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Ethnic Violence in China: Time for a Change in Beijing's Approach?

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The recent outbreak of rioting in China's Xingjiang province has exposed the long-simmering tension in the Muslim-majority region engendered by Beijing's policy of integration and assimilation. China needs to beware of pushing disgruntled Uighurs into the arms of Al Qaeda.

THE TENSION after the recent violence in Urumqi, the worst in China since 1949, is likely to be a continuing source of instability. Ethnic and religious violence, especially terrorism, will be the biggest national challenge to China in the coming years. President Hu Jintao, who rushed home from the G8 Summit in Italy, understood its seriousness to personally take charge of the situation.

Mounting ethnic clashes between local Uighur Muslims and Han Chinese settlers in the capital of western China's Xingjiang province on Sunday July 5 killed 156 and injured over 1000. The violence in Urumqi broke out after Han workers in a toy factory in Shaoguan, Guangdong killed two Uighur workers on June 25. A malicious rumour that six Uighurs raped two Han women triggered the riots.

A Troubled Province

Like Tibet, Xingjiang is an autonomous region in China. It has been a troubled province with sporadic terrorist attacks. Among other irritants, Beijing's policy of settling Han Chinese in Xingjiang has been a source of tension for years between the native Uighur community and the government. Despite China developing Xingjiang into one of the most economically productive regions of the country, a minority of the Uighurs resent Beijing's assimilation and integration policy. The support and sympathy from the Uighurs for the separatist movement in Xingjiang has grown significantly during the last decade. The influences from neighbouring Pakistan and developments in Afghanistan have radicalised a tiny segment of the Uighurs who are mostly tolerant.

Current and Emerging Threats

The propaganda by the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM), an Uighur separatist group associated with Al Qaeda, is fuelling the anger. ETIM was responsible for a series of bombings in

Xingjiang and elsewhere in China in the lead up to the recent Beijing Olympics. ETIM is likely to memorialise the Xingjiang violence and issue a series of video statements. ETIM is also likely to conduct a revenge attack in China or against Chinese targets overseas. The ETIM leadership, located in Waziristan on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, is out of China's reach.

Having received training, weapons, finance and ideology from Al Qaeda, ETIM members have transformed. They attack not only China but fight both the Pakistani security forces in tribal Pakistan and the Afghan security forces in Afghanistan. Al Qaeda-trained ETIM suicide bombers present a growing threat both to coalition forces in Afghanistan and to China's stability and security. Al Qaeda ideologues have argued that after the defeat of the existing superpower, the US forces in Iraq and Afghanistan, the next enemy of the Muslims will be the multi-headed dragon -- a reference to China, the emerging superpower. In addition to ETIM, a dozen Uighur separatist groups in the United States, Canada, and Europe are radicalising the Uighur communities in China. Some of these groups with terrorist links have been able to influence the US and other western governments to release the Uighur detainees held in Guantanamo Bay.

The US politicised the global fight against terrorism when it refused the Chinese government a request to extradite the Uighur terrorists in US custody who were captured in Pakistan and Afghanistan in 2001-2. Citing human rights abuse by China, the US has released the Uighur detainees to Albania and Bermuda. Instead of remaining divided, the US and China should build a partnership to fight the global threat of terrorism and extremism.

Snowball Effect

Today, China suffers from unrest both in Tibet and Xingjiang. Its policies to manage these sensitive areas have been unsuccessful. Continuing unrest in Tibet and Xingjiang will be an irritant to China's steady progress. There is no evidence to suggest that the situation in Tibet sparked the violence in Xingjiang. Nonetheless, it is very likely that one may continue to influence the other in the future.

If there is greater radicalisation of the Uighur communities both in China and overseas, the Uighur and Tibetan communities may work together outside China. Like the Tibetan exile groups, the Uighur exile groups are becoming better organised. Although the Tibetan Dalai Lama is himself unlikely to encourage such a union, his successors may decide on joint protests and even joint action. Beijing's short-term approach of being unwilling to speak to mainstream leaders such as the Dalai Lama reflects its lack of understanding of managing ethnic and religious communities.

The Future

Xingjiang, as China's new flashpoint, will present a greater challenge than Tibet. Bordering Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Russia, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, Xingjiang is critical to China in geo-political and geo-strategic terms. As threats are increasingly transnational, Beijing will have to take extra care to secure Xingjiang and build counter terrorism partnerships with its neighbours.

Despite Beijing's military might, it has limitations in countering the virulent ideologies affecting its citizens. Beijing's existing capabilities are not suitable to restoring long-term stability in Xingjiang. To meet the challenge of Xingjiang after the July violence, Beijing will need to invest even more in developing Xingjiang and empowering the mainstream Uighur community. Beijing will need to win over the Uighurs who resent the Han settlers. Beijing and its representatives in Xingjiang also must work with Xingjiang's community and religious leaders to build social resilience. The Chinese government needs to build a norm and an ethic in the communities of Xingjiang against extremism and its vicious by product, violence.

Need for Calibrated Approach

Today, 70-80% of all the world's conflicts are ethno-political or politico-religious. The ethnic and religious conflict zones produce human suffering, virulent ideologies, internal displacement, refugee flows and spawn terrorists and extremists. China needs to study how other countries have successfully managed, or failed to manage, ethnic and religious tensions. China needs to craft a long-term policy to mitigate the emerging and existing drivers of separatism.

Violence in Xingjiang, ETIM, and Uighur separatist movements will remain at the top of the Chinese agenda in the coming years. Unfortunately, China's hardline approach towards Uighur separatists fails to differentiate between terrorists, supporters and sympathisers.

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