

# BIG TROUBLE



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China likes to portray itself as a Confucian society: orderly, deferential and internally coherent. But that vision is not, and never really has been, the case. Culturally, the Confucian-infused society may be more vulnerable to authoritarianism, but violence, demonstrations and unrest at the bottom are matched by corruption, greed and indifference at the top. This is a society with a veneer of stability, but underneath there has always been the threat of unrest and frequent convulsions.

Although not a perfect example, the 20th Century cruelly exposed the inability of China's society to cope with the political, social and economic changes. Warlords, rice riots, foreign intervention, major wars, civil wars and a revolution arguably made China the most turbulent country of the century. The Communist party under Mao merely added more turbulence; following the Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution and the internal dissent in the Party when Mao died, it was not until the 1980s that the Party was able to steer the country towards a greater outward appearance of stability.

But this appearance has been achieved with "smoke and mirrors". The Tiananmen Square protest of 1989 was only the most obvious outbreak that punctured this cosy and complacent vision of an orderly society at peace with itself. In fact, social tensions have only increased as social change has been driven forward by a massive economic boom. In addition, external factors have influenced internal issues: the Uighur issue has been brought into greater focus by the growth of Islamic fundamentalism beyond Chinese borders.

The Uighur, a Muslim cultural group in the north west of China, have been generally unknown outside of China until quite recently. They form the easternmost tip of a line of Muslim cultural groups that stretch across Central Asia, and have much in common with them. The consistent mistreatment of the Uighur by the Chinese state stretches back a long way, with discrimination rife over work, housing and education. They also face limited access into the Party structure and periodic resettlement to bring in more of the dominant Han Chinese to their traditional

**Face off: riot police were deployed to break up the student-led protests in Hong Kong**



areas, further smothering their culture. During the period of tension between the Soviet Union and China, the Soviets encouraged Uighur ambitions. Relaxation of travel restrictions in the 1980s meant many Uighur travelled on the Hajj and became exposed to Islamic fundamentalism. Many Uighur leaders have subsequently fled into Central Asia.

But, in recent years, the Uighur have started to strike back publicly, and forcefully. An arc of significant terror attacks can be traced, starting with bombings in Urumqi in 1992 and carrying through to the most incidents during 2014. But, given that the terror attacks often have significant time gaps between them, it could be years before the next one, or months, or weeks.

The Uighur attacks have taken place in the province of Xinjiang, and primarily in the provincial capital Urumqi. A suicide attack at the main railway station in April 2014 involved knife assaults and a bomb, causing mayhem. It was a stark indicator that these large attacks cannot be swept under the carpet by Beijing, and indeed Beijing has increasingly embedded its response in the international community's counter terrorism approach. This has led to certain Uighur groups being prescribed as terrorist organisations by the UN. The Chinese authorities have designated four groups as terrorist organisations: the East Turkestan Liberation Organisation (ETLO), the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), the World Uyghur Youth Congress (WUYC) and the East Turkestan Information Centre (ETIC). ETLO and ETIM have also been labelled as terrorist organisations by the Shanghai Co-operation Organisation (SCO), which has effectively closed off the Central Asian bolt-hole for Uighur dissidents. In 2002, the UN and the USA followed suit with regards to ETIM, though the US declined to do the same with ETLO. Although some commentators have said that ETLO and ETIM receive funding and support from al-Qaeda, this has been questioned given that group's fading prominence, and some doubt whether ETIM actually exists.

But despite these groups, the Uighur have no clearly-defined goal or dominant organisation, which makes things far harder for Beijing to pin the Uighur demands down and either negotiate or institute a crack down. Unlike, for example, ISIS, there is no clear political demand for a separate, Islamist, Uighur state. Indeed, some groups simply call for greater autonomy within the Chinese political structure, while others are more focussed on the discriminatory bread and butter issues that affect the lives of ordinary people. This also means that activists often support different groups through their lifetime, or several, or veer between groups depending on which one seems most attractive at the time. In some ways this is the fault of policies by the Chinese authorities. By cracking down on any dissent of any kind, they have discouraged the growth of moderate groups who they could have negotiated with while concentrating on taking on the extremists.

As well as presenting a domestic terrorist threat, Uighur extremists have also struck overseas. In 2006 a group of 22 Uighur militants were captured by the US military in Afghanistan, and then held for six or seven years before release. They claimed to have been trained by ETIM leader

Abdul Haq, who came to a sticky end in a drone attack in Waziristan after alleged involvement in the 2008 attacks in China. Two other Uighur militants were sentenced for plotting a bomb attack on a Chinese-owned store in Dubai in 2010, while in the same year Norway foiled a Uighur-led bomb plot.

This pattern indicates there will be more attacks in the foreseeable future – most likely drawing on the 2013 attack in Tiananmen Square for inspiration. Five people died and 38 were injured in the first major terrorist attack on the capital, which attracted a huge amount of international attention to the Turkmenistan Islamic Party which claimed responsibility. Other, more low-tech suicide attacks in Urumqi and Xinjiang province, are also likely, and possibly attacks like the railway station massacre at Kunming in Yunnan province in 2014.

