As a strategic response to the terrorist threat faced by countries the world over, many states have introduced governmental counter-terrorism policies or what may be called attempts aimed at deradicalisation and prevent strategies. These are intended to assist the public agencies and departments in understanding their role in dealing with terrorism as well as to assist investigations by local authorities and firefighters in dealing with radicalised combatants (Lowe, 2018: 58). For instance, the UK’s CONTEST policy is based on four “p”s – prepare, protect, prevent and pursue – which echoes closely the EU counter-terrorism strategy, which is also based on four strands of disengagement and exit strategies, and the Canadian Government’s counter-terrorism strategy, which has four strands to it. The US policy listed in the National Strategy for Counter-terrorism also discusses the measures and procedures that have been strengthened in order to “improve” US capabilities in countering terrorism, especially by preventing it from occurring (Ibid: 59). China is no exception; it too grapples with the threat of radicalisation at various levels in different parts of its territories. Keeping this in mind, it has initiated several measures as a prevent strategy in view of increased radicalisation, both religious and ethnic, in Xinjiang over the last two decades. Heeding the clarion call given by many scholars who had warned of the likely “Palestinisation” of conflict in Xinjiang if alternative strategies are not adopted for conflict resolution, China has brought in prevent strategies to curtail the menace of severe political and social instability, often instigated by troublesome forces, organisations and mechanisms from abroad. This also bears from the fact that China’s approach of using development as an antidote to ethnic tensions in Xinjiang has failed miserably, forcing it to adopt prevent strategies against terrorist elements.

With China now focusing on the Belt and Road initiative, touted as its foremost foreign policy apparatus for the present century, curbing extremist instances in Xinjiang has become even more important to maintain stability in its frontier regions. Keeping this in view, President Xi Jinping has urged the security forces to erect a “Great Wall of Steel/Iron” around the violence-hit western region of Xinjiang. These attempts are deemed even more important to change China’s image which has often attracted criticism for its restrictive policies and widespread harassment of religious groups, and understandably so, as it faces the challenge of grappling with 55 minority nationalities (56 including the Han majority), some of which occupy large territorial swathes of its polity. The Uyghurs in
fact do not even constitute the largest Muslim population; it is the Hui community with its 10.5-million-strong population that has emerged as the second largest ethnic minority in China. They exhibit a lot of cultural affinity to the Hans and are virtually indistinguishable from them. They have close trade linkages across the country and do not pose a severe challenge to the central administration. It is the Turkic Muslims in Xinjiang who are considered “bad Muslims” and hence have been at the receiving end from the state for resisting the central authority. A recent study by the Pew Research Centre placed China at a high position of number two just behind Egypt amongst countries with a high degree of religious restrictions using data from 2015 (Williams, 2017). Rising inequality from state-orchestrated migration as well as natural migration has been at the heart of separatist movements in the form of Han–Uyghur clashes in Xinjiang. Given this rise in radical tendencies it would be prudent to examine why the state’s policies have been rendered counter-productive to the goal of integrating Xinjiang’s minorities in its larger nation-building exercise and whether deradicalisation as a strategy can show the way forward.

Though there is no major consensus on how to define the terms “radicalisation” and its counterpart “deradicalisation”, for the purpose of this paper Dalgaard-Nielsen’s definition of radicalisation, that is, as Koehler points out in this volume, a “growing readiness to pursue and support far-reaching changes in society that conflict with, or pose a direct threat to the existing order” will be used. This would subsume the trend that radicalisation occurs due to networks, group dynamics and peer pressure and a constructed reality as propounded by Kepel (2004). Whether or not the use of violence is actually a key aspect of radicalisation remains contested, as Koehler points out, since even non-violent radicalisation can occur. This may be understood as the “social and psychological process of incrementally experienced commitment to extremist political or Islamist ideology”, as explained by Horgan and Braddock (2010: 152). Both violent and non-violent radicalisation has been witnessed in the case of Xinjiang. Deradicalisation is understood in terms of deliberately focusing on an ideology or the psychological aspects of an existing violent phenomenon to wean away the radicalised groups and minimise the risk of re-radicalisation. This occurs through a process of voluntary or involuntary attempts to turn from a position of perceived deviance or conflict with the surrounding environment towards moderation and equilibrium, deriving from a societal negotiation, also explained by Koehler earlier in this volume. It is often used in combination with attempts at disengagement of the deviant groups from their parent movements.

