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Islam and instability in China's Xinjiang

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Executive summary

On March 1st 2014 a knife-wielding group of ten people attacked passengers and passers-by in the railway station in Kunming, the capital of China's south-western Yunnan province. Twenty-eight were killed and 113 injured. By the following day the government was describing the incident as a "separatist" attack perpetrated by "terrorists from Xinjiang". The attack in Kunming is the latest in a series of violent incidents in China that the government attributes to radical Islamist organisations that aim to promote what it calls the "Three Evils" of "terrorism, separatism and religious extremism". These acts have predominantly occurred in China's far western Xinjiang region, most recently in January and February 2014. Incidents in other parts of China have been attributed to the same forces.

However, a number of accounts from academic and non-Chinese media sources, as well as human rights organisations, have questioned the official explanation of many such incidents. Critics accuse the government of lacking transparency and failing to offer reliable evidence, and claim that it is failing to acknowledge the widespread and diverse grievances of people in Xinjiang. This report aims to reconcile these different narratives of dissent in a region of growing significance for China's economy and energy security.

Background

Xinjiang is China's largest administrative region, but owing to its mountainous and desert geography, is comparatively sparsely populated. In China's 2010 census, Uyghurs – Turkic-language-speaking Sunni Muslims – accounted for 44% of Xinjiang's population and Han Chinese for 41%.[2] In the north of Xinjiang, which includes the regional capital, Urumqi, Han Chinese form a majority of the population, while in the south, where Kashgar is the main urban centre, Uyghurs predominate. The region is also formally subdivided into a number of ethnically titular areas (e.g. the Changji Hui Autonomous Region, the Yili Kazakh Autonomous Region, etc.).

Although there are an estimated 23-50 million Muslims in China (around 1-2% of the population), divided among ten predominantly Muslim ethnic groups,[3] state claims and concerns about terrorism focus invariably on the Uyghurs, who are geographically concentrated in Xinjiang. There are also significant cross-border Uyghur populations in Kazakhstan (220,000), Uzbekistan (55,000) and Kyrgyzstan (49,000).

The notion of Xinjiang as a unified political entity is a comparatively modern concept, as reflected in its name, which translates as "new territory" or "new frontier", and was coined during the Qing Dynasty (1644-1912). For much of its history the region was effectively outside the control of China's political centre; only since the founding of the People's Republic in 1949 has it been fully incorporated. In 1949 Han Chinese comprised only 5% of the population, but their numbers increased rapidly as a result of state-sponsored migration from other provinces. For the first few decades after "liberation", most of the migrants were incorporated into the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corp (XPPC), an organisation set up under the control of the

1 The author wishes to acknowledge the invaluable comments of Sam Geall and Isabel Hilton on earlier drafts of this report.
2 The latter figure may be an underestimate, because it fails to include soldiers and many workers in the state-owned industries and farms whose *hukou* (household registration document) is located in other provinces.
3 The Hui and Uyghur are the largest groups, accounting for around 80% of all Muslims in China, followed by the Kazak, Dongxiang, Kirghiz, Salar, Tajik, Uzbek, Bonan and Tartar.

People's Liberation Army to absorb the remnants of the defeated KMT (Nationalist) forces. The XPCC is still organised into military-style units called *bingtuan* that are involved in both agricultural and industrial production, most notably in the extractive industries. They also have a paramilitary role – most major cities in Xinjiang are surrounded by *bingtuan*, which, in addition to their production roles, act as a reserve of additional security forces. During protests in Yining in 1997 and riots in Urumqi in 2009, thousands of *bingtuan* troops were brought into the city (see below for more on these incidents).

"Xinjiang" or "East Turkestan"?

