

# Terrorism in China

## Growing Threats with Global Implications

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Until rather recently, China was able to hew closely to Deng Xiaoping's advice to maintain a low profile internationally, particularly in regions of the world salient to the most active and dangerous international terrorist organizations. This limited foreign policy had the unintended—though surely welcome—consequence of keeping China off the radar of the international jihadist movement. Highly capable groups such as al-Qaeda neither directly threatened the country nor forged deep alliances with indigenous Muslim terrorist groups aligned against the Chinese state. Chinese policymakers have also had notable success limiting both the volume and effectiveness of terrorist attacks on their own soil, but this relatively calm state of affairs is under increasing pressure and is rapidly changing for several reasons.

First, China's global economic and political emergence has introduced an international jihadist element into what had been a largely isolated domestic movement. Economic growth and great-power ambitions have propelled China onto the international stage in search of resources, market access, and prestige. The growing Chinese footprint in the Middle East and North Africa is of particular concern since these regions are those most hotly contested by extremist jihadi organizations that consider foreign incursion into Arab lands an especially egregious offense.<sup>1</sup> Second, signals of increasing acceptance of a stakeholder role in the global economic and political order—such as China's ascension to the World Trade Organization, the Beijing Olympics, and Chinese cooperation in security efforts such as the antipiracy campaign off the coast of Somalia—increase the extent to which those opposed to that order see the country as a legitimate target for terrorist attacks. Where China was once viewed as a patron of liberation movements (including those active in Palestine)

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and a counterbalance to the United States and the Soviet Union, current jihadist propaganda characterizes it as inheriting the designation of “head of the snake” from the United States.<sup>2</sup> Third, China’s ongoing security crackdown in Xinjiang has forced the most militant Uyghur separatists into volatile neighboring countries, such as Pakistan, where they are forging strategic alliances with, and even leading, jihadist factions affiliated with al-Qaeda and the Taliban. The result is cross-fertilization between previously isolated movements, leading to the diffusion of tactics and capabilities that have the potential to substantially increase the sophistication and lethality of terrorism in China.<sup>3</sup>

At the same time, technological and social changes within China are making terrorism more difficult to combat while increasing the value of attacks to perpetrators. The mobility and information exchange on which China’s economic growth is predicated, especially in the most developed coastal regions, increases both the vulnerability to major terrorist attacks and the dividends that such an attack would yield to its perpetrators. Should the organizations operating in Xinjiang become capable enough to break through government containment and project attacks into the eastern population centers, they would have easy access to soft, high-profile targets as well as an information and media environment that is increasingly ripe for terrorist exploitation.

To further clarify the nature of China’s terrorism problem, this article provides a brief background of Uyghur separatism and violence in Xinjiang then outlines the origins and present shape of its counterterrorism policy and evidence on the forces heightening the threat of terrorism in China. These developments have policy implications for China and the international system.

## **The Threat of Terrorism from Xinjiang**

Terrorist incidents have occurred in China with increasing frequency since the late 1980s as the result of the grievances of non-Han ethnic minorities, particularly the Uyghurs.<sup>4</sup> These grievances generally center on the perception that the Uyghurs’ culture and grip on Xinjiang is under attack through a growing insistence on the use of Mandarin Chinese in the education system, limitations on religious authorities and practices, and increasing economic inequality.<sup>5</sup> While impossible to measure conclusively, Uyghur dissatisfaction appears to have only grown over the

past two decades in the face of massive in-migration by ethnically Han Chinese that has increased their representation in the region from just under 7 percent in 1940 to 40 percent today—leaving the Uyghurs as a minority in Xinjiang with approximately 45 percent of the population.<sup>6</sup>

Throughout this analysis, the focus is on the Eastern Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), which is widely regarded as a long-standing terrorist organization and the most active organization currently operating in Xinjiang. In recent years the ETIM has begun referring to itself as the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) or the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Party (ETIP).<sup>7</sup> While Chinese sources identify a substantial number of organizations operating in Xinjiang, the best evidence indicates that most are passing groupings of individuals, not terrorist organizations as identified by standard definitions. This is perhaps unsurprising given the government's incentive to exaggerate the extent of the immediate terrorist threat to justify (both at home and abroad) the extensive security apparatus that is primarily in place to subdue ethno-nationalist mobilization and separatism.

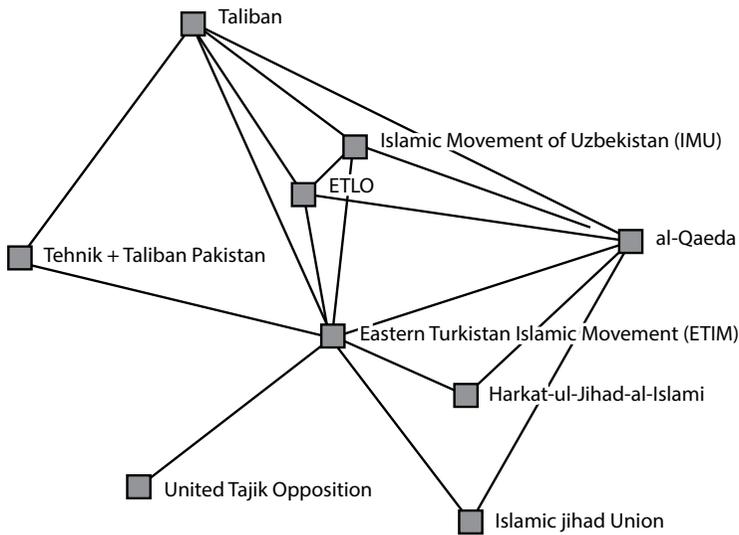
The collapse of the Soviet Union led to the establishment of new states along the western border of China. These states contain titular populations with ethnic and religious characteristics more closely resembling those of western China's long-resident non-Han populations, and this has contributed to an upsurge in Uyghur nationalism. The expectation that the collapse of the USSR would precipitate weakness in the Chinese state—a perception strengthened by the 1989 events in Tiananmen Square—further emboldened separatism.<sup>8</sup> However, Beijing's response to this threat was immediate and repressive. The government was successful in preventing both terrorist attacks and the ability of these organizations to grow and operate. Separatist violence has remained limited in scope and largely confined to Xinjiang, with terrorist organizations too weak to conduct attacks in eastern China where they would have the most significant political effect.