Ethnic radicalisation in Xinjiang

China’s endeavours to assimilate Xinjiang as an autonomous region have been marked by an oscillating hard and soft policy over the last few decades. The region, which has abundant oil resources like the Tahe oilfield and Dushanzi refinery and boasts of the largest natural gas-producing capabilities in China, has emerged as a key strategic location facilitating oil and gas trade, making it even more indispensable to China. While Muslim Uyghurs had traditionally been the predominant majority in the province prior to mass migrations of Hans into the region, the current demography exhibits equal proportions of Turkic-speaking Uyghurs and Mandarin-speaking Hans. This alteration in the demographic component is a major source of instability and disgruntlement for the locals as well as the central government.

Historically, the ethnic minorities in Xinjiang have enjoyed widespread cultural autonomy as the Qing rulers did not bother interfering with their religious practices or even bureaucratic
practices. However, after the establishment of Xinjiang as an autonomous region under the People’s Republic of China (PRC), the state has constantly sought to keep a firm rein on both political and religious aspects. The Communist Party’s Anti-Rightist Policy of 1957, which opposed “local nationalism” and the Cultural Revolution of 1966–76 under which the minorities witnessed most of their religious texts and institutions being destroyed, left many scars on the psyche of the Muslim minorities.

The unwieldiness of their aspiration for a separate state of “East Turkestan” sought by the Uyghurs, led by fragmented ideologies, continues to be a major source of dissatisfaction amongst the local communities, especially since the other ethnic groups – Kazaks, Kyrgyz, Uzbek and Tajik – who had been vying for independence realised their goals and formed their own independent nations (Central Asian Republics) as a result of the disintegration of the Soviet Union in the 1990s. This explains the surge in dissent in Xinjiang post-1990. In fact a combination of ethnicity and religion has made the region more vulnerable to the movement of religious and political ideologies, groups and weapons (Davis, 2008). The state’s response to the outbreaks of unrest in Xinjiang in the 1990s, especially bombings in Beijing in 1997, has been mostly ham-fisted as the state maintains a heavy hand on the administrative and traditional customs in the region. While the “Strike hard campaign” had been announced as one of the foremost measures in 1996 in an attempt to curb separatism, a “war on terror” has been declared more recently to curb the “three evils” of religious extremism, separatism and terrorism in the wake of the 9/11 attacks and the larger augmentation of the “Global war on terror”.¹

More significantly, there has been a parallel rise in violence in Xinjiang as the PRC has sought to assert its rise on the international stage, perhaps both as a cause and effect. In 2006, Wang Jinxiang, deputy director of the National Development and Reform Commission, had assured the National Committee of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) that the national strategy to develop the country’s western region under the Western Development Campaign had made great progress.² But on the ground, the radical groups utilised the opportunities provided by economic modernisation and the soft policies of the state to further their agenda, often abetted by their Muslim Brotherhood abroad and local support from Muslim clerics and influential businessmen. Ever since, violent outbreaks have been occurring sporadically as the groups that claim responsibility frequently merge and collapse depending on the unofficial support they derive from extremist elements and governments, for instance, from Turkey and other states in their neighbourhood.

This was even more evident in the extremist instances that flared up around the Beijing Olympics and subsequent to the event, since it was seen as an opportunity by the minorities in China to bring the issue of human rights violations to the forefront of international politics. An aircraft attack in March and multiple killings in August 2008 had put the Chinese authorities on high alert. The state has ever since maintained a strict vigil on minorities in Xinjiang as well as Tibet. The scale of radicalisation and the rise in violence in Xinjiang till 2005 had been mapped by Bovingdon and Garner (2010), who identified 158 political violent events and organised protests from 1949 to 2005, of which 142 had a clear ethnic component. China claims that there has been a rise in Islamist-inspired terrorism and inter-ethnic violence especially after 2009; the year 2013 alone witnessed at least five major incidents in Kashgar, Turpan and Khotan (Clarke, 2017). The Uyghurs have, however, failed to emerge as a unitary force harbouring a single agenda which has been a major drawback for their struggle – while some aspire for a separate state, others wish for cultural autonomy while some others are in fact integrating into the Chinese system (Ibid). The central government has tried to wean away many of these radical elements by making efforts to co-opt the local elite,
especially the Uyghurs who have spearheaded the struggle for an independent state of East Turkestan. At the same time, it has begun to identify Muslim institutions and practices that are a source of instability.\(^3\)