The idea that Xinjiang should be considered part of China (both historically and at present) is contested by some Uyghurs, especially those active in diaspora organisations (mainly concentrated in the U.S., Germany and Canada). For many of these the preferred term for the region is "East Turkestan", a term first coined by 19th-century Russian Turkologists, who perceived an affinity between the peoples of the Tarim Basin (the desert region that makes up most of present-day southern Xinjiang) and those of "West Turkestan" – the area in Central Asia that corresponds to the post-Soviet states of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan. In Xinjiang the name acquired political resonance in the 1930s, when the region was controlled by a series of warlords, some of whom were backed by the Soviet Union. Following a successful rebellion by gold miners in 1933 in Hotan, a city in southern Xinjiang, the First East Turkestan Republic was established around the southern city of Kashgar. However, the republic's lack of resources and isolation (no other state agreed to recognise it) meant that it was short-lived: it was overthrown by the Han Chinese warlord Sheng Shicai in 1934 (Forbes, 1986). Another republic with the same name (usually referred to as the Second East Turkestan Republic) was established in 1944 in the north-west of the region. This was backed by the Soviet Union and was a more stable entity, which lasted until 1949, when its main leaders died in a plane crash while on their way to Beijing to negotiate with Mao Zedong. The surviving leadership agreed to cede control of the region to the new communist regime.

Since then the term "East Turkestan" has often been used by those who regard the region as a politically separate entity from China and seek its independence. While it is impossible to ascertain how widely this ambition is shared by Uyghurs in Xinjiang, given the sensitivity of the topic, we can say that the formation of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan following the break-up of the Soviet Union is likely to have had some impact on Uyghurs' aspirations to form their own state. These post-Soviet states have tended to use ethnicity as the major criterion of "belonging" to the nation. Uyghurs in Xinjiang and the wider region could claim the right to a state on the same basis (Kamalov, 2009).

In order to counteract the perceived threat of cross-border independence movements between Uyghurs and other ethnic groups in China and their co-ethnics in the newly independent former Soviet republics, China formed an intergovernmental organisation in 1996 known as the "Shanghai Five", whose members were China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Russia. The organisation was renamed the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) in 2001 when Uzbekistan joined. Its current goals include "making joint efforts to maintain and ensure peace, security and stability in the region". In addition to its member states, the SCO has granted observer status to Iran, Afghanistan, India, Mongolia and Pakistan, and dialogue partner status to Belarus, Sri Lanka and Turkey; the latter is the only NATO member associated with the organisation.

Chinese government policy in Xinjiang

While the level of support among Uyghurs for separatist ideas is unclear, there is certainly widespread resentment against the Chinese government's policies in the region. For instance, under family planning regulations Han citizens may only have one child, while Uyghurs (and other ethnic minorities) in the province are allowed to have two, but many Uyghurs still regard this as too restrictive. Additional complaints include economic exclusion, arbitrary detention, the exclusion of the Uyghur language from education and cultural oppression. Examples of the latter include the imprisonment of Uyghur writers, scholars and musicians – most recently the historian Ilham Tohti, who at the time of writing is in detention, having been charged with conspiring against the state (*South China Morning Post*, 2014). In addition, books and music have been publicly burnt for their allegedly separatist content (Dillon, 2002). There has also been widespread destruction of traditional Uyghur neighbourhoods throughout the region, most notably Kashgar's old city, around 80% of which has been razed (Holdstock, 2014).

Religious restrictions are another major source of tension in the region. These include increased surveillance of Muslims during Ramadan (especially of students and those who work in state institutions, who are prohibited from fasting or attending a mosque) and the banning or heavy policing of cultural events with a religious component (such as the festivals that occur at the shrines of local saints).[4] There are also arrests of imams, closures of mosques, and, recently, prosecutions for spreading material promoting "religious extremism" on the Internet

4 It is instructive to compare the way in which Islam is policed in Xinjiang with the treatment of Muslims in other parts of China, most notably the Hui, who are present in most major cities in China and have their own nominally autonomous region in Ningxia in the north-west of the country. Although subject to the same restrictions as any religious group in China (e.g. that worship must take place in registered venues), in general the Hui appear to be given more cultural and religious latitude than the Uyghurs. For instance, Xiao Mei and Wei Yuqun (2014) describe the preferential treatment given to Hui in Linxia in Gansu province with regard to the use of public space.