The political divides between eastern and western China are increasingly clear. The security presence in Xinjiang is enormous, both in terms of manpower and spending. Over the past several years, the government has increased security with numerous “strike hard” campaigns in which suspected nationalists were rounded up and communication and mobility were severely curtailed. In reality, the extent and reach of the security apparatus in Xinjiang would be utterly alien to an average Han Chinese

resident of, for example, Shanghai. Xinjiang bristles with police, military personnel, security cameras, and checkpoints. Regular searches and identity checks are commonplace, as are shutdowns of Internet and mobile communication networks.<sup>9</sup> Movement between cities, particularly during restive periods, is often limited. While Chinese budgets are opaque, official sources trumpeted a 90-percent increase to the Xinjiang public security budget in 2010 to 2.89 billion yuan (\$423 million).<sup>10</sup> This considerable sum, however, is likely dwarfed by central government spending on public security in the region, which amounted to \$111 billion in 2010 with an unknown—but certainly considerable—percentage being spent in Xinjiang. In addition, the People's Liberation Army, which is budgeted separately, is very active in western China and engages in activities commonly associated with domestic security bureaucracies, such as counterterrorism, surveillance, and border protection.<sup>11</sup> Yet, despite this massive investment in security, there is potential for increased instability in the future.

Over the past decade, the centers of operation of the most important Xinjiang groups—most notably the ETIM/TIP—moved into Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. The most militant Uyghur separatists have been forced into these volatile neighboring countries, including Pakistan, by the NATO war in Afghanistan and the security crackdown in Xinjiang and are developing ties with jihadist factions there affiliated with al-Qaeda and the Taliban. This process of displacement has contributed to a web of relationships among key Uyghur terrorist organizations and major terrorist groups throughout the region (see fig. 1).<sup>12</sup> Strong international alliances with capable organizations tend to radicalize and build the capacity of domestic organizations, exacerbating the threat. This cross-fertilization between previously isolated movements leads to more attacks and higher casualty counts through the diffusion of particularly deadly tactics, such as suicide bombings, which China has largely been able to avoid thus far.<sup>13</sup>

Figure 1 presents a disturbing web of relationships, particularly because it includes al-Qaeda and the Taliban. The depth of these ties has been the subject of some debate. Throughout the 1990s, Chinese authorities went to great lengths to publicly link organizations active in Xinjiang—particularly the ETIM—to al-Qaeda.<sup>14</sup> But the best information indicates that prior to 2001, the relationship included some training and funding but relatively little operational cooperation.<sup>15</sup>



**Figure 1. Relationships among regional terrorist organizations**

There is, however, substantial evidence that more meaningful relationships have developed over the last decade and that the capabilities of terrorists operating in Xinjiang are increasing as a result. For example, in October 2009, Abu Yahya al-Libi, a high-ranking al-Qaeda leader, called on Chinese Uyghurs to wage holy war against the Chinese government, claiming that China would face the same sea of Islamic fighters that brought the Soviet Union to a standstill in Afghanistan. Al-Libi's comments point to the increasing interest of the broader jihadist movement as well as al-Qaeda's central leadership in expanding its reach into Xinjiang. This is fueled by the fact that, at present, the most militant elements of the Uyghur separatist movement appear to be concentrated in North Waziristan, the notoriously unstable and ungoverned tribal region of Pakistan that is home to important elements of the Taliban and al-Qaeda.

The ETIM/TIP leadership has been active in the tribal regions of Pakistan for some time. While the Uyghurs that were in Afghanistan prior to 2001 (including those picked up by US forces and sent to Guantanamo) were peripheral to the international jihadist cause, this is also no longer the case. According to *Karachi Islam*, a jihadist newspaper, the recently killed leader of the ETIM/TIP, Abdul Shakoor Turkistani, also commanded al-Qaeda forces and training camps in the federally

administered tribal regions of Pakistan.<sup>16</sup> The fact that the head of the ETIM/TIP was also head of al-Qaeda forces in the most volatile region of Pakistan indicates that considerable cross-fertilization has already occurred. Indeed, the 2012 airstrike that killed Shakoor also killed two Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistani (TTP) commanders and 15 other militants of unknown organizational affiliation while they were engaged in a joint training exercise.<sup>17</sup> Shakoor assumed control after Abdul Haq al Turkistani was killed in a 2010 US Predator drone strike in North Waziristan. Haq was also central in al-Qaeda activities and a member of al-Qaeda's *Shura Majlis* (executive council).<sup>18</sup> Abdul Haq was so highly placed in al-Qaeda leadership that he served as a mediator between rival Taliban factions and played an integral role in military planning. He attended meetings in Waziristan with Baitullah Mehsud, the primary Taliban official in Pakistan. Moreover, Haq was known to have played a role in discussions among senior Taliban, Haqqani Network, and al-Qaeda leaders regarding the Pakistani military's operation in South Waziristan. Interestingly, Abu Yahya al-Libi (the aforementioned Libyan al-Qaeda leader who called for attacks on China) was also in attendance.<sup>19</sup>

