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China's Greatest Weakness: Internal Conflicts with Ethnic Minorities

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ABSTRACT

China's 55 recognized ethnic minorities pose a challenge to the state's vision of national unity, but not the one historical precedent suggests. Because China faces neither the wartime collapse nor the demographic balance that broke apart the Ottoman and Russian empires, this paper argues that the principal danger to China is the strategy the state has chosen of coercive assimilation. Four case studies are examined along a spectrum of that strategy, from the heavily coercive campaigns against the Xinjiang Uyghurs and Tibetans, to the recently completed linguistic assimilation of Inner Mongolia, and the near-total cultural absorption of the Manchu. Drawing on international organization documents, national legislation, census data, and scholarly studies, the analysis finds that assimilation has produced resistance rather than acceptance, that resistance now cooperates across ethnic lines, and that its internationalization has drawn sanctions and genocide designations. Alternative interpretations of the same record, including Beijing's counterterrorism and development rationales, are weighed against the documentary evidence. The paper concludes that coercive assimilation imposes growing political and reputational costs on China, and that greater protection of minority rights and cultural identity would better serve the state's own long-term stability.

Keywords: China, ethnic minorities, Xinjiang Uyghurs, Tibet, Inner Mongolia, Manchu, assimilation, unity, territorial, autonomy, resistance, human rights, cultural heritage

INTRODUCTION

Internal diversity can be both a cornerstone of a nation's cultural wealth and a source of profound instability. For China, home to 56 officially recognized ethnic groups, this diversity presents complex challenges. While the Han Chinese majority comprises 91.11% of the population according to the 2020 national census (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2021), the remaining 8.89% encompasses distinct identities, languages, and histories that often stand in tension with the state's vision of national unity. For several of these groups, the question of autonomy is more than a political demand: their advocates, and increasingly international bodies, describe the survival of their languages, religions, and cultural practices as being at stake (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights [OHCHR], 2022a).

Among them, the Uyghurs practice Islam and have linguistic ties to Central Asia, while Tibetans follow Tibetan Buddhism with a deep-rooted spiritual connection to their land. The Mongolians and Manchu, meanwhile, carry distinct historical narratives as independent entities before their incorporation into China; both once ruled dynasties that governed China itself, the Yuan and the Qing. Government policies toward these groups, such as the promotion of Mandarin as the national language and economic initiatives that disproportionately benefit Han settlers in minority regions, have often been perceived as assimilationist (Domingo, 2020).

The state's response to this diversity is shaped by a long-standing prioritization of territorial control. From the integration of Hong Kong under the "one country, two systems" framework to increasing pressure on Taiwan, China's assertiveness in maintaining territorial control is evident, and this stance extends to its minority regions, where granting autonomy is treated as a threat to sovereignty itself, especially since the five provincial-level autonomous regions and most minority autonomous areas sit along China's land frontiers (Leibold, 2013). These regions are also vast, resource-rich, and geopolitically strategic: Xinjiang borders eight countries and anchors the overland routes of the Belt and Road Initiative, Tibet holds the headwaters of Asia's major rivers, and Inner Mongolia supplies coal and rare earths. The state's grip on these regions stems from their economic and strategic value, but also from a deeply ingrained historical narrative of territorial integrity.

One image in particular motivated this research: the Tibetan, Inner Mongolian, Uyghur, and Manchurian leaders of governments-in-exile standing side by side, holding their peoples' flags, at the Conference for the Independence and Restoration of Chinese Minorities. Hosted by the Policy Research Institute of the Tibetan Government-in-Exile and Jang Gye-hwang, chairman of the Korea History and Territory Foundation, the event brought four of the largest minority groups together to send a message of their fight for autonomy to the central government (News CJ, 2023). Four movements that had been suppressed separately convened and publicly affirmed a shared mission on the soil of an established state, the Republic of Korea, signaling a growing international dimension to their cause and an increasing willingness among exiled leaders to collaborate across ethnic and cultural lines.