The rise in violence in Xinjiang can be attributed to several socio-economic and political factors: a ban on religious activities which the state considers illegal and human rights issues, which have surfaced as a major reason for discontent amongst the local population and differences in perception on balancing indigenous cultural developments. There is a constant struggle for resources and opportunities between Uyghurs and Hans due to ethnic-based discrimination policies of the government as most of the decision-making authoritative jobs fall under the purview of Hans, leaving the middle-rung and lower-category jobs for the other ethnic minorities. The human resource development also suffers as a result of the biased education policies which lay more stress on Mandarin education in comparison to ethnic language-based education – leading to widely differing career prospects for them (Dillon, 2004: 21) and difference of availability of health amenities, which fuels a discourse of deprivation amongst the Uyghurs (Schuster, 2009: 423).

The state has termed the religious revival as an ethno-nationalist and splittist threat (\textit{fenlie zhuyizhe}), thereby targeting the theoretical and ritualistic manifestations of religion. For instance, it has restricted the celebration of regional holidays, study of religious texts and free expression of religious preferences through personal appearances, including the way they prefer to dress to the naming of their children, which has drawn a backlash from the Uyghur community. An example of the state’s heavy-handed approach to discourage Uyghur women from wearing traditional headscarves or veils was the “Project Beauty campaign” (Leibold and Grose, 2015). In December 2014, some county-level authorities in Xinjiang began disseminating a brochure that identified 75 forms of “religious extremism” for local officials to be aware of, as reported in the \textit{Global Times}. In March 2017, the Xinjiang legislature Standing Committee passed a law to curb religious extremism which bans wearing veils or “abnormal beards” without specifying the term. It deems it illegal to refuse to watch state television and listen to state radio, or prevent children from receiving national education – activities deemed “manifestations” of extremism (Gan, 2017).

China has closed down several mosques and increased control over the Islamic clergy through the China Islamic Organisation. Anyone deemed in contravention of the rules is punishable or liable for detention in China’s notorious and discredited Re-education Through Labour (RTL) programme. Of late it has even banned dozens of baby names with religious meanings that are widely used by Muslims elsewhere in the world under the “ Naming Rules for Ethnic Minorities”, such as Islam, Quran, Mecca, Jihad, Imam, Saddam, Hajj and Medina, stating that any babies registered under such names would be barred from the “hukou” household registration system that gives access to health care and education. Night markets have been closed and the process of assimilation has been pushed hard, including cash incentives for mixed marriages between Han and Uyghurs.

These measures have naturally given rise to resentment amongst the local population which views these attempts by the government as a challenge to their personal and religious freedom. The government, however, refuses to take note of the social disruption that its policies are causing and attributes the religious disorientations to the “dramatic social transformation” that is taking place in China today (Annual Report on China’s Religions 2010 by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS)) and the confusion amongst the ethnic groups resulting from China’s soft and hard policies. The soft policies include positive discrimination in terms of concessions from the one-child policy and reservation of government jobs for locals (Article 17, 18, 22), priority to ethnic minorities in enterprises and institutions (Article 23), fiscal transfer,
poverty reduction and arranging for assistance from developed provinces in the East, which the
government had earlier doled out on various occasions (instituted through the Law of Regional
Ethnic Autonomy in 1984 and amended in 2001). Interestingly, it has been observed that the
chances of violence in Xinjiang have increased with gross domestic product (GDP) per capita
increases as the frequency of protests over ethno-nationalist issues increased with urbanisation
because economic development fostered the very conditions for local minorities to form ethnic
networks (Cao, Duan, Liu and Wei, 2018). In this sense, economic integration through trade
has not led to assimilation of Uyghurs as in the case of the Hui minority.

These soft measures have failed to address the sentiments of relative deprivation as higher
population density has exacerbated resource scarcity and worsened inter-group competition,
leading to further radicalisation amongst the Uyghurs. The government is now hard pressed to
come up with alternative strategies to deradicalise. Though the cavalcade of measures brought
forth during the earlier part of 2017 may seem prudent to the government since it wants to
maintain a complete grip over the minority regions given its Belt and Road summit initiative,
it may be hard for the government to justify its approach to the indigenous people.

