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Will World Uyghur Congress Sink a Great Ship?

By MUTSUJI Shoji

The 4th General Assembly of the "the World Uyghur Congress (WUC)" was held in Tokyo on May 14. With parliamentarians from various countries including Japan attending the Congress, Rabiye Qadir, a representative of Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region criticized the repression against ethnic minorities in the Region by the Chinese government and emphasized that China would not be able to forge solid footing in the international community unless she should come to respect such principles as human rights and freedom. Meanwhile, while the Chinese government had tried to press the Japanese government not to convene the Congress, visas were, in the end, issued to the parties concerned including Chairperson Qadir. This created a wide range of effects, as exemplified by that fact that the Chinese government in response virtually cancelled a summit meeting between President Hu Jintao and Prime Minister Noda, claiming that their repeated requests to defend "China's core interest" had been neglected.

Along with the issue of Tibet, which is well-known among other ethnic minority issues in China, the Chinese government is quite nervous about the issue of Uighur. Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, westernmost of China and adjacent to boundaries with countries in Central Asia, covers approximately one-sixth of China in terms of space. The Uighurs, having the largest population of more than 7.2 million in the region, is one of the biggest of 55 ethnic minority groups in China. The Uighurs, inspired by their own cultural identity, had long groped for independence, even after the region was seized by the Qing Dynasty, and in 1944 declared establishment of the "East Turkestan Republic" which was then recognized by the Soviet Union. However, China, wary of extension of the Soviet influence, formally incorporated Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region into the country as its own territory in 1955, and this was tacitly approved by the Soviet Union under the international environment of the Cold War.

In Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, there has been observed periodical occurrence of riots and demonstrations by Uighurs since the beginning of the 1990s after the end of the Cold War. Along with it, Uighur-related organizations which had long been working outside the country also gained momentum. These organizations are roughly divided into two lines of

activities; one adheres to such human-right-related secular norms as "right to national self-determination" and the other to Islamic doctrine with propensity to armed struggle. Both lines of activities have rapidly expanded their influence since the 1990s, but their greatest difference from those in Tibet is that their resistance is not unified.

The Chinese government regards the riots provoked within Xinjiang by Uighurs, which have been spurred since the 1990s along with the activities of those foreign-based Uighur-related organizations, as "acts of terrorism agitated by the separatists", and implements the draconian "strike hard" security campaign against them. However, now that the "war on terror" is almost over and that "Arab Spring" stormed throughout the Middle East, it is quite difficult to justify everything at least with such rhetoric. Just as Chairperson Qadir of WUC stated, there is no denying that China's argument on human rights that "a strong state is the only guarantee of individual rights and is therefore paramount" quite deviates from the global norms on human rights.

On the other hand, no matter how much criticism China receives from the outside world, it is least expected at this stage that Xinjiang should secede from China and become independent. There will arise big friction if a foreign country should, for whatever reasons, support separation and independence of a region of any one country.

Besides, Uighurs living in Xinjiang do not seem to wish for "separation and independence," either. According to an investigation conducted by H. S. Yee in Xinjiang in 2003, it was confirmed that, while Uighurs have an strong ethnic consciousness and are more dissatisfied than Chinese with economic disparities among ethnic groups caused by the open-economic policy, they take a negative attitude either toward separatist and independence movements or toward the "strike hard" campaign by the government. Notwithstanding the disparities with the Chinese, it cannot be denied that Uighurs are also beneficiaries of the policies of "reform and openness" as in job opportunity, etc.

Frequent occurrence of demonstrations and riots should be considered to be not so much their quest for "separation and independence" as manifestation of their frustration caused by their dissatisfied coexistence with the Chinese. Should it be the case, the claim for "separation and independence" would be welcomed neither by the international community nor the Uighurs in Xinjiang themselves.

From this point of view, we could understand why WUC, at its General Assembly on May 14, made no direct reference to "separation and independence," but focused on criticism to

repression against the ethnic minorities by the Chinese government. Again, it is assumed that tactical consideration was made when the Tibetan government-in-exile, also in conflict with Beijing, switched its policy from "independence" to "a high degree of autonomy " so that it could gain domestic and international support more easily. Thus, it could be said that the center of gravity of the ethnic minority issues in China is shifting from "separation and independence" to "reduction of disparities among ethnic groups in terms of politics, economy, and culture."

Besides, even if the Uighurs approve that they belong to China in return for the benefit they receive, though only partially, from China's economic growth, it is clearly impossible to sustain her economic growth almost indefinitely, and thus, winning the hearts and minds of ethnic minorities by dangling "a carrot" before them would not always be a viable option. However, the Chinese government maintains a hardline stance, sheltering behind the principle of "non-interference in internal affairs." They may fear that only one concession would erupt all the ethnic minority issues in China, just as a leak will sink a great ship. This is, in other words, an issue which might uproot the basis of the Communist regime. Therefore, while it is inconceivable that the Chinese government should revise the existing system of autonomous region in the foreseeable future, the frustration of Uighurs is expected to be increasingly exacerbated. Since her shift to a route of "reform and openness," China has realized remarkable economic growth with an unprecedented degree of pragmatism. However, that pragmatism is fatally lacking when it comes to political and social issues in particular. It should be noted that, as long as this goes on, the Communist Party and the Chinese government will gradually be caught in their own trap.

(This is the English translation of an article written by MUTSUJI Shoji, Lecturer, Yokohama City University, which originally appeared on the BBS "Giron - Hyakushutsu" of GFJ on May 20, 2012.)