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The Beijing Olympics and China's Militant Groups

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AS CHINA prepares to host the 2008 Beijing Olympics, there are concerns that international terrorists, as well as local minority militant groups mainly located in the Xinjiang region, will seize the opportunity to mount attacks or small-scale skirmishes. The Olympics would also be an ideal event for terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda to display their intent and capability in full view of the international media and fuel their cause with the oxygen of publicity. There is a precedent: the 1972 Munich Olympics.

The Chinese authorities are not taking any chances. On 11 June 2007, the central bank, the People's Bank of China, issued stringent rules to clamp down on terrorism financing by strengthening state control over the banking system. Local banks and financial institutions are required to report suspicious transactions promptly, and alert the authorities to suspicious funds movement and assets transactions that could be linked to terrorist activity. The financial regulator is ensuring compliance of the new rules by imposing a wide range of penalties that include revoking an institution's operating licence.

Uighur Militant Groups

Of particular concern to the authorities is the development of minority militant Uighur groups in the Xinjiang region, in particular, the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), which is one of the strongest Uighur militant groups with alleged links to Al Qaeda. The Chinese authorities have been vigilant and clamped down hard on the militant Uighur groups to prevent their aggressive pursuit of an independent Islamic state in China. ETIM however continues to survive despite previous clampdowns and arrests.

In January 2007, Chinese police raided an ETIM training camp on the Pamirs plateau, close to the Afghan and Pakistani borders. They managed to seize 22 hand grenades and over 1,500 grenades still in the making after a fierce gun battle. It was reported that one policeman was killed and another injured. Police also captured 17 terrorists. Previous raids and crackdowns by coalition forces in Afghanistan and Pakistan had also yielded a huge weapons cache of thousands of hand grenades, guns, swords, knives, detonators and explosives. However, the most significant discovery was of evidence indicating ETIM's direct linkage with Al Qaeda.

The Al Qaeda linkage with the ETIM came under the spotlight again in January this year with the release of a 32-minute video, with specific references to making China a Jihad zone. The video comprises two parts. In the first half of the video, a considerable amount of time is dedicated to legitimising the use of jihad in Eastern Turkestan. Interestingly, the video encourages all jihadis who are keen to learn about the Eastern Turkestan region to refer to a "World Islamic Resistance Book".

In the second half of the video, ETIM showcases its capability with an impressive array of weaponry and explosives, including a demonstration on vehicle bombings. The video emphasises jihad is the duty of every Muslim in East Turkestan and that all jihadis should first undergo rigorous training to prepare for battle in Eastern Turkestan. The video concludes with an appeal to Uighur Muslims to revolt against state authorities who have neglected their needs. There is also a call for the wider Uighur community to seize key events as platforms to voice their grievances.

Understanding Uighur grievances

The authorities' inattentiveness to the Uighur community's needs could be due to an inaccurate understanding of the nature and scale of the problem, thus resulting in counterproductive solutions when managing Uighur grievances. Amnesty International has argued that, besides political control on their religion and culture, China's ethnic Uighur minority community remains victims of widespread abuses and repression by the non-Muslim Han Chinese immigrants to the region.

Over time however, such repressions and abuses have important implications in terms of defining how the Uighurs decide to deal with their grievances. Presently, the vast majority of Uighurs are moderate, peace-loving Muslims who have no inclination towards violence. What they hope is for the authorities to lift the political restrictions on religious worship and cultural expression; only a very small segment of Uighurs are militants or support the militant Islamist Uighur groups. However, this small pool is growing as a result of exacerbating resentment. What is needed is not more repression but appropriate policies to prevent this pool of militant Uighur groups from expanding their support base among the wider Uighur diaspora within China and abroad.

The potential exists for the Uighur grievances in Xinjiang to escalate. Militant groups in Xinjiang, abetted by Al Qaeda, may become determined to engage in a violent, bloody struggle against the authorities. The situation in Xinjiang could mirror ethnic conflicts in other parts of the world wherein inappropriate military and non-military approaches worsened the conflict by depriving minority groups of their freedom in religious and cultural expressions.

The Larger Question

The larger question is whether the ETIM will be capable of posing a credible threat to the Chinese authorities in the lead up to the Beijing Olympics? The sheer quantity of explosive materials gathered at the recent raid in January 2007, coupled with the fact that a fierce gun battle ensued thereafter with the capture of 17 alleged terrorists, is indicative of the ETIM as a credible threat. Furthermore, ETIM's linkage with Al-Qaeda accentuates the group's potential to become a major force. That said however, the ETIM does face two major stumbling blocks. First, the group faces a serious logistical impediment. It is virtually impossible to covertly transport weaponry and explosives thousands of kilometers from Xinjiang province to Beijing in a populous country like China amidst tight security. Secondly, authorities have been swift in dismantling the terrorist outfit and the discovery of the training facility in the mountains of Pamirs plateau, south Xinjiang, was a severe blow to the militants. Nonetheless, increased attacks within Xinjiang Province are possible as more than 1,000 ETIM members have been trained with Al Qaeda.

Self-Radicalization

More importantly, the authorities should safeguard the interests and needs of thousands of Uighur migrants who have moved to Beijing and other cities in China. Many Uighurs work as artists, entrepreneurs, food peddlers, students and intellectuals in Beijing, and are concentrated in Ganjiakou and Weigongcun, also known as "Xinjiang Village". The PRC authorities can be expected to act to prevent Islamist radicals from radicalizing the Uighurs in Beijing and minimize any motivation for the

Uighurs to self-radicalize. If Muslim Uighurs are deprived of legitimate sources of religious knowledge, they may seek Islamic knowledge on the Internet where virulent Islamist ideas are rampant and be inspired to challenge the state.

Although the Internet is heavily censored in China, thus making it difficult for radical Islamist websites to be received, this is not a fool-proof safeguard against preventing radical Islamist ideas from creeping in. It is difficult to police the Net. The fact that there are hundreds of radical Islamist websites out there makes it increasingly problematic. Such self-radicalized individuals are more difficult to detect as they are not aligned with established militant groups. The authorities are less likely to track down these individuals as they are unable to monitor group communications and behaviour.

It is critical for the Chinese authorities to manage Uighur and other minority grievances sensitively. The spread of Islamist militancy and the ease in which it grafts on existing conflicts between Muslim minority groups and non-Muslim states have been witnessed in several countries. Hence, the potential for the Uighur conflict to radicalize further is something that must not be taken lightly, especially in the run-up to the 2008 Olympics.

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