The benefits of terrorist cooperation generally accrue in the form of training, the infusion of resources, and the inflow of foreign fighters. Until quite recently, there was little evidence to suggest that foreign fighters have substantially infiltrated Xinjiang or that terrorists perpetrating attacks in China were trained abroad.<sup>20</sup> However, attacks in Kashgar on 30–31 July 2011 indicate that this, too, is changing. The attacks were complex and coordinated, involving a car bomb, truck hijacking, and stabbings on the first day. The following day there was a coordinated attack on an area popular with Han Chinese involving multiple bomb blasts, shootings, and stabbings. While the degree of operational sophistication suggested collaboration in itself, concrete evidence came from a video released by the ETIM/TIP a month later showing one of the attackers training in a Pakistani camp. Subsequently, China issued a list of six ETIM/TIP members it accused of engaging in collaborative terrorist activities throughout Asia, including “a certain South Asian country,” a veiled reference to Pakistan.<sup>21</sup>

The reality is that Uyghur nationalism and separatism are evolving in a very dangerous and volatile part of the world. Continued and deepening collaboration is likely, and deep relationships with al-Qaeda and the Taliban place the ETIM and, by extension, the other violent factions of

the Uyghur separatist movement close to the center of a dense web of international terrorist relationships that have the potential to increase the capability of these organizations. To date, Uyghur violence has been notably low-tech, mostly employing knives and rudimentary homemade explosives. With international relationships comes the potential for technological and tactical diffusion that could substantially increase the reach and lethality of attacks in the future. Moreover, as US engagement in Afghanistan draws to a close, hardened and highly capable jihadist elements active in that conflict (including Chinese Uyghurs) will return home, potentially bringing radicalism and terrorism with them. This, of course, is precisely the same dynamic that took hold in the aftermath of the Soviet war in Afghanistan and will require China to further evolve its counterterrorism policy.

### **China's Evolving Counterterrorism Policy**

Counterterrorism policy in China has evolved over the last 60 years in ways that reflect the country's transition from pariah to major power. Under Mao, China openly supported terrorist organizations such as the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine.<sup>22</sup> Assistance to these groups was integral to its political identity as a primary patron of liberation movements in the developing world. Moreover, China's relative international isolation after the Sino-Soviet split necessitated trade and political relations with states that were also relegated to the periphery of the international system, including sponsors of terrorism such as Iran, Syria, and Libya.

As Deng Xiaoping brought China back into the international fold, these practices declined because the almost single-minded focus on development left little room, politically or financially, for relationships with radical organizations and marginalized states. Also, these relationships became liabilities as China sought acceptance into the international system to facilitate its economic growth.<sup>23</sup>

The shift from open support for terrorist organizations to disengagement was followed by a second major shift to a position of active opposition. This policy change was in response to mounting concern among the leadership over the emerging separatist movements in Xinjiang as well as, to a lesser extent, external pressure to become a more engaged global stakeholder. Current terrorism policy in China is therefore the

product of dueling concerns over domestic stability and autonomy on the one hand and international stature and reputation on the other—a tradeoff that other scholars have identified as competing core elements of the country’s foreign policy more generally.<sup>24</sup>

The 9/11 attacks on the United States served as an opportunity for China to solidify and accelerate its shift to a policy of active opposition to international terrorism while smoothing over a particularly rough patch in the US-China bilateral relationship. The George W. Bush administration came into office with what initially seemed to be a tougher line on China than that held by his predecessors. On the campaign trail, Bush excoriated President Clinton for “appeasing” China. The Hainan spy plane incident, a mere 10 weeks after Bush’s inauguration, brought relations to their lowest point in years. The rapid escalation in tension with the new administration was a source of consternation for the Chinese government, which began looking for a favorable moment to correct course. An obvious one emerged when the Bush administration reached out for allies in the global war on terror (GWOT). This opportunity for rapprochement was doubly attractive because it could be done while addressing the long-standing separatist threat in Xinjiang. By placing separatist violence in Xinjiang in the context of 9/11 and the GWOT, Chinese policymakers leveraged US policy to reframe their handling of violence in western China from one that might be subject to international criticism regarding human rights to one where such critiques would seem hypocritical.

To accomplish these interwoven objectives of international emergence, improved relations with the United States, and confrontation of separatist violence in its west, China promptly voiced strong support for the United States in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks and initiated closer cooperation on international counterterrorism efforts. The United States, eager to build an international coalition, reciprocated by officially identifying the ETIM, the primary separatist group operating in western Xinjiang, as a terrorist organization. As a result, China was able to improve bilateral relations with the United States while clearing space for its preferred policies in Xinjiang.<sup>25</sup>

