

# Identity crisis in

By Ashfak Bokhari

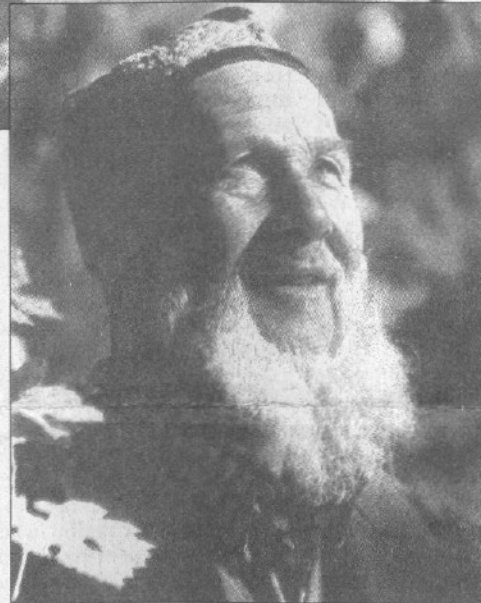
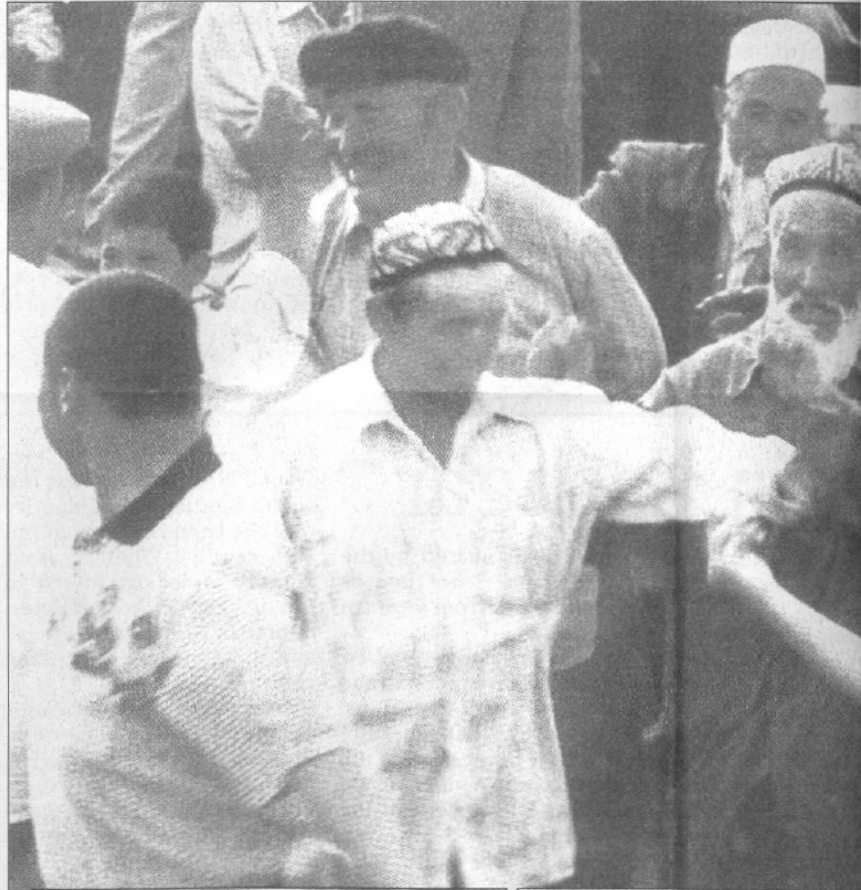
ancient silk route and frequented by merchants from all over the world and famed travellers such as Marco Polo, Kashgar is situated in a fertile oasis at the foot of the Pamirs near the Tajikistan border. It has a history of more than 2000 years. From second to the 10th century, Persian and Indian cultural influences were strong in the region when Buddhism flourished there. It was in the 11th century that Islam came to the region.