Scholarship on the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) ethnic governance documents an evolution from early accommodation to aggressive assimilation. Kwon (2011) details how initial policies granted limited regional autonomy and recognized minority languages, yet over time these concessions were systematically undermined: what began as "accommodation policies in the question of national integration" turned into "assimilation" (p. 11). Domingo (2020) builds on this by demonstrating how economic and political policies of assimilation exacerbated unrest, as state-led development initiatives produced disparate outcomes between Han regions and minority regions and channeled gains to Han settlers, while protests in Inner Mongolia, separatist uprisings in Xinjiang, and nationalist movements in Tibet were met with unrelenting pushback, creating a cycle of resistance and state retaliation. Zenz (2020) underscores the shift from yet another standpoint, documenting reproductive policies as a tool of demographic suppression: using testimonies backed by government documents, he finds that population growth rates in the two largest Uyghur prefectures fell by 84 percent between 2015 and 2018, due in part

to compulsory sterilization procedures. Jiang Qing, Mao Zedong's wife, gave the assimilationist strain within party thinking its bluntest expression when she asked, "Why do we need national minorities anyway?… If you follow socialism, why worry about ethnicity?" (Kwon, 2011, p. 33). Taken together, these sources suggest that minority unrest is not reducible to restrictions in any single sector of life; rather, minority communities increasingly interpret the accumulation of such policies, and the gap between early promises of autonomy or religious tolerance and later practice, as a coordinated effort to weaken their ethnic identities as a whole.

A second body of scholarship places these policies within longer histories of nation-building. Leibold (2013) traces the debate among Chinese intellectuals and officials that preceded the assimilationist turn, finding a growing consensus for a "melting pot" model that would strengthen national integration at the expense of minority rights and regional autonomy, which indicates that assimilation was a deliberate choice of direction rather than an accident of administration. Bovingdon (2010) argues that Uyghur discontent is essentially local and nationalist rather than an offshoot of global Islamism, and that state propaganda deliberately blurs the two; Roberts (2020) extends this, showing how the post-9/11 language of terrorism was used to justify the mass internment system. Shakya (1999) remains the standard history of modern Tibet's incorporation and resistance, and Bulag (2002) examines how the Mongols on China's northern edge have coped with demographic marginalization and the politics of national unity. These studies focus primarily on the actions of the Chinese state, however, with less emphasis on the agency of minority groups themselves, and almost none on their cooperation with one another. This paper builds on them by examining how the four groups are actively working, and increasingly working together, to raise international awareness and mobilize support, emphasizing the agency of these communities in shaping their own futures.

The paper argues that China's greatest weakness lies in its internal composition of ethnic minorities, but not in the way historical precedents might suggest. Precisely because China must not be broken apart demographically, the state has made coercive assimilation, the absorption of minority languages, religions, and identities into the Han mainstream, the CCP's instrument of control. The objective of the study is therefore twofold: to explain why the CCP chose assimilation over accommodation, and to assess what that choice costs a state that stakes its legitimacy on unity. Three hypotheses guide the analysis. First, minority grievances are rooted in a documented policy shift from accommodation to assimilation rather than in economic disparity or foreign agitation alone (H1). Second, assimilation has produced resistance rather than acceptance, with the visibility of resistance scaling with the coerciveness of the policy (H2). Third, this resistance has internationalized, generating cooperation among exile movements across ethnic lines and drawing genocide designations, sanctions, and legislation that turn a domestic policy into a global liability (H3). The paper proceeds through the methods, two historical precedents that establish the conditions under which grievance becomes fragmentation, the four case studies in order along the spectrum of assimilation, and a discussion that tests the hypotheses against the case evidence and weighs alternative interpretations.

METHODS

This research employs a historical-comparative approach, analyzing historical events and their implications for modern ethnic conflicts in China. It first examines two well-known cases of multiethnic imperial breakdown, the late Ottoman Empire and revolutionary Russia, to identify the conditions under which ethnic grievance turns into fragmentation, and then measures contemporary China against those conditions. The four Chinese cases were chosen to represent variation in the intensity and completeness of assimilationist policy rather than a single type: Xinjiang and Tibet, where assimilation remains contested and heavily coercive; Inner Mongolia, where linguistic assimilation was recently completed over mass protest; and the Manchu, whose near-total cultural absorption this paper treats as the end point of the assimilationist trajectory. The cases are selected for variation on the explanatory variable, not for representativeness: groups such as the Zhuang and the Hui, whose relationships with the state have historically been less openly conflictual, fall outside this design, and the findings should not be generalized to them without further study.