The process – modes and agents of radicalisation

The militant movement in Xinjiang led by the East Turkestan Islamic movement (ETIM)/
Tu-Dong forces and later by the Tukistan Islamic Party (TIP) has reorganised along religious
lines after the demise of the Eastern Turkestan People’s Party. Drawing inspiration from the
victory of the Afghan Mujahideen over the Red Army, most Uyghurs have sought to
mobilise local support through various slogans like “Down with socialism”, “Take Barin,
establish East Turkestan” and so on (Castets, 2003: 38). Militant Uyghur groups often
exploit Xinjiang’s porous border with Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Afghanistan to
establish training camps and move explosives and small arms into China (Wolfe, 2004).

Many young students and entrepreneurs who travel to the neighbouring regions for study
and business become easy targets of recruitment by “terrorist and splittist” organisations
operating abroad.

The Chinese Government has alleged that since 1997 the ETIM has been leading pious
Muslims astray by offering board, lodging and scholarships as bait through its offices in dif-
ferent Asian countries. Besides physical training they receive basic skill drills such as assem-
bling and disassembling different weapons and shooting. More and more Uyghurs are being
radicalised and trained overseas by groups such as al-Qaeda, Islamic State and most probably
more localised Southeast Asian groups (Sainsbury, 2017). However, the evidence provided
by the Chinese Government and the international agencies, in the form of documentaries
and video clippings that argue these acts of violence in Xinjiang are infiltrated as part of
a larger terrorist network, is very often fabricated and by no means involves entire move-
ments or their leaders; some of these acts are no more than ordinary crimes. Wang Lequan,
secretary of Xinjiang’s Chinese Communist Party (CCP) committee in 1998 highlighted the
preliminary nature of these attacks – “Since early 1996, a series of criminal activities involv-
ing violent attacks have taken place in Xinjiang” carried out by “a handful of criminals”.

The term terrorism has been increasingly used only after 2001 in the context of the
global wave of the fight against terrorism and that too with unclear definitions and purposes
in the present context. In its Document No.7 issued in 2000, the CCP had briefly identified
the principal danger to Xinjiang’s stability as the “separatist force and illegal religious activ-
ities” without defining these terms in a precise manner. There is an attempt to manipulate
the discourse on terrorism by Beijing by exploiting the remoteness of Xinjiang and its
cultural distance and restricted information. This exaggeration of the narrative on the crimes of Eastern Turkestan Terrorist Power (Dongtu kongbu shili zuixing jishi) further radicalises the Uyghur youth.

Meanwhile, other organisations which have been critical of the cause of a separate Turkestan but which do not have terrorist links are also often dubbed as extremist by the Chinese Government, especially the World Uyghur Congress and the East Turkestan Government-in-exile. Earlier in 2014, US National Security Advisor Susan Rice alleged that Chinese Uyghurs from Xinjiang had been sighted in Iraq and Syria fighting among the ranks of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) insurgency. In the same year China also took action by seizing passports to prevent its citizens from travelling to Syria and Iraq as many Chinese citizens had been reported to have worked in tandem with the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in the Middle East. In November, ISIL claimed to have executed Chinese citizen Fan Jinghui, prompting strong condemnation from President Xi Jinping. Two weeks later, ISIL posted a song online in Mandarin calling for Chinese Muslims to take up arms against their country.

Palpably, there is an increasing trend amongst Uyghurs to relate their nationalism more in terms of an ideological religious nationalism instead of ethnic religious nationalism which also targets co-ethnics viewed as collaborators with the state (Country Reports on Terrorism, 2015). The state has tried to wean away some of these radicalised groups by stating that “religious extremism under the banner of Islam runs counter to Islamic doctrines and it is not Islam and that these ethnic groups should not turn a blind eye to the diverse and splendid cultures of Xinjiang” (White paper, 2019).

State responses to Uyghur radicalisation

The Chinese state has responded deftly to the radicalisation movement in the province, firstly by ensuring international support and secondly by churning out indigenous initiatives. To begin with, the inclusion of ETIM in the terrorist list by the UN Security Council has provided China the needed international support to wage a war against terrorism and at the same time led to a loss of sympathy for the independence movement of the Uyghurs. Simultaneously, China has been relentlessly trying to establish evidence on the funding of these terrorist organisations by various local and international financing mechanisms (China Daily, 2002). The state has also tried to keep a firm control over the polity through the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (XPCC) which, being the main organ of the state in the defence realm, is also one of the main reasons for intensification of Uyghur–Chinese conflict. In addition the state has tried to suppress all dissent by imprisoning prominent intellectuals, as illustrated by the case of Ilham Tohti.

