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OFFICE OF STRATEGIC SERVICES
RESEARCH & ANALYSIS BRANCH

R & A 2309S
7 JULY 1944

POLITICAL DYNAMICS OF CHINA'S NORTHWEST

I. *The Northwest*

The Chinese Central Government considers as one of its greatest assets the strategic area known as China's Northwest. Although the definition of its boundaries varies from time to time and person to person, the region at present may be conveniently taken to comprise the historic northwestern Chinese province of Kansu, the former northeastern Tibetan province of Tsinghai on the south, Ningsia and the western part of Suiyuan on the north, and the west-central part of Shensi unoccupied by the Chinese Communists on the east. Sparsely populated in comparison to the rest of China, the Northwest plays a large role in Government calculations for post-war economic expansion.

Perhaps even more important, it is the key to Chinese control of lands dominated or formerly dominated by the Soviet Union (Outer Mongolia and Sinkiang), as well as of Inner Mongolia, and Tibet. The Chinese are concerned with possible expansion of Soviet influence and have clearly announced their own intention of establishing China's sovereignty over Inner Mongolia and Tibet. In addition, China's Northwest is a possible strategic objective for a Japanese military drive designed to extend Japan's north China position or to develop a base for a flank attack on Chungking. Finally, the Northwest is a potential base for Allied operations against the Japanese.

Chinese Central Government use of the Northwest for military purposes in the war against the Japanese has been limited. Chungking's control over much of the area has scarcely passed the nominal stage. Kansu and Shensi are old provinces of China proper, but have only recently emerged from feudal warlord control. The rest of the region has been formed into new provinces fairly recently, Suiyuan, Ningsia, and Tsinghai in 1928. The governors of these provinces, although appointed by the Central Government and theoretically subject to its regulations, actually administer their territories in semi-autonomous fashion. The necessity for united action against the Japanese and the shift of the national capital from Nanking to Chungking have accelerated the nationalization of the Northwest, but relations between the Government and some of the provinces remain tenuous.

II. *Ethnic Pattern of the Northwest*

In addition to the normal decentralization of a country emerging from warlordism, the complicated ethnic pattern of the Northwest has

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DATE: JAN 2002

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presented a severe obstacle to the national mobilization of its power. Although there are a number of other fairly large ethnic fragments in the area, the politically significant groups in the Northwest are four: the Chinese, the Muslims, the Tibetans, and the Mongols. Their modes of life and their inter-relationships are dynamic factors upon which depend both Japanese efforts to exploit ethnic stresses and Chinese attempts to build national strength in China's Northwest.

a. *Chinese*

The Chinese, predominant in Kansu and Shensi and scattered throughout the Northwest, are numerically the greatest unit. A long, unbroken Chinese tradition and a predominant strain of Chinese stock have always existed in the Northwest. Moreover, frontier conditions have persisted in parts of the region down to the present time and garrison colonies have been constantly moved to the ever-shifting frontier. While affecting a considerable sinification of the non-Chinese minorities, these Chinese themselves hardened under the pressure of warlike races and the rigors of a difficult climate and uncertain diet. They have become a rugged, daring, and rather dour, conservative people with a proud contempt for down-country Chinese.

b. *Muslims*

The Muslims, forming large minorities in Tsinghai, Kansu, and Ningsia, constitute the second largest population group in the Northwest. While ethnically distinct from other groups, they are primarily bound together by religious ties. With the greatest concentration of believers, the most active schools of Islamic doctrine, and the greatest degree of Muslim-controlled political and military power, these Muslim communities are the most self-conscious, homogeneous, and exclusive in China. Muslims of the Northwest are fanatical and fiercely intolerant. Wahhabism, a fundamentalist-reformed Mohammedanism, has been given forthright official patronage by Ma Pu-fang, Governor of Tsinghai, and has produced a puritanical revival of distinctive religious practices and taboos that have sharpened the differences and antagonism between Muslims and non-Muslims.

Although subsistence economy among the Muslims is identical with that among the Chinese of the area, there is a distinct tendency on the part of the Muslims to monopolize or appear in predominant proportions in trades such as those of carter, muleteer, fur-trader, and cattle-trader, which require hardihood and daring. Above all they make formidable soldiers. Although the Muslims are divided linguistically into groups speaking Chinese, Turki, and Mongolian, and at times display certain strong antipathies to one another, they form a close-knit religious group in opposing the Chinese.

c. *Tibetans*

The Tibetans of the Northwest, mostly in southern Tsinghai, are bound together by language, a strong racial consciousness, and religion.

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This essential homogeneity is sometimes obscured by striking differences between the nomads and sedentary peoples, and by the complexity of village, lamasery, and tribal control systems, but is none the less real. The ties between the Tibetans of the newly organized Chinese province of Tsinghai and the central Tibetans of the Lhasa area are strong. There must be approximately one-half million Tibetans in the Northwest region, almost equally divided between sedentary and nomadic peoples.

