



How Pakistan's Unstable Tribal Areas Threaten China's Core Interests

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January 2012

Abstract

With all eyes focused on the consequences of the United States and NATO of the accidental air strikes which killed 24 Pakistani soldiers, little attention has been paid to China which will also be greatly impacted by Pakistan's refusal to go after militants based in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). This article analyses the political, economic, and military dimensions of FATA-based militants' threats to China's core interests and increasing Chinese Turkistanization of Al-Qaeda. With a Chinese Uyghur appointed as al-Qaeda's top commander of its forces in Pakistan as well as the leader of Turkistani Islamic Party (TIP), China is now in the sights of both TIP and Al-Qaeda that threatens to destabilize Xinjiang if Islamabad fails to control its militants.

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ANALYSIS

Introduction

With all eyes focused on the consequences for the United States and NATO of the accidental air strikes, which killed 24 Pakistani soldiers, little attention has been paid to another big player who will be greatly impacted by Pakistan's refusal to go after militants that are using the country as a refuge: China. Pakistan-based militants in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) are increasingly a threat to China's core interests: national stability and territorial integrity.



In July, Turkestani Islamic Party (TIP) militants trained in FATA launched yet another attack against China with bomb explosions in Kashgar, Xinjiang, ahead of China's launch of "China-Eurasia Expo" in Urumqi under the auspices of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). TIP wants Xinjiang to be an independent Islamic state, and the China-Eurasia Expo is a centerpiece of China's Eurasia strategy of developing its western provinces and rebuilding the Silk Road of trade and commerce across the Eurasia heartland (*Beijing Review*, September 15, 2011; *China Daily*, September 6, 2011; Xinhua, September 1, 2011).

Outraged at Pakistan's inability to clean up its own backyard, Chinese Communist Party-controlled press was immediate and harsh in decrying this incident (*China Daily*, August 12, 2011; Xinhua, August 1, 2011). This quickly prompted a scurrying of Pakistani leaders – military intelligence chief Lt. Gen. Ahmed Shuja Pasha, Foreign Minister Hina Rabbani Khar and President Asif Ali Zardari – to Beijing to mend relations with its patron (*Dawn*, August 25, 2011; *New York Times*, August 1, 2011).

In these meetings, China allegedly demanded to set up military bases in FATA or in the Federally Administered Northern Areas (FANA) that borders Xinjiang province (*Asia Times*, October 26, August 10, 2011). After the bombing, the Chinese government reportedly deployed at least 200,000 security personnel to pursue Uyghur terrorists in the region, more than the 140,000 coalition troops currently in Afghanistan (*Asia Times*, August 31, 2011).

China also is revising its anti-terror law to possibly allow military intervention abroad (Xinhua, October 27, October 24, 2011). One official commentary warned that "If the violent forces in Xinjiang gain ground, China may be forced to directly intervene militarily in Pakistan and Afghanistan, but this is clearly not the situation China would like to see" (Xinhua, September 27, 2011; "China and Pakistan: Evolving Focus on Stability within Continuity," *China Brief*, November 30, 2011). While these reports may be speculative, taken together, they suggest Beijing's concerns – especially with a less active U.S. presence in Pakistan – may be rethinking fundamental tenets of its security policy.

FATA-Based Militants' Threat to China's Core Interests

That Beijing might demand a military base in this hotbed would underscore its view on the gravity of the FATA threat against China's core interests: realizing its western development strategy across Eurasia; continued economic growth for Chinese Communist Party (CCP)'s legitimacy and survival; and sovereign control over Xinjiang to deter "splittism" in other parts of the country, such as Tibet and Inner Mongolia as well as to preserve its claims on Taiwan. Chinese Defense Minister Liang Guanglie spelled out China's core interests – which received further official elaboration in the Peaceful Development White Paper – at the IISS 10th Asia Security Summit last June:

"The core interests include anything related to sovereignty, stability and form of government. China is now pursuing socialism. If there is any attempt to reject this path, it will touch upon China's core interests. Or, if there is any attempt to encourage any part of China to secede, that also touches upon China's core interests related to our land, sea or air. Then, anything



that is related to China's national economic and social development also touches upon China core interests"

(*Straits Times*, June 6, 2011).

China also fears TIP's close ties with al-Qaeda in FATA, and increasing Chinese "Turkistan-ization" of al Qaeda. Trained by al-Qaeda in FATA, TIP already has claimed a number of attacks in Xinjiang as well as against Chinese economic interests in Pakistan. The extent of TIP militants' network of terrorist activities in Pakistan was revealed in 2009 when they threatened the Chinese Embassy in Islamabad through a letter to kidnap Chinese diplomats and consular officers.