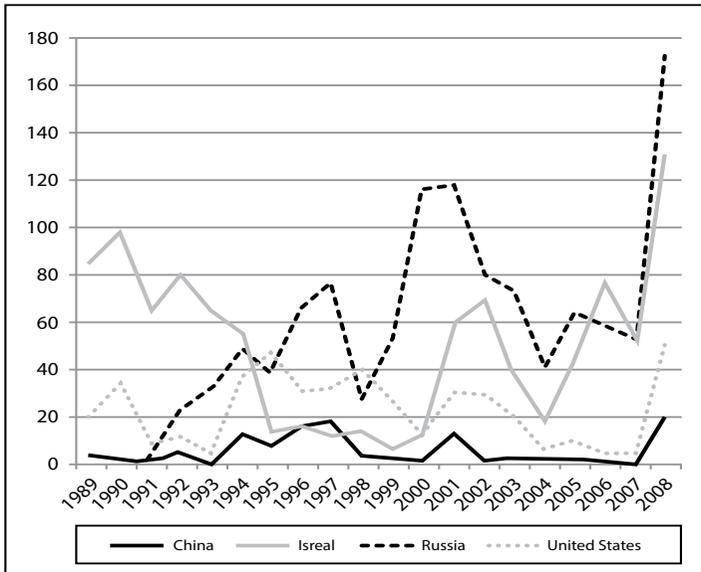
China’s engagement with the so-called global war on terror came with broader implications for its foreign policy and role in the international system, since it involved a shift from the practice of treating terrorism as a domestic issue cloaked by sovereignty to characterizing it as an international

problem.<sup>26</sup> This introduced an important contradiction to China's usually consistent insistence on the sanctity of sovereignty. In general, Chinese authorities have sought to place domestic terrorism challenges in the context of the GWOT when that argument generates international goodwill and provides cover for preferred policies in Xinjiang. However, international criticism, such as occurred in response to the preemptive security crackdown in the lead up to the 2008 Olympic Games, is typically met by a reversion to claims of sovereignty over internal matters.

One can contextualize the relative success of China's counterterrorism policies by plotting the level of violence in that country alongside the number of attacks in Israel, Russia, and the United States from 1989 to 2008 (see fig. 2). The analysis combines data from the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) with information drawn from Chinese and Western media reports.<sup>27</sup> The level of violence in China is consistently well below that of the other three countries—a distinction particularly notable given China's substantially larger population. Russia has generally suffered the most incidents over the past two decades, and violence there appears to be increasing. This represents a cautionary tale for China since the violence against Russia emanating from the Caucasus bears important structural resemblances to the threat of violence from Xinjiang. Specifically, Chechen Muslims were also seemingly isolated from the broader jihadist movement, but links were quick to form once the conflict gained prominence. These links then contributed directly to increased capabilities that allowed Chechen terrorists to strike deep into Russia and conduct sophisticated attacks like those on Moscow's Dubrovka Theater in 2002, Beslan in 2004, and the Moscow subway system in 2010.

While still relatively low, even after its emergence in the late 1980s, the level of terrorist violence in China has varied over time in ways that can inform our understanding of the evolving nature of the threat. The general rise in number of attacks from between 1989 and 1997 reflects an upsurge in Uyghur nationalism in response to opening Central Asia after the collapse of the Soviet Union. During this period, key organizations such as the ETIM rose to prominence. Over the following decade, China had remarkable success in tamping down violence, with the notable exception of a cluster of incidents immediately following the 9/11 attacks in the United States. However, the long quiet did not indicate the underlying problem had been resolved, as there was a dramatic spike

in violence ahead of the 2008 Beijing Olympics, heightening the threat of terrorism.



**Figure 2. Terrorist incidents per year (1989–2008)**

The historical case of China also seems to support the notion that strict authoritarianism can insulate against terrorism—terrorism was essentially unheard of in China prior to the 1980s. Some of this observation may stem from the lower reliability of the data from that period, but certainly the near absolute social controls in place in the Maoist era made terrorism especially difficult. Strict assignments to work units enforced with grain rations meant that mobility was minimal and several layers of watchful eyes kept close tabs on social order.

The liberalization that has occurred over the last 30 years stripped away much of the infrastructure of social control, but China remains nonetheless far better equipped to control and observe both its own citizens and foreigners within its borders than most liberal democracies—even many autocracies—given the reach and effectiveness of the bureaucratic state and security apparatus.<sup>28</sup> Counterterrorism efforts are further facilitated by the relatively high visibility of foreigners and ethnic minorities in eastern China. Since the emergence of serious separatist violence in the late 1980s and early 1990s, social controls are much stricter in Xinjiang than elsewhere in the country, and Uyghurs living and traveling outside the province are subject to special scrutiny. Finally, guns and

other weapons are difficult to obtain, as exemplified by the recent spate of high-profile stabbings in China. However, the relationship between weapons availability and terrorism should not be overstated. Suicide vests and improvised explosive devices can be fashioned from readily available materials, underlining the importance of the diffusion of tactics and knowledge and, by extension, international connections.<sup>29</sup>

## **The Threat of Terrorism**

Until the last decade, China was not militarily or economically active in the regions of the world most salient to the broader Salafist jihadi movement. Moreover, China's status as a developing country, potential challenger to the United States, and relative outsider to the existing political and economic order reduced its symbolic value as a target. As a result, China has not suffered direct attacks from international terrorist organizations, nor have these groups had a strong incentive to forge deep alliances with indigenous terrorists active in western China.<sup>30</sup>

The consequences of China's rise in areas ranging from economics to international security have been widely discussed,<sup>31</sup> but the terrorist impact upon the country has generally escaped scrutiny. As China grows economically, isolationism is increasingly untenable since further development is predicated on access to resources and markets. The search for energy in particular has already led China to engage increasingly in the Middle East, North Africa, and other regions central to the interests of established terrorist organizations. China's penchant for controlling resources at the source exacerbates the problem, since Chinese nationals, business holdings, and military assets abroad are more vulnerable to terrorist attacks, which in turn could precipitate nationalist responses at home. Chinese nationals working abroad have increasingly come under attack. For example, authorities in Dubai convicted a Uyghur from Xinjiang of conspiring to bomb a shopping mall specializing in Chinese goods. Muslim extremists in Peshawar, Baluchistan, and Afghanistan have also assassinated Chinese workers.

