

China Confronts Islamist Terrorism

The attention of the world has been focused on the Middle East and on the nuclear agreement with Iran that almost certainly will lead to that country becoming a nuclear power. Less attention has been paid to the link between a Muslim ethnic group in China and Islamist terrorists, and even less to the need for American-Chinese collaboration in the fight against Islamist terrorism.

China has the world's largest population and can now be regarded as the fastest growing economy, having overtaken that of the United States in 2014. The Chinese economy has been slowing down over the last year, yet the growth has been estimated at 7 per cent during 2015.

Since the 1980s, the state socialism of the Communist system, the People's Republic founded in 1949, has been transformed in many ways to one of private enterprise that has generated rapid growth. But that economic development has not been accompanied by political reform, and the Communist Party, the world's largest party, retains a monopoly of power.

China has been having its share of problems. One acute one was the problem with its stock market equities and with inflationary trends. In June 2015 the Shanghai Composite Index plunged more than 30 per cent, an amount of \$3 trillion, and nearly 1,500 companies halted their shares from trading. The turmoil in Chinese equities has shown that central government had failed to control events. The markets are operated and regulated by the state. However, the dramatic fall in the stock indices reflected weakness in regulation of capital markets as well as panic among retail investors, rather than weakening growth outlook.

China, using a variety of methods including threats to arrest those who were selling short, loosening monetary policy, and buying stocks directly, finally stopped the stock market plunge. China is obviously concerned with the problem that global investors, unhappy that many companies were suspended from trading during the stock market panic, are turning away from Chinese stocks.

Yet China is now concerned not only with growing its economy, but also with a threat that the democratic countries of the West and the United States have been facing and that continues to grow more formidable.

China is now forced to deal with the increasing threat of Islamist terrorism.

The main problem at present comes from the ethnic group, the Uighurs living in Xinjiang, the most northwesterly region of China, one bordering on the states of the former Soviet Union. The region contains about 20 million people of whom 10 million are Uighurs, a mostly Sunni Muslim, Turkic speaking group that is recognized by China as one of the 56 ethnic groups in the country.

Mostly occupied with agriculture and trade, the Uighurs regard themselves as culturally and ethnically close to central Asian countries. The area for a few months in 1949 was declared an East Turkestan state, but then became part of Communist China. In October 1955 China set it up as an Autonomous Region, and refers to it as an inseparable part of the Chinese nation. Central authorities encouraged Han Chinese, now about 40 per cent of the Xinjiang population, to settle there. They have taken part in establishing the new industrial towns and family villages, and integrating the area into mainstream China.

The commercial and cultural activities of the Uighurs are severely controlled by the central Chinese authorities who have imposed restrictions both on the expressions of Islam and

on the cultural identity of the people. Residents have difficulty in obtaining passports to travel, and women are restricted in wearing of veils.

This atmosphere of repression has led to violence. Grievances of Uighurs in the past have mostly been economic, cultural, or political in nature, involving either calls for an independent state or for greater political and cultural autonomy in China. Now, those grievances have become infused with Islamist terrorism, and pose a threat to Chinese security. Uighurs have established connections with both al-Qaeda and with the Islamic State (IS).

Information from China is understandingly imperfect and the exact danger of terrorism is arguable. What remains relatively unknown is the exact number of outbreaks of terrorism in Chinese territory although there are frequent reports of deadly clashes with police.

However, it is evident that from the 1990s Uighur separatist groups were mounting attacks against the central government: the most well-known group doing so is the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM). This organization has been labeled a terrorist organization by China, by the United States, and by the United Nations Security Council. It is interesting that the Obama administration removed it from the list of Foreign Terrorist Organizations in 2012. The founder and former leader of ETIM was killed in 2003, and his successor was killed in 2010.

Instances of Islamist violence over the last few years have become known. Anti-government protests took place before the Beijing Olympics in 2008 and again in 2009 when riots led to 200 people being killed. In October 2013 a car ploughed into a crowd and burst into flames in Tiananmen Square in Beijing, killing two and injuring 40. In March 2014, stabbings in Kunming killed 29 people and injured 130 others. In April 2014 an attack was made with knives and explosives at the railroad

station in Urumqi, the capital of Xinjiang. Another attack in the same town in May 2014 killed 31 and injured more than 90. On June 13, 2015, three knife-wielding terrorists trying to flee China to join the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria were killed.

China claims that some of these would-be jihadists received training from Osama bin Laden and the Taliban. Some of them fought in Afghanistan, Chechnya, and Uzbekistan.

The Chinese government says that 109 members of the Muslim Uighur community who had been repatriated by Thailand had gone there, perhaps assisted by Turkish diplomats, on their way to join the jihadists in Turkey, Syria, or Iraq. Presumably, the affinity of Turkey for the jihadists is due to the fact that Uighurs are also a Turkic people. Sixty-seven other Uighurs remain in Thailand which is uncertain on how to deal with them.

It appears that these would-be jihadists were radicalized by information and materials sent by the exiled World Uighur Congress, a group based in Germany, as well as by ETIM. China believes that more than 300 Uighurs are fighting for IS in Iraq and Syria. Though little known, 22 Uighurs, captured in Asian fighting mostly in Afghanistan, are detained by the U.S. in Guantanamo Bay.

China now faces the same problem as the Western democracies and the United States. All fear the return of the local jihadists who may form a terrorist cell. The West may take lessons from China that has imposed border controls and countering those groups, especially Turks, who have given fake Turkish passports to the Uighurs whom they helped smuggle out of the country.

China, which contains about 20 million Muslims in its borders, has been forced to join in the fight against Islamist terrorism. As a result of its recent problems, China said it

was willing to join that war against the Islamic State, but without joining the “international coalition,” or supporting air strikes. So far it is limiting its activity to personnel training of anti-Islamist fighters and emergency humanitarian assistance.

It is incumbent on the Obama administration to induce the Chinese to be more active in the fight against Islamist terrorism.

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