(BBC, 2013b). Although the Chinese government seldom offers much explanation of what it defines as "religious extremism" (see *China Daily*, 2013a; 2013b), the term is generally taken to refer to Islamic beliefs that have at least an affinity to, if not an exact adherence to, Wahhabism, the conservative branch of Islam that has its origins in Saudi Arabia. While there is a broad scholarly consensus that "Wahhabism" has increased in popularity in south Xinjiang since the 1990s (e.g. Bovingdon 2004; Fuller & Lipman 2004; Gladney 2003), the degree to which it has done so remains unclear. The present author can attest the visible differences in religious practices between the north and south of the region; in the latter there is increased adoption of the *hijab* or *niqab* by women, and considerably less alcohol consumption by Uyghur men in public. However, as Gladney (2010) argues, in Xinjiang the term "Wahhabi" is often used to refer to any strict Muslim, which makes it difficult to establish exactly which aspects of Islamic belief and practice have changed.

As for the extent to which religious beliefs have motivated confrontations between Uyghurs and the state in Xinjiang, the presence of religious elements in these incidents should be interpreted with caution. As Bovingdon (2010: 121) argues, "Uyghurs have often used religion as a vehicle to express wide grievances or have made the state's repression of religiosity examples of broader repression".

Although a full examination of the legitimacy of the Uyghurs' complaints against the Chinese government is beyond the scope of this report, it is also worth noting that many of these grievances have their counterparts elsewhere in China. China's judicial system is opaque and lacking in independence, while the demolition of traditional neighbourhoods has been an almost universal feature of the last three decades of modernisation (e.g. the destruction of Beijing's *hutongs* in the run-up to the 2008 Olympics). Nonetheless, many Uyghurs believe that the ways in which some national policies are applied in the region are particularly prejudicial to them.

These grievances – sometimes separately, more often in combination – appear to underlie most of the disturbances in Xinjiang over the last two decades. The most notable of these were the riots in Urumqi in July 2009, when a protest at the killing of Uyghur migrant workers in the south-eastern province of Guangdong became violent. Vehicles and shops were set on fire and many civilians were attacked. The government reported 200 deaths (most of them Han Chinese) and claimed that the violence had been "instigated and directed from abroad, and carried out by outlaws in the country". The true instigator of the unrest, according to the Chinese government, was the World Uyghur Congress (WUC), a Washington, DC-based organisation led by the exiled Uyghur businesswoman Rebiya Kadeer. The WUC denied responsibility and blamed the violence on the government's refusal to acknowledge Uyghurs' long-standing grievances and what it claimed was the heavy-handed response to the protests on the part of the security services.

However, the fact that Uyghur dissent in Xinjiang is nourished by the difficulties of ordinary life does not preclude the possibility that radical Islamist organisations are also a threat to the stability and security of the region, and, if the government's claims about the Beijing and Kunming attacks (see below) turn out to be valid, to the security of other parts of China.

Xinjiang's economic and strategic value

In economic terms Xinjiang lags behind the prosperous eastern provinces, but is by no means among the poorest regions in China. In 2012 it was ranked 18th out of the country's 31 administrative divisions,[5] with a gross domestic product only slightly less than the national average. Its main natural resources are large quantities of gas and oil, which currently account for about 30% of China's natural gas output and 13% of its crude oil (Oster, 2010), and huge coal reserves: 2.2 trillion tonnes according to some estimates (World Coal Association, 2011). The latter is of particular importance for China's west-east power strategy, whereby both electricity and gas will be generated in Xinjiang then transferred to central and eastern provinces (Xinhua, 2013). Xinjiang is also important for China's energy security as a transit province for gas and oil from a number of Central Asian republics (*Oil Gas Daily*, 2013). The energy deals China has signed with Xinjiang's neighbours are key elements of China's overall engagement strategy for Central Asia (Saferworld, 2013), which combines significant investment in infrastructure, communications and energy with low-interest loans – in June 2012, for instance, former president Hu Jintao announced that China would offer $10 billion worth of loans to members of the SCO.

The fact that Xinjiang borders eight countries[6] gives it considerable strategic importance, not least because three of these borders – those with Tajikistan, Pakistan and India – remain disputed. Nor should the symbolic significance of retaining Xinjiang within a state that does not admit the possibility of secession by any of its ethnic groups be underestimated. China has prepared for such an eventuality through building strong economic and military relations with bordering countries. It has conducted joint "anti-terror drills" with its close ally, Pakistan, and other members of the SCO, including Kazakhstan in 2010 and Kyrgyzstan in August 2013 (Xinhua, 2011). China has also been pursuing cooperation on security matters with Afghanistan (Panda, 2014).