Primary sources include international organization documents, national legislation, census data, and public statements by minority leaders and exile organizations; secondary sources include academic studies and historical accounts. These sources are not treated as equally authoritative. Findings of United Nations bodies and peer-reviewed scholarship are given the greatest evidentiary weight. Investigative reports such as Zenz (2020) are relied upon where their findings converge with UN assessments; Zenz's figures have been publicly contested by the Chinese government, and this paper avoids resting any claim on a single investigator's estimates. News outlets that receive government funding, such as Radio Free Asia, and advocacy organizations, such as the International Campaign for Tibet, are treated as valuable for documentation but as interested parties whose framing reflects their missions. Statements by exile organizations, including the governments-in-exile discussed below, are read as evidence of how the movements understand themselves and of what they are doing, not as neutral descriptions of conditions inside China. Chinese state sources and official statements are cited for the government's position.

Four limitations should be acknowledged. First, independent fieldwork inside Xinjiang, Tibet, and Inner Mongolia is effectively impossible for outside researchers, so accounts of conditions on the ground rest on testimony, leaked documents, and evidence assembled by third parties; where possible, such claims have been checked against United Nations findings. Second, the study relies on English- and Korean-language sources and does not analyze Chinese-language archival or internal policy documents directly, which limits access to debates within the party-state. Third, the historical-comparative design identifies mechanisms and conditions rather than yielding predictions; the Ottoman and Russian precedents discipline the argument, but they cannot establish what China will do. Finally, because the case studies concern ongoing events, some figures, particularly current detention estimates, may be revised as new evidence emerges.

HISTORICAL PRECEDENTS

Ottoman Empire (1916)

The Ottoman Empire's collapse during World War I was accelerated by internal ethnic revolts, particularly the Arab Revolt of 1916 (Rogan, 2015). The empire, at its height, encompassed a vast range of peoples, from Arabs to Kurds, Armenians, and Greeks, often with distinct cultures, languages, and political aspirations, and this diversity became an increasing source of tension as nationalist movements gained traction during the 19th and early 20th centuries. The revolt, spearheaded by Arab nationalists with support from Britain, capitalized on the Ottomans' inability to manage a diverse population amidst the pressures of war. Britain's promise of independence to Arab leaders, as stated in the Hussein-McMahon correspondence, strengthened motives for autonomy, illustrating the vulnerabilities of multiethnic states during periods of external pressure and internal dissent (Rogan, 2015).

Russian Revolution (1917)

The Russian Revolution also saw ethnic minorities, including Ukrainians, Finns, and Poles, seeking independence amid the chaos of World War I and the collapse of the Tsarist regime. Within the Russian Empire, ethnic Russians made up only 44.3 percent of the population according to the 1897 imperial census, meaning the majority of the Tsar's subjects belonged to other nationalities (Kappeler, 2001). Russification policies promoting the Russian language and the Orthodox Church created widespread resentment among these groups (Fitzpatrick, 2008). The January Uprising of 1863 by the Poles was an early, unsuccessful attempt to end Russian rule, but it revealed the minorities' accumulated discontent with the imperial regime. When the Tsarist state crumbled in 1917, a power vacuum emerged and minorities seized the opportunity: Ukraine's Central Rada declared the Ukrainian People's Republic, Finland declared independence in December 1917, and the Polish state was re-established in 1918 after more than a century of foreign domination. Bolshevik forces resisted many of these movements to hold the new Soviet state together. Yet as Suny (1993) argues, the national question was never truly resolved; it lingered, was built into the Soviet federal structure, and returned to help dissolve the USSR itself in 1991.

Lessons and the Limits of the Analogy

Two conditions appear in both precedents. The first is grievance: sustained policies of linguistic and religious homogenization, whether Ottoman Turkification or Russian Russification, turned diversity into organized resentment. The second is opportunity: fragmentation only happened when the central state was catastrophically weakened by war and when outside powers were willing to back separatist claims. Grievance without opportunity produced failed uprisings like the January Uprising, while grievance combined with opportunity produced new states.

The analogy to contemporary China is instructive precisely where it breaks down. China faces no wartime collapse, and its minorities constitute under nine percent of the population rather than nearly half. A demographic fracture of the Ottoman or Russian type is not a realistic near-term scenario, and this paper does not predict one. What the precedents illuminate instead is the mechanism Beijing appears to be

trying to preempt, and the cost of the method it has chosen. Because the state cannot be broken apart demographically, its leadership appears to have concluded that the national question can be closed permanently through assimilation, by eliminating the distinct identities from which future claims might arise (Leibold, 2013). The case studies below test whether that strategy reproduces the first condition, grievance, in an intensified form, and whether its severity has generated a partial substitute for the second condition in the form of external pressure: international condemnation, sanctions, and support for exile movements. The question this paper asks, then, is not whether China will fragment, but what assimilation costs a state that stakes its legitimacy on unity.

