

## China Should Watch Its Periphery

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By Ahmed Rashid

China's periphery is in revolt, from [Hong Kong](#) in the east to Xinjiang and Tibet in the west and south. Although this is not a co-ordinated revolutionary movement, it is the greatest challenge the [Chinese Communist party](#) has faced since the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s.

On November 6 1967 the powerful Chinese general [Lin Biao](#), who was second only to Chairman Mao Zedong, gave a speech in Beijing commemorating the 50th anniversary of Russia's October revolution. His words became an anthem for revolutionaries in Asia and Africa.

Describing how the Chinese Communists seized power in 1949 he turned traditional Marxist theory on its head: "Arouse the peasant masses in the countryside to wage guerrilla war, unfold an agrarian revolution, build rural base areas, use the countryside to encircle the cities and finally capture the cities."

By "using the countryside to encircle the cities", peasant armies in peripheral regions of poor countries, far from capital cities, could revolt and seize power without needing the support of a revolutionary working class. The idea garnered widespread criticism and a debate sprang up between the Soviets and the Leninists and Trotskyists in Europe. But Lin's guidance was backed by a spate of national liberation movements in Africa and Asia in the 1960s. Today the crisis for [China](#) is that its periphery is creeping into the debate about democracy, greater autonomy and the political future of the country for the first time, even as the millions in its cities appear to be satisfied by capitalist consumer gains and uninterested in greater democracy.

Despite fundamental differences, Tibetans and Uighur activists in Xinjiang are linking [what is happening in Hong Kong](#) with their own struggles for greater autonomy and religious freedom. To outsiders the Hong Kong protests have seemed incredibly civilised and urbane, with a [calm and cool reaction](#) from the authorities (save for some tear gassing). However, protests in other parts of China's periphery have been violent and have generated brutal crackdowns by the police, army and Communist party.

Tibetans have protested against Chinese rule since the 1950s and the Tibetan cause has been taken up by international celebrities and western governments. In May the Dalai Lama, Tibet's spiritual leader in exile in India, asked for an inquiry into the self-immolations of more than 130 protesting Tibetans over the past five years. Contrary to Tibet, there is very little information coming out of Xinjiang. The religious restrictions on Muslims in Xinjiang, a throwback to the Stalinist era, have led to attacks by Uighurs wielding knives and axes, militant attacks, protests, marches and riots. Some Uighurs is even known to be training with the Taliban in Pakistan and Afghanistan. The Chinese response has been the harshest since the 1989 crackdown on Tiananmen Square. Yet few people in the west are aware of the hundreds of [Uighur killed in Xinjiang](#) during the past two years.

The danger here arises from the extreme Islamic radicalisation taking place in the neighbouring states of Pakistan and Afghanistan and in Central Asia more widely, which can easily spread to Xinjiang.

The western periphery has been left out of the [vast economic development](#) that has taken place in other regions of China and even though there are huge new infrastructure projects planned for Tibet and Xinjiang, local people still see these endeavours as benefiting the Han Chinese settlers in their midst rather than their own smaller ethnic groups.

The Marxist answer to the problems posed by the dozens of minority groups living in China is to give them limited cultural autonomy while keeping political power firmly in the hands of the Communist party, which is of course dominated by Han Chinese. However, this has not yet provided a satisfactory solution. The issue was also raised in Hong Kong where elected leaders have to be vetted by Beijing before they can stand for elections.

We are already seeing Lin's theory coming home to roost in China's periphery. China is a vast, tumultuous country that needs far greater relaxation of centralised rule by the Communist party if it is going to stay peaceful and fulfil the wishes of all its peoples rather than just the majority.

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