The 2011–12 upheaval in Libya illustrates several aspects of this emerging vulnerability. The uprising against the Gadhafi regime trapped close to 30,000 Chinese citizens in that country. This led to a popular outrage within China, mostly voiced online, and a dangerous situation for the government, since the perception of inaction could have put

the regime on the wrong side of nationalist sentiments.<sup>32</sup> In response, China sent the *Xuzhou*, a recently launched, state-of-the-art missile frigate, and initiated its first substantial mission in the Mediterranean to evacuate its nationals. Given China's increasing economic involvement around the globe, similar scenarios will inevitably arise with increasing frequency. Moreover, the very presence of military assets to protect China's economic and strategic interests can create grievances among local populations that can, in turn, motivate terrorist violence and provide an inviting target, much as has been the case for the United States.<sup>33</sup> In this light, it is worth noting that the *Xuzhou* went directly to the Mediterranean from its prior mission defending against piracy off the coast of Somalia—further underlining China's increasing presence in terrorist hotbeds and engagement with international initiatives.<sup>34</sup>

In general, China has become a more desirable target for internationally oriented terrorist organizations as it solidifies its status as an international power and stakeholder in the existing international order. Acceptance by the World Trade Organization, the 2008 Beijing Olympics, and the 2010 Shanghai Expo are all very visible signals of China's emergence, but they also increase its symbolic value as a target of a major international terrorist attack.

The global jihadist community is clearly reassessing its view of China's place in the international system and its legitimacy as a target. Brian Fishman notes the example of Akram Hajazi, a major intellectual figure for jihadist strategists, who wrote in 2007 that China's rise to preeminence in the international system would only cause it to replace the United States as the primary enemy.<sup>35</sup> This opinion appears to be influencing a diverse group of highly capable international terrorist organizations. For example, while China has traditionally remained relatively neutral toward Lashkar-e-Taiba due to that organization's complex relationship with the security services in Pakistan (a long-time ally) and role in the ongoing rivalry with India (a long-time rival), the terrorist group now prominently targets China in its propaganda, accusing it of systematic mistreatment of Chinese Muslims.<sup>36</sup>

The experience of the United States is a cautionary tale. Aside from US support for Israel, its military presence in the broader Middle East and support for unpopular Arab regimes were the primary motivations that brought the United States into focus as a target for international terrorism.<sup>37</sup> As Osama bin Laden himself stated shortly after the 9/11

attacks, “I swear to God that America will not live in peace before all the army of infidels depart the land of the prophet Muhammad.”<sup>38</sup> There is evidence that this abstract threat is already beginning to coalesce into something more concrete. In 2009, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) threatened to target Chinese nationals and projects in Algeria in retaliation for the treatment of Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang. China’s embassy called on the nearly 50,000 Chinese in that country to be on guard, and security measures at Chinese firms were substantially upgraded. This threat was notable because it underlines the degree to which the treatment of Muslims in western China has emerged as an issue for the global jihadist movement. It also demonstrates that Chinese assets in the Middle East and North Africa are both a grievance and a liability, and it shows that the potential linkage between Xinjiang and the Chinese presence abroad is not lost on those who would perpetrate attacks.

### **Liberalization and Terrorist Opportunity**

The model of growth that has allowed China to develop so rapidly is predicated on a partial loosening of social controls in support of economic liberalization, and many have pointed to this social liberalization and the preliminary flowering of civil society as positive externalities of that drive for growth. These changes, however, also increase China’s vulnerability to terrorism. This tension between growth and social control is felt particularly in western China, where the official government goal for Xinjiang—having it serve as a commercial hub for the region—has come into direct conflict with the perceived need for strict social control to quell the restive Uyghur population. For example, preparations for the first annual China-Eurasia Expo in September 2011 required a substantial expenditure on increased security, and strict restrictions were put in place in ethnic Uyghur neighborhoods for the duration of the event. In the longer term, maximizing economic growth will not only require loosening restrictions on the movement and interaction of the local population but also accommodating foreign traders and investors who will demand a greater degree of openness, just as they have in eastern China. Officials tend to see this as a substantial risk, particularly since many Uyghurs view the outward signs of economic growth and investment as a grievance, owing to the fact that they generally do not share equally in the benefits of this growth.

Rapid changes in the means and effectiveness of social control are compounded by equally momentous changes both in governmental policies over control of the media favoring limited liberalization and in technological changes that make communication easier and censorship more difficult. While these changes can be positive when it comes to holding officials accountable in the context of the SARS outbreak, the Sichuan earthquake, or the recent high-speed rail accident, the rewards are less clear when it comes to terrorism. Indeed, increased media freedom has the potential to increase the rewards of terrorism for those who would perpetrate it. In the past, China has been able to downplay or completely obscure news of terrorist attacks, thereby eliminating much of its appeal as a political act.<sup>39</sup> But media liberalization, the Internet, and social media are making this increasingly impossible.<sup>40</sup>

In China's partially competitive media market, news outlets are forced to navigate the difficult task of providing programming that appeals to the Chinese public without crossing obscure and constantly evolving redlines laid down by party officials.<sup>41</sup> This results in an incentive to get as close to these lines as possible without crossing them, leading to both a relative increase in controversial stories that challenge government priorities and to substantial self-censorship.<sup>42</sup> This tension between the party line and the bottom line is particularly stark in the traditional media's coverage of terrorism occurring within China. The public has a powerful appetite for such information, so news outlets attempt to provide it without crossing the line that separates the acceptable from the unacceptable. However, the government has strong incentives to limit dissemination of this information. This dynamic tends to push the coverage and discussion of terrorism out of the print and television media and into informal outlets.