Turkestan, a name no more in use, was conventionally used for the regions of Central Asia that lie between Siberia on the north, and Tibet, the Indian subcontinent and Afghanistan on the south, the western limit being the Caspian Sea, and the eastern one being Mongolia and the Desert of Gobi. It used to be inhabited by people of Turkish races, but that is not the case anymore. Now these regions do not have amidst its population even the Turks of the Ottoman Empire. Nevertheless the term has come to stay.

Xinjiang, meaning 'new lands', is East Turkestan and in the distant past it was also once called Kashgharia. This region flourished under Mongol rule in the 12th century. In the 14th and 15th centuries when Bokhara and Samarkand became centres of Muslim scholarship, there was an 'invasion' of Kashgar by religious fanatics from Bokhara. They created in East Turkestan the power of the *khojas*, or theologians, who afterwards fomented the many wars that were waged between the rival factions of the white and the black mountaineers, or Tartars, which continued till the 17th century, ultimately paving the way for the Chinese invasion.

It seems history is repeating itself in this region. The peaceful quiet of the Xinjiang region has been shattered, to a large extent, by hardliners, hundreds

China and Pakistan, being traditional allies for over four decades, are together working actively to root out the monster of separatism and extremism from the former's Xinjiang autonomous area. China, on its part, has become more selective in granting visas to Pakistanis intending to travel to the troubled region



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**W**HILE walking down narrow, dusty lanes in an old residential locality of Kashgar, one felt overwhelmed by a strange kind of nostalgia. A glance at the texture of dilapidated, red-brick houses, extended milk shops, bakeries churning out big *naans*, and ill-maintained age-old mosques gives you a feel of a place you have been to before. It is like being in the midst of a myriad of cultures and religions of what has been the Orient.

Kashgar, located in the far-west of China's Xinjiang

autonomous region, is also called Kashi and was known as Kashgharia in the remote past. It was one of the cities a delegation of Pakistani journalists was taken to recently by the Chinese government to make them familiar with life and conditions obtaining there. The other city of Xinjiang we visited was Urumqi, its capital — a modern and developed metropolis surrounded by strings of oases, mountains, deserts and vast tracts of grasslands where many Uighurs still move around on their horses. Xinjiang's attractions are its people, landscape, dances and unique musical instruments.

Once a key centre of the

of whom are trained and tutored in seminaries inside Afghanistan and then sent to their home region to carry out subversion in the name of independence. It comes at a time when the Asian giant, riding the crest of an incredibly high rate of economic growth, promises to become the world's second biggest economy after the United States, and provide some degree of prosperity to its 1.3 billion people within a decade.

Although the movement launched by the separatists, whom China now describes as 'splittists', does not appear to be of great effect, it has clearly unnerved Beijing. The authori-

ties have erected a fencing wall all along the border with Pakistan, as India is doing on the Line of Control on their side of the disputed Kashmir territory, with a view to preventing infiltration of militants.

China has become more selective in granting visas to Pakistanis intending to travel to this part of the country. Besides, it has asked India to take extraordinary measures to protect its embassy staff there, as it fears attacks from the separatists. And, above all, joint anti-terror exercises by the Chinese and Pakistani troops have taken place for the first time.

Xinjiang was annexed in 1757 by the Manchus of China's Qing dynasty (1644-1911). It was made an autonomous region in 1955 by the Communist Party regime. It covers one-sixth of the country's total territory, occupies an area slightly larger than Western Europe, has a population of 13 million, mostly Uighur Muslims who practise Sufi Islam and speak Turkic language.

Xinjiang is perhaps the least 'Chinese' in appearance of all parts of the People's Republic. Not many are aware of the fact that the Uighurs had succeeded in setting up a separate East Turkestan Republic twice in this

region in the recent past 1931 to 1934, and again 1944 to 1949. The second was voluntarily given up by appeal by Mao Zedong a success of the revolution.

How strong is the new of pro-independence movement is difficult to ascertain. Xinjiang Governor I Tiliwadi told the Pakistani journalists: "The days of rders and bombs are over (separatists) are no more

ent here. They are only gangs, have no following very much hated by the people and now they operate from ide." And in a euphoric tone declared: "These are most favourable times in

# s in Kashgar

Islamabad last year that the head of the ETIM, Hasan Mahsum, was shot dead by Pakistani troops on October 2 in a raid along the Pak-Afghan border. Mahsum had conducted a series of violent terrorist activities, including robbery and murder, in Urumqi and Hotan region.