The pressing need to check radicalisation was brought to the fore by Chinese dissident Wang Lixiong in his 2007 book, My West China: Your East Turkestan, where he cautions on the likely “Palestinisation” of conflict in Xinjiang in which “the full mobilization of a people and the full extent of its hatred would be directed against the state” (Lixiong, 2014). From 2014 onwards, the state’s reaction has been largely framed under an attempt to strengthen security and counter-terrorism measures by increasing Xinjiang’s internal security budget. President Xi Jinping now heads a specially formed committee on China’s new National Security Council to deal with security and counter-terror strategies in Xinjiang. At the same time the state has declared a “people’s war” to exterminate the “savage and evil” separatists who are directed by foreign extremists to incite violence at home. It has accelerated counter-terrorism and deradicalisation initiatives through three specific local regulations, including “the Regulations of Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous
since 2014, the state has destroyed 1,588 violent gangs, arrested 12,995 terrorists, seized 2,052 explosive devices, punished 30,645 people for 4,858 illegal religious activities and confiscated 345,229 copies of illegal religious materials. (White Paper on The Fight Against Terrorism and Extremism and Human Rights Protection in Xinjiang, 2019)

Besides co-opting the elite the authorities have tried to elicit assistance of ordinary Uyghurs through the offer of financial rewards for tip-offs to police regarding suspicious individuals and activities. In 2014, China made a forceful attempt to link violence in Xinjiang to the radical Islamic threat and the rise of ISIS and also used soft-power techniques to target radicalisation through anti-extremism campaigns. For instance, in a commemoration speech at China’s National People’s Congress in March 2014 in the honour of the victims of a knife attack in Kunming train station in which 33 were killed and 144 injured, the deputy chair of the China Dancer’s Association, Dilnar Abdulla, complained that “religious extremists” in the Muslim region of Xinjiang were “campaigning for the commoners not to sing and dance”.

Several such campaigns have been introduced with the intent of inculcating an alternative set of behaviours in addition to criminalising Islamic behaviours. The most prominent part of these campaigns is the organisation of song and dance events by the cultural bureau for displays of loyalty to the party and nation and singing of revolutionary songs. The emphasis on public demonstrations of happiness is another recurring theme in the reports of these campaigns. Some of these programmes have drawn displeasure from the media in international Islamic countries and organisations; for instance, it was the reports of the Imams publicly dancing to the Chinese internet hit song “Little Apple” that aroused the ire of the Turkish media in 2015. Nonetheless, the state has equipped the mosques and imams with modern infrastructure with access to medical services, LED screens, computers, drinking water and electricity facilities and automatic dispensers of shoe coverings to better satisfy their reasonable religious demands (White Paper, 2019).

However, despite these local measures the biggest challenge for China in countering terrorism and extremism emerges from the lack of clear definitions on its understanding of the terms “terrorism and extremism”. Country Reports on Terrorism, published by the US Government (Bureau of Counter terrorism and Countering Violent Terrorism, 2015) lament that the lack of transparency and information provided by China about violent incidents that the government characterised as terrorist incidents greatly complicates the effort to verify details and its tendency to prevent foreign journalists and international observers from independently verifying media accounts leads to improper reporting (White Paper, 2019). This is also the primary reason why counter-terrorism cooperation between China and the US has remained limited. Yet China remains committed to implementing the resolution of the General Assembly of the United Nations concerning the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy (60/288) through a people-centred approach. So far the two countries have initiated several technical workshops on countering the spread of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and increased consultations aimed at stemming the transnational flow of foreign terrorist fighters, countering terrorist funding networks, increasing information sharing on terrorist threats and sharing evidentiary best practices.
A more successful regional attempt to curb extremist influence and radicalisation of Uyghur youth has emerged under the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) framework with the Central Asian countries. For its part, China has also been a member of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), as well as the Asia/Pacific Group on Money Laundering and the Eurasian Group on Combating Money Laundering and Terrorist Financing, both of which are FATF-style regional bodies. China and the US have met at least once a year (for the last four years) to engage in a technical discussion related to anti-money laundering (AML) and countering the financing of terrorism (CFT) under the AML/CFT Working Group within the Strategic and Economic Dialogue (S&ED).

