

China's Counter-terrorism in Xinjiang: Inward Looking Template

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Abstract

The Uyghur insurgency continues to be an unresolved internal security threat for China. China's counterterrorist policy reflects an amalgamation of military coercion, socio-economic transformation, and a propaganda warfare. The communist state and its unparalleled reaction against the Uyghurs make its anti-terror calculus a complex one. This article seeks to analyse the nuances of the Chinese counterterrorist policy and debunks the popular myth that the Chinese have come to display Islamophobia in their approach to the Uyghurs.



China's insularity from global terrorism has ended. Changing character of the Uyghur insurgency in the restive Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) in its north-western frontiers and the corresponding threats posed by the same pose new challenges. The beginning of the year of 2017 was marked by a terror attack carried out by two Chinese Uyghurs in a night club at Istanbul, Turkey, leaving 37 people dead. The attacks carried out by the radical Uyghurs from 2013-2017 reveal a paradigm shift in the character of the vulnerability to which the Chinese government is being exposed. Targeting civilians have become the new norm for the Uyghur insurgency. Recent trends also underline the fact that Uyghur extremism is simultaneously focused outside the Chinese territory.

Pitted against these challenges, Beijing's counterterrorism policy combines a legal and military response against the dynamic insurgent movement. Although the National Security Law passed by the National People's Congress (NPC) in 2015 embodies the fundamentals of the anti-terror framework, the reality unfolds a strategy that has a range of social, political, cultural, religious, and economic ramifications.

The Institutions and a Narrow Target

At the institutional level, the National Security Commission headed by President Xi Jinping is the apex agency in the country which oversees the anti-terror mechanism. National Counterterrorism Leading Small Group (NCTLSG) is the nodal agency specifically responsible for the coordination of counter-terror policy of China. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) and special police units like People's Armed Police (PAP) and Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (XPCC) constitute the law enforcement apparatus in the Xinjiang region. Additionally, Beijing had established a National Counterterrorism Office along with a Counterterrorism Bureau under the Ministry of Public Security (MPS). An estimate of the strength of personnel assigned with the task of counter-terrorism is not available.

The first and foremost feature of China's counter-terrorism strategy is its broader structure which focuses on a narrow target – the ethnic Uyghur Muslims, a Sunni-minority group with an approximate strength of 10 million that seeks an independent East Turkistan in the Xinjiang region. It is an obvious consequence of China's divergent approach towards the terrorism, definition of which is ostensibly distinct from the western security parameters. Beijing's treatment of terrorism reflects more of an exclusive anti-ethnic propaganda, particularly against the Uyghurs, not found in other counter-extremist profiles elsewhere in the world. This dimension is indicative of an "inward-looking" approach, i.e. the corroboration of terrorism predominantly as a domestic phenomenon, which evoked only minimal concerns about the terrorist threats at the global sphere. Such an outlook has been an outcome of the separatist tendencies of the Uyghurs who have often been evidently involved in various armed attacks within and outside the country. Overtime, the proximity of the Uyghur insurgents with the foreign terrorist organizations like Taliban, the Islamic State (IS) and others, under the label of Turkistan Islamic Party (earlier known as East Turkistan Islamic Movement) has redefined its external dimensions.

According to a **report**, the IS released the first ever video threat against China in March 2017. The video highlights the Uyghurs who are fighting in Syria and the Chinese oppression in the Xinjiang region. It also includes the pledge by IS to "shed blood like rivers" in China. In addition, the IS Al-Hayat Media Centre has enhanced their propaganda through an acapella chant (*nasheed*) in Mandarinas an exercise to expand its clientele from China.

Main Battleground



(Trucks packed with criminals and suspects in Yili, Xinjiang, at a mass public sentencing in May 2014, Photo Courtesy: The Guardian)

Xinjiang has been acknowledged to be the "main battleground" by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in its counter-extremist measures.[1] Besides, Xi Jinping had identified Kashgar, a prominent town in Xinjiang, as the "frontline" of anti-terror efforts.[2] Beijing's crackdown on the extremism in the Xinjiang province accommodates a comprehensive scheme of military and non-military means. The PLA, para-military forces and the constabulary have been conferred with extra-ordinary powers with regard to the Xinjiang region. Under the banner of "strike hard", China officially re-launched its periodical law enforcement camp in June 2014. Apparently, the security forces are even empowered with the provision for preventive detention which can extend indefinitely. These special military and policing powers are largely Uyghur-centric.

On the other hand, Xinjiang is gifted with a promising economic geography. It is a metallogenic belt consisting of oil, gas, rare-earth metals and non-ferrous metals. The commercial prospects of the region enables the state to pour in large sums as investments as part of its alternative policy of socio-economic transformation. However, the native Uyghurs remain in poverty and wage a constant struggle to survive by virtue of the economic inequality in contrast to the rest of China. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its constituent China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) are among the attempts by the government to bridge the economic gap between its impoverished west and the affluent east. Uyghurs claim that the development-driven activities and its dividends are accrued only by the ethnic Han sections, their historical rivals, constituting 40 percent of Xinjiang's population. This aggravates the issue of the prevailing ethnic cleavage, and the resulting discontent distorts the equations of tranquillity and coexistence. The Chinese reaction to these waves of ethnic incompatibility and secessionist frequency has been cultural absolutism.