4 Much has been written about this; see Taylor (2007); Large and Patey (2011).
5 Composed of its 22 provinces, five autonomous regions (which include Tibet and Xinjiang) and four directly administrated municipalities.
6 Mongolia, Russia, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India.

However, the extent to which there is a fully fledged system of security cooperation among SCO members is unclear. A rule that provides for a collective response to events "threatening the peace, stability and security of a member state of the SCO or the entire region" was adopted at the 2012 SCO summit in Beijing, which in principle would allow SCO member states to intervene politically and diplomatically in another member's internal conflict. While it is difficult to envisage China's neighbours intervening in Xinjiang, not least because a large force of Chinese troops and armed police is already deployed there, a degree of cooperation between the Chinese and neighbouring security services certainly exists: over the last decade several Uyghurs whom the Chinese had accused of being extremists have been arrested and deported from SCO countries (Szadziewski, 2011). This suggests that it would be difficult for a group to function among the Uyghur populations of neighbouring countries with the intention of targeting Xinjiang without attracting a repressive response in the member state in question.

The "Three Evils" before September 11th 2001

On March 1st 2014 a knife-wielding group of ten people attacked passengers and passers-by in the railway station in Kunming, capital of China's south-western Yunnan province. Twenty-eight were killed and 113 injured (for more discussion, see below). The attack is the latest in a series of violent incidents in China that the government attributes to radical Islamist organisations that aim to promote what it calls the "Three Evils" of "terrorism, separatism and religious extremism". In order to assess the Chinese government's claims to being a victim of Islamic terrorism, it is helpful to understand the way that its own narrative has changed in response to events in and outside China. Neither the nature nor the causes of dissent have changed over the last thirty years: many of the government's most disputed policies in Xinjiang, such as family planning, Han resettlement and religious freedom, have a long history. There has been a significant change, however, in the official description of the events that discontent has generated.

This narrative shift is not immediately apparent in contemporary official accounts of events in Xinjiang, which often argue that the region's "terrorism" has long historical roots. The website of the Chinese Embassy in the U.S. has a section entitled "History and development of Xinjiang" which claims that:

> Since the peaceful liberation of Xinjiang [in 1949], the "East Turkistan" [sic] forces have never resigned themselves to their defeat. The tiny group of separatists who had fled abroad from Xinjiang collaborated with those at home, and looked for opportunities to carry out splittist and sabotage activities
> (Chinese Embassy in the U.S., 2014).

Serious official concern over religious extremism and separatism in Xinjiang, however, was only expressed after 1990, when hundreds of people gathered outside the government offices in Baren in south Xinjiang to protest against the recent extension of strict family planning policies to the Uyghurs. As with many such incidents in Xinjiang, the lack of reliable eyewitnesses or independent media makes it hard to verify what happened, although both official and unofficial accounts suggest a large police response and many fatalities (Amnesty International, 1999). Some of the protestors were said to have carried a banner predicting the defeat of Marxism-Leninism by religion, and a subsequent report on the incident on Xinjiang television displayed documents allegedly found on the protestors calling for jihad and death to "infidels". The Chinese government characterised the protest as "a counter-revolutionary rebellion" whose aim was to destroy national unity and overthrow the government (Amnesty International, 1999). A month later the Xinjiang provincial government passed new regulations governing protests in the region. These stipulated that all protests must be officially approved beforehand and that the application must specify the protest's "purpose, methods, slogans or catchphrases, participant numbers" and "not threaten the unification [sic] of the state" (Bovingdon, 2010: 125).

The Baren incident, although not officially described as Islamic terrorism, nevertheless led to a tightening of religious policies in Xinjiang. During the more politically liberal decade of the 1980s there had been a relative loosening of state control in the province, with a marked increase in mosque construction, in part made possible by the prosperity brought by Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms. After Baren the authorities targeted "illegal religious authorities", halting mosque construction, closing schools of religious instruction and increasing state monitoring of Islamic clergy. Imams were required to undergo political education and some 10% of the roughly 250,000 clergy the authorities examined were defrocked.

