

FIGHTING ON THE

In the early morning hue of bustling vegetable market stalls, a scene of horror unfurled as two vehicles ploughed through the crowds. The attack on a shopping street in central Urumqi on 22 May 2014 was another milestone in a bloody resurgence of the Uighur insurgency in the far Western Chinese province of Xinjiang. It came only a few days after two Uighur militants were killed at Urumqi train station when they detonated their suicide vests. This one attack led to the deaths of a reported 39 people. It also initiated a year-long crackdown by the state against Uighur separatist insurgents.

But this is nothing new. The Chinese government and People's Liberation Army [PLA] have been fighting a protracted counter insurgency [COIN] campaign against several, mostly Uighur-led separatist movements for more than 60 years. The insurgency peaked in the late 1990s, but the level of violent attacks reached new heights before the 2008 Beijing Olympics and the year following it, with three days of civil unrest in Urumqi in July 2009 which left around 200 people dead after a brutal clampdown by Chinese security forces. The deep rift between the Uighur and Han Chinese, which was fuelled by this 2009 riot, still endures to this day.

Nearly seven months after the Urumqi market attack, the six perpetrators were sentenced to death by the Intermediate People's Court in Kunming. The court ruled them guilty of participating in a terrorist organisation, handling explosive materials and corruption. The attack reflects a deep-seated ethno-nationalistic divide in the most western province of China. A recent spate of attacks in 2014 has also made it clear that Uighur separatist tradecraft and skills are becoming more professional and better co-ordinated. The attacks themselves have made the headlines in Western media outlets, despite the constraints faced by foreign journalists when trying to acquire corroborated news from the region.

The Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region [XUAR] was established in 1955 and has been a thorn in the side of the Chinese state ever since. Prior to the XUAR, the Soviet Union supported a Uighur-led East Turkestan Republic between 1944 and 1949. The region is home to an estimated ten million Uighurs, a Turkic Muslim ethnic minority which has been disenfranchised since the beginning of the Chinese state. Separatist violence came to a head in the 1990s as the Soviet Union dissolved and a number of independent central Asian republics were established. The insurgency has received external material support from a number of areas, and since 9/11 a number of Uighur-linked or inspired groups have morphed into the global jihadist East Turkistan Islamic Movement [ETIM], which provided an AQ footprint in Xinjiang until its leader was killed in Pakistan in 2003.

Wang Lequan, the local Communist Party Secretary,

“The separatists don't have the people's hearts and are doomed to fail. Their sabotage activities will not shake the stable development of reforms in Xinjiang.”

Chinese President Hu JINTAO, August 2009



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Police patrol the gate of Kunming's Intermediate Court during the 2014 terrorism trials

played a pivotal role in the 15 years prior to the 2009 spike in insurgent activity. His counter insurgency models were framed around the subjugation of Uighur neighbourhoods through a “comprehensive security management” system. This suppression has fuelled the cycle of violence in the tinderbox around Urumqi. The security campaign has had a marked effect over the past year in providing security in the main cities of Xinjiang. By combining a wide-ranging security mission involving the Peoples Liberation Army [PLA], People's Armed Police [PAP] and Paramilitary Xinjiang Production and Construction Corp [XPCC], the civil unrest has been largely quashed. Recent COIN research by RAND (2013) suggests that forces employing an overbearingly repressive security strategy and collective punishment, as has been routinely witnessed in Xinjiang, rarely succeed, however.

Xinjiang is a hugely resource-rich region for China, and one of its most significant provinces economically to furnish its increasing energy needs. Xinjiang holds more than 30 per cent of China's oil and natural gas reserves and more than 40 per cent of its coal. A symptom of the insurgency in recent years has been a widespread belief that the Han Chinese are creaming the profits of this burgeoning economic boom, fostering resentment among the Uighur population. Beijing has attempted to address certain areas of economic development, such as in the education sector; free high school places are provided in southern Xinjiang, which has the highest Uighur population in the province.

