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Domestic Security in China: The Xinjiang Quagmire

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Synopsis

Enhancement of domestic security spending may not be the panacea that Beijing is looking for to stabilise its restive Xinjiang province. There is a need for a calibrated response with due sensitivity to Uighur identity and concerns.

Commentary

DURING THE annual National Peoples' Congress last week, Beijing announced an 11% increase in spending on domestic security. At US\$ 111 billion, this is higher than China's defence budget, making it one of the few in the world to spend more on internal security than on defence. The increase comes amidst continuing tensions in Tibet and in the wake of an armed attack in Xinjiang on 28 February 2012.

However, it is unrealistic to expect that a stronger security apparatus could, on its own, stem the bouts of violence in the region, while underlying issues remain unaddressed. The February 2012 incident in Kashgar, in which a group of Uighur armed with knives ran headlong into a crowd and killed 13 people, characterises the type of violence that has haunted Xinjiang in recent years - sporadic, but intense. However, with the Chinese media blackout, and Uighur activist organisations strongly contesting all official accounts of events, the question of what underlying problems these attacks reflect has become increasingly prone to wild guesses.

Beijing's Policies: Oppressive or Misunderstood?

Beijing's approach to Xinjiang has always been cited as a major source of discontent leading to several of the violent attacks in the past. Chinese policies have been seen to be assimilative at any cost, marginalising the Uighur vis-à-vis the Han Chinese and threatening the survivability of the entire community. This has been further exacerbated by the government's overreaction and lack of restraint in dealing with protests and uprisings by the Uighur.

However, it would be unfair to castigate all of Beijing's policies as leading to cultural, ethnic or religious persecution. The main issue is not with policies per se, but lack of overall transparency, the official rhetoric concerning the grievances that underlie the protests and an overwhelmingly violent response to them by the state.

The priority that the Chinese government places on economic development and the tools that it employs to

ensure national stability are seen to be trampling the identity - cultural, religious and ethnic - of Uighur as a minority community. This has been aggravated by Beijing lumping extremist ideology together with particular religious practices, cracking down on both at the same time. Attempts to voice discontent are construed as anti-state actions, and the ensuing military action is often highly disproportionate.

Finding the truth in Xinjiang

The Xinjiang situation is also characterised by a lack of facts. Accounts of events come mainly from two sources: state-sponsored media and overseas Uighur activists who claim to have sources within the region. Reporting by these two entities however cannot be independently verified, due to China's ban on the presence of outside media in the region. Therefore, it has become difficult to determine where facts end and embellishment begins.

State media attributes the incidents to rioters or terrorists belonging to the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) also going by the name Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP). Beijing also accuses overseas Uighur organisations especially the World Uighur Congress for inciting unrests in Xinjiang. Uighur activist groups however, claim that the protests are acts of the local Uighur lashing out at Beijing's "systematic oppression". These incidents nevertheless, are being exploited to garner international support for resisting what is being termed as "state oppression" in Xinjiang. As the facts continue to be obfuscated, it has become difficult to distinguish protests against specific grievances by local Uighur from organised acts of terrorism.

Scaling the Terrorist Threat

The fact that China faces a terrorist threat cannot be disputed. This threat has both domestic roots and transnational linkages. But Beijing's attempts to project it as a credible national security threat, thereby justifying hard counter-measures, lacks legitimacy due to a transparency deficit and conflation of the issues at the local level. This stems from Beijing's propensity to label any or all challenges to its authority anywhere in the country as the outcome of "three evils" - splitism, separatism and terrorism.

Though the terrorist threat to China is real, it is of limited consequence. The ETIM exists and operates mostly outside China – mainly in Pakistan. The group has very limited resources and personnel and scant support in Xinjiang, to be a credible threat to China on its own. Groups like the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and even Al Qaeda support the cause of ETIM. But these groups have priorities and problems of their own apart from the Xinjiang issue. There is no indication that any of the overseas Uighur organisations is inclined or capable to carry out terrorist attacks in China.

This makes a strong case for Beijing to be able to distinguish between protests against specific grievances which can be easily resolved and acts of terrorism, especially those with external connections. Events between 2009 (the Syringe attacks and riots) and February 2012 reflect anguish and discontent at a local scale which could have been dealt with and resolved in a more calibrated manner.

It is important to understand that the Xinjiang issue could be transforming from a separatist struggle to one which is seeking an equitable stake in development and economic prosperity, and perhaps to preserve native identities. Beijing's propensity to see the discontent as a separatist issue can lead the Uighur to perceive government response as demonic and extreme.

Fortunately for China, the situation in Xinjiang is not and does not portend to be a problem of massive proportions. However the best way for the government to establish enduring peace is to understand and empathise with Uighur identity and associated concerns. National or social stability is mostly cultivated, rather than enforced. Beijing would do well to temper its actions with appropriate sensitivity to overall issues involved rather than attempt to crush all dissent with mere force.

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