CASE STUDIES

The relationship between China and its minorities combines strategic interest, suppression, and a push for sinicization, meaning cultural homogenization into the Han. The four cases are presented in order along the spectrum of assimilation described above, from the most contested and coercive campaigns to the most complete. For each, a historical overview establishes how the conflict with the Chinese state arose (H1), followed by an account of present-day resistance (H2) and its international dimension (H3). The comparison across the cases is developed in the Discussion.

Xinjiang Uyghurs

The Uyghurs, a Turkic-speaking Muslim ethnic group primarily residing in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region of northwestern China, occupy the most coercive end of the spectrum. The region, known to Uyghurs as East Turkestan, experienced brief periods of independence with the establishment of the First East Turkestan Republic in 1933 and the Second East Turkestan Republic in 1944. While these states were short-lived, they reflect long-standing aspirations for self-governance; by 1949, Xinjiang was fully incorporated into the People's Republic of China (Bovingdon, 2010). Since incorporation, the state has implemented strict policies aimed at curbing separatist sentiment: severe restrictions on religious practice, cultural expression, and the use of the Uyghur language, alongside ubiquitous surveillance through technologies such as facial recognition and algorithmic policing, under which ordinary acts of faith and identity, such as attending mosques or wearing traditional clothing, have often been met with harsh penalties (Roberts, 2020). Roberts (2020) shows how the post-9/11 language of counterterrorism gave the state a justification for this apparatus, recasting a largely nationalist grievance as an extremist threat.

In recent years, international attention has focused on mass internment. Since 2017, estimates suggest that more than one million Uyghurs and other predominantly Muslim minorities have been detained in so-called "re-education" camps (OHCHR, 2022a). Testimonies from former detainees and leaked government documents describe forced labor, ideological indoctrination, physical abuse, and forced sterilization within these facilities (Zenz, 2020). Several governments and international bodies have characterized the policies as genocide, a designation Beijing rejects. Although Beijing claims the camps have closed, a 2025 report by the Simon-Skjodt Center for the Prevention of Genocide found that more

than half a million Uyghurs remain in prisons and detention centers, while roughly three million were subjected to forced labor in 2023, which the report presents as evidence that repression has been institutionalized through the formal prison system rather than ended (Radio Free Asia, 2025). United Nations experts reported in January 2026 that Xinjiang's 2021–2025 five-year plan projected 13.75 million instances of coercive "labour transfers," warning that these programs, applied to Uyghurs and Tibetans alike, forcibly re-engineer minority cultural identities under the guise of poverty alleviation (OHCHR, 2026).

In response to this repression, the Uyghur diaspora has emerged as the most organized opposition China has faced. The World Uyghur Congress (WUC), based in Germany, works with governments and international bodies to press for sanctions against officials and companies alleged to be complicit in violations, efforts that contributed to legislation such as the U.S. Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act and the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act. Beyond political lobbying, advocacy groups use digital platforms to share testimonies and document abuses, while communities in Turkey, Canada, and the United States organize demonstrations and cultural events to preserve their identity in exile. Some factions within the independence movement have historically taken more militant approaches, and reported ties to Islamist groups have complicated international perceptions of the movement, perceptions the Chinese government has used to justify its crackdowns; the great majority of Uyghur advocacy, however, remains committed to nonviolent resistance and international legal action (Bovingdon, 2010). Xinjiang thus anchors the pattern this paper describes: the heaviest repression at home has coincided with the most organized opposition, and the highest costs, abroad.

Tibetans

Tibet, one step along the spectrum, has faced conflict and repression since its incorporation into the People's Republic of China in 1950. Historically, Tibet maintained a distinct political and spiritual structure, with the Dalai Lama serving as both head of state and spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhism, and China's military entry in 1950, together with its assertion that Tibet was an inseparable part of Chinese territory, sparked decades of resistance (Shakya, 1999). The turning point came in 1959, when a widespread uprising against Chinese rule was violently suppressed, forcing the 14th Dalai Lama and thousands of Tibetans into exile in India. From Dharamsala, the Tibetan government-in-exile was established, becoming a focal point for preserving Tibetan culture and advocating self-determination; it continues to promote the Middle Way Approach, a policy seeking genuine autonomy within the framework of the Chinese constitution while safeguarding Tibetan cultural and religious heritage (Central Tibetan Administration, n.d.).

