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Anti-Chinese Protests in Turkey: Relations with China Under Test

By James M. Dorsey

Synopsis

Protests in Turkey against alleged repression of Muslim Uighurs in Xinjiang have put China's sensitive relationships with the Muslim world to the test. The protests raise the spectre of China's restrictive policy towards the Uighurs muddying relations with other Muslim nations as well.

Commentary

CHINA AND TURKEY had high hopes when Prime Minister Wen Jiabao on a 2010 visit to Ankara negotiated a strategic partnership, that envisioned Turkey helping China quell a simmering insurgency in its north-western autonomous region of Xinjiang.

The deal, a year after then Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan accused China of genocide in Xinjiang, involved a halt to Turkish support for Uighur secessionist groups. It promised mutual economic benefit and Turkish leverage at both ends of the Silk Road Economic Belt that Beijing hopes to revive across the Eurasian land mass. Together with the Maritime Silk Road in what Beijing calls the "One Belt One Road" project, this comprises a network of roads, railways, ports and pipeline that China expects will link it to the Middle East and Europe via Central, Southeast and South Asia.

High hopes

In recognition of the fact that Uighurs historically have always looked West towards their Turkic cousins rather than East at the Han Chinese, China encouraged Turkey to invest in Xinjiang on preferential terms in the hope that greater Turkish influence would dampen nationalist sentiment in the region that has been on the rise since the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests. Chinese expectations of Turkey's potentially moderating influence were also reflected in China's decision to send religious students to Turkey rather than to Islamic centres of learning in the Arab world.

Close relations were further highlighted by Ankara considering the acquisition of a Chinese surface-to-air missile system and Turkey becoming the first country in which a Chinese bank would operate an overseas business with the acquisition of Tekstilbank by Industrial and Commercial Bank of China, the world's largest bank.

China had hoped that by enlisting Turkey it would be able to counter US support for Uighur activists that it viewed as an effort to create problems for Beijing in its own backyard. Chinese concerns have since been heightened by the fact that an estimated 300 Chinese Muslims have joined the Islamic

State (IS) in Syria whose leader, Abu Bakr Al Baghdadi, described China as one of the worst violators of Muslim rights.

War of words

Those hopes now threaten to be mired in a war of words between Beijing and Ankara sparked by Uighur nationalist protests against Chinese discrimination, including a ban on fasting during Ramadan and the forced opening of restaurants during daytime fasting hours.

The ban was introduced at the tail end of a failed year-long government campaign against what it termed "terrorism" and "illegal religious activity" that involved strict controls of sermons in mosques, closure of a number of Islamic schools and restrictions on traditional dress.

Nationalist Turks see the ban that applies to government employees, students and teachers – a significant segment of the Uighur population -- as the latest of a series of restrictive measures aimed at weakening Uighur identity and religiosity. Chinese authorities have defined illegal religious activity among others as refusing to shake a woman's hand; rejection of inter-ethnic marriage; boycotting government social programmes, and closing restaurants during Ramadan. Women's headscarves and beards are viewed with suspicion.

The measures have also sparked protests in Malaysia and Cairo. The 57-nation Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) expressed concern and called on Beijing to respect Uighurs' religious rights. The Qatar-backed International Union of Muslim Scholars headed by prominent Islamic scholar Sheikh Yousef al-Qaradawi put out a similar, more strongly worded statement.

Turkish passions were fuelled by sensationalist reports in pro-government media of a massacre of Uighurs while fasting and others being forced to consume alcohol. These came amid domestic Turkish politicking as Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu sought to forge a coalition government in the wake of last month's parliamentary election that failed to produce an absolute majority for the ruling Justice and Democracy Party (AKP).

A pro-government newspaper, catering to nationalist sentiment, published a bloodied map of Xinjiang as part of its coverage of a visit to Beijing by a delegation from the left-wing Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), the first pro-Kurdish party to be represented in the Turkish parliament. The newspaper said the HDP had gone ahead with the visit "despite the East Turkestan torture," a reference to Xinjiang by its Uighur and Turkic name.

Chinese policy as core driver of unrest

In response, Chinese officials have revived accusations that Turkey is encouraging Uighur radicalism. Tong Bishan of the Chinese public security ministry's Criminal Investigation Department recently told foreign correspondents that Turkish diplomats in South-east Asia had facilitated passage of hundreds of Uighurs to Turkey from where they were being sold to IS as "cannon fodder".

Tong was referring to the issuing of Turkish passports to 173 Uighur refugees in Thailand to prevent their return to China. The issue of Turkish passports has however become sensitive after the perpetrators of an attack last year at a train station in Kunming in Yunnan province in which 33 people were killed, were found to have been travelling on Turkish documents.

China's focus on external forces fuelling unrest in Xinjiang was however called into a question by a clash with police last month in the ancient city of Kashgar in which 28 people died. The clash's background suggested that Chinese policy rather than Islamist ideology may be a core driver fuelling nationalist violence.

The attackers were reportedly members of one family whose land had been confiscated and given to a Han Chinese. Impoverished, the family turned to religion, only to be tackled by authorities who forced female members to bare their hair and males to shave their beards.

The government, rather than heed warnings of the impact of Chinese policies, has sought to silence its critics. Uighur scholar Ilham Tohti warned in a lengthy article published after he was arrested last

year that because Chinese policies “do not address deep-seated problems, we cannot afford to be sanguine about Xinjiang’s future, nor can we be certain that violence will not erupt again”.

Tohti’s warning appears to be something that China accepts as a principle to counter jihadism anywhere but in Xinjiang. In a recent debate on US-Chinese cooperation in the Middle East, Yang Jiemian, a senior fellow at Shanghai Institutes for International Studies, argued that “tackling root causes” was the key to combatting extremism but that “China has other ways” that include a “strong medicine with side effects”.

It is the strong medicine that threatens to complicate China’s relations with key players in the Muslim world, as seen in the protests by the OIC and global Islamic leaders as well as in countries such as Malaysia and Egypt.

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