In May 2015 the Chinese state media reported that it had dismantled 181 “terror groups” in Xinjiang. In December 2015, the National People’s Congress Standing Committee approved the country’s first comprehensive counter-terrorism law to “provide legal support for counter-terrorism activities as well as collaboration with the international community.” In addition to the provisions under the Constitution of the PRC, China’s anti-terrorism law system is currently composed of:

1. the Criminal Law of the PRC
2. the Criminal Procedure Law of the PRC
3. the National Security Law of the PRC
4. the Counter Terrorism Law of the PRC
5. the Regulations on Religious Affairs and Opinions issued by the Supreme People’s Court, the Supreme People’s Procuratorate, the Ministry of Public Security and the Ministry of Justice.

These responses have helped to curtail the threat of Islamic radicalisation to some extent but not yet effectively.

**Deradicalisation as a strategic tool**

The necessity to deradicalise is imminent if the state wants to avert the growth of separatism as a challenge to long-term political stability in Xinjiang. The Chinese state is coming to terms with the fact that military, enforcement and intelligence measures alone will not be sufficient to combat religious extremism. Hence there is an emerging consensus amongst Chinese scholars and policy makers that if rigorous deradicalisation (qu jiduanhua) measures are brought into practice, it can reduce the risk of violent extremism (Congressional-executive, Commission on China, Annual report 2016). It also has to be curbed for the reasons that it lends support to the active independence movement in Tibet and influences nascent ethnic unrest in Inner Mongolia (George, 1998, No. 73).

Though there has been a reversal of policy approach since the 2009 Urumqi riots in terms of adopting a stringent apparatus, as reflected in the change of guard at the top levels and the two Work Forums in 2010 and 2014, the current government under Xi Jinping is more open to accept alternatives for the resolution of Xinjiang conflict. Under the larger parapet, Xi Jinping called on Xinjiang residents to identify themselves, regardless of their ethnicity, with China, the Chinese nation, its culture and socialism with Chinese characteristics. Endorsing the deradicalisation approach, Zhang Chunxian, then top leader of Xinjiang, used the term “deradicalisation” for the first time in January 2012. In a study on the approach to deradicalisation, Angel Rabasa, a senior political scientist with RAND Corporation, had explained that “getting militants to refrain from violence is only part of
the process; ideally the goal is to get the individual to change his belief system, reject the extremist ideology and embrace a moderate worldview”. The Chinese Government has made efforts in this direction by obtaining intelligence on extremist organisations and by discrediting the extremist ideology and bringing about a shift in belief from extremist ideas to mainstream values.

In May 2013, the strategy of deradicalisation materialised in a policy document entitled “Several Guiding Opinions on Further Suppressing Illegal Religious Activities and Combating the Infiltration of Religious Extremism in Accordance with Law”, issued by Xinjiang’s CCP Committee. The policy document, often referred to as the “No. 11 Document”, elaborated and defined the borders between ethnic customs, normal religious practices and extremist manifestations. In 2014, the No. 11 Document was supplemented by a “No. 28 Document” that referred to another policy guideline entitled “Several Opinions on Further Strengthening and Improving the Work with Regard to Islam” (Zhou, 2017). By and large the deradicalisation approach has been high on its agenda since the Second Work Forum in 2014 and has been pursued in different forms by multiple CCP and government organs and civil society groups.

To project its approach towards deradicalisation in Xinjiang, China has postulated several approaches under the “five keys”, “four prongs”, “three contingents”, “two hands” and “one rule” strategy. The “five keys” approach in its documents highlights five methods respectively to solve five different categories of problems, that is, ideological, cultural, customary, religious and legal keys – ideological problems should be solved by means of ideology, cultural problems should be solved through the means of culture, folk customs should be treated with an attitude of respect, religious problems should be solved in accordance with religious rules and violent terrorism should be combated in line with the rule of law and by means of iron-fisted actions (Lina, 2015).

The “four prongs” approach articulated by Zhang Chunxian at the Xinjiang Stability Work Conference on 8 January 2016 refers to a combination of methods based on “squeezing by correct faith”, “counteracting by culture”, “controlling by law” and “popularizing science” (Tong and Yunyan, 2016). Under its “three contingents” strategy the Chinese Government has identified its 1.28 million cadres, 0.4 million teachers and 28,000 religious figures as an integral part of a human resource pool which can help in maintaining stability and security in the region. Meanwhile, the two hands refer to “one firm hand” which cracks down on terrorists and the other firm hand which educates and guides Uyghur people and the “one rule” refers to the policy of ruling Xinjiang according to law. The emphasis on the rule of law suggests the adaptability of Xinjiang authorities to change their previous deradicalisation practices, which are perhaps not firmly based on the law (Zhou, 2016).