China's policies in Tibet have increasingly aimed at assimilation. Religious practice is heavily restricted, monasteries are closely monitored, and the teaching of the Tibetan language has been systematically limited in favor of Mandarin, including through a widespread boarding-school system that separates children from their families. Infrastructure projects such as the Qinghai-Tibet Railway, while presented as economic development, have facilitated the influx of Han settlers, and dam construction on the Brahmaputra River has sparked protests over potential ecological damage. The suppression of Tibetan

identity has produced extreme forms of protest: since 2009, over 150 Tibetans have self-immolated in acts of defiance against Chinese rule (International Campaign for Tibet, n.d.). Despite these pressures, the Tibetan cause remains a prominent international issue. The Free Tibet movement, a global network of activists and exiled Tibetans, continues to press for attention through protests, awareness campaigns, and lobbying; the government-in-exile's work with foreign governments contributed to legislation such as the United States' Tibetan Policy and Support Act; and Tibetan Buddhist centers worldwide serve as both spiritual sanctuaries and cultural institutions that keep Tibetan language, art, and history alive in exile.

The struggle remains deeply tied to Tibet's spiritual leadership, and the question of succession is no longer hypothetical. On July 2nd, 2025, days before his ninetieth birthday, the Dalai Lama declared that the Gaden Phodrang Trust holds sole authority to recognize his reincarnation; within hours, Beijing rejected the plan, insisting that any successor must be chosen through the "golden urn" ritual and approved by the central government (Amnesty International, 2025). The stage is thus set for rival fifteenth Dalai Lamas, one recognized by Tibetans and one installed by the state, a confrontation that crystallizes the broader contest between minority self-determination and state control. Seventy-five years of occupation and assimilation policy have not extinguished Tibetan identity; what they have done, this paper contends, is move the conflict onto ground, religious legitimacy and international opinion, where the state's coercive advantages appear to matter least.

Inner Mongolia

Inner Mongolia occupies a middle position on the spectrum: a case in which the assimilationist program has recently been carried through to formal completion. Once rulers of the Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368), the Mongols were later subdued by the Ming and Qing dynasties, leading to their gradual incorporation into China. Inner Mongolia officially became an autonomous region in 1947 under the CCP, but this autonomy has remained largely symbolic. Over the decades, state policies encouraged Han Chinese settlement, making the roughly six million ethnic Mongols a minority in their own homeland and diminishing their political influence (Bulag, 2002; Minority Rights Group International, n.d.), while the region's natural resources and strategic position along China's northern border with Mongolia and Russia make it central to Beijing's economic and geopolitical objectives.

The decisive confrontation came over language. In 2020, the government announced plans to reduce Mongolian-language education in favor of Mandarin in local schools, sparking the region's largest protests in decades, with tens of thousands of students, teachers, and parents in the streets; the demonstrations were met with detentions of activists and suppression of media coverage. Yet the protests did not halt the policy. A comprehensive switch to Mandarin-medium instruction took full effect across the region on September 1st, 2023, and beginning in 2025, ethnic Mongolian students have been required to take the national college entrance examination in Chinese (Radio Free Asia, 2023). The completion of the transition on schedule, over the largest demonstrations the region had seen in decades, illustrates the state's willingness to pursue assimilation regardless of popular resistance, and this paper reads it as a likely preview of the trajectory of Tibetan and Uyghur education, where parallel Mandarin-medium instruction and boarding-school policies are already documented.

Environmental degradation and land encroachment further fuel Mongolian resistance. The expansion of state-backed mining and industrial projects has displaced thousands of traditional herders, destroyed grasslands, and polluted local ecosystems, eroding the pastoral way of life that anchored Mongol identity. Activist groups such as the Southern Mongolian Human Rights Information Center, operating largely from exile, document these developments and have formed alliances with international environmental and human rights organizations. The Inner Mongolian case thus demonstrates that mass, peaceful, and highly visible resistance is not, by itself, enough to change state policy, a finding whose implications are taken up in the Discussion.

