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Growing Uighur Militancy: Challenges for China

By Nodirbek Soliev

Synopsis

With the emergence of a new generation of Uighur militants drawn to conflict in the Middle East, there has been a shift in the threat landscape of China. Chinese investments and citizens in conflict-ridden countries such as Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iraq may become a potential target for the current transnational network of Uighur militants.

Commentary

THE EXECUTION of a Chinese hostage identified as Fan Jinghui, a freelance consultant from Beijing, by ISIS in Syria in November 2015 has sent a clear message to the Chinese government of the risks of investing in unstable areas. Although this has been the first and so far only known case of deliberate killing of a non-combatant Chinese citizen by jihadist groups in the Middle Eastern theatre, it is unlikely to be the last.

In recent months, Uighur jihadists, who have been trained, armed and sheltered by Al Qaeda, the Taliban and ISIS in the Af-Pak and the Middle East regions, have shown their efforts and intentions to strike at China's overseas interests. To meet its growing demand for critical energy and mineral resources, China through its state-owned enterprises has been investing or promised to invest heavily in a number of conflict-affected countries such as Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iraq. As these countries' security remains fragile, lacking the capacity to provide sufficient security, Chinese investment projects and citizens are likely to become easy targets for Uighur militants operating in or near these areas.

Uighur militancy in a new phase

The ongoing turmoil in Syria and Iraq has been a key factor behind the expansion of Uighur militancy from China and the Afghanistan-Pakistan region to the Middle East. As such, the terrorist threat to China has become transnational and multi-faceted. At present, nearly 1,000 Uighur fighters and their family members from China's Xinjiang province have joined both Al Qaeda's Syrian affiliate al-Nusra Front and its rival ISIS in the Middle East.

Afghanistan, on the other hand, remains a traditional battlefield of the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP)/the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) which is the most prominent Uighur group with close links to Al Qaeda and the Taliban. TIP is believed to have approximately 300-500 militants in Afghanistan. There has been no evidence to suggest that ISIS has any Uighur members in Afghanistan.

While the majority of Uighur fighters in the Middle East have joined the TIP's Syrian branch known as Turkistan Islamic Party in the Levant (TIP-L), a few hundred Uighurs appear to have aligned with ISIS. TIP-L as a close ally of al Nusra Front is now part of "*Jaish al Fatah*" ('Army of Conquest'), the new coalition of jihadists which has been fighting against the Syrian government force in Syria's northern Aleppo and Idlib provinces since March 2015.

Economic interests under TIP Threat

TIP militants have been strengthened by their experience of fighting against government and coalition forces in Afghanistan and the Middle East. They have gained significant advances in tactics and strategy as a result of their ideological and operational engagement with the Taliban, Al Qaeda, and al-Nusra Front.

Since its creation in 1997, TIP's ultimate goal has been the establishment of an independent Islamic state by the name of 'East Turkistan' in Xinjiang. Undoubtedly, TIP has perpetrated several acts of violence across China operating from the Af-Pak region. However, currently, such organised entities pose only a limited threat to China's domestic security because they lack widespread support and high security measures at borders prevent their entry from overseas.

A dearth of opportunities to fight at home against China seems to make Uighur militants overseas turn to targeting Chinese economic interests in various conflict-ridden areas in which they are operating. In August 2015, a propaganda video issued by TIP featured Uighur militants ambushing vehicles carrying local security personnel of Chinese state-owned copper mine "Mes Aynak" in Afghanistan's Logar province, close to the capital Kabul.

The Metallurgical Group of China (MCC) has a USD 3 billion deal with the Afghan government to mine and process copper from Mes Aynak, the largest undeveloped copper field in the world. Given the drawdown of the Western forces in Afghanistan, the threat from TIP to any prospective Chinese infrastructure projects in Afghanistan and Pakistan is likely to grow.

Uighur's Global jihad rhetoric

In recent years, TIP's propaganda has adopted global jihad rhetoric to publicise the Uighur minority cause and call for violence against China's global interests. In July 2015, TIP commended al-Shabaab, Al Qaeda's branch in Somalia, when al-Shabaab's car bomb attack on a hotel in the capital Mogadishu damaged the Chinese embassy nearby, killing at least one embassy staff member and injured three others. Although the strike on the Chinese embassy appeared to be unintentional, TIP claimed that it was a "practical response to the Chinese aggression" in Xinjiang and encouraged al-Shabaab to carry out more of such attacks.

The safety of the growing Chinese investment and workers in Iraq is also under threat. Beijing has heavily invested in Iraq's petroleum sector. In 2014, Iraq was China's fifth largest oil exporter. Chinese companies own five oilfields, four of which are located in the southern and one in the central parts of Iraq. Moreover, there are more than 10,000 Chinese workers in Iraq, mostly with Chinese oil companies.

Although Chinese and Iraqi officials expressed their confidence that oilfields in the southern regions are "completely safe", the possibility of ISIS, which now controls large swathes of northwest of Iraq, striking major oilfields in the south cannot be ruled out. Uighur fighters who appeared in the ISIS propaganda video in August 2015 claimed that they are "fully aware of how Uyghurs are being oppressed" in China, Thailand and elsewhere and warned that they will target China wherever possible.

Need for Better Response

The protection of its overseas economic interests is crucial for a rising China. Although Chinese state-owned enterprises and workers based in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iraq have been protected primarily by local military and police, these countries' domestic security remains volatile and inadequate.

Given the capacity and intentions of the current transnational network of Uighur militants, the threats to Chinese investment and citizens in these countries are expected to increase. China's new anti-terrorism law that was enacted on 27 December 2015 has paved the way for Beijing to deploy its military for overseas counter-terrorism purposes.

To effectively deal with evolving risks, China now needs to take pre-emptive measures and recalibrate its responses within the framework of its longstanding non-interference foreign policy. In the long run, there is a need to develop comprehensive counter-radicalisation and community engagement strategies, relying less on hard power and more on winning "hearts and minds" of its Uighur minority community in Xinjiang.

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