Besides these approaches the government has tried to legalise its standpoint on counter-terrorism through laws such as the Counter-Terrorism Law (CTL), passed on 27 December 2015, which for the first time introduces China’s specific provisions on terrorist deradicalisation; Article 29 is a general stipulation on social and custodial deradicalisation while Article 30 addresses post-imprisonment deradicalisation. In addition to the National Law, it adopted the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region’s Implementing Rules on the “Counter-Terrorism Law of the PRC” (Xinjiang IR_CTL) – the regional law comprising 61 articles in 10 chapters featuring important provisions to supplement the national law. These laws yet again showcase a hard and soft approach of the Chinese Government to the issue of radicalisation. While the state finds it difficult to prevent radicalisation since most of it is foreign-sourced, the current approach of the state is to deradicalise imprisoned radicals, released radicals and radicals who have not been in
prison. Accordingly the state has devised custodial programmes, post-imprisonment programmes and social programmes.

In an effort to upend the traditional role of prisons as hotbeds of radicalisation, the Chinese Government has made provisions of the prisons, detention centres and community correctional facilities to supervise, educate and correct criminals imprisoned on terrorism and extremism charges. The Prison Administration, a governmental agency administered by the Department of Justice in Xinjiang, has gained hands-on experiences that they are sharing with the prisons based all over country, labelling them as “Xinjiang experiences”. These experiences include boosting the capabilities of prison officials for deradicalisation, familiarising themselves with local customs, traditions and culture as well as being integrated into the Fang Hui Ju project, providing religious counselling to dispel extremist ideology by inviting reliable Islamic scholars and religious leaders to give counselling to radicalised detainees, garnering external support from other governmental agencies, for instance joint mechanisms involving partner institutions for policy interpretation legal aid and occupational help and civil society organisations, as well as utilising deradicalised prisoners to speak out against extremism (Zhou, 2017).

The implementation of these projects, though difficult, has yielded some results. Claiming its deradicalisation efforts to be successful, China has reduced sentences for some of its prisoners who have shown signs of improvement. In August 2014, two inmates, Maimaituofuti Maimaitirouzi and Gul’amam Abudula, were sent to their home prefecture Hetian, having been assigned the responsibility to use their own experiences to expose the harm caused by extremism and demonstrate the benefits of change (Zhou, 2017). More recently, China reduced sentences of 11 people in February 2016 jailed for threatening state security after declaring the success of its deradicalisation programmes. However, such claims have been discredited by Uyghur expatriates who dismiss it as Chinese political propaganda. More interestingly, the commutation of sentences occurs largely after self-criticism by the prisoners who express deep regret for having hurt their families and causing damage to their nation. This reflects the hangover of historical approaches in the Chinese psyche which still remains stuck in the self-critical approaches of its past leaders.

The reintegration of these released prisoners remains another issue of concern for the Chinese authorities. It is essential to ensure that, after the painstaking deradicalisation process, these individuals find employment and become socially integrated so as to avoid reversion to extremism. For this purpose the Chinese authorities have devised the “Placement and education” strategy which helps to generate employment for individuals redeemed from radicalisation. One such instrument was the “Beauty Project” launched in 2011, a five-year special programme with a budget of 80 million Chinese Yuan to develop industries for women’s fashion, cosmetics and accessories and promote the employment rate for Uyghur women. In pursuing this strategy the government aims to create employment for 100,000 labourers in southern Xinjiang between 2018 and 2020, and a total of 1.4008 million urban jobs. It intends to popularise the already-running nine-year compulsory education rule so that minorities can benefit most from it as well as improve the social security system.