Manchu People

The Manchu, once rulers of China during the Qing Dynasty (1644–1912), define the far end of the spectrum, and for this paper's argument they are an essential case. Following the fall of the Qing, the Manchu experienced widespread assimilation, driven by state policies and nationalist movements that favored Han cultural dominance, and many Manchu traditions, language practices, and social customs have been lost or diluted. While the Manchu population in China exceeds ten million, only a small fraction are fluent in the Manchu language, which UNESCO classifies as critically endangered (Moseley, 2010). Unlike the Uyghurs or Tibetans, the Manchu have faced not overt political suppression in recent decades but a gradual cultural erosion over the course of a century. They show what "successful" assimilation looks like from the inside, and, this paper argues, they illustrate the end point toward which current policy in Xinjiang, Tibet, and Inner Mongolia points.

Yet even here, identity has proven unexpectedly resilient. In recent years there has been a resurgence of efforts to revive Manchu language and heritage: grassroots initiatives, including online courses, university programs, and independent educators, teach the language and promote traditional customs, and revitalization has extended to traditional clothing, music, and historical research. Despite the absence of a formal political autonomy movement, some Manchu intellectuals and activists call for greater recognition of their history and cultural rights, advocating state support for language education and arguing that the erasure of their identity undermines China's ethnic diversity. Internationally, advocates have sought collaboration to safeguard their heritage, including partnerships with academic institutions to document the language and initiatives involving Korean politicians on shared historical concerns. One entity, the Hong Kong-based "Manchukuo Government," claims to be the government-in-exile of the former state of Manchukuo; its legitimacy is contested, however, as it invokes the name of a state widely regarded as a Japanese puppet regime and operates within territory under Chinese control, limiting both its credibility and its practical reach. The stronger evidence of Manchu cultural resilience lies in the grassroots revival and academic initiatives.

The Manchu case carries a lesson that cuts both ways. For Beijing, it may look like proof that assimilation works. The revival movement suggests the opposite: even after the language has nearly died and the community has been formally absorbed, the identity persists and is being deliberately rebuilt. Assimilation, on this evidence, suppresses the expression of difference without extinguishing it.

DISCUSSION

Cross-Case Findings

The first hypothesis, that minority grievance is rooted in a documented policy shift from accommodation to assimilation, is supported across all four cases, though the shift arrived at different times: earliest for the Manchu, whose absorption unfolded over a century; sharply intensified in Xinjiang and Tibet during the 2010s; and completed for Inner Mongolia with the 2020–2023 language transition. In each case, the decisive grievances concern language, religion, and demographic change, the core markers of identity, rather than economic deprivation alone. This is consistent with Kwon's (2011) account of the CCP's trajectory and with Domingo's (2020) finding that development policy has functioned as a vehicle of assimilation rather than an alternative to it.

The second hypothesis, that assimilation produces resistance whose visibility scales with coercion, is broadly supported, with two instructive qualifications. Xinjiang, the most coercive case, has generated the most organized diaspora opposition; Tibet's decades of restriction have produced both the self-immolation protests and a durable government-in-exile; and Inner Mongolia's language reform triggered the region's largest demonstrations in decades. The first qualification comes from the Manchu case, where resistance takes the form of cultural revival rather than political mobilization, suggesting that once assimilation is nearly complete, opposition changes form rather than disappearing. The second qualification cuts the other way: in Inner Mongolia, visible mass resistance did not stop the policy. Resistance imposes costs on the state without, so far, changing its course.

The third hypothesis, internationalization, is where the cases converge most clearly. Exile movements that once worked in isolation now convene and speak together, as at the Conference for the Independence and Restoration of Chinese Minorities in Seoul (News CJ, 2023). International bodies, for their part, increasingly treat the individual struggles as products of a single policy: the January 2026 statement by UN experts on coercive labor transfers explicitly extended the documented pattern from Uyghur to Tibetan populations (OHCHR, 2026). What began as four separate disputes is increasingly addressed, by both the movements themselves and their international audience, as one.

International Scrutiny and Its Costs

International organizations have consistently criticized China's treatment of its minorities, particularly the Uyghurs and Tibetans. The August 2022 OHCHR assessment found credible allegations of arbitrary detention, torture, and ill-treatment that may constitute crimes against humanity, and called for the immediate release of all individuals arbitrarily detained (OHCHR, 2022a). Later that year, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination urged China to investigate violations in Xinjiang, to cease intimidation and reprisals against Uyghur and other ethnic Muslim communities both domestically and abroad, and to ensure that victims are provided with adequate and effective remedies (OHCHR, 2022b). During the Universal Periodic Review of China's human rights record in January 2024,

multiple countries, including the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia, criticized China's policies in Xinjiang and Tibet and urged the release of those arbitrarily detained (OHCHR, n.d.); China dismissed the criticisms, accused Western nations of hypocrisy, and continued to assert that its policies combat terrorism and promote development.