The larger concern for the terrorism/media nexus in China is therefore not traditional media, but the "new media." With more than 420 million Internet users, China has more people surfing the web than any other country, and new web-based technologies are increasingly directing media attention. Over the past decade, numerous incidents first reported online generated such outrage that traditional news media were compelled to report on them, often leading to changes in the government's positions.<sup>43</sup> The spread of these new technologies severely undermines the current model of media control in China, one which relies on a combination of self-censorship and official oversight.<sup>44</sup>

The decentralization of the flow of information, stemming in large part from the rise of Internet forums and social media, has made it increasingly difficult for the Chinese government to control information, including information about terrorist attacks. The popularity of Internet message boards proves highly challenging for government censors who find themselves nearly always in the position of playing catch up. The more recent explosion in popularity of Twitter-style microblogs (*weibo*) has the potential to completely upend the system due to their sheer volume and speed coupled with complete decentralization. Where Chinese authorities once were able to keep terrorist incidents out of the public consciousness, and therefore largely devalue them for potential perpetrators, technology has made this increasingly difficult.

An analysis of Chinese news from July and August 2008 (the height of the terrorist campaign preceding the Olympics) bears out the inherent tension between media incentives to report on terrorist events and government interest in suppressing this information, as well as the increasing difficulties in doing so.<sup>45</sup> There were a substantial number of Chinese-language newspaper articles on terrorism during this period, indicating that the media sees a market for such information. However, very few touch on the specifics of attacks within China, and many downplay the threat of terrorism.<sup>46</sup> Instead, many stories emphasize preparedness for attacks or positively profile first responders who would be responsible in the event of future attacks.<sup>47</sup>

The restrictions on the traditional media seem to have pushed much of the actual discussion of the 2008 events toward online message boards and other new-media outlets. For example, a search of *tianya.cn* (a popular Chinese Internet forum) for discussions relating to the 2008 terrorist campaign reveals a much broader discussion of the emerging threat of terrorism in China.<sup>48</sup> Many comments are openly nationalistic, and many posts express the view that the West—and the United States in particular—downplays the threat of Uyghur terrorism. In many of these same threads, talk of terrorism takes on a xenophobic edge. In particular, comments focus on Muslims and Chinese ethnic minorities—especially the Uyghur and Hui—associated with Islam. Other posts praise the victims of terrorism and demand a strong response from the authorities. There are relatively few discussions of specific events, but there are many allusions to posts being “harmonized,” indicating that censorship is likely.<sup>49</sup> However, it is certainly not the case that all commentary about

unreported attacks is assiduously removed from Internet forums (even for attacks that went unreported in the Chinese media), indicating the limitations of censorship in this context.

## **Looking Toward the Future**

There are reasons for serious concern about the future threat of terrorism in China. The forces that have prevented and limited violence to date are under increasing pressure as China grows and liberalizes, and this is occurring in the context of a maturing separatist movement emanating from a substantial, ethnically coherent population with deeply felt grievances. Put simply, one downside of growth and liberalization is increased exposure to both international and domestic terrorism.

The appetite for discussion, both in the media and on Internet forums, suggests that future terrorism in China has the potential to engender a substantial public reaction which will in turn require a response from the state. This stands in some contrast to the Japanese case, where the 1995 attack on the Tokyo subway system was notably ignored. This opened the political space for the organization to be dealt with in the legal domain. In this sense, China appears to more closely represent the global norm, where public reaction necessitates a less discriminate, less restrained response, which can actually increase the value of terrorist acts.

A popular nationalist response to terrorism can be problematic for Beijing. First and foremost, it can force a strong response the government would prefer to avoid for strategic reasons. Indeed a substantial body of existing scholarship argues that a primary objective of terrorism can be to goad the government into an overreaction, often fueled by popular sentiments.<sup>50</sup> Also, to the extent that the attack has links to organizations operating abroad, popular demands for action could drag China into regional confrontations with Pakistan or Afghanistan.

Many of the forces described here cannot be stemmed. China cannot withdraw from the international stage and cannot forestall liberalization indefinitely without substantial costs. Regardless of the Communist Party's stance on political liberalization or retrenchment, communication technology and access to it will likely continue to advance and make censorship ever more difficult. The implication is that Chinese policymakers have painted themselves into a corner. By responding to the growing unrest in Xinjiang with heightened repression, they have exacerbated

ethnic minority grievances and introduced an increasingly stark tradeoff between continued security on the one hand and a growing political divide between the east and west of the country on the other.<sup>51</sup> As it stands, China's ability to subdue terrorism and violence has come at the price of a highly authoritarian and centrally planned western region that stands in growing contrast with a relatively freer and more capitalist east. Increasing pressure on the present calm leaves Chinese policymakers with three unpalatable options: increased terrorism, ever more heavy-handed security in Xinjiang, or political accommodation of minority grievances. The first of these options has long been deemed unacceptable (as it is in most countries), and the third appears politically untenable due to the recent leadership transition and a longer-term sense of insecurity at the top levels of government. Unfortunately, the remaining option—harsh crackdowns on Uyghur nationalists and increased security—further fuels existing grievances while entrenching the divide between a freer and more prosperous east and a security state in the west.