In a video on August 1, 2009, TIP leader Abdul Haq al Turkistani urged Muslims to attack Chinese interests to punish Beijing for what he described as massacres against Uyghur Muslims during their uprising in Xinjiang (*Asia Times*, August 10, 2011). Abdul Haq had been appointed a member of al-Qaeda's *majlis-e-shura* or executive council in 2005, but was subsequently killed in a 2010 U.S. drone strike and succeeded by Abdul Shakoor Turkistani, a Chinese Uyghur well known for his friendly terms with major Taliban groups in Waziristan (*Asia Times*, October 26, 2011).

A few weeks before the death of Osama bin Laden, al-Qaeda appointed him as new commander of its Pakistan forces and training camps (*Times of India*, May 11, 2011). Beijing thus has legitimate fears that Pakistan's inability to crack down on TIP and al-Qaeda in FATA will undermine China's hold over Xinjiang and sabotage China's access to strategic minerals and markets across the Eurasian heartland.

Political Dimension of the Threat

It was not surprising therefore when Beijing dispatched its elite commando forces, the Snow Leopard, near Pakistan's borders in the aftermath of the Kashgar bombing and stepped up its "Strike Hard" campaign (*China Daily*, August 13, 2011). Xinjiang is a strategic region for China. Three times the size of France and one sixth of China's land area, it share borders with eight countries: Mongolia, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India. It is rich in energy resources and a key transport corridor for China to access energy and strategic minerals from Central Asia, Caspian region and the Middle East [1].

Instability in Xinjiang is a threat to CCP credibility and legitimacy. Senior CCP officials seem to think that if the government is seen as weak and unable to control Xinjiang, this may encourage separatism in other regions, such as Tibet, Inner Mongolia, Taiwan, and potentially elsewhere. Moreover, the CCP needs continued access to energy and strategic minerals in Central Asia to help feed its voracious economic growth. The SCO is China's vehicle to project its influence across this pivot of the Eurasia heartland.

In 1996, then-President Jiang Zemin presided over a Politburo Standing Committee meeting that addressed Xinjiang's stability. In a document called "Document #7," CCP issued directives to resolve regional issues. Document #7 outlined three main security concerns: (1) outside influence in destabilizing Xinjiang; (2) erosion of state's authority as religiously-motivated groups challenge authority at the local level; and (3) economic impoverishment in the region as a catalyst for discontent. CCP's courses of action to address these issues are



threefold: (1) resolve problems of foreign influence through multilateral diplomacy with Central Asian republics; (2) crack down on challenges to state authority; and (3) promote economic development to resolve impoverishment [2]. This Document #7 served as the blueprint for China's "Develop the West" Silk Road Strategy to stabilize Xinjiang and spur local economic growth.

Economic Dimension of the Threat

Terrorist attacks from al-Qaeda-trained TIP potentially threaten a core tenet of China's strategy of stabilizing Xinjiang – as an 'inseparable part of China', for resource extraction and as a springboard into Central Eurasia. More than 43 percent of investment allocated by the central government to expand domestic demand was used for projects in western regions (Xinhua, October 16, 2009). Xinjiang is also a vital section of the continental rail route, the Eurasia Land Bridge, which connects China with Europe (*Beijing Review*, August 11, 2011).

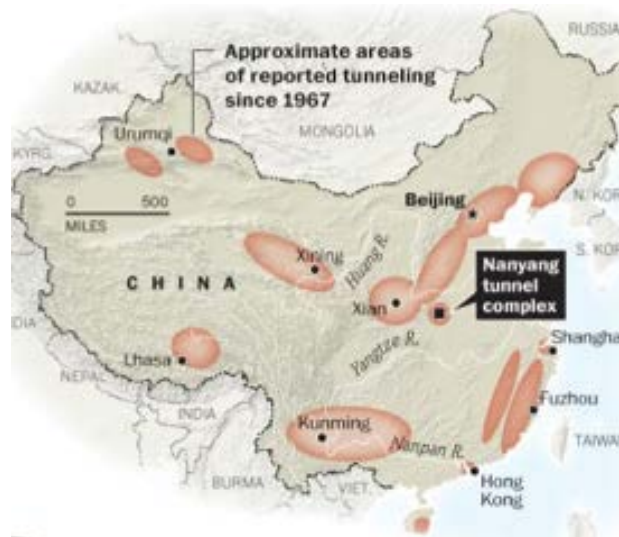
On April 23, 2010, in a meeting held by the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China Central Committee, President Hu Jintao stated, "it is a major and urgent task of strategic significance for us to boost the economic and social development of Xinjiang to achieve lasting stability in the region." According to Wang Ning, an economist with the Academy of Social Sciences in Xinjiang, the development of the region would speed up the political, economic, and cultural exchanges between China and Central Asian states and contribute to regional prosperity and stability. To that end, China's Civil Aviation Administration plans to have six new airports in the region by 2015, bringing the total number to 22. There are also plans for new flight routes to link Xinjiang's capital Urumqi to Istanbul, Dubai, Samarkand in Uzbekistan, Yekaterinburg in Russia, and Tbilisi in Georgia (Xinhua, July 2, 2010).