Yet although Islam was under greater scrutiny, the official focus remained primarily on separatism rather than the religious component of the numerous protests, violent or otherwise, that took place in Xinjiang during the rest of the decade, including the large demonstration in February 1997 in Yining (known by Uyghurs as "Ghulja") in north-west Xinjiang. This was an initially peaceful protest against the arrests of Uyghur young men who were involved in social organisations that had been set up to tackle the drug abuse and alcoholism prevalent among Yining's Uyghurs. As with the Baren protests, some protestors appeared to shout religiously inspired slogans that ranged in content from declarations of faith to calls for an Islamic caliphate. How the protest became violent is unclear, but in the following weeks there were multiple arrests, public executions and a heightened security presence in the region. The official account initially downplayed any political aspect to the event, arguing that it was the work of drug addicts, thieves and other "social garbage". However,

the official narrative soon shifted to that of a separatist "riot"; by June 1997 the authorities had begun explicitly to link separatist activities with religion. The *Xinjiang Daily* reported that a crackdown on underground religious activities had resulted in an official ban on the construction or renovation of 133 mosques. In addition, the authorities claimed they had broken up more than 100 illegal Koranic classes. In July, Amudun Niyaz, chairman of the Xinjiang People's Congress, publicly called for the "waging of a people's war against separatists and illegal religious activities". However, he was careful to add, "Our struggle against national separatists is neither an ethnic nor a religious problem. It is a political struggle between those who safeguard the motherland's unification and security and those who split the motherland."

It is notable that before 2001 some official accounts of both the Baren incident and the Yining protests did attribute key organising roles to Islamic groups (the East Turkestan Islamic Party and the East Turkestan Islamic Party of Allah), but in both cases the nature and capabilities of these organisations were ill-defined (Xu, 1999). There were few, if any, official suggestions that they might be linked to other Islamist terrorist groups operating from Pakistan, Afghanistan or any other Central Asian country.

The significance of the use of religious slogans and rhetoric in these and other protests is debatable. We cannot entirely rule out the possibility that these are expressions of a more conservative brand of Islam (e.g. Wahhabism) than has traditionally been practised in Xinjiang, where adherence to the Hanafi school of Islamic jurisprudence has been leavened with influences from Zoroastrianism, Buddhism and Shamanism. Until recently Wahhabism was primarily found in south Xinjiang, aided by proximity to counterpart movements in Pakistan and Afghanistan. But in the case of the protests in Yining in 1997, many Uyghurs claimed to the present author in 2001 that the adoption of a more conservative approach to Islam by many Uyghurs in the city came *after* the crackdown. Many young Uyghur men admitted that before the protests they often drank alcohol, rarely went to the mosque and did not fast during Ramadan (Holdstock, 2011). The growth in religiosity among Uyghurs in Xinjiang can thus be seen as a response to the crackdown on Islam. Smith Finley (2013) argues that there has been a consequent shift in the way many Uyghurs define themselves, which now tends to be in oppositional terms to Han Chinese, with one of the central differences commonly being identified as the lack of religious belief among the latter.

The post-September 11th 2001 link between Islam and terrorism in Xinjiang

The significance of Muslim identity in Xinjiang was to shift dramatically in the wake of the September 11th 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon in the U.S.

On November 14th 2001 China's then-Foreign Ministry spokesman, Zhu Bangzao, gave a press briefing on Uyghur separatism. He listed organisations based in Afghanistan, elsewhere in Central Asia and in Xinjiang that he claimed were fighting to end Chinese rule over the region (China's Permanent UN Mission, 2001). Zhu argued that some Xinjiang separatists had received training in Afghanistan before being sent to China and that an organisation known as the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) was supported and directed by Osama bin Laden. It was claimed that Hasan Mahsum, the leader of ETIM, had met Bin Laden in 1999 and 2001, and received promises of "an enormous sum of money". Bin Laden's aim was apparently to launch a "holy war" with the aim of setting up a theocratic Islamic state in Xinjiang.