One clear policy direction by the Chinese over the last few decades has been to subdue dissent in the ethnic Uighur populations through investment and economic development. This has in many respects had a counter effect: modernisation has further exacerbated ethnic marginalisation and alienation for the Uighurs in the historic homeland. Running in parallel to this has been widespread migration to the province, along with its neighbouring Tibet, by the Han Chinese. The competitive economic situation has aided a growing divide between the two ethnic groups.

A number of causal factors to the insurgency are outlined by Zhao (2010), many of which classically are interwoven and interdependent. They include government-imposed restrictions on religious activities, cultural discrimination and oppression and economic inequality between the Han Chinese and the Uighurs in Xinjiang. Similarly, the immigration of Han Chinese into Xinjiang is causing economic inequality between the two nations. There has been an undercurrent of political oppression in the province and an inadequate Uighur representation in the government.

The Chinese government's tough repressive measures against the insurgents – which have become known collectively as the “Strike Hard” policy – have spurred a growth of Uighur nationalism in the region. This has been fuelled by the growing external influence of radical Islamism, particularly from across the borders of Pakistan and Afghanistan.

The resurgence of violent extremist activity in Xinjiang is a reflection of the shifting sands of Chinese policies in the region. China has sought to critically address Uighur separatism using a multiplex of counterinsurgency strategies, enveloping cultural, economic, educational and religious reform to unseat the insurgency and to enhance integration with the Han Chinese. There has been some success in the Xinjiang Provincial administrations with bringing in educated Uighurs into key governance positions. But broadly China has relied on a focused and security-led approach which has served to alienate and further marginalise the Uighur population.

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So what are the solutions? A critical COIN mantra states that successful COIN forces must be flexible and able to adapt. What is clear is even an overwhelming security response in the last two years is not quelling the Xinjiang insurgency, against an adversary displaying quite basic tactics. While criticism can be levied at the Chinese state for their heavy-handed security strategies in dealing with some deep seated ethno-nationalist issues, some new approaches are required.

Firstly, China needs to urgently refresh its policy towards ethnic minority populations in XUAR to foster enhanced integration between the majority Han Chinese and Uighur populations. The balance between security and civil liberties is currently distorted and must be redressed. The bolstering of border security missions between Xinjiang Province and Afghanistan/Pakistan is also essential. Porous borders and proximity to these unstable neighbours have had a serious impact on the development of the Uighur insurgency.

Classic counter insurgency strategies need to be applied, especially in reshaping the economic assistance and support to Uighur minorities to prevent any further economic or ethno-nationalistic marginalisation. There has been systemic discrimination in the job market towards Uighurs, and the driver for state-led economic reform in Xinjiang has generated distinct animosity towards the Han elite. Further impetus needs to be given to building confidence between Uighur and Han communities to prevent any further antipathy and discontent escalating in regional areas of tension.

Finally, the state needs to lift repression of religious freedom in Xinjiang, which has aligned with the security crackdown since the May 2014 attacks in Urumqi. There has been a clear failure to address genuine religious grievances and alienation in the region.

Significant Uighur attacks

28 October 2013

A suicide attack using a car in Tiananmen Square in Beijing killed five and injured 38. The three people in the vehicle were Uighurs. Attack claimed by Turkistan Islamic Party.

1 March 2014

A knife attack by at least ten militants at Kunming Railway Station, Yunnan Province. Thirty-one people killed, 141 others injured. On 12 September 2014, three suspects [Iskandar Ehet, Turgun Tohtunyaz and Hasayn Muhammad] were convicted of murder and terrorism offences at the Higher People's Court in Kunming and sentenced to death.

30 April 2014

A knife attack at Urumqi railway station before two militants detonated suicide vests. Three killed and 79 injured. Attack took place shortly after Chinese President Xi Jinping visited the region.

22 May 2014

Two SUVs were driven into crowds in an Urumqi vegetable market and explosives used. Thirty-one people killed and 90 injured.

21 September 2014

Luntai County bomb blasts nr Urumqi. Fifty people killed.

12 October 2014

Knife/bomb attack by four Uighur militants at a farmers' market. Twenty-two people killed.

29 November 2014

Shache county attack. Fifteen people killed and 14 injured.

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Heightened alert: security was stepped up across Xinjiang region following the 2014 attacks