The dominance of religion, Lamaism, is the most important single aspect of Tibetan life and culture. Family life, tribal and intra-tribal controls, and the distribution of wealth all fall within the sphere of religion. Religious leaders control or at least strongly influence all Tibetan political and economic reactions. The weight of religious opinion always falls on the side of intransigent conservatism that resists all change, whether from outside or inside the society.

Although the sedentary Tibetans are probably a little more numerous than the nomads, the nomadic ideal dominates Tibetan life. It has fostered admiration for Spartan virtues, an extreme restiveness under authority, emphasis on trade, and a tendency to violent, direct action regardless of the consequences. The preoccupation with firearms amounts to a mania. Many Tibetans who have horses to sell have refused to part with them for anything but guns, and the Chinese Government has been forced to connive at gun-running in order to secure remounts for the Chinese army. The combination of this fierce, nomadic ideal with the actual fact that there are a great many Tibetan farmers firmly established in most of the tillable valley bottoms, has enabled the Tibetans as a whole to offer a firm resistance to the advance of the Chinese.

d. *Mongols*

The Mongols of the Northwest, predominant in Suiyuan and in parts of Ningsia and Tinghai, have been rather thoroughly penetrated by Tibetan or Chinese culture. The religious aspect of Mongol culture everywhere is very much under Tibetan lamasery domination, and the prestige of Lhasa as the sacred city has remained high. The culture of the Mongols in Suiyuan and Ningsia is already breaking up under the impact of Chinese pressure from the south while a deterioration of the leadership by lamas and the Mongolian nobility has weakened the traditional pattern of the society. Moreover, the Mongols of this region are all nomadic and have been comparatively defenseless against the invasion of the Chinese farmer and Chinese political domination.

III. *Chinese-Minority Relations*

Between all of these racial groups economic competition, racial prejudice, and religious incompatibility produce stresses and frictions. But the antagonism of the three minority groups towards the Chinese is the basic political fact of the Northwest.

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a. *Chinese-Muslim Relations*

The Chinese of the Northwest are afraid of being unable to repress their Muslim neighbors or keep them at a safe distance. Within less than a hundred years three major Muslim rebellions have broken out with devastating effect, and to the Chinese the contempt of death which the fiery Muslims show in battle seems a little inhuman. The rather consistent loyalty of Kansu to the Central Government is largely based on this complex. A complete warlord independence would seem hazardous to the Kansu Chinese, despite their numerical superiority, because of their bloodthirsty neighbors. Consequently Kansu has constantly looked to the Central Government for effective, if distant, protection.

The Muslims, for their part, hate and despise the Chinese. The hatred is based on the weight of Chinese culture, official power, and economic competition thrown against them, and the scorn is directed at the Chinese as idolaters and pig-eating pagans.

b. *Chinese Tibetan Relations*

The general Chinese attitude toward the Tibetan is a kind of greedy arrogance. The Chinese look upon the wealth of the Tibetan as theirs to exploit either by taxation or by trade. The Chinese are fully convinced that the Tibetan is infinitely barbarous, and regard it as altogether legitimate to put Chinese colonists on Tibetan land and to nullify Tibetan political organization as much as possible. Under certain circumstances, particularly in border areas, this viewpoint is colored with a fearful respect for the Tibetans' occasional preference for forceful action.

Tibetan dislike of the Chinese springs from resentment of this superior attitude and is intensified by the constant economic pressure of land-hungry Chinese. With a stationary or declining population, the Tibetans feel constantly on the defensive. Moreover, the freedom-loving Tibetans have seldom paid any regular taxes to their own rulers and associate the Chinese with the idea of outrageous tax assessment. At the same time the Tibetans are a little contemptuous of the Chinese lack of the Spartan virtues they admire.

c. *Chinese-Mongolian Relations*

The Chinese attitude toward the Mongols is much the same as their attitude toward the Tibetans. But exploitation of the Mongol, particularly the appropriation of his land, has proceeded much further. Only the presence of the Outer Mongolian People's Republic under Soviet auspices and the erection of the Japanese puppet state of Meng-chiang in Inner Mongolia have caused the Chinese to adopt a somewhat more conciliatory attitude in order to keep from losing that small portion of Mongolia which they still have.

IV. *The Northwest and the Chungking War Effort*

At present the Central Government cannot be certain of support from any of these minority groups. The outstanding leader of the

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Muslims, Ma Pu-fang, Governor of Tsinghai, is said to pride himself on being a personal friend of the Generalissimo. But beyond sending between two and five thousand horses a year for the Chinese army, he has taken no active part in the war. At the beginning of hostilities Ma made the gesture of sending two divisions to the front, but they were soon withdrawn. In the meantime sporadic, conveniently timed Tibetan rebellions have given Ma an excuse for building up his own armed forces and getting arms from the Central Government. While Chungking's great Muslim General, Pai Ch'ung-hsi, has attracted Muslim support for Chungking in other parts of China, his liberalism and religious laxity won him no respect among the Wahhabiist regions of the Northwest.

Ma Hung-kwei, relative of Ma Pu-fang and Governor of Ningsia, has been even less robust in his support of the Central Government. He is reported to have traded with the Japanese, supplies of wool going regularly down the Yellow River to Paot'ow or across the semi-desert Gobi.