This argument received important support in September 2002, when the U.S. government placed ETIM on one of its lists of terrorist groups – not, as is sometimes erroneously stated, the U.S. foreign terrorist organisations list, but the terrorist exclusion list, which calls for far weaker measures to be taken against those listed. The decision to list ETIM has since been questioned by a number of scholars and experts on the region, including Millward (2004), who argued that the Chinese government's case "contains much inaccurate, questionable, or contradictory reporting and slanted conclusions reflecting ulterior agendas". The Chinese government has furnished little evidence to support its threat assessments.

A definitive assessment of the Chinese government's case is impeded by the difficulty of gaining access to primary sources. Restrictions on foreign journalists in Xinjiang make investigative work very difficult, and the basic facts of most incidents, including the number of casualties or the sequence of events, remain unconfirmed. This has not prevented a number of "experts" in global security issues, such as SITE (a monitoring service that offers material on "the Jihadist threat"), *The Long War Journal* (whose aims are the same as SITE's) and IntelCenter (another subscriber service offering counter-terrorism intelligence), from treating the Chinese government's assertions as hard facts. This has helped to establish a narrative about a Uyghur terrorist threat that has been influential in policy and security circles in the U.S. and elsewhere, despite the uncertainty regarding the extent to which these organisations carry out investigative or fact-checking work. In a 2006 interview with the *New Yorker* magazine SITE's founding director, Rita Katz, "conceded that her group doesn't check the scientific accuracy of each [terrorist] manual or the legitimacy of every threat" (Wallace-Wells, 2006).

Even well-researched reports into issues affecting Central Asia and China sometimes inadvertently reproduce this narrative. Saferworld, an independent international organisation working to prevent violent conflict, wrote a report on Central Asia (Saferworld 2013) containing two passages[7] that imply the existence of organised Uyghur

separatist forces willing to commit acts of terrorism. While the entirely legitimate aim of both passages is to represent the Chinese government's concerns, the failure to point out that these claims are disputed could be read as a tacit endorsement of this position.

A notable exception to this pattern is the work of Roberts (2012), who wrote a much-cited (and -contested) analysis of the evidence of a significant Uyghur separatist terrorist threat, concluding that it was not sufficient. Roberts points out that before 2001 few scholars had heard of ETIM, and addresses the circumstances surrounding the 22 Uyghurs who were detained as enemy combatants at the U.S. prison facility at Guantanamo Bay after 2002. Based on personal interviews with some who had been released, as well an analysis of their statements, he concludes that, while ETIM did in fact exist in 2001 and had the stated purpose of training Uyghurs for militant activity against the Chinese state, it had no operational capacity, being restricted to a few ramshackle buildings near Jalalabad in Afghanistan. Most of the men who went there "ended up there through a variety of benign circumstances … and were ambivalent at best about the prospect of participating in armed struggle". When the U.S. began bombing Afghanistan, Roberts' interviewees fled to northern Pakistan, where they were quickly turned over to bounty hunters and sold to the U.S. military. The fact that the U.S. government has since released all but three of them also suggests it does not regard these individuals as former or future terrorists. Roberts (2012) concludes:

> the facts do not support the idea that there is, or has been in recent history, a substantial and sophisticated Uyghur terrorist threat. The evidence of actual terrorist acts perpetrated by Uyghurs is largely inconclusive as is the information about the capacity and reach of ETIM … as a terrorist group.

Future security

Yet if the Islamic terrorist threat to China is discounted, what is the explanation for the succession of violent incidents in Xinjiang (and now Beijing and Kunming) since the Urumqi riots of 2009 (BBC, 2011a; 2011b; 2013a)? Roberts (2012) concedes that "given the animosity that many Uyghurs harbour for the Chinese state, it is difficult to imagine that there are not at least some who would seek to use violence". There are certainly Uyghurs willing to condone such tactics: in Urumqi in 2010 several young Uyghur men expressed the opinion to the author that violence was the only viable form of resistance to Chinese rule, although the issue of the extent to which such statements may be for show rather than a statement of actual intent should not be ignored (Holdstock, 2010). But if one accepts Roberts' logic, it is arguable that, were financial and organisational structures available to such Uyghurs, then China could potentially be subject to bona fide acts of terror (see the discussion of the Kunming attacks below).

