



Returning Uyghur Fighters and China's National Security Dilemma

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OE Watch Commentary: In early 2017, CCP Secretary General President Xi Jinping announced his desire to build a “Great Wall of Iron” to apparently promote security and peace in China’s Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. This is likely a continuation Beijing’s focus on implementing strict security measures in the region since deadly 2009 riots in the region’s capital city of Urumqi. However, it also comes at the same time that China faces a new challenge in the form of Syrian-trained Uyghurs potentially returning to Xinjiang.

Western nations also face challenges with radicalized fighters returning to their home countries, as the war in Syria winds down. China’s returning fighter challenge, however, is also linked with the al-Qaeda affiliated Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) which has been active in Syria. The Islamist radicalization of some of these fighters while abroad has also helped build links of solidarity between them and the broader global Islamic terror community.

Pressure may be increasingly mounting on Uyghurs in Syria as Idlib, the location where they are believed to be concentrated, remains the last major rebel-held area and therefore a key focus of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, especially after government forces recently took control of the Golan Heights front in Syria’s southwest. On July 18, the Syrian government agreed to release a large number of prisoners in an agreement with rebel forces in exchange for an evacuation of pro-government civilians into a government controlled zone. Idlib is within a multi-party de-escalation agreement that should be an end to conflict between rebels and government forces there. However, Syrian government forces have violated the agreement in other areas, and the evacuation may possibly precede an increased pressure campaign on rebel groups. As Assad consolidates power, Chinese nationals fighting alongside al-Qaeda may leave the fighting and attempt to return to China. How Beijing responds to these returning fighters may dramatically alter the security situation in Xinjiang and the rest of China.

China has long accused the TIP and the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM), the two main Uyghur terror groups, a highly suspect assertion prior to 2009. At the time the majority of Uyghur fighters and terrorists espoused separatism instead of Islamic fundamentalism. Shortly after Islamic State (IS) leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi’s declaration of the Caliphate in 2014, IS released the first edition of their main propaganda magazine, *Dabiq*, in which they singled out China and several other nations as threats. A wave of Uyghur-language propaganda and Uyghurs leaving China for Syria have helped to deepen the connection between Xinjiang and Syria.

Estimates of the number of Uyghurs this connection has drawn to Syria vary. While ETIM and TIP have traditionally espoused separatism from China, some Uyghurs in Syria appear to have become indoctrinated in Islamic militarism. There have been several indications that some Uyghurs in Syria consider China as a target. In early 2017 an Islamic State video depicted a group of Uyghurs making threats to China before ending with an Uyghur fighter executing a prisoner. Another Uyghur also states that, “we didn’t care how the fighting went or who Assad was... We just wanted to learn how to use the weapons and then go back to China.” Notably, Malhama Tactical, a for-profit Jihadist military training group, also made a threat against China in early 2017 and claimed to have added Chinese nationals to its instructor ranks. Importantly, the group is known to operate in Idlib, where there may be a large Uyghur population. While actual figures on fighters returning to Xinjiang are likely withheld from the media, Jacques Neriah of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs claims that the Chinese government has arrested around 100 returning fighters as of the end of 2017.

Furthermore, ongoing harsh treatment of Uyghurs may sharpen extremist groups abroad’s focus on China. Stabilizing Xinjiang and neutralizing the effects of radicalization is made more difficult by the social conditions and discrimination that Uyghurs face, including pervasive economic, workplace, and even interpersonal discrimination. The post-2009 era in Xinjiang is a time of increasingly strict and comprehensive security measures. Policy escalation has aimed at limiting movement of Uyghurs, strictly controlling their potential weapons, and removing their meeting areas where radicalization, organization and attack planning may take place.

In addition to the already ubiquitous “convenience police stations” which enforce a high level of community penetration, Xinjiang also saw a massive recruitment of informal security agents in 2016. Many of the more than 30,000 new hires were positioned in the convenience police stations, where they closely monitor surrounding communities. China is also known to have a large scale re-education program in Xinjiang, as well as pervasive electronic surveillance. Re-education in many cases may not be permanent detention, and if the program is not successful in disengaging the individual from violence, they may simply re-engage upon release because of a lack of reintegration and community-based programs. Moreover, prisons around the world are known for providing fertile radicalization environments rather than deradicalizing individuals.

While it is known that a large number of Chinese Uyghurs have travelled to Syria to fight, how many of them are still alive and will be returning to China is as of yet unknown. To be clear, China does not face a threat of thousands of fighters returning to wage an open battle. Rather, the risk of foreign fighters returning is in the potential for a small few to slip through the security cracks and re-enter their communities, or to exit detention programs without disengaging from violence. Once returned, they can become powerful force multipliers who may introduce leadership, technical and tactical knowledge, resources, and radicalization methods to the community.

While a high level of community penetration and the use of community members as security agents may prove effective in detecting returned fighters, it will do little to counter the religious undertones which may motivate a new face of terrorism in Xinjiang or to neutralize the influence of those who are not apprehended. Given its traditional preference for coercive measures, it is unlikely that Beijing will adopt a softer approach that promotes reintegration, community bonds, and religious education. Instead, heightened security measures may be in store for Xinjiang, as well as heightened threat levels and heightened tensions. **End OE Watch Commentary (Grace)**

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Continued: Returning Uyghur Fighters and China's National Security Dilemma

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Source: “Xi calls for building ‘great wall of iron’ for Xinjiang’s stability,” *Xinhua*, 10 March 2017. http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-03/10/c_136119256.htm

Chinese President Xi Jinping said Friday that the “great wall of iron” to safeguard national unity, ethnic solidarity and social stability should be fortified in China’s Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region...Xi called for safeguarding ethnic unity, and reinforcing solidarity between the military and government, soldiers and civilians, police and the public, as well as between the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps and local communities.

Xinjiang is an important “security barrier” in northwest China which holds a special strategic position and faces special issues, Xi said, adding that governing the region well is of great significance...He also stressed guiding people of different ethnic groups to enhance their sense of identity with the motherland, the Chinese nation, Chinese culture, the CPC and socialism with Chinese characteristics...



Map showing the location of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region.

Source: By MrPenguin20 [Public domain], from Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Flag_of_the_Turkistan_Islamic_Party_in_Syria.svg, Public Domain.