Despite fervent wishes of those in Beijing who hope the rising economic tides alone will diminish the threat of terrorism emanating from Xinjiang, there is little evidence to suggest growth alone will be sufficient. Policymakers have consistently pointed to the substantial economic growth in Xinjiang, which has averaged about 10 percent over the last 15 years, as evidence that their policies are working. The party's contention is that the same implicit contract that governs the relationship between the people and the government in the rest of China—robust economic growth in exchange for unquestioned political authority—should hold here as well. However, in western China this formula is upset by the substantial ethnic and nationalist sentiments. Moreover, while the numbers would be enviable in the United States, growth in Xinjiang has actually lagged behind that of coastal China, owing in no small part to tight controls on the economy and society.

The economy in Xinjiang is dominated by the oil industry and the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps, which are both government controlled and together account for close to three-quarters of provincial GDP. The remainder of the growth comes primarily from government spending and subsidies. This is an expensive proposition, and it reinforces the structural divides between the regions and underlines the extent to which the economy is based primarily on resource extraction and redistribution rather than the vibrant production-based industry that

we commonly associate with China and its growing economic clout. Indeed, Xinjiang's potential as a hub for oil and gas exploration will likely bring the divide between east and west into even starker relief. To the extent that the region's economic development is predicated on resource extraction to fuel industrial growth elsewhere in the country, it will diminish the need to promote growth through other channels. At the same time, the infrastructure surrounding resource extraction, such as pipelines and refineries, are vulnerable to attack. The result may be yet another spiral in which increased security and increased displacement feed on one another. More to the point, the widely held perception among Uyghurs in Xinjiang is that economic growth, regardless of its source, is accruing primarily to the Han immigrants and by fueling the influx of Han Chinese only serves to accelerate the demise of independent Uyghur identity.

The most viable long-term solution would be to address underlying grievances of the Uyghur population within the confines of the political system. This would ideally entail providing political space for moderates by granting more meaningful autonomy, thereby isolating extremists from the broader ethnic community. However, if past behavior is the best guide to the future, then it is more likely that increased terrorism will be met with an attempt to forcefully impose social control and roll back liberalization. This is already happening in Xinjiang, where social controls are substantially stricter than in the east. The implication is that the short-to-medium-term future of liberalization may be one of "two Chinas:" a relatively open east in which more freewheeling commerce and political behavior fuel one another's growth, and a lagging west characterized by mutually reinforcing isolation and authoritarianism.

The two-Chinas approach incentivizes the cross-border linkages between militants identified here. It also puts a premium on their ability to take the fight to eastern China where the government's capacity to disrupt it is lower and the rewards of an attack are higher. Thus, the more Beijing tries to bottle up grievances in the west, the higher the rewards for groups who can strike in the east.

This presents real challenges for Chinese leaders. While policymakers have identified growing inequality and geographically uneven development patterns as pressing policy problems, solutions are strained by the inability to put Xinjiang and other western provinces on the same security footing as the rest of the country. Furthermore, Chinese policies in

Xinjiang are a substantial impediment to the country's aspirations to become the leading power in Central Asia. There has been some success in this domain in terms of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization as well as energy trading, but the sense that Beijing is substantially at odds with minority populations who share cultural and linguistic similarities with China's Central Asian neighbors reinforces the notion that China is a distant, foreign power in the region regardless of the contiguous borders.

A rise in terrorism in China will have unpredictable consequences for the international system. The trends identified here will be difficult to stem, and it is therefore prudent to consider the challenges and opportunities they present for US policymakers. Chief among these are the implications for regional relations in central Asia. To the extent that elements in Pakistan's tribal regions contribute to terrorism in China, they could potentially insert tensions into the relationship between China and Pakistan that closely mirror those that now plague the relationship between the United States and Pakistan. This has the potential to significantly complicate regional dynamics, including those involving India. The risk of regional tension is heightened by the reality that if attacks escalate, there will be a temptation to place the blame on the neighboring countries from which the terrorist organizations operate, be it Pakistan, Afghanistan, or elsewhere. Even if Chinese policymakers view such moves as strategically unwise, they may prove necessary to appease nationalist sentiments and deflect critiques of the state. Finally, any meaningful increase in terrorism in China may pose challenges for foreign policy strategies predicated on further liberalization in that country insofar as the intolerance of violence against the state leads to a broader reaction against liberalization nationwide.

This overall pattern of violence suggests two key points. First, what terrorism there is in China appears to respond to broader geopolitical circumstances and strategic opportunities (e.g., 9/11 and the Olympics), which is surprising given it is perpetrated by ostensibly weak and isolated organizations with local grievances. Second, tensions and grievances can remain dormant for significant periods of time only to flare dramatically, suggesting the present quiet is no guarantee for the future.<sup>52</sup> Indeed, more recent incidents such as the 2011 attacks in Kashgar suggest that we may be entering a new, more volatile, phase.

