News: International concern has been growing about what China is doing to its Uighur population. Reports have emerged of China ‘homogenising’ the Uighurs.

Prelims focus: About Uighurs and their issue with Chinese govt.

Mains focus: Ethnic conflicts in China and its consequences for the world order.

Issues

Around a million Uighurs, Kazakhs and other Muslims have been bundled into internment camps, where they are allegedly being schooled into giving up their identity, and assimilate better in the communist country dominated by the Han Chinese.

China resolutely denies all such allegations, claiming the camps to be ‘educational centres’ where the Uighurs are being cured of “extremist thoughts” and radicalisation, and learning vocational skills.

About Uighurs

- Uighurs are a Muslim minority community concentrated in the country’s northwestern Xinjiang province.

- They claim closer ethnic ties to Turkey and other central Asian countries than to China.

Why is China targeting the Uighurs?

Xinjiang is technically an autonomous region within China — its largest region, rich in minerals, and sharing borders with eight countries, including India, Pakistan, Russia and Afghanistan.

- Over the past few decades, as economic prosperity has come to Xinjiang, it has brought with it in large numbers the majority Han Chinese, who have cornered the better jobs, and left the Uighurs feeling their livelihoods and identity were under threat.

- This led to sporadic violence, in 2009 culminating in a riot that killed 200 people, mostly Han Chinese, in the region’s capital Urumqi. And many other violent incidents have taken place since then.

- Beijing also says Uighur groups want to establish an independent state and, because
of the Uighurs’ cultural ties to their neighbours, leaders fear that elements in places like Pakistan may back a separatist movement in Xinjiang.

- Therefore, the Chinese policy seems to have been one of treating the entire community as suspect, and launching a systematic project to chip away at every marker of a distinct Uighur identity.