Even if this conclusion is accepted, two caveats need to be made. The first is that since 2001 violent incidents in Xinjiang have received disproportionate amounts of both media coverage and scholarly attention compared to similar incidents elsewhere in China. When a Han Chinese man in a wheelchair tried to blow himself up at Beijing airport in July 2013 the government did not describe the incident as terrorism (*South China Morning Post*, 2013a); nor were the explosions outside the Communist Party headquarters in Taiyuan in Shanxi province in November 2013 categorised as terrorism (*South China Morning Post*, 2013b). Millward (2004) argues that, unlike in the rest of China, where violent forms of protest had increased, "both the frequency and severity of violent activity associated with Uyghur separatism have in fact declined since the late 1990s". This conclusion was echoed by Bovingdon (2010), after performing a similar analysis of recorded violent incidents throughout China. Roberts (2012) also examined the frequency and distribution of these incidents, and like the previous authors was of the opinion that the "general impression of a threat escalating since 1990 to crisis proportions today is exaggerated". This conclusion may need to be revised if the Kunming attacks are indeed the result of Uyghur dissent in Xinjiang.

The fact that violent incidents continue requires explanation, hence a second caveat. Ultimately, an opinion on whether or not China has been (or will be) a target for Islamist terrorism requires a judgement about what constitutes "terrorism". The incident in Tiananmen Square in late October 2013 is a good example. On October 28th a jeep exploded in Tiananmen Square after crashing into the wall of the Forbidden City. Five people were killed, including the three passengers, and more than 40 were injured. The Beijing police said it was a terrorist attack and that the driver and passengers were Uyghur. They also claimed to have found knives and a "jihadist flag" in the jeep, although how the latter escaped the flames remains unclear. The government blamed the attack on ETIM.

Suggestions by a number of experienced commentators (including Roberts) that it might have been an isolated incident born of a particular grievance were condemned by the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman, Hong Lei, as a "slander on China's ethnic and religious policy" that amounted to "connivance with terrorists" (Reuters, 2013). Even the later appearance of a video on social media from a group calling itself the Turkestan Islamic Party (TIP) condoning (although not, as some claimed, admitting responsibility for) the attacks failed to settle the issue.

7 "It also wants its Central Asian neighbours, which have the largest Uyghur populations of any countries except for China, to take a more active part in the fight against Uyghur separatism" (Saferworld, 2013: 7); "The specific concern in this regard is whether separatist organisations operating in Xinjiang may find a sanctuary, as well as financial, technical, and training support in post-2014 Afghanistan, as well as in Pakistan" (Saferworld, 2013: 12).

Nicholas Bequelin of Human Rights Watch questioned the timing of the release of the video, a full month after the incident, suggesting that the temporal interval cast doubt on the veracity of the claim. Gladney also struck a sceptical note, observing that the TIP are "so shadowy and nebulous that almost anyone could step in and say they were this group and get support". In the past, such groups have falsely claimed responsibility for incidents in videos assembled from materials that are easily available on the Internet – in one previous TIP claim, that of responsibility for explosions on two buses in Kunming in 2008, the Chinese government subsequently denied the claim (BBC, 2008).

The Kunming train station attacks

The brutal attack at Kunming train station on March 1st 2014 was carried out by at least ten attackers, of whom two were women, wearing dark clothes and armed with knives. Four of the attackers were killed by police at the scene; one woman was injured and captured. Although the government attributed responsibility to Xinjiang "separatists" within 24 hours of the attacks, at that point it made no reference to the ethnicity of the attackers nor provided any indication of which, if any, organisation they might be affiliated to. This did not prevent widespread speculation on Chinese social media (for overviews see Wertime & Lu, 2014; Tang, 2014) and in the Western media (e.g. Larson, 2014; Pomfret & Martina, 2014) that Uyghurs were responsible. The Ministry of Public Security's first reference to the ethnicity of one of the suspects came on March 3rd, after three further suspects were apprehended, naming Abdurehim Kurban as the group's leader. Although it did not specify his ethnicity, it is a Uyghur name (Xinhua: 2014). The authorities also claimed to have found a jihadist flag at the crime scene (Global Chinese Press, 2014), just as in the incident in Tiananmen in 2013, and reports circulated that the attackers had spared a Hui man (Philips, 2014). While this is far from proof that the attacks followed a radical Islamist agenda, it does illustrate the Chinese government's wish to continue to promote the impression that China is the target of religious extremism.