The consequences of this scrutiny are no longer merely rhetorical. Genocide designations by several governments, sanctions on officials and entities, import bans under the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act, and diplomatic boycotts have imposed measurable economic and reputational costs. Notably, these costs were generated by the state's own domestic policy choices rather than by any external enemy, which is what distinguishes them, in this paper's framework, from the wartime pressures that broke the Ottoman and Russian empires.

Alternative Interpretations

The account above is contestable at three points, and each alternative deserves a hearing. The first is Beijing's own: that its policies in Xinjiang are counterterrorism and deradicalization, and that its broader minority policy is poverty alleviation and development (OHCHR, n.d.). This account is not without factual foundation. The region experienced deadly violence in the 2000s and 2010s, including riots and attacks attributed to Uyghur militants, and living standards in minority regions have risen under state investment (Roberts, 2020). The difficulty is one of proportion and design. As Roberts (2020) and Bovingdon (2010) show, the state's framing conflates a largely local, nationalist grievance with global jihadism, and the measures adopted, mass internment, birth suppression, and family separation, apply to entire populations rather than to individuals suspected of any offense. The OHCHR (2022a) assessment reached a similar conclusion, finding the legal framework itself to be discriminatory in application, and development has repeatedly doubled as demographic and cultural engineering, as the labor-transfer programs indicate (OHCHR, 2026). The state's account explains why some security policy exists; it does not explain the scope of the policy that exists.

The second alternative holds that the international costs of assimilation are smaller than this paper claims. Condemnation is far from universal: when 22 mostly Western states criticized China's Xinjiang policies at the UN Human Rights Council in July 2019, 37 states, including several members of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, responded within days with a letter defending Beijing's record (France 24, 2019). Many governments have declined to raise the issue, and trade with China has continued notwithstanding sanctions. This objection has force, and this paper does not claim that international pressure threatens the Chinese state's survival. The claim is narrower: the costs are real, durable, and self-inflicted. Import bans under the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act reach global supply chains regardless of third states' positions; the genocide designation complicates relations with several of the world's largest economies; and the UN documentary record thickened rather than faded between 2022 and 2026. A liability need not be fatal to constitute a weakness.

The third alternative denies the premise altogether: with minorities constituting under nine percent of the population and the security apparatus pervasive, one might argue that assimilation, whatever its ethics, is

simply not a strategic vulnerability, and that this paper's title overstates the case. Two findings weigh against this reading. The first is the Manchu case, which indicates that even near-total absorption does not extinguish identity; the policy therefore appears unable to deliver the permanent closure of the national question that is its goal. The second is that the vulnerability identified here is not separatist capability but legitimacy. A state that stakes its claim to rule on national unity, and must then permanently coerce parts of its population and defend itself against genocide findings in order to maintain that unity, has converted a governable diversity into a standing indictment. That is a weakness even if no territory is ever lost.

CONCLUSION

China's internal vulnerability lies less in diversity itself than in the state's chosen response to it. Because China cannot be fractured demographically as the Ottoman and Russian empires were, the state has adopted assimilation, the absorption of minority languages, religions, and identities into the Han majority, as its instrument of control, a strategy international scholars and exile groups increasingly describe as a form of cultural genocide. The four cases show what that strategy has produced. In Xinjiang, maximal coercion has led to mass internment, an international genocide debate, and the most organized diaspora opposition China has faced. In Tibet, decades of assimilation policy now point toward a confrontation over the Dalai Lama's succession that coercion appears poorly suited to resolve. In Inner Mongolia, the language transition was completed on schedule over the largest protests in the region's modern history, a demonstration of state resolve that has also alienated a generation of Mongols. And the Manchu people, the supposed success story, shows that even near-total absorption does not extinguish identity, which revives the moment space allows.

If this analysis is correct, the policies most likely to secure China's long-term stability are the reverse of those now pursued: genuine regional autonomy, protection of minority languages and religious institutions, and development that does not double as settlement policy. Nothing in the record reviewed here suggests that the current leadership is inclined toward such a reversal, and this paper does not predict one. What the analysis anticipates instead is continued grievance at home, deepening solidarity among exile movements, and a lengthening international record of designations, sanctions, and findings.

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