

China's Metastasizing Terrorist Threat

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Rafaello Pantucci is currently the director of International Security Studies at RUSI (Royal United Services Institute). His research focuses on counter-terrorism as well as China's relations with its Western neighbours.

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While Europe has been engulfed in fear of growing terrorist threats over the past few years, China is also going through an interesting juncture of the growing terrorist threats domestically and abroad. The Chinese embassy bombing attack which occurred in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan in 2016 left a significant mark of the juncture since it became the first attack targeting Chinese nationals in the country and having a clear association with a terrorist group. Indeed, it differed from previous attacks seemingly targeting Chinese nationals abroad, although it remains unclear whether it was terrorist-related or just criminal. Hence, Chinese nationals are increasingly becoming a target of terrorist attacks not only in China but also in foreign countries. This report aims at grasping a big picture of growing terrorist threat faced by China and China's response to the threat, and prospecting the future.



The evolution of the terrorist threat

Uighurs, a shrinking Muslim ethnic minority residing in China's western province Xinjiang, has been accused of its radicalized anti-state movements in a context of the growing terrorist threats faced by China. While still occupying a substantial portion of the region, they increasingly feel the pressure of Beijing, with Han Chinese and their culture taking over the region. Due to the religious and cultural identity threat by Beijing and mass immigration of Han Chinese to the region in the 1990s, a lot of Uighurs left China to seek asylum abroad or go fighting in training camps in Afghanistan and Pakistan in order to fight back against Beijing's repressive policies over them. This number of Uighurs going abroad to fight has increased and constantly evolved into increasing radicalization of the Uighur anti-state movement over time. Now there is a growing number of Uighur fighters in terrorist networks in Syria and Iraq who fight alongside both ISIS and other terrorist groups on the battlefields.

A growing recognition of the Uighurs by the terrorist groups is an evidence of an expansion of Uighur militants in the global terrorist networks. A leader of Al Qaeda, for example, released a message to praise Uighur fighters as the brave, which distinctly contrasts with an interview of Osama Bin Laden, the former leader of Al Qaeda, back in 1999 when he claimed he had never heard of Chinese Muslims. A leader of the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP), an organization having a substantial footprint fighting in Syria alongside anti-Assad groups, also released a video message threatening China and encouraging Uighurs in Xinjiang to leave the country and join the group for a fight against China. In addition, a footprint of Uighur militants can be found even in Southeast Asia. The Uighur militants are now showing up in a link to the network of MIT (Mujahidin Indonesia

Timur) in Indonesia to either join a training camp of MIT or head to the battlefields in Syria and Iraq through Southeast Asia. It seems 70-80% of Uighur who went to Syria and Iraq to join the battlefields had been through Malaysia, according to the leaked documents of ISIS.

Thus Uighur militants' links with terrorist networks are getting more intricate and expand to different directions. Over time the threat by Uighur fighters migrated from being in a particular region of China to the whole country and now to a number of foreign countries as well. The threat is becoming more unpredictable as Uighur militants' directions and destinations have been spread from Central Asia to Southeast Asia. Beijing's concern is growing, as actual terrorist attacks and the threat picture are getting worse in both China's homeland and abroad



China's response to the growing threat

To fight against the growing Uighur militants' terror threat both at home and abroad, China has taken various approaches. At home, China has defined a double-edge strategy to get rid of the root of radicalization of Uighurs: a hard military crackdown on any expression of dissent and heavy economic investment. China's hard clampdown on Uighurs might be a reason why there was no report on any incident in Xinjiang over the past year, but China is also trying to obliterate all information regarding the Uighurs' unrest. On the other hand, substantial economic investment is an effort to develop Xinjiang region to appease the Uighurs. Beijing encourages investments in the region and develops the local economy. However, it is not clear whether the benefits of the investments actually go to the local Uighur community or is concentrated in a particular community. A recent visit to the region suggests that Xinjiang does not seem to be well integrated with the rest of China, and does not enjoy the economic boom announced by the authorities: the Uighur regions seem to be desolate, empty and heavily clamped down.

China takes various approaches to deal with growing terrorist threats abroad. Firstly, China has engaged in global discussions on counterterrorism by holding a regular discussion with the UK and having a dialogue with France. China also hosted several sessions of Global Counterterrorism Forum in Beijing, particularly regarding threats around cyber terrorism and foreign fighters.

