in the north-western part of China in Xinjiang province, some 3,300 kilometres away by land and some 9 hours by flight from Bangkok to Urumqi, capital of Xinjiang, would be an issue in Thai-China relations. Yet, it has increasingly become an important thorn in bilateral ties in recent years.

Who are the Uighurs?

In the Western media, the Uighurs are seen as a persecuted Muslim community in Han-dominated China. Between 1-3 percent of China's population is Muslim, including Huis but the single largest concentration is the Uighurs in Xinjiang province. Uighurs reside in the strategically located province of Xinjiang, which recorded a great historical past under Buddhist and Muslim dynasties, and who are largely Turkic speaking and of Islamic faith. Historically, the Uighurs have resisted China's attempts to assimilate them into a mainly Han-dominated China and where the Uighurs are believed to be discriminated on various political, economic and social-cultural grounds and where millions of Han Chinese have been transmigrated into the region since 1950, forming almost half of the province's residents today. Many Uighurs see China as a colonizing power and refer to Xinjiang as Eastern Turkistan, the independent homeland they have been clamouring for decades.

What is the Uighur issue?

From China's perspective, long before the world was threatened by terrorist groups such as the Al Qaeda and the Islamic state, China argued that the Uighurs in Xinjiang were suffering from the three 'evils' of extremism, terrorism and separatism. Since the 1980s, the situation was aggravated with Uighurs accused of linking up with international terror groups such as the Al Qaeda and since 2014, with the Islamic State. Hence, from China's perspective the Uighur issue stems from the threat of Islamic radicalism, extremism, terrorism and the desire to dismember China through separatism.

From the Western perspective and supporters of the Uighurs' cause, China's repression and suppression of the Uighurs is the key issue, almost akin to the Tibetan issue. In fact, China has defended the hard policies against the Uighurs on grounds of security as well as the need for effective nation building. For instance, in October 2018, the detentions of thousands of Uighurs, some alleged, up to a million of them, was defended on grounds of the need to civilise them. According to Shohrat Zakir, Governor of Xinjiang region, the internment of Uighurs was to stop the lure of religious extremism and this was undertaken through the promotion of the Mandarin language and education in Science. By providing 'free vocational training', the Uighurs and other Muslims would be given the necessary skills to work in factories.

How is Thailand affected by the Uighur issue?

The outflow of Uighurs out of Xinjiang province has affected China's relations with a number of states in Central and South Asia, in the Middle East, Turkey, and a number of Southeast Asian states such as Malaysia and Thailand. In particular, despite Thailand geographical distance from Xinjiang, it has become sucked into the Uighur issue, complicating Sino-Thai ties.

Sino-Thai relations have been complicated by five major issues involving the Uighurs. Thousands of Uighurs have sought refuge in Thailand and hence, the refugee issue is the first major source of problem between Beijing and Bangkok over the Uighurs. China has demanded that all Uighur so-called refugees, who have fled China, be repatriated, something Bangkok has resisted for long. Second, many Uighurs are using Bangkok as a transit point to go to third countries, be it in the Middle East, Turkey or elsewhere, and this have also soured Thailand's relations with China as Beijing sees Bangkok playing the role of a facilitator of this mass movement of Uighurs, most of whom eventually adopt anti-China attitudes and stance overseas.

Third, is the attention Thailand has brought unto itself as a player in human trafficking of Uighurs and other minorities such as the Rohingyas, etc. Major international human trafficking rings are based in Thailand and where, often, some senior Thai officials have also been implicated in facilitating the trade in humans.

Linked to the above factors is the Uighurs' quest for sanctuary and safe haven in Thailand, either to permanently base them in Thailand or to use it as a transit point. Whatever the ultimate objective, in addition to the Central Asian states, Thailand has become a destination of choice for the Uighurs. This is because of the presence of thousands of Uighurs with family networks in Xinjiang, the presence of major Uighurs-linked human trafficking groups and where the Uighurs believe that Thailand and especially the Turkish diplomatic officials, would facilitate the Uighurs' international travel, among others, through the issue of visas and even Turkish passports, something Turkey has denied.

However, it is the fifth factor that has aggravated Sino-Thai relations with regard to the Uighurs and this has to do with the links of some Uighurs with international terrorist groups and increasingly, with Southeast Asian terror groups. Since the mid-1980s, many Uighurs fought with the Mujahideen against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. Building on the links with the Mujahideens, many Uighurs joined Al Qaeda and became highly adept in terrorist tactics, with many of them fighting in various international jihadi hotspots in Central Asia, the Middle East, South Asia and eventually, even in Southeast Asia. This trend continued since the mid-2014, when many Uighurs switched sides and supported the Islamic State, by being involved in combat in Iraq and Syria, with other groups continuing to be involved in jihadi struggles in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and later, in the Philippines and Indonesia.

Sino-Thai relations became complicated by the Uighurs when China applied strong political, diplomatic and even economic pressures on Thailand to repatriate the thousands of Uighurs to China.