Complete Ostracisation

Apparently, China resorts to an order that dictates a complete ostracisation of the ethnic Uyghurs from the external environment. Beijing's global economic clout has facilitated the rise of expatriate Chinese citizens including the Uyghur Muslims. China views this access to the external setting and the consequent assimilation that takes place, particularly in Islamic countries, as a catalyst for jihadist indoctrination and the rise of religious fundamentalism in the Xinjiang region. In this direction, China had ordered the security personnel in Xinjiang to seize the passports and travel documents of the Uyghur Muslims in a bid to prevent them from travelling abroad. In addition, Beijing had issued a notice in May 2017 requiring all the Uyghur students abroad to return to their home-state on or before 20th of the same month.[3] Authorities in Xinjiang are reportedly keeping those families, whose members are studying abroad, as hostages. China is also keen on getting the Chinese Uyghurs who are detained in other countries deported on various charges, especially related to terror-attacks. Beijing maintains 36 extradition treaties with various countries in this direction.

China's security establishments are also relying on a psychological warfare in terms of a stringent communist propaganda as part of its deradicalization process in Xinjiang. There are reports which are suggestive of incidents wherein the ethnic Uyghurs have been detained on grounds of lack of attendance in the funeral of a local CPC member.[4] Such instances underscore the attempts to extract unflinching compliance of Uyghurs towards the communist state. Even peasants in the Xinjiang province have been made to undergo counter-ethno-religious extremist curricula in the nearby schools designed for its "stability maintenance" programme.[5] Promotion of bilingual education, particularly Mandarin, also constitutes the anti-terror drive. Under the Chinese carrot and stick approach, Xinjiang authorities also offer monetary rewards for those (including Uyghurs) who are willing to inform the suspicious activities by the fellow Uyghurs.[6]

A campaign called "Revealing Errors," is routinely held in Xinjiang's Aksu (Akesu in Chinese) prefecture to uncover behaviour which is considered politically destabilizing.[7] Village residents belonging to the age group of 18-65 years are being brought to their village office daily to confess their demeanours or to expose the mistakes by others. China's state-owned media repeatedly touts the story of Hanipa Alimahun, a 76-year-old Uyghur woman in Xinjiang, for raising nine orphans hailing from four different ethnic groups. It can be viewed as a component of its propaganda to label the conflict-stricken region as a "harmonious society." She also holds the honorific titles of "Mother of China" and "Most Beautiful Mother in China." [8] Faculties of the universities and colleges in the region are also constantly asked to write and publish papers praising the schemes introduced by the communist government to promote "ethnic unity". [9] Uyghurs also claim that they are forced to undergo a free and mandatory labour camp, known as *hashar*, in spite of the fact that it is legally prohibited.

No Islamophobia though



(Chinese police officers and paramilitary policemen patrol a street in Kashgar city in July 2014,
Photo Courtesy: Radio Free Asia)

In 2016, the top brass of the communist leadership demanded the ethnic Uyghurs to profess “Marxist Atheism” by renouncing Islam.[10] Proscription on Islamic names has been the latest development in Xinjiang at a time when restrictions on long beard, public use of veil and other religious symbols are already in existence.[11] Ethnic Uyghurs are also prevented from taking up the Ramadan fasting. CPC cadres and sympathisers also do not find a place in the list of exemption for violations. There has been a report revealing the arrest of a local CPC secretary for conducting her own marriage (*nikah*) in accordance with the Muslim rituals.[12]

Beijing’s counter-terrorist narrative, however, does not tantamount to an Islamophobic episode. Uyghur is just one among the ten Muslim minority groups inhabiting China. The remaining belong to the Hui, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Uzbek, Tajik, Tartar, Dongxiang, Salar and Bonan ethnicities. China’s coercive approach specifically targets the Uyghurs, while the state treats the remaining Muslim nationalities with due reverence and recognizes their rights and privileges. Muslims, particularly the Hui, have been sceptical of the ethnic Uyghurs and identify them as unpatriotic separatists.

Another dimension which deserves attention is how China reacts to the religious establishments in the Xinjiang region. The Chinese Central Ethnic-Religious Affairs Department runs a “mosque rectification” campaign as a means to demolish dilapidated places of worship.[13] The purpose is to distinguish those buildings which pose threat to the security of worshippers in the region. Moreover, the government had deployed a team of 350 officials in 2016 for a mosque-monitoring assignment in the Hotan (Hetien in Chinese) Prefecture for three years.[14]

Conclusion

The counter-extremist undercurrents of China enhanced its prospects of multilateral cooperation at international forums like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). SCO’s Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) serves as the platform for the Chinese state to deliberate and facilitate international support for its counter-terrorist endeavours. Political instability in Pakistan and Afghanistan has been a source of concern for Beijing. The spectre of Islamabad and Kabul lapsing into the category of “failed states” and ideological and logistical linkages between the terror groups based in these countries with Uyghurs is worrisome for China.

China seeks to play a role in the Afghan Peace Process and Beijing’s \$46 billion CPEC provides it with a greater say in Islamabad’s affairs. The post-2001 US-China bilateral cooperation on counter-terrorism postulates a set of convergences in terms of their shared interests. A May 2017 report discloses the presence of colonies composed of 10,000-20,000 Chinese Uyghurs in Zanbaq and Jisr-al-Shughourin the Idlib province of Syria.[15] The rising Uyghur footprint in Syria is a token of their affinity with the Islamic State and al-Qaeda. Given the good relationship which China shares with Russia and the latter’s engagement in the Syrian Civil War, the prospects of the former’s military engagement in the Middle East seems inevitable. As a result, at home, the prospects of China’s military heavy-handedness coming to an end in the Xinjiang region is remote.

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