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Not Just Politics: A Different Approach to Supporting Ethnic Minorities in China

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A number of demonstrations in Inner Mongolia during spring 2011 highlighted several important aspects of China's policies towards ethnic minorities, the actual situation in that region, and the sensitivity of the Chinese government to Western political involvement. As with the disturbances in Tibet in 2008 and Xinjiang in 2009, the authorities immediately blamed foreign meddling for the unrest. If Western governments and pressure groups really want to help and support China's ethnic minorities, a different approach from the current political one is needed.

Potentially the most effective way for Western nations truly to help and support the interests of ethnic minorities in China is through efforts in the socio-economic realm rather than the highly sensitive political realm. There is more room for fruitful engagement on this front. Such engagement furthermore has the potential to build stronger and more trusting relationships between China and Western governments, while external political pressure on this historically sensitive issue potentially breeds animosity and distrust.

Unrest in Inner Mongolia

On 10 May 2011, a vehicle belonging to the Chuncheng mining group hit and killed an ethnic Mongolian herder who was part of a group of herdsmen in Xiwu Qi, Inner Mongolia, protesting against the destruction of the grasslands and the killing of cattle by the Chuncheng mining group, which had defied the local government's environmental policies. This event set off a number of demonstrations in Xilinguole Meng, and security forces and other mechanisms were deployed to prevent further social unrest. Western media were quick to respond with reports that were sympathetic to the plight of ethnic minorities, widely citing Inner Mongolian dissident groups in exile.

China's Sensitivity to Political Pressure over Minorities

The Chinese government is sensitive to Western political pressure for a number of reasons. First, during the nation-building process that was initiated by the republican government in 1911, and continued by the communist government after 1949, ethnic minorities were granted an important status. The ethnic autonomy policy is in place to guarantee that minorities govern themselves, and allows them to amend and adjust centrally stipulated policies in accordance with their own particular conditions. However, rather than following the Soviet example, China's communist government did not grant its ethnic-minority areas the right to secession or separation. There thus exists a tension that can be summarized as 'being autonomously ruled by Beijing', a tension that the Chinese government considers vulnerable to foreign exploitation, and the experience of the United States instigating unrest in Tibet during the 1950s and 1960s, and the USSR in Xinjiang during the 1970s, has shown that foreign governments are indeed willing and able to exploit this tension.

Second, the Chinese government believes that Western nations have a particular sympathy for minority causes, as most European nations were themselves built around single ethnic groups. The West's moral support for the 1989 demonstrations, and the continued provision of arms to Taiwan, further add to the legacy of Chinese government unease about foreign involvement in China's internal affairs.

Finally, the international community's rejection of the principle of respect for state sovereignty in the cases of Kosovo, Iraq, and, more recently, Libya in order to provide support for what were considered oppressed, suffering, or struggling groups, makes China uneasy. The combination of these reasons makes any Western political pressure on behalf of China's ethnic minorities not only extremely unwelcome, but also increases the likelihood that coercive methods are employed to manage tensions and dissent, rather than conciliatory methods.

China's Minority Policies: Affirmative Action

The Chinese government has in fact implemented a number of measures that are intended to foster national unity and mitigate potential ethnic minority issues beyond granting political autonomy. In Inner Mongolia, for example, a large variety of Mongolian-language media exists. Students can, depending on their studies, complete their education, up to and including their Masters, in Mongolian. Affirmative action policies in education, employment and family planning are used to level the playing field and to benefit ethnic minorities relative to their Han compatriots. Quota systems are in place in the public sector to ensure an ethnic minority presence, and the highest positions in public institutions are reserved for ethnic Mongolians. These measures are intended to contribute to Beijing's policy of minorities ruling themselves. Western governments should not overlook these measures.

Socio-Economic Engagement: The Answer?

The answer may lie in the socio-economic realm, where foreign engagement is potentially more fruitful and welcomed, especially as this is in line with the Chinese government's own approach to minority areas since the era of Deng Xiaoping. First, although minorities' autonomy policies guarantee preferential employment for minorities, in practice it is only implemented in the public sector. In Inner Mongolia, and throughout China, the growing private sector is increasingly becoming a major source of employment. Foreign companies in Inner Mongolia that judiciously adhere to the preferential employment policy could significantly contribute to employment access for Mongolians, who often suffer discrimination by eastern Chinese companies. Foreign investment in infrastructure and manufacturing could further complement Chinese government efforts.

Second, Western engagement in rural areas could be particularly beneficial. Many rural issues are not ethnic as such, but gain an ethnic dimension because Mongolians are more dominant in these areas, while Hans dominate urban areas. Open-pit mining, the cause of discontent in Xiwu Qi in May 2011, damages the fragile ecology of the Mongolian pasturelands. The Chuncheng mining group ignored the local government's environmental policies, thus sparking the protests, as this Han Chinese company was damaging the livelihoods of Mongolian herders. Had this occurred elsewhere in China it would not have been an ethnic issue, and therefore should, in this instance, not be considered as such here. Foreign investment in Chinese mining companies in Inner Mongolia could foster adherence to environmental policies. Efforts by environmental NGOs in cooperation with local governments could help to restore the fragile grassland ecology, which is suffering from overgrazing and pollution, and assist in the development of livelihood-safeguarding mechanisms for those people who are dependent on the pasturelands.

Finally, Western companies and governments that provide apprenticeship programmes and scholarships favouring Mongolians, in accordance with China's own affirmative action policies, could improve Mongolians' access to education and, later, employment. Implementing these programmes in rural areas would be particularly beneficial because of the higher incidence of poverty and poor education.

While a number of foreign firms are found in Inner Mongolia, mostly East Asian, they do not constitute significant employers compared to domestic counterparts. Efforts could therefore be made to increase their number and scale. With Inner Mongolia's well-developed infrastructure network and close proximity to Beijing and other large markets, this should not be difficult to incentivize. Cooperation among Western governments, the Chinese central government and local authorities—essential for building trust—could seek to identify the region's comparative advantages in labour and raw materials, and attract investment to dedicated development zones, which are located in the suburbs of most major urban areas in the region. Both the Chinese and Western governments could employ subsidies, low-interest loans and tax holidays.

It is clear that, for the reasons mentioned above, foreign political engagement on behalf of the Chinese minorities is unwelcome. However, socio-economic engagement is potentially more fruitful. Such engagement is in line with Beijing's own policies and would demonstrate an understanding and desire to cooperate that could potentially help to build stronger relationships with the Chinese government, and allay their fears of foreign intervention.

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