Most of the international community resisted and objected to this Chinese pressure as it was believed that the returned Uighurs would be summarily executed for crimes related to the three evils.

When in July 2015, Thailand repatriated 109 Uighurs to China, Sino-Thai difficulties stemming from the Uighur issue was blown open. While the fate of the repatriated Uighurs is largely unknown, many have presumed that they would have been executed for crimes relating to extremism, terrorism and separatism. Worse was to come for Thailand, where in the following month, August 2015, some Uighurs were believed to be involved in the bombing of the sacred Erawan shrine in Bangkok in August 2015, that killed 20 people, signalling the link between Uighurs and terrorism, this time, on Thai soil.

What is the consequence of the Uighur issue in Thai-Chinese relations?

While Thailand has continued to be a country hosting Uighurs, there have been occasions when the Uighur issue has complicated Sino-Thai relations. By and large, Thailand has resisted demands from China to repatriate Uighurs, with Thailand preferring to repatriate Uighurs to third countries, mainly Turkey, to prevent global pressures of kowtowing to China to persecute the already strongly persecuted Uighurs. But when under Chinese pressure, more than 100 Uighurs were returned to China, many in the international community, including the United States and the United Nations Human Rights Commissioner, condemned Thailand for its behaviour and for succumbing to Chinese pressures. Since then, even though many thousands of Uighurs remain in Thailand, Bangkok has resisted further pressures to repatriate the Uighurs with the Uighurs remaining a constant thorn in Sino-Thai relations.

Road Ahead - What policies are needed to manage the issue?

As long as Thailand continues to act as a magnet for Uighurs' short or long-term migration, Sino-Thai relations would remain hostage to the Uighur issue. As Thailand is a signatory to many international conventions regarding refugees and humanitarian assistance, the continued provision of assistance to the Uighurs would be applauded by the international community as a gesture of goodwill and humanitarianism. While there would be some political and diplomatic costs involved, nevertheless, these gestures are important, at least, with Thailand acting as a transit point for the persecuted Uighurs to find refuge in third countries, be it in Turkey or the Western world, where many Uighurs have been resettled.

However, Thailand, even if need be, with cooperation with China, must stamp any Uighurs that are involved in acts of terrorism. Clearly, there are many Uighurs that are associated with Uighur-based terrorist organizations such as the East Turkistan Islamic Movement and its successor, Turkistan Islamic Party or even worse, have linked up with global and regional jihadi groups such as the Al Qaeda and the Islamic State and in Southeast Asia, with the Jemaah Islamiyah, Mujahidin Indonesia Timur and the Abu Sayyaf Group. These Uighurs are a security threat and Uighurs of this persuasion must be dealt with strongly, if need be, even with close cooperation with China. However, what must

also be clear is that China's narrative that all Uighurs are associated with extremism, terrorism and separatism is definitely not true and this is where prudence and astute judgement will go a long way in developing a balanced posture for a healthy Sino-Thai relation as far as the Uighurs are concerned.

As Thailand is commemorating its 43th year of the relationship in July, people-to-people exchange has become the most important aspect of their bilateral relations. Chinese Ambassador Lyu Jian highlighted this connection in his recent speech to mark the occasion saying that the main objective of Thai-Chinese relations is to improve the standard of living of their two peoples at all levels.

Truth be told, at the highest level, as Crown Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn has been traveling to China for study tours and leisure, a total of 41 times since 1986, making her the most frequent visitor to China among the world's monarchies. Furthermore, in 2013 she was selected by the International Friendship Association of China as one of the 10 most popular personalities in China.

Sirindhorn's reputation and her knowledge of China have immensely influenced the Thai people's interest in learning more of Chinese culture, literature and language. As a Chinese scholar in her own right, she has translated a score of Chinese literature and poems. More than a dozen books were penned by her about trips and impressions of Chinese, both in urban and remote areas, over the past three decades. Thanks to her, nearly one million Thais have been inspired and they are now studying the Chinese language at schools and in private. More than 5,000 Chinese teachers are tutoring in various parts of Thailand.

Of the 31 Confucian Institutes established in ASEAN, 15 are located in Thailand, comprising the largest numbers in the region. Indonesia has six while the Philippines has only four. In addition, China picked Thailand as the first country to set up its first Cultural Center in the region in 2012. Bangkok is also the regional center of Chinese media with more than 100 media workers representing all media platforms. Xinhua News Agency also has a Thai-language news website, which has become quite popular. The only downward trend seemed to be the number of Thai students studying in China. According to China's Ministry of Education, there were 19,976 Thai students in 2015 down from 20,206 in 2010. This number is still the largest among the total number of 71,101 ASEAN students.