A spokesman told the Pakistani journalists that Mahsum's death was "a tremendous contribution" by Pakistan to the war on terror not only in China, but also for the whole world. But, he added, his death has not led to the ETIM's demolition. Pakistan also extradited an important leader of the ETIM, Ismail Kadir, in March 2002. Chinese officials told the Pakistani newsmen that many separatists who were based in Afghanistan have dispersed after 9/11 and that some of them have mixed up with Uighur immigrants living in Lahore and Rawalpindi. The Uighurs are, in fact, living in Pakistani cities for quite a long time, and have nothing to do with the resistance movement. They have almost assimilated with the local population. Though the Chinese would not confirm, the killing of three Chinese workers at Gwadar on May 3 this year also appears to be the work of Uighur separatists.

The US has in general maintained, to the dislike of Beijing, that it was a local insurgency and that China should strive for a settlement of the 'dispute' with the dissenters. China accuses the US of double standards in defining terror, but is now glad that the State Department has put the ETIM on the list of terrorists.

That China and Pakistan, being traditional allies and close friends for over four decades, should engage in serious efforts to root out the monster of separatism and extremism from a part of the Chinese territory was a moral need of their 'all-weather friendship'. Pakistan, already suffering from the deadly malaise and its society badly shaken by its effects, would be too willing to help contain its spread to within its borders.

More than 200 Chinese and Pakistani elite troops had held their first joint anti-terrorism exercises named 'Friendship 2004' in Taxkorgan Tajik autonomous county, located in the southwest of Xinjiang in



**IN SEARCH OF IDENTITY:** Different shades of the Uighur people living in the Xinjiang region, ranging from religious minded old to the party-loving young

history of Xinjiang. There is tremendous progress. All ethnic groups are united."

He is not entirely wrong. The region has embarked on the road to industrial progress and the last year's growth rate was 11 per cent. In 2000, China had launched a development programme for the western region which includes nine provinces, Xinjiang being one of them. In the four years since then, about 50 projects have been started, involving an investment of over

ferred to keep silent about the presence and activities of Muslim separatists, who were there even in the 1980s. It was only after 9/11 that they suddenly opened up and began talking publicly about them. On January 23, 2002, Beijing released a lengthy report about them for the first time, after a meeting of the Shanghai Six group.

The separatist movement, official media says, carried out 200 attacks between 1990 and

projects have been started, involving an investment of over 730 billion yuan. These include setting up of a 'Silicon Valley of Western China' in Shaanxi province.

Two episodes at the beginning of the 1990s proved to be a turning-point for the struggle of Uighur nationalists. First, the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan suggested that a lone Muslim people struggling against a big power could emerge victorious. Second, the attainment of separate statehood by the Central Asian Muslim republics after the collapse of the Soviet Union meant that their dream of a separate state of East Turkestan was achievable.

Chinese officials had pre-

200 attacks between 1990 and 2001, caused 162 deaths and injuries to 440. Several groups are engaged in this strife, but only one of them, the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), is the real cause of anxiety. Now, it has been put on the list of terrorist organizations by the US.

On December 15, 2003, the Chinese Ministry of Public Security made public a list of 'East Turkestan' terrorist organizations and 11 terrorists. Pakistan has been highly helpful and cooperative in China's efforts to contain terrorism or, as the latter calls it, "the three evils of extremism, splittism and international terrorism."

Beijing was informed by

autonomous county, located in the north-west of Xinjiang in the first week of August. The live-fire drill, on the Pamirs at above 4,000 metres, involved encirclement, assault and mop-up practices, and achieved "great success", according to China's Maj-Gen Chen Bing. The exercises also used most advanced weapons and included joint demonstration of anti-terrorism operations. Cheng later said that the exercises proved that Pakistani troops had rich experience in information collection and organizing combat operations.

According to one of the narratives by the official media

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