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CHALLENGES FOR XINJIANG: POST U.S.-NATO DRAWDOWN FROM AFGHANISTAN

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The past few days have seen various conflicting reports in the global media about the purported increase in the presence of the Islamic State in Afghanistan, including the apparent killing of an Afghan Taliban commander by supposed IS militants in the Charkh province.ⁱ When juxtaposed with the drawing down of the US-NATO forces last year and the imminent (almost) complete withdrawal of the Coalition Forces by 2016, along with the various terrorist safe havens around the Af-Pak borders - a big question mark appears to loom over the future of the overall stability and security of Afghanistan. The obscure nature of the threat of Afghanistan re-emerging as a bastion for global jihad, at a time where new forces are at play, is bound to have wider regional implications. It is in this regard, that the neighbouring Chinese restive region of Xinjiang is likely to face spillover effects, adding to the instability in the region.

The conflict in Xinjiang

Over the years, the indigenous and Muslim Uighur people have developed various socio-economic grievances against the Chinese rule. Some of the Chinese policies (post-1949) that have diluted the Uighur identity include a massive restructuring of the society in Xinjiang by promoting the migration of Han Chinese into the region. In terms of the ethnic identity, the CCP, for instance, has issued its own "official" history of the Xinjiang region which has been "emasculated, folklorised, prettified, Hanified...but [which] precludes any hint of opposition in the past or present."ⁱⁱ The Muslim identity of the Uighurs has also been undermined with Beijing almost dictating the way the local population must follow their religion, through the issuance of such policies and laws that prohibit children less than the age of 18 from practicing religion and even bans adults from preaching to them. In addition, the State also preapproves any publication that discusses religion, and all religious professionals live under constant surveillance and State controls. Government informers often attend



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prayer services, and Police drop-ins on gatherings partaking in *iftar* to monitor those who have been observing the fast, are also frequent. Development has been uneven (favouring the Han) and the areas of Xinjiang with predominantly Uighur population still remain among the poorest in the region. Job opportunities and other socio-economic privileges are also mostly reserved for the Han.ⁱⁱⁱ

All of these grievances have increasingly stirred up feelings of agitation, discrimination and subjugation among the Uighurs in Xinjiang, as they fear a complete loss of their ethno-religious identities. While, the majority of the Uighur public only want the Uighur ethnic identity to remain intact and value the role of Islam in Uighur life, and want to achieve these goals within the construct of the State as long as their grievances are fairly addressed, a section of separatists, disgruntled as a result of the Chinese policies has also emerged, which believe in an armed struggle for the complete independence of “East Turkestan.”^{iv}

Linkages of ETIM to the terrorist organisations in Afghanistan and Pakistan

As the activity of the Uighur militant groups increased in the 1990s, so did the influence of the terror groups, the Taliban and the Al Qaeda, in Afghanistan at the same time. Hasan Mehsum, after spending time in Afghanistan and meeting the local Taliban leaders, in fact established the ‘East Turkistan Islamic Movement’ (ETIM) in September 1997 in Pakistan in a region along the Afghanistan border, and the group is still believed to be running its operations from the Af-Pak border region. Ever since then, the ETIM maintained close ties to the Taliban till around 2003, and at the same time established relations with the Al Qaeda and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), which it maintains till today. In 2005, Abdul Haq, the head of ETIM after Mehsum, was reportedly inducted as a member of the Al-Qaeda’s ‘Shura Council’. On November 16, 2008, in an incident outlining the close association between the ETIM and the Al-Qaeda, a self-proclaimed Al-Qaeda spokesperson allegedly released a statement declaring the appointment of a certain “Abdul Haq Turkistani” by Bin Laden as the head for two organisations – “Al-Qaeda in China” (in particular, Xinjiang) and “Hizbul Islam Li-Turkistan” (Turkistan Islamic Party or TIP).^v



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Reportedly since the late 1990s, at least 200-1000plus ETIM operatives have received training in the Af-Pak border areas, including camps in Mazar-I-Sharif, Kunduz, Vardak, Kandahar, Herat and other areas in Afghanistan. Al Qaeda has also over time issued statements of solidarity towards the cause of the Uighur Muslims. In addition, Bin Laden apparently asked the ETIM leadership to broaden their area of operation from only Xinjiang to an increased presence in Central Asia, mainly Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. This saw the emergence of an association between the ETIM and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) & the Islamic Jihad Union (IJU). Together, the groups managed to orchestrate attacks against Chinese targets in Central Asia.^{vi}