One of the most unique aspects of Thai-Chinese relations has been the large number of Chinese-trained Thai doctors in Chinese traditional medicine and acupuncture. Over 1,300 Thai doctors have now registered with Ministry of Public Health as qualified practitioner of traditional Chinese medicine. Thailand is the only country in ASEAN that shares the codification of their traditional medicines with China. Today, over a dozen of Thai universities offer courses in Chinese traditional medicine.

While the pyramid-like bilateral relations—at the top epitomized by Princess Sirindhorn's affection for the Chinese language and at the people's level symbolized by Damrong's desire to master basics putonghua for survivability—continue to grow, there is still a big void in between. There are urgent needs to transform these relations into a more encompassing partnership, involving all stakeholders with better organizational networks like the ones found in Thailand-US relations and Thailand-Japan relations. Obviously this is easily said that done. But both countries have to think outside the box now in order to further strengthen and increase people's awareness of each other's history and culture. Notably, the Thai people tend to be complacent thinking that Thailand and China have been friends

for more than 3000 years so that they must have a better understanding of China than other countries.

Far from the truth, there is an urgent need for the Thai people to learn more about China's history and culture. Of late, the daily discourses on Thai-China relations have been focusing on political and security realm. After the coup of May 2014, Thailand's relations with the West, especially the US and Europe, have gone downhill. Washington and Brussels punished Bangkok with strong condemnations and slapped a series of sanctions. However, Asian friends were more understandable of Thai political conditions. They have been more tolerable and continuing their diplomatic ties with Thailand without jeopardizing bilateral relations.

Without doubt, Thailand has been branded quickly as a country adopting the pro-China approach to win friends supportive of the current military government. In the post-coup era, China has also beefed up all round cooperation with Thailand. In the absence of long-standing cordial contacts with the US, political and security ties with China have increased and assumed new significance. Last year, Thailand decided to purchase three Chinese-made submarines worth US\$3.6 billion. Several new areas of cooperation were also initiated especially in intelligence exchanges, counter terrorism training and joint military industrial development, among others. During the transitional four-years, Thai-China economic ties have also increased and become more strategic especially in the Mekong subregion and infrastructural projects related to the Belt and Road Initiative.

With growing political and economic clout of China, Thailand's new political and security cooperation with China has been under close scrutiny by the international community and media, leaving the cultural and social relations in the back-burner. However, with continued influx of Chinese tourists, it is imperative that the Thai authorities concerned must equip themselves with better understanding of Chinese culture and speaking ability of putonghua as well as other dialects. The Chinese tourists visiting Thailand were coming from various parts of China, representing different stages of economic development and socialization. The majority of them are all traveling for the first time to a foreign destination. Coming from various parts of China with different dialects and customs, they are trying to communicate with other Chinese with their dialect, or if possible, with putonghua. Such are the complexities of Chinese visitors which the Thai people, especially those in the service industry, must comprehend. Otherwise, Thailand could suffer some backlashes if there are some incidents that stir up cultural stereotypes and malfeasances.

At this juncture, China's growing influence has much to do with its portfolio in huge infrastructure projects, causing high suspicions of Beijing's motive in deepening economic dependency with its smaller neighbors in order to achieve political gains in the future. The Thai-China ties do not subscribe to this perspective because they are more diversified and balanced based on mutual respect and painstaking negotiations. The recent agreement on the long-delayed construction of high-speed train was a good case study. It took three and half years to complete, and is considered to be the longest time span in the annals of contract negotiations.

Granted Thailand's prominent regional profile, ambassador Lyu stressed that Thailand and China must strengthen and expand their bilateral cooperation to synergize their economic and developmental plans, especially the Chinese Belt And Road Initiative with Thailand 4.0 Industrial development plan. As the incoming ASEAN chair, the envoy said that Thailand can increase the quality and effectiveness of ASEAN-China bilateral cooperation including those in Mekong Lancang

Cooperation, sustainable development and governance. For Thai-China relations, Lyu said that the two countries need to improve cooperation in all areas aiming at poverty eradication and sharing of knowledge in science, technology including high-speed train, SMEs, economic and social fields. More exchanges between think tanks, media and youth are pivotal.

In final analysis, Thailand and China must now zero in on improving better understanding of cultural dynamics and history between the two peoples. It must go beyond the general perception or misperception of their cultural significance. The growing interconnectedness and proliferation of social media has added extra urgency for both countries to increase their efforts to prevent any xenophobia that might occur by design or by default.

*Taxi drivers in Thailand are powerful opinion makers, as they are the first point of personal contacts. They are considered as opinion changers as well as information multipliers who could swing public opinions dramatically through their word of mouth communications. Their impromptu comments, imagine or real, based on hearsay, personal biases, prejudice and misunderstanding, has greatly shaped the ongoing political discourse at the people's level.

ARCID CHINA POLICY BRIEF

1. Kavi Chongkittavorn, “New Challenges of Thai-China Relations”, Volume 1, No.1, July – August 2018
2. Bilveer Sigh, “The Uighur Issue in Thai-China Relations”, Volume 1, No.2 September – October 2018