China's Counterproductive Counterterrorism Policies

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JUSTIN HASTINGS, OCT 8 2014

China is currently in the midst of yet another crackdown on Uyghur separatist violence, and this one is unlikely to be more successful in the long term than the previous crackdowns. Violence in Xinjiang is not particularly new. Although hard data are difficult to come by, violent incidents appear to have increased throughout the early 1990s, and reached a sufficiently concerning level that the Chinese government instituted the first major Strike Hard campaign against Uyghurs in 1996. While violence continued into the late 1990s, the crackdown led incidents to die down in the first half of the 2000s. However, the 2009 ethnic riots in Urumqi were followed by a surge in violence and Chinese government crackdowns (Hastings 2011).

Generally, a terrorist threat can be thought of as a combination of the group's intentions and capabilities (Ganor 2008). When dealing with a terrorist group or even a broader movement with terrorist elements, counterterrorism policy at its core is logically a matter of degrading either terrorists' desire to attack or of inhibiting their capacity to inflict damage (Ganor 2008). The Chinese government certainly knows this, and its counter-separatism policy in Xinjiang has broadly attacked both intention and capabilities. Yet, even on the Chinese government's own terms, that policy has been a failure – largely because the strategies themselves are actually counterproductive as applied to Xinjiang.

First, while there is no chance China will actually accede to Uyghur independence, the government has attempted to dampen separatist fervor by addressing the reasons why there is a separatist movement in the first place. This could lead to policies that attempt to limit the exposure of Uyghurs to separatist and Islamist ideologies, and that respond favorably to Uyghur grievances. Yet China's attempts to control the religious practices and education of Uyghurs have also counterproductively been associated with a hardening of Uyghur views on Islam (Han 2014b). Government intransigence in the face of Uyghur complaints also arguably makes it more likely that a given Uyghur protest will escalate into (unplanned) violence (Hastings 2005).

The CCP has also long had a policy of developing Xinjiang economically in the hope that an increased standard of living will decrease Uyghurs' desire for breaking away from China, or at least decrease support for violent elements within their population. Xinjiang features prominently in the 'Go West' campaign to develop western Chinese provinces and regions, with countering separatism (both in Xinjiang and in Tibet) being intrinsic to the goals of the campaign. Yet China has pursued development in Xinjiang largely by exploiting the region's natural resources and exporting them outside of Xinjiang, building transportation infrastructure that has brought in millions more Han Chinese, and handing out jobs that have disproportionately gone to Han Chinese rather than Uyghurs. Economic development has itself created greater schisms between Uyghurs and the Chinese state, and more generally Han Chinese (Han 2014a, Hastings 2012).

Second, the government has attempted to inhibit the ability of separatists to either engage in violence, or to minimize the damage the violence does when it happens. In practical terms, this amounts to crackdowns and the hardening of potential targets. In Xinjiang, however, this is problematic. Police stations and local government buildings, which have traditionally been one of the primary targets of Uyghur separatists, can be hardened against attacks, but other, softer, targets, such as pro-government Uyghur officials and religious leaders, marketplaces, and transportation infrastructure, are too numerous to protect and difficult to harden without significantly disrupting daily life.

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The Chinese government's campaign to degrade separatists' capabilities has been somewhat more successful. It has attempted to deny separatists the time and political space to plan attacks and recruit members by arresting group members, rolling up cells planning attacks before they happen, and placing strict limits on Uyghur groups' activities and meetings, as well as through controls on religious practice and education. In concert with the crackdown on the ability of groups to organize, the Chinese government also attempted to limit their ability to acquire weapons and other materials for launching attacks themselves. The Strike Hard campaign and following crackdowns have all included raids to confiscate weapons and explosives from attack plotters. Beginning in the late 1990s, China also began improving relations with Central Asian states, going so far as to insert counter-separatism into the goals of the nascent Shanghai Cooperation Organization. This unusual regionalism on China's part was at least partly aimed at gaining help in closing off the ability of Uyghur separatists to use Central Asian states as bases for acquiring weapons and launching attacks back into China (Hastings 2011, Hastings 2012).

But with the post-2009 upsurge in violence, the twin strands of China's counter-separatism have led to attacks and, more generally, acts of violence that can be carried out with little or no planning with improvised materials. There is thus no organization for the security forces to disrupt, and no materials they can intercept before an attack. The attack in March 2014 in Kunming's main train station, in which assailants used knives to slice at and stab passersby, is one such example. There have also been several attacks in the past several years in China in which the attackers used trucks or cars to drive into a crowd, causing initial injuries, then leaped out and began assaulting victims with knives and improvised explosives (Han 2014b, Han 2014a, Hastings 2014).

It is not clear that the Chinese government actually knows what is going on with Uyghurs or in Xinjiang, leading to blunt and clumsy measures. After every attack, scores of young Uyghur (usually) men are rounded up and arrested, or unnamed and apparently numerous 'attackers' are reported as having been shot on sight (Han 2014b). In both cases, there is little in the way of an attempt to hone an investigation down to the actual perpetrators. The Chinese government also clearly does not differentiate at a fundamental policy level between different separatist activities or among organizations. China's own propaganda materials and yearbooks refer to a nebulous "East Turkestan organization" as being responsible for many attacks. In government materials on the security situation in Xinjiang, pro-independence leafleting is considered to be just as much of a terrorist incident as a bombing (Hastings 2011). The recent conviction on 'separatism' charges of the Uyghur academic Ilham Tohti for speech critical of the government suggests that the spread of information is viewed similarly to actual separatist violence.

Finally, given the increasing attention toward Xinjiang by Uyghur activists and Western governments and NGOs, China regularly accuses mysterious foreign elements of orchestrating attacks within China, but does not seem to recognize that the nature of many, even most, of the acts of violence seen in Xinjiang neither require, nor would be particularly helped by, foreign instigators. To the extent there is a foreign element to Uyghur separatism in recent years, it appears to have come from Uyghurs attempting to leave China to escape government repression and possibly join up with fights elsewhere. One theory about why the Uyghurs who staged the Kunming train attack were in Yunnan at all states that they were attempting (unsuccessfully) to leave China to go to Southeast Asia (East by Southeast, 2014). Four Uyghurs were detained in September in Indonesia after apparently entering the country to look for a wanted Indonesian terrorist leader. Additionally, the Iraqi government claimed that there were a hundred Chinese nationals fighting for ISIS in northern Iraq, with the head of ISIS giving a speech in September that singled out China for attention. China's policies may paradoxically be creating the very problem it always feared.

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