Over time the group has also been involved in closer relations with a number of jihadi groups in Pakistan, which has served as a “liaison and logistics hub” for the Uighur groups. Post 2006, a number of ETIM militants along with IMU and IJU members have been known to be seeking refuge in the Mirali region, Ghulam Khan and Miranshah areas of North Waziristan in FATA, Pakistan. Experts and related intelligence have suggested that while the IJU offers protection to ETIM, the “larger umbrella of protection” for both the IJU and ETIM is provided by the Tehreek-e-Taliban (TTP).^{vii}

Implications for Xinjiang and the Uighur groups post-drawdown

The withdrawal of the U.S.-NATO forces from Afghanistan is likely to pose a serious concern regarding the operation of Uighur militant groups in the areas along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, as there may be a spike in the movement of ideologies and militants in and out of Xinjiang, with Afghanistan established as a safer “safe haven”. Instability in Afghanistan would also result in an increase in the production of opium and consequently, an increase in drug trafficking into China through Xinjiang. In fact, the situation has already been worsening in the recent years with the Xinjiang police detecting at least 15 cases related to drug trafficking from Afghanistan in 2010 alone. According to the Chinese academics, Afghanistan poses “the most serious threat from outside”, which has had and will continue to have a “strong influence on the security situation in Xinjiang.”^{viii}



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Al Qaeda, having already announced the formation of its regional branch, the Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), and in order to establish regional supremacy, aided by its historical ties with the ETIM, thus could very well involve itself in Xinjiang. At the same time, the Islamic State has also expressed interest in establishing its presence in Central Asia, and the IMU's leader, Usmon Ghazi, has sworn allegiance to Baghdadi in September 2014.^{ix} That comes on the back of a number of TTP's commanders also having pledged allegiance to the IS. Thus, with Al Qaeda, TTP & IMU and consequently, the Islamic State, all having ties to the ETIM, Xinjiang may well be susceptible to coming under the influence of a number of these actors.

Hence, the Xinjiang issue vis-à-vis the impending departure of the coalition forces from Afghanistan, is of great concern to Beijing. This is indicated in China's insistence on including the issue as part of its bilateral security arrangements with both Pakistan and the United States. A document describing China-Pakistan bilateral relations states that "Pakistan firmly supports China's position on Xinjiang", despite the fact that the Uighur population is Muslim and Pakistan is an Islamic republic. A corresponding U.S.-China document describes the Xinjiang conflict as a "prominent issue" in the U.S.-China bilateral relations.^x

However, as has been pointed out earlier, the majority of the population in Xinjiang does not wish for an armed struggle for independence, and hence curtailing the influx of extremist ideologies into Xinjiang is very much possible. The onus for that lies with the Chinese government, that must roll back its military and colonial control of Xinjiang, along with a prompt and fair redressing of the Uighur population's social, religious and economic grievances.

(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 [CAPS])

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ⁱ David Sterman (comp.), "ISIS Reportedly Kills Afghan Taliban Commander", *The South Asia Daily, Foreign Policy*, February 2, 2015, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/02/02/isis-reportedly-kills-afghan-taliban-commander-modi-to-visit-china-pakistan-tests-cruise-missile/>, accessed on February 5, 2015.

ⁱⁱ J. Todd Reed and Diana Raschke, *The ETIM: China's Islamic Militants and the Global Terrorist Threat*, (Santa Barbara, California: Praeger, 2010), pp. 17-35.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v Rohan Gunaratna, Arabinda Acharya and Wang Pengxin, *Ethnic Identity and National Conflicy in China*, (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 54-58.

^{vi} Ibid.

^{vii} Ibid. pp. 61-68.

^{viii} Zhao Huasheng, "China and Afghanistan: China's Interests, Stances and Perspectives", A Report of the CSIS Russia and Eurasia Program, Center for Strategic and International Studies, March 2012, p. 11-12.

^{ix} Shawn Snow, "ISIS looks for a foothold in Central Asia", *The Diplomat*, January 18, 2015, <http://thediplomat.com/2015/01/isis-looks-for-foothold-in-central-asia/>, accessed on January 29, 2015.

^x Rajan Menon, "When America Leaves Asia After the Afghan War", *The American Interest*, Vol. 7 No. 5, April 5, 2013, <http://www.the-american-interest.com/2012/04/05/when-america-leaves-asia-after-the-afghan-war/>, accessed on January 30, 2015.