Kashgar, a key hub near China's far western border, is emblematic of both Beijing's outreach and vulnerability. Kashgar is being developed into a Special Economic Zone (SEZ) and together with Pakistan's northern provinces of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Gilgit-Baltistan, this will form the central plank in the emerging architecture for new silk routes. There are ideas to establish a trans-border economic zone on both sides of Pakistan and China by establishing manufacturing hubs, trade houses, and clearing houses as well as the use of yuan for cross-border trade settlement (*Global Times*, September 18, 2011). Since FATA borders Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Gilgit-Baltistan and the latest terrorist attack was in Kashgar, collectively the foundational stone of China's Silk Road development strategy, China would not be able to launch this central plank if FATA militants became a more significant destabilizing force.

Military Dimension of the Threat

One key aspect of Xinjiang that is sorely neglected in press coverage regarding terrorism is China's nuclear arsenal. Xinjiang hosts China's nuclear test site Lop Nur and elements of the Second Artillery Corps, China's strategic missile force. Some of the Second Artillery's vaunted tunnels – the so-called "Underground Great Wall" for hiding missiles and nuclear warheads – also surround Urumqi, the capital of Xinjiang and site of the July 2009 riots that killed 200 people and injured almost 2,000 others (See map).

Map: Nuclear Tunnels in China



Source: The Washington Post, November 29, 2011

Persistent unrest on a national scale has left at least China's Xinjiang-based nuclear warheads vulnerable, like during the Cultural Revolution (*Washington Post*, November 29, 2011; *People's Daily*, July 6, 2009) [3]. Should such unrest occur again—probably on a scale even more substantial than 1989—these weapons might become vulnerable to seizure by Uighur militant groups.

Implications of Pakistan's Inability to Neutralize FATA Militants

If Pakistan continues its lax attitude towards FATA militants and attacks on Chinese soil increase in severity and frequency, Beijing would likely see this as a continued threat to national sovereignty and territorial integrity. China already appears to be taking several courses of action to redress this problem.

Increased PLA Presence in Pakistan

One course of action, as mentioned earlier, is the reported demand for PLA bases in the FATA in addition to its current troop presence in northern Pakistan. When it comes to China's territorial integrity, China has a history of responding forcefully when its borders are violated or threatened: in 1950 it invaded North Korea; in 1962 it invaded India; in 1979 it invaded Vietnam; and, since the 1990s, it has confronted other claimants in the South China Sea several times. PLA engineers have been assisting in earthquake recovery since last January; however, its not clear how long they will stay or whether the PLA contingent lacks security elements for its protection (*India Today*, January 4; *Financial Times*, November 3, 2011; *Asia Times*, October 26, 2011; *Asia Times*, August 1, 2011;).



Beijing has not tolerated any direct violation of its territorial integrity (outside of compromises in territorial dispute negotiations), suggesting it might attempt to deal with FATA militants more effectively within Pakistan if Islamabad cannot. The recent fallout between the United States and Pakistan also suggests Pakistani weakness that could spur Beijing to act or pressure Islamabad to boost the Chinese presence in the country. Islamabad's demands of Washington correspond almost point by point with the Taliban's list of demands in November as conditions for entering into peace negotiations: Pakistan's review of its U.S. ties, suspension of NATO supply lines and closure of Shamsi Air Base (*Asia Times*, December 3, 2011; *Long War Journal*, November 28, 2011; Associated Press, November 21).