But some security analysts have claimed that ETIM has burnished its image and tried to make itself look like a larger threat than it actually is in order to encourage the Chinese authorities to undertake more repressive measures. The result, the group hopes, would be to drive more people into the arms of ETIM. International organisations such as Amnesty International and individual analysts have indicated that this strategy may be working. According to them, Chinese authorities are increasing their repressive measures, heightening security and trying to downplay or in some cases obliterate Uighur culture.

In defence of their actions, however, the Chinese authorities can point to incidents such as the 2007 raid on a training camp during which they claim to have seized 1,500 hand grenades – which does beg the question where such a hoard of munitions came from – and in which 18 terrorists were killed and another 17 captured. This was followed in 2009 by a major riot in Urumqi, in which 150 people eventually died, triggered by previous riots in Shaoguan in which two Uighur migrant workers were killed. This highlights the continuing ethnic tensions, and the effect the Uighurs and the authorities have had in stoking up Han hostility against the Uighur minority.

Despite claims to the contrary, the situation both real and increasingly serious. On 21 September 2014, 50 people were reported killed in an “organised and serious” terrorist attack – of whom 40 were classified by the authorities as “rioters”. On the same day, in Tianshan, a suicide bomber injured 54 civilians, after attacks on two police stations, a shop entrance and a marketplace. This spate brought the death toll to more than 300 in Xinjiang province in 2014 alone.

The ethnic tensions between the Han and the Uighur can be seen as part of the growing pains of China, as the frantic pace of growth and industrial expansion put strains on a society that has mostly been very rural and almost unchanged in many places for hundreds of years.

These tensions have become increasingly political. The Communist party weathered the storm of the collapse of the USSR, and continued along the path of greater economic growth. The expectation at the time was that if people were materially satisfied they would make no political demands. This strategy contains two serious flaws. In the first instance it relies on continuous

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*Uighur extremists have attacked civilians, including children, with knives and explosives*

economic growth to keep the growing middle classes and urban workers in employment and the consumer durables flowing. This is difficult to manage in a global economy where China is dependent on export markets, as 2008-2010 demonstrated. The second flaw is that as people get wealthier they do tend to want a greater share of political power, because they feel more and more drawn in to where the State spends its resources.

The latest manifestation, and the most public, has been in Hong Kong. Here, large, intermittent political demonstrations have grabbed headlines. Political demonstrations here, against China's desire to exert firm control over the governance of Hong Kong, are predictable and are not likely to go away. But these are accompanied at the other end of the socio-economic spectrum with rural demonstrations and riots against local corruption, often based around planning decisions and rumours of bribery. If these took place in Xinjiang province the authorities would be quick to label them as "terrorist acts", but not so among Han or Cantonese ethnic groups. This just blurs the line further between what actually is a terrorist or separatist-inspired convulsion and what is driven by more day-to-day issues.

But a perfect storm is brewing in the growing urban areas. The younger generation are increasingly well-educated and show little appetite for working in a factory churning out cheap exports for the West. Instead, they are looking to finance, IT and high-tech industries – ones which can only successfully flourish in an environment of open access to information. This is clearly a direct threat to the established order. Currently, many young Chinese are voting with their feet and emigrating to use their skills overseas. This brain drain cannot really be sustained forever. These people are going to demand and expect changes.

In the rural areas, those left behind will also feel the need for change; they want a greater slice of the growing national cake to dampen increased resentment that the coastal cities are motoring up the social scale while they are still stuck somewhere in the 1950s.

With terror not likely to go away, and political unrest on the horizon, China's reputation for stability looks set to take a nosedive. Repression is not the answer. Both are intellectual ideas, and the demands of one group for increasing access to information will only help the other gain political support overseas. Unless the authorities slam on the brakes and draw the country back to some 1970s manufacturing idyll, with no internet and heavily controlled borders, both are going to increasingly gather momentum.

The dash for economic growth, while retaining authoritarian political control may have looked like a good idea in 1992 when the new Russia was collapsing and looked politically and economically chaotic, but economic growth and political liberalism do go hand in hand; having one without the other has so far proved illusory.

This is where the Uighurs could suffer. Political liberalism is also inimical to Islamic fundamentalism, and no growing middle class will see it as anything other than a threat. Uighur ambitions for greater cultural and political autonomy could be acceptable within a more liberal China – after all, Hong Kong is already governed in a completely different way. But if the authorities continue to see any manifestation of Uighur political or cultural identity as a threat, they will play into the hands of the extremists.

This is what makes the Yunnan and Beijing attacks and overseas atrocities more alarming: the Uighur extremists are extending their reach. Attacks on growth cities like Shanghai or Shenzhen will surely lead to demands to "do something" and be informed about what is being done – demands for greater openness. Indeed, this is a strategy that the Uighurs would do well to adopt, if only to put more pressure on the authorities. In Xinjiang, it seems, the more the authorities tighten their grip, the more they turn people against them. The classic terror strategy is to encourage that situation. By launching attacks against middle class targets, the authorities will be pressurised to order more repression – just what organisations like ETIM and ETLO want to happen. The Chinese authorities, for political reasons, are probably inflexible enough to do exactly what they want.