

RSIS Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical and contemporary issues. The authors' views are their own and do not represent the official position of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced with prior permission from RSIS and due credit to the author(s) and RSIS. Please email to Editor RSIS Commentary at RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg.

China's International Terrorist Problem

By Raffaello Pantucci

SYNOPSIS

The pattern of terrorist attacks in Pakistan shows that it is those motivated by separatist or other political motivations – and not jihadist ones – that are currently the ones that pose the most serious threats to Chinese interests around the world.

COMMENTARY

An [attack on a convoy of Chinese workers](#) in Gwadar highlights the persistent threat posed to Chinese nationals in Pakistan, home of the supposed jewel in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI): the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The fact that the attack [was claimed by Baluchi separatists](#) highlights a curiosity about the threat China faces. For all their rhetoric, jihadist groups do not prioritise Chinese interests and nationals when they commit atrocities.

China's Uyghur Concerns

In China's security outlook, the terrorist group most frequently referred to by the Chinese authorities is the Uyghur-associated militant group, the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM). The group has been the source of some controversy, with the United States [denying its existence](#) as a group notwithstanding its agreement to have it [included in the roster](#) of proscribed terrorist organisations in the wake of the September 11 attacks on America, and [reports of the US military targeting it in Afghanistan](#).

Whatever one believes about ETIM's existence, there is no doubt that a militant group of Uyghurs exists, based mostly in [northern Syria](#) and [Afghanistan](#), where they operate and release propaganda materials under the name of the Turkestan Islamic Party (TIP). But it has been a very long time since their last attack against China or Chinese

interests. Hints have been dropped of their links to [instances of violence in Pakistan](#) and [elsewhere](#), but the group has not claimed responsibility for them.

Rather, the TIP seems to appear as an active part of the jihadi milieu focused on local adversaries in Syria especially; their most recent reports highlight fighters dying in attacks on Russian targets. Notwithstanding the abuse suffered by its people within China, and its clear dislike for Beijing that is apparent from their propaganda, it does not appear focused on attacking China.

There are a number of possible reasons for this. It could be that the group lacks the capability. It could also be that the group believes that attacking Chinese civilian targets might undermine the global sympathy for the Uyghur cause. It could also be that they are kept in check by the security pressure against them. But no security blanket is perfect, and this is a group that has not done anything publicly injurious against Chinese interests in a long time.

Others that Carry the Anti-China Banner

This is also not to say that the Uyghur cause has not been held up by others. Most prominently, the Islamic State of Khorasan Province (ISKP), an Afghan affiliate of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), has [published considerable propaganda](#) against Chinese interests, and is supportive of the Uyghur cause and angry at the Taliban for working with China.

This has attracted a lot of attention though not many attacks. A [prominent attack in December 2022 against a Chinese hotel](#) in Kabul came amidst an ISKP campaign against the foreign powers supporting the Taliban – prominent attacks targeting [Russian](#), [Pakistani](#) and [Iranian](#) interests were also made at around the same time.

And this was at a moment when Kabul (and Afghanistan more generally) was a target-rich environment of Chinese nationals and interests. Concerned about the security of its citizens, the Chinese Embassy has [issued repeated warnings](#) advising its nationals visiting Afghanistan to register and not go too far off the beaten track.

Across the border in Pakistan, there have been frequent attacks on Chinese nationals, but the majority have been by Baluchi or Sindhi separatists. Some very lethal attacks, like the one in July 2021 on a bus load of Chinese engineers in Dasu that killed nine of them, was traced back to elements [linked to the Tehreek e Taliban Pakistan \(TTP\)](#), which suggested a change in their targeting pattern. This shift in focus towards China is of great concern but has not led to a concerted campaign by the TTP yet.

The TTP is certainly jihadist but has separatist motivations as well – seeking to expel the Pakistani state from the tribal regions of the country. In other words, the motivations of many of the movements targeting Chinese interests in Pakistan appear driven by local issues rather than by support for the Uyghur cause or some wider jihadist vision.

Beyond South Asia

Looking further afield to Southeast Asia, [jihadist groups have started to refer](#) to China

more frequently in their statements. But these were often done within the same terms that local tensions with ethnic Chinese communities were mentioned. While opposition to the BRI or the alleged mistreatment of Uyghurs in Xinjiang feature in their rhetoric sometimes, they seem to be added on rather than as discrete issues to attract local support and attention.

In Africa, Chinese nationals have also found themselves the targets of militant groups, but these were often kidnap for ransom situations. The killing of nine Chinese miners in Central African Republic in March 2023 was blamed locally on rival groups, although rumours circulating widely, seemingly [supported by some evidence](#) from the ground, suggested that it was in fact Russian mercenaries that might have been responsible.

While the Somali al Qaeda-linked jihadi group al Shabaab has made reference to China and the Uyghur cause occasionally, [including once striking](#) at the Chinese Embassy in Mogadishu, the attack was an incidental target. The group has not focused its attention on attacking Chinese targets.

In summary, there is not a lot of evidence so far that jihadist groups have been targeting China in a constant and focused way. Instead, China appears to be attracting the ire of local separatist groups more frequently.

Conclusion

Of course, there are analytical problems with this conclusion. Attacks alone are a bad metric for assessing terrorist groups and their threat and capability. It is hard to know whether a quiet period is a result of choice, response of security forces or something else.

More broadly, it is observable that attacks by jihadist groups like ISIS and al Qaeda are [down except in Africa where they are thriving](#). But it is very difficult to know how much of this is due to either group playing a strategic long game, adopting different approaches for different regions, or the result of effective deterrence by the security forces ranged against them.

But it is striking to note that in China's international terrorist problem, the primary opponents it faces are secular ethno-separatists, who draw their strength in having Chinese interests caught between the state (whom they are working with) and unhappy locals who see China as an adversary by default.

Given the extensive reach of the BRI where China's interests will continue to develop, the threat profile against China is likely to grow; seemingly not driven by jihadists or Uyghur militants, but by angry locals who see China as a force supporting the enemy in their capital cities.

Raffaello Pantucci is a Senior Fellow in the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (ICPVTR) at S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore.

T: +65 6790 6982 | E: rsispublications@ntu.edu.sg | W: www.rsis.edu.sg