In addition to the global dialogue conducted on counterterrorism, China has built stronger bilateral relations with prioritized countries, such as Syria, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. For example, Guan Yufei, China's Rear Admiral and a director of international cooperation at the Central Military Commission pledged military and medical support to Syria, last year. In early 2017, China also committed 16 million dollars to providing humanitarian aid to Syria. Given the growing number of radicalized Uighur fighters on the battlefields

in Syria, China tries to strengthen its ties with the regime so that Damascus can ultimately deal with terrorist groups on the ground which are of special interest for China, such as the Turkistan Islamic Party.

Regarding Afghanistan, China has maintained a position as a hedger by engaging with every interested party in Afghanistan and making sure that China doesn't pick any particular side. However, as the number of Uighur militants who have moved from Pakistan to Afghanistan is growing, China is now trying to engage much more in military and security level in Afghanistan. Last year China announced the formation of an anti-terrorism alliance with Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Tajikistan to boost coordination in border security at a senior military level. Even though China has engaged in security issues in Afghanistan and Central Asia for years, generally through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, achievements within this framework so far have been limited as countries like Uzbekistan were not particularly interested in coping with Afghan's security issues through the SCO format. Therefore, China looked for an alternative format in order to target specifically border security in the region, particularly at its borders with Tajikistan and Afghanistan. When it comes to Pakistan, China has made substantial security-related investments into the country and has increasingly looked towards private security companies to protect its citizens in Pakistan.

However, China's various efforts into security coordination with Central Asia still face limitations. The relations that China has been trying to build with Central Asia to protect its interests abroad are still incomplete and developing. Moreover the strained relations between Central Asian governments that China wants to cooperate with make the coordination more complicated (thus explaining why China favors bilateral cooperation, ed.). Also, border security and counterterrorism are fields where China has limited experience and does not have sufficient forces to deal with. Fighting against terrorist threats abroad remains a challenge, while on the domestic front one may ask for how long the hardline approach against the radicalized Uighur movements can continue. Despite a totalitarian police, it's getting more difficult to clamp down on activists who may use either sophisticated weapons or everyday supplies such as knives and cars which cannot be easily and fully controlled in advance.



Conclusion: prospecting the future of China's terrorist threat

Chinese nationals are increasingly becoming the target of terrorist threats abroad as a consequence of Beijing's active global policy and enlarged footprint, which implies having more assets, and more nationals abroad, including in dangerous environments where they are facing growing threats. The implementation of the One Belt One Road

Initiative across Eurasia will only add to the challenge. Nevertheless, China is obviously not going to tone down its active development and foreign policy. Beijing's policy is to strengthen ties with its neighbors in order to face the threats. In the meantime, Uighur militants have expanded and been recognized in the international terrorist groups which start embracing Uighur militants' ultimate interest – to strike China. At this crucial juncture, the possible evolution of the domestic evolution of growing terrorist threats in China has to be considered. Even though Uighur is the only ethnic minority generally blamed for terrorist attacks so far, given the incidents in Hong Kong over the past few years, such as the arson attack in the metro in February 2017, there is a possibility that these sorts of anti-state violence would further develop into a terror attack in the future. A radicalization of Hui Muslim ethnic minority could not be ruled out as well, and may add to potential terrorist threats. Despite little evidence, some Hui Muslims seem to show up in the terrorist network in Afghanistan and on the battlefield of Syria. Given the increasing radicalization of Sunni which has taken place all over the world through the internet, the emergence of newly radicalized groups in China needs to be taken into account. If these new threats materialise, it would be more difficult for China to address them.



Questions and Answers

- Dealing with terrorist threat in a context of One Belt One Road (OBOR) project

Beyond its transcontinental ambition of linking China to Europe, OBOR is also partly an internationalization of China's domestic approach to Xinjiang. As discussed above, China tries to appease Uighurs in Xinjiang through the benefits of economic development. In this perspective, building an economic corridor in Central Asia would connect Xinjiang to the world, and would bring economic returns which may help to stabilize the region in the long view. In fact, this might not be so easy, as economic strain is usually not a major factor of the radicalization. Unlike what Beijing thinks, the poor do not tend to turn to terrorism as they are more preoccupied with feeding themselves than getting into political ideology fights.

- How many Uighurs have joined the Turkistan Islamic Party in Syria?

Numbers are difficult to pin down but it is believed that there are about 1000 Uighurs in Syria. The question is whether all these Uighurs are fighters, or if the figure of 1000 Uighurs includes children and women. According to the videos that TIP produced, women and children are indeed present as well.

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