



ANALYSING RECENT ATTACKS IN XINJIANG

Sana Hashmi

Associate Fellow, CAPS

Of late, there has been a surge in violence in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR). In fact, the year 2014 has specifically been one of the most violent years in China's history. On July 28, 2014, masked extremists attacked civilians, government officials and personnel of Xinjiang Police Force in Shache County in southern Xinjiang. A gang armed with knives and axes attacked a police station and government offices in Elixku Township and some moved onto Huangdi Township, attacking civilians and smashing vehicles as they passed.ⁱ It is considered to be the deadliest attack in Xinjiang in the recent past which led to the killing of more than 100 people including 59 assailants. Two days after the attacks, on July 30, 2014, the Xinjiang government web portal Tianshan reported that Jume Tahir, the government-appointed imam of the 600-year-old Id Kah mosque in the city of Kashgar, was killed by "three thugs influenced by religious extremist ideology".ⁱⁱ On August 23, Xinjiang police claimed to have executed eight people who were involved in the July 28 attacks.

These were not the only attacks in the year. On May 22, 31 people died and 90 were injured in a series of explosions in an open air market in Xinjiang. On April 30, another explosion was carried out at the South railway station in Urumqi, capital city of Xinjiang. The attack took place in the wake of the visit of the Chinese President, Xi Jinping to XUAR in April who during the visit pledged "to deploy a "strike-first approach against terrorists in the region" and stated that the province's long-term stability was "vital to the whole country's reform, development and stability."ⁱⁱⁱ China's another peripheral area, Kunming was also rocked by a terror attack on March 1 when Kunming's city railway station was attacked by eight unknown attackers, leaving 29

people dead and more than 100 injured. Eight assailants were shot dead by the police force on the spot and the rest were taken into the custody. It was claimed by the central government that the attack was carried out by the Uyghur separatists groups. It is noteworthy that Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has always accused East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), a Uyghur separatist group, to have an association with Al-Qaeda.

Chinese leadership's response to the attacks has always been prompt and it has started Chinese version of 'war on terror'. In fact, China's support to the US' "war on terror" was emanated from its own desire to get international support for its internal upheavals in the XAUR. Till now, several Uyghurs have been detained. According to the figures released by the Xinjiang police force on May 25, 23 terrorist and religious extremist groups were taken down in the Hotan and more than 200 suspects were caught and 200 explosive devices were seized in Kashgar and Aksu prefectures.^{iv} In August, more than 20 people were sentenced to jail on the charges related to terrorists' activities.

However, the moves have not yielded significant results for the leadership. Xinjiang and some other peripheral areas in China are still witnessing such violent attacks every month now. One may argue that such attacks are attributed to the rampant ethnic unrest in XUAR. Some Uyghurs have expressed resentment toward China's Han majority in the recent years over what they say is harsh treatment from Chinese security forces and Han people taking the lion's share of economic opportunities in Xinjiang.^v They claim that Uyghurs face widespread discrimination in employment, housing and educational opportunities, as well as curtailed religious freedom and political marginalisation.^{vi}

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Xinjiang, being rich in resources like coal, oil and gas, is of utmost importance to the Chinese leadership. It is also a home to China's nuclear testing programme. Additionally, it shares borders with Afghanistan, India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan and Tajikistan. It may be noted that for China, it acts as a buffer with its Central Asian neighbours who are also politically unstable. At the moment, China is also concerned about the US troop's drawdown from Afghanistan which could have a potential to pose grave challenges to China's internal security. This is a cause of concern for China because militant groups in Afghanistan are particularly sympathetic towards Uyghurs in Xinjiang. That's clearly one of the reasons why China is pushing for its greater presence in Afghanistan.

Considering that Xinjiang holds immense importance in China's strategic endeavours, it is important for Chinese leadership to take steps in improving the standard of living of ethnic minorities mainly Uyghurs. Generating employment, relaxing religious restrictions and focussing on education are vital to ensure the long-term stability in XUAR.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies)

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ⁱ "China Focus: 18 Xinjiang terrorist rioting suspects surrender", *Xinhua*, August 10, 2014, at http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2014-08/10/c_133546149.htm, accessed on August 20, 2014.

ⁱⁱ "Uighur Imam Murdered after Morning Prayers", *Al Jazeera*, July 31, 2014, at <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/asia-pacific/2014/07/china-kills-suspects-uighur-imam-murder-2014731143855645225.html>, accessed on August 17, 2014.

ⁱⁱⁱ For more details, see Sana Hashmi, "Terror Attacks in China", *IIT Chennai China Studies Centre*, June 5, 2014, at <http://csc.iitm.ac.in/?q=node/490#overlay-context=node/489%3Fq%3Dnode/489>, accessed on June 5, 2014.

^{iv} Yin Pumin, "Counter Terror: Efforts to Root out Religious Extremism and Terrorism are Increasing", *Beijing Review*, June 3, 2014, at http://www.bjreview.com/Cover_Stories_Series_2014/2014-06/03/content_622270_3.htm accessed on August 20, 2014.

^v Jeo Sterling, "Dozens Killed, Injured in China Terror Attack", *CNN*, July 30, 2014, at <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/07/29/world/asia/china-terror-attack/>, accessed on August 17, 2014.

^{vi} Ibid.