If the two Muslim regimes in Tsinghai and Ningsia could be induced to give whole-hearted support in fighting the war against the Japanese, the Allied position in the north could be immeasurably strengthened. Reinforcements could be sent to Chinese troops carrying on desert patrol warfare in western Suiyuan. Central Government troops could proceed to this front along the natural communications lines parallel with the Yellow River. Most important, perhaps, the fighting manpower of the Muslims could be directed at the Japanese. In the plains of Mongolia and northern China the Muslim cavalry would be especially effective.

Partial Muslim cooperation could possibly be won by a system of payment according to results delivered, arms and equipment being paid to the Muslims as they made military gains. But to get thorough support the Chinese Central Government would be obliged to adopt a policy toward racial minorities that clearly guaranteed a considerable autonomy and security to the Muslims after the war. Although it is doubtful if any of the Muslims desire a Japanese victory they have at present no evidence that they would benefit by assisting the Chinese to win. The Muslims, judging from past experience, are probably sure that the successful end of the war for the Chinese would mean an attempt by the Central Government to end the Muslim menace. Only a promise of secure autonomy given by the probable victors, Japanese or Chinese, would enlist active Muslim participation in the war.

Chinese-Tibetan relations have deteriorated since the establishment of nominal Chinese authority over the northeastern part of Tibet. The old Tibetan control system, based on tribal organization and lamasery authority, weakened without strong substitute being provided. Banditry and lawlessness increased, and armed, mounted, desperate Tibetans formed an enormous refugee class fighting to retain a somewhat anarchic way of life. The Chinese Government has made several quite fruitless attempts to draw levies of soldiers for the present war from Tibetan Chiefs, and have been mildly successful in collecting wool, sheepskins,

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and remounts. Farther removed from the actual front than the Muslims and somewhat less martially proficient, the Tibetans have contributed very little to the Chinese war effort and would probably continue to give little aid in any event.

On the other hand, there is a possibility of Japanese organization of Tibetan aid in support of a military drive into the Northwest. A Japanese propaganda effort of several years standing has created a fairly widespread impression in many Tibetan areas that the Japanese wished to be known as co-religionists dedicated to the restoration of the Chinese Emperor. Since the Tibetans can date most of their troubles from the time of the founding of the Chinese Republic, they have a nostalgic memory of the days when they were the somewhat pampered vassals of the Empire. The co-religionist tie is very appealing to Tibetan sentiment, and the Tsinghai Tibetans would take advantage of, and coincidentally assist, any weakening of present controls by Japanese pressure on China.

Under present conditions the Mongols of the Northwest are also a distinct liability to the Chinese Government's war activities. They have little future before them as an ethnic unit and consider themselves exploited and betrayed by the Chinese. With little to lose, they might decide to throw in their lot with the Mongols of the puppet state of Mengchiang and assist a westward advance of the Japanese.

The complicated internal pattern of racial stresses in China's Northwest clearly requires an enlightened, skilful Chinese administration in order, at a minimum, to prevent Japanese encroachment and, at a maximum, to develop the Northwest as a base for operations against the Japanese. With the removal of the urge to prepare or to engage in war against each other, the minority groups might contribute their meager resources for the war, and—more important—resist attempts at infiltration by Japan, which would then constitute the only real threat to their cultural and ethnic autonomy.

V. *Chungking Apprehensions in the Northwest*

The present policy has not looked in that direction, but has indicated three other objectives in the Northwest. In the first place the Generalissimo has long indicated a desire to make central Tibet an integral part of China, an aim defined in no uncertain terms in his book, *China's Destiny*. Widely accepted rumors stated that the Chinese Government had planned an attempt at the conquest of Tibet just before the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese war and again in 1943. Probably due to the reluctance of the provincial governors to follow orders, no major encounters occurred. But the Northwest is potentially useful as a base for Chinese penetration of central Tibet.

The Northwest is also being used as a base for the colonization and military development of Sinkiang Province, from which the Soviet Union withdrew support in the fall of 1943. The Chinese approach route to Sinkiang is flanked by Muslims, who are linked by ethnic and religious

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ties with dissatisfied non-Chinese groups in Sinkiang. Moreover, recent clashes on the Sinkiang-Outer Mongolia border have highlighted the possibility of future conflicts of interest on the Sino-Soviet frontier, a development for which the Chinese Government clearly intends to be prepared.

Finally, the Chinese Central Government is estimated to be maintaining several hundred thousand troops under Hu Tsung-nan in the Northwest as a blockading force against the Chinese Communists. Actually the Communists seem to have had little effect on the political orientation of the peoples of the Northwest. The peoples of this area, possibly because of ingrained conservatism and favorable conditions of land tenure, have been generally opposed to Communism. While grapevine propaganda might conceivably bring some support to the Communists by retelling the successes of the Communist peasant-betterment program in Shensi, the Chinese have fairly completely walled off the isolated Communist area from the Northwest. Nevertheless, the Central Government is devoting a great proportion of its political and military energies in the Northwest to the preparation of powerful opposition to the Communists.

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