This further underscores Pakistan's weakness in face of militants and could prompt China to pressure Islamabad to support Chinese bases in the FATA or FANA. On January 4, Chief of Army Staff General Afhfaq Parvez Kayani left for Beijing on a five-day official visit at the invitation of Chinese authorities to discuss the complete range of Sino-Pakistani security and defense relations (*Pakistan Today*, January 4.). This visit deserves some scrutiny to assess how Beijing sees Pakistan's security situation and what, if anything, China can do to protect its interests.

Slowing Future Chinese Investments in Pakistan

Another course of action is further withdrawal and deterrence of future Chinese investments in Pakistan. On November 22, militants targeted a convoy carrying Chinese engineers in a bomb attack in Balochistan. In September, China's Kingho Group withdrew from a \$19 billion coal deal in Balochistan after bombings in Pakistan's major cities. In November, Pakistan sent a large delegation from Sindh to Beijing to try to garner Chinese investments. Downplaying security concerns, the delegation reiterated how Pakistan has taken special measures to protect China's 120 projects and over 13,000 staffers throughout Pakistan (Xinhua, November 22, 2011; *Global Times*, November 18, October 25, 2011; *Wall Street Journal*, September 30, 2011).

China's massive investment losses in Libya and evacuating its 36,000 workers however are still fresh in Chinese minds – reminding them of the high cost of investing in highly unstable countries, especially in one that is the central base of several dozen terrorist organizations. With TIP's close links with al-Qaeda that explicitly targets Xinjiang and Chinese citizens and al-Qaeda's cooperation with other terrorist organizations, Beijing has legitimate fears that the status quo in the FATA is increasingly unsustainable.

Conclusion – Pakistan between a Rock and a Hard Place

In light of recent U.S./NATO-Pakistani fallout, Islamabad is trying to play the China card and their "all weather friend" as an alternative to the United States. However, upon closer scrutiny, Chinese aid pales in comparison to U.S. aid and is not a feasible replacement in the near or medium term. Nor does Beijing want to take on the U.S. burden. For example, Center for Global Development published a report in May revealing that average recorded grant assistance to Pakistan for FY2004 - 2009 from China was \$9 million compared with the United States at \$268 million. Oxford University also published a report in February that revealed U.S. FDI flow in Pakistan averaged 28 percent of total share from 2001 - 2009, while China stood at a meager 2 percent of total



share in the same period. As for military aid, a few defense deals between China and Pakistan is no comparison for U.S. military assistance at \$2.5 billion in addition to economic assistance at \$1.8 billion in 2010 [4].

There also is growing perception in Beijing that it must take proactive measures to protect its interests abroad (*Asia Times*, December 17, 2011). Its willingness to deploy paramilitary forces to patrol the Mekong in December in response to the October killing of 13 Chinese sailors underscores how changing security pressures may lead Beijing to diverge from its previous policies of “nonintervention” and deploying troops abroad.

China has long contributed to UN peacekeeping missions overseas, but this is the first time it will carry out sustained operations in another country without a UN mandate. By deploying more than 300 armed police to the lawless triple-border area of the Golden Triangle (Laos, Thailand and Burma) in a joint patrol, coupled with its new domestic anti-terror laws to pave way for military intervention abroad, this may be an indicator of how China will address TIP militants in the lawless AfPak border area of FATA to safeguard its growing economic interests if Pakistan fails to control its militants.

Notes:

1. Hasan H. Karrar, *The New Silk Road Diplomacy: China's Central Asian Foreign Policy Since the Cold War*, Vancouver: University of British Columbia, 2009; James A. Millward, *Eurasian Crossroads: A History of Xinjiang*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2007.
2. Hasan H. Karrar, *The New Silk Road Diplomacy*, pp.72-75; Millward, *Eurasian Crossroads*; “Record of the Meeting of the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau of the Chinese Communist Party Concerning the Maintenance of Stability in Xinjiang,” March 19, 1996, available online at <http://caccp.freedomsherald.org/conf/doc7.html>
3. Mark A. Stokes, “China's Nuclear Warhead Storage and Handling System,” Occasional Paper, Project 2049 Institute, March 12, 2010.
4. Muhammad Arshad Khan, “Foreign Direct Investment in Pakistan: The Role of International Political Relations”, TMD Working Paper Series No. 039, University of Oxford, February 2011; “Aid to Pakistan by the Numbers”, Center for Global Development, available online at http://www.cgdev.org/section/initiatives/_active/pakistan/numbers,



Remarks: *Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.*

This article was first published by China Brief, Vol 12, Issue 1, January 6, 2012 by the Jamestown Foundation.

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