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# RSIS COMMENTARIES

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## **China's Xinjiang Predicament: Time to Look Out of the Box**

By Nodirbek Soliyev

### **Synopsis**

*In spite of China's sustained law enforcement response, its Xinjiang province continues to experience sporadic outbreaks of violence. The recent attacks in Xinjiang and Beijing question whether China's current approach is the most effective one to bring lasting peace to the province.*

### **Commentary**

THE BLOODY clash between ethnic Uighurs and the Chinese police that took place on 15 December 2013 in Xinjiang reflects a reality that rising China faces today. It was the fourth outbreak of such violence that has flared in Xinjiang since April 2013 in which at least 84 people have been killed and 25 others injured.

The Chinese government's reaction to the incident was as usual: Beijing called it a "terrorist" attack blaming a "violent terrorist gang" in Xinjiang for it, and scaled up security measures to stabilise the region. However, enhanced security measures alone cannot realistically be expected to curb violence in the region, especially when social and economic discontent of its Uighur minority remains unresolved.

### **Uighur militancy in a new phase?**

China often claims the attacks in Xinjiang, its Muslim-dominated western province, to be the work of terrorists and tends to associate such violence, with few exceptions, with the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM). However, it has not shown any conclusive evidence to substantiate these claims. A number of factors challenge the official Chinese claim on this significant development.

There are reports that numbers of Uighur radicals have travelled to Syria to participate in anti-Assad "jihad" since 2012. However, any fighting experience alongside some of the most battle-hardened groups has not been reflected in the recent attacks in Xinjiang. There were no sophisticated explosives used in the attacks, and the assailants did not even possess guns. The attacks were carried out with knives, axes and other primitive weapons. Tactics used by assailants include mainly stabbing with knives and arson. The attacks have targeted police, government installations, and local Han workers that symbolise Beijing's authority. Target assessment shows that Uighurs have specific grievances against Beijing's policies.

### **Social and economic grievances of the Uighurs**

Xinjiang's crisis is a result of growing discontent among Uighur people that was fuelled by China's domestic

policy in the region. Many of the Uighurs have grievances that are driven by ethnic, religious and cultural factors.

Over decades, government-sponsored immigration of Hans into the province has been a central part of China's policy in Xinjiang. Beijing portrays this policy as intended to stimulate economic development and forge social cohesion but it has also been found to be counter-productive. The policy has altered the demographic make-up of the province reducing the Uighurs into a minority in Xinjiang. In 1940 Uighurs comprised over 80 percent of the population, while today, there are around nine million ethnic Uighurs who make up about 46 percent of the province's population; the rest are mainly Han Chinese who constitute about 39 percent.

To improve its infrastructure and entice Uighurs with the opportunity of economic prosperity, the Chinese authority announced a new ambitious plan in 2010. This was portrayed by China as a "balanced approach policy" towards Xinjiang, giving priority to economic development to modernise the region by 2015. It has funded enormous economic development projects in Xinjiang, including the building of schools, hospitals and the construction of earthquake-proof houses.

However, economic development without a comprehensive political and social approach to allay the fears of the Uighurs proved to be equally counter-productive. The local Han population has benefited from these economic projects but the Uighurs feel left out. Private employers in Xinjiang are more inclined to hire Han Chinese workers than local Uighurs who are disadvantaged by language and technical skills. These measures have increased socio-economic imbalance between Uighurs and Hans and aggravated the discontent among local Uighurs.

Uighur leaders exiled in the West blame the Chinese authority for lack of religious freedom. For example public personnel are said to be prohibited from fasting during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. Uighurs regard their religion as a key foundation of their distinct cultural identity.

### **Terrorists exploiting the local grievances?**

That the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) poses a significant threat to China's stability is incontestable. The ETIM, based in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), has managed to survive even during the US-led coalition forces antiterrorism campaign in Afghanistan since October 2001. However, it is hard for the Uighur militants outside China to slip into the mainland to trigger any unrest at home due to the high security measures along its borders since 2009.

Since the July 2009 inter-ethnic clashes between local Uighur and Han people that left nearly 197 dead and 1,700 injured most of whom were ethnic Hans, China has increased its security presence in the province. The police has conducted widespread house-to-house searches and made hundreds of arrests as part of the counter-measures against what it projects as "three evils" – terrorism, extremism and separatism. Currently, there are more than 40,000 closed-circuit television cameras, roughly 600 police boxes and 756 traffic police checkpoints that operate 24 hour in Urumqi, the capital of Xinjiang.

In the process of ensuring security in key areas, China has also suppressed peaceful protests, causing a significant portion of the Uighur youth to turn to militancy. Militant groups such as the ETIM will easily exploit the grievances of the Uighurs. The 28 October 2013 suicide attack in Beijing's Tiananmen Square is an example. The ETIM recruited local Uighurs – a 33-year-old man, his wife and 70-year-old mother who were not battle-trained militants – to carry out the attack. The attack killed five people including the three of them and injured at least 38 others.

For lasting peace and stability China needs to take an enlightened approach to address the root causes of ethnic tensions in Xinjiang. Violence in Xinjiang has often been in protest against Beijing's policy towards the Uighurs and in defence of their ancestral lands from the massive influx of inhabitants from outside. Ethnic Uighurs conceive of themselves as a diminishing population. They insist on preservation of the cultural and social distinctiveness of their society. The core demand of Uighurs has been demographic and cultural "non-interference".

For Uighurs, safeguarding their ethnic identity is much more important than any promised economic development. To reduce persistent discontent among local Uighur people, China needs to think out of the box and address these issues.

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