Overall the implementation of the deradicalisation strategy has been carefully planned and implemented to convey constant and coherent messages against the threat of three evils in Xinjiang and has deployed multifaceted programmes to underscore the role of community engagement to prevent and control further radicalisation. It has helped to curtail the menace of terrorism reflected in the retrieval of tourism in 2018. Recently, the CCP has created a new bureau to improve intelligence and policy coordination in Xinjiang under the Central
United Front Work department and provide advice and policy proposals to China’s top leaders. This reflects Beijing’s growing concern about stability in the region (Mai, 2017) and also its inability to reconcile its historical approach of treating these regions as frontier areas when seeking to constrict them within the sovereignty approach. The fact that Xinjiang is positioned geographically between neighbouring states with Islamic influence and a central polity on the other hand which demands lesser focus on religion is somewhat gloomy. Therefore, deradicalisation through cultural and innovative means seems to be the only option available for China. Lack of an integrative policy that could strike a balance between the needs of the local people and its own nationalist agenda has the potential to destabilise the entire Chinese state. Deradicalisation as a strategy to uplift the Uyghurs has the potential to resolve the ethnic issue whereby violence as a means of expression could become unnecessary. However, the costs of this transformation need to be taken into consideration. Meanwhile, not being able to track the exact source of terrorist expansion remains the most prominent detriment to deradicalisation efforts. The disenfranchisement amongst the Uyghurs resulting from state policies also cannot be disregarded. While deradicalisation has the potential to benefit some strata amongst the radicals who are able to return and assimilate with the mainstream, the state increasingly comes under the microscope for its resemblances to a police-state or an authoritarian regime.

Notes
1 Shan Wei and Weng Cuifen, China’s New Policy in Xinjiang and Its Challenges, Online URL: www.rai.nus.edu.sg/publications/files/Vol2No3_ShanWei&WengCuifen.pdf
2 Uyghur Muslim Ethnic Separatism in Xinjiang, China, Elizabeth Van Wie Davis, Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, January 2008, Online URL: https://apcss.org/college/publications/uyghur-muslim-ethnic-separatism-in-xinjiang-china/. He said that a total of one trillion Yuan (US$125 B) has been spent building infrastructure in western China with an annual average regional economic growth rate of 10.6 per cent for six years in a row.
3 However, sometimes it was found that Chinese respondents overestimated the proportion of the Muslim population in China. On average, the respondents thought that around nine out of every 100 people in China were Muslims, when the actual share of the Muslim population was around 2 per cent in China.
4 The Chinese Government has sought to curtail the terrorist incidences through its increased economic and strategic cooperation with the Central Asian countries under the SCO grouping as it threatens their stability as well.
5 The government estimated that, from 1992 to 2001, Eastern Turkestan Forces initiated at least 200 violent terrorist attacks in which 162 people of different nationalities died and more than 440 were wounded.
7 Under the SCO framework, China and other neighbouring countries have signed the following documents: the Shanghai convention on Combating Terrorism, Separatism and Extremism, Cooperation Between SCO Member States on Combating Terrorism, Separatism and Extremism, SCO Convention on Combating Terrorism, and another one on Extremism, SCO Cooperation Programme on Fighting Terrorism, Separatism and Extremism for 2019–2021 and SCO Plan of Action for Cooperation with the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan on Fighting Terrorism, Drug Trafficking and Organised Crimes.
8 The law broadened China’s definition of terrorism and the scope of its counter-terrorism measures, and made provisions to establish a counter-terrorism intelligence centre to better coordinate terrorism response and information sharing across different Chinese government agencies. The law also required foreign firms to provide technical and decryption assistance to Chinese authorities as part of terrorism-
related investigations. The legislation stipulated measures on tightening internet security management, inspection of dangerous materials, prevention of terrorism financing and border controls.

9 He also proposed five basic principles for governing Xinjiang: protecting legal religious activities; stopping illegal ones; deterring religious extremism; guarding against its infiltration; and cracking down on crimes related to extremism. The fifth principle involves the clear authorisation to conduct harsh crackdowns on religious extremism.

10 “Squeezing by correct faith” means using correct faith to clarify the people’s understanding of Islam, awaken their minds and squeeze out extremism; “counteracting by culture” means seeking effective and practical solutions to counteracting extremism and guiding people to secularisation and modernisation; “controlling by law” means making the best of the rule of law not only in regulating social behaviour and countering religious extremism but also in guiding social expectations and building social consensus; “popularizing science” means spreading the knowledge about and promoting the use of science and technology in order to guide the people to uphold science, remove ignorance and deny extremism.

11 It is a special project/mass line campaign started by the government of Xinjiang under the leadership of Zhang Chunxian in March 2014 aimed at investigating the conditions of the people, serving the interests of the people and winning the hearts and minds of the people. At present the trainees at the centres are those who were incited, coerced or induced but were not serious enough to constitute a crime or those who did not cause actual harm.

References