At the time of writing no group has claimed responsibility for the attacks, nor has the Chinese government named any specific group. Some sections of the Chinese press have elaborated on possible reasons for the timing and location of the attack (BBC, 2014). An editorial in the *Beijing News* noted that the attack took place just before the start of China's *lianghui,* its annual parliamentary session, and concluded that "the political motive of the attackers is very obvious". As for the choice of location, the *China Youth Daily* quoted Yin Zhuo, a high-level official in the People's Liberation Army, who claimed that Kunming was picked for its lax security and being easily accessible from Xinjiang without flying (BBC, 2014).[8]

The Kunming attack is not the first time a major incident outside Xinjiang has been linked to problems in the region (Faison, 1997), but if the government's claims are vindicated, the episode represents an important departure in both strategy and capability for Uyghurs who oppose the Chinese government. Significantly, there has been little suggestion thus far that the attacks were in response to a particular local grievance. Uyghur activist organisations such as the WUC have not suggested a local cause, calling for a calm assessment of the evidence and consideration of social and political conditions in Xinjiang (WUC, 2014). At present, the only alternative to the government account is Radio Free Asia's contention that the attackers were Uyghurs who had fled to Kunming in 2013 to escape persecution in Xinjiang, but who had been denied permission to leave the country (Radio Free Asia, 2014). Although the story is plausible, until more evidence is produced this hypothesis must be treated with the same caution as the official one.

What is not in dispute is the high degree of organisation evident in the planning and execution of the attacks, and the apparent aim of causing widespread fear and loss of life among civilians. In these respects, it has the characteristics of an act of terror.

The motivation remains unknown, and a definitive connection between the attacks and the situation in Xinjiang has yet to be established, but many in China will not wait for proof. There has been a marked deterioration in relations between Han and Uyghurs in Xinjiang over the last five years, a decline that arguably began with the Urumqi riots in 2009 (Palmer, 2013). On July 6th 2009, the day after the riots began, Uyghur neighbourhoods in Urumqi were attacked by mobs of Han Chinese. With the memory of the Tiananmen Square explosion so recent, in which Uyghurs were once again implicated, the Kunming attacks seem likely to deepen anti-Uyghur prejudice among Han Chinese, both inside and outside Xinjiang. The day after the Kunming episode a local government office in the neighbouring province of Guangxi posted a notice asking residents to report any Uyghurs they saw in the area (Beech, 2014). Given the tenor of the Chinese leadership's response to the attack thus far – Xi Jinping, the Chinese president, spoke of the need to "go all out to maintain social stability" (Kalman & Brannigan 2014) – many commentators (e.g. Hilton, 2014) have predicted that there will be a severe crackdown on Uyghurs in Xinjiang, and perhaps elsewhere in the country. This is likely to increase Uyghur alienation further and may increase the likelihood of further incidents.

8 While the former may be true, it is currently a 60-hour journey by train from Urumqi to Kunming, with no direct train. Many other major cities in China are more easily accessible by train from Xinjiang.

Conclusion

To assess the true level of threat China faces from terrorist groups in Xinjiang demands that we distinguish among various accounts of the violent incidents in China that have been linked to the region. This in turn requires a judgement about the capabilities and motivations of a number of shadowy organisations with regard to their possible role in such incidents. A survey of the credible evidence suggests that while the Chinese government's characterisation of the threat it faces has been exaggerated, the potential for Islamist acts of terror to occur does exist and, if the Chinese government's attribution of the attacks to Xinjiang is correct, it will mark a major shift in the ways in which Uyghur dissent is expressed. Experts on the region who acknowledge this threat also acknowledge that Uyghur resentment of government policy in Xinjiang has been as much a motivating force as any hypothesised Islamist agenda. The future stability of Xinjiang, and perhaps other regions in China, cannot simply be reduced to the question of China's security arrangements with its neighbours, nor its own internal security provisions, but will also continue to be determined by the consequences of the policies it applies in Xinjiang.

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