That said, from the US perspective there are potential upsides as well. As demonstrated by the rapprochement between China and the Bush

administration in 2001 and the ongoing regional cooperation within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, counterterrorism efforts also have the potential to tie China to the international community in productive ways. In particular, cooperation on counterterrorism furthers the ongoing erosion of its insistence on a strict interpretation of sovereignty norms. As a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, China's difference in perspective on this matter has prevented international cooperation in a variety of domains. To the extent that cooperation on counterterrorism could close that gap, it could have positive externalities for security cooperation elsewhere in the system. **SSQ**

## Notes

1. These grievances include both the economic and military presence of foreigners, but for a more specific treatment of the link between occupation and terrorism, see R. A. Pape, *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism* (New York: Random House, 2005); and Pape, "The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism," *American Political Science Review* 97, no. 3 (2003). But see also S. Ashworth et al., "Design, Inference, and the Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism," *American Political Science Review* 102, no. 2 (2008).

2. Brian Fishman, "Al-Qaeda and the Rise of China: Jihadi Geopolitics in a Post-Hegemonic World," *Washington Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (2011).

3. M. C. Horowitz, "Nonstate Actors and the Diffusion of Innovations: The Case of Suicide Terrorism," *International Organization* 64, no. 1 (2010); and M. C. Horowitz and P. B. K. Potter, "Allying to Kill: Terrorist Intergroup Cooperation and the Consequences for Lethality," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, released online 10 January 2013.

4. This raises the thorny question of the definition of terrorism. Beijing has been known to characterize nonviolent mass mobilization in Xinjiang and Tibet, as well as protests by Falun Gong, as acts of terrorism. While few terrorism scholars would agree with that definition, outlining a common scholarly definition of terrorism remains a challenge. Because violence in Xinjiang has an ethnic dimension and therefore typically targets both ethnic Han and the Chinese security apparatus, I define *terrorism* as the illegal use of violence by a nonstate actor to attain a political, economic, or social goal through fear, coercion, or intimidation. This is a widely employed definition borrowed from the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START).

5. Herbert S. Yee, "Ethnic Relations in Xinjiang: A Survey of Uyghur-Han Relations in Urumqi," *Journal of Contemporary China* 12, no. 36 (2003).

6. The remainder is made up of various other minorities, led by ethnic Kazaks and Hui.

7. By way of comparison, China, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan—and by extension the Shanghai Cooperation Organization—have designated the Eastern Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETLO) as a terrorist organization. In general, the ETLO is more moderate than the ETIM/TIP and has been convincingly linked to relatively few terrorist incidents, most of which took place in the late 1990s. The United States refused China's request to classify the ETLO as a terrorist organization in 2003 based primarily on its prior renunciation of violence.

8. G. Bovingdon, *The Uyghurs: Strangers in their Own Land* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

9. Wei Shan and Gang Chen, "The Urumqi Riots and China's Ethnic Policy in Xinjiang," *East Asian Policy* 1, no. 3 (2011).

10. Cui Jia, "Xinjiang Security Funding Increased by 90 Percent," *China Daily*, 13 January 2010.

11. Roy Kamphausen, David Lai, and Andrew Scobell, *Beyond the Strait: PLA Missions other than Taiwan* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2008).

12. I generated figure 1 using data from the Terrorism Knowledge Base (TKB), a dataset developed and sponsored by the Memorial Institute for the Prevention of Terrorism. I supplemented these data with open-source academic and media publications to generate a more complete picture of the relationships in this understudied portion of the broader terrorist network.

13. Horowitz and Potter, "Allying to Kill"; and Horowitz, "Nonstate Actors and the Diffusion of Innovation."

14. The United States and United Nations also assert that a link exists.

15. J. Todd Reed and Diana Raschke, *The ETIM: China's Islamic Militants and the Global Terrorist Threat* (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2010).

16. Abdul Shakoor Turkistani was killed 24 August 2012, and at this writing it is unclear who replaced him. Chinese authorities accused him of planning attacks on Chinese nationals in Pakistan and orchestrating the ETIM/TIP campaign prior to the 2008 Olympics. *China Daily*, 21 October 2008.

17. Bill Roggio, "Turkistan Islamic Party Leader Thought Killed in US Drone Strike," *Long War Journal*, 25 August 2012, [http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2012/08/turkistan\\_islamic\\_pa\\_1.php](http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2012/08/turkistan_islamic_pa_1.php).

18. Abdul Shakoor is also thought to have been appointed to this body when he was given command of al-Qaeda forces in the region.

19. Bill Roggio, "Al Qaeda Appoints New Leader of Forces in Pakistan's Tribal Areas," *Long War Journal*, 9 May 2011.

20. However, fighters from Xinjiang have been active in other theaters such as Afghanistan and Chechnya, and there have long been concerns that such fighters will return to Xinjiang battle-hardened. See Reed and Raschke, *ETIM*.

21. Ministry of Public Security, "List of Confirmed Terrorists, Batch 3," 6 April 2012.

22. Mao Zedong stated in a speech on 22 August 1964 that

The Palestinian Arabs should go back to their homeland. Right up to the present time we have had no diplomatic relations with the Israeli government. The Arabs are the overwhelming majority. All Arab peoples are opposed to their fellow-Arabs being driven out of Palestine. If we don't stand on your side we will be making a mistake. That is why we are with you. But it is not just a question of Israel but of who stands behind Israel. Therefore it is a world question and particularly one concerning the USA.

23. There are exceptions to this trend. For example, China maintains ties to Iran, Sudan, Zimbabwe, Burma, and North Korea, though these relationships reflect strategic concerns about commerce, borders, encirclement, and local instability rather than concerns about international standing.

24. See M. D. Swaine and A. J. Tellis, *Interpreting China's Grand Strategy: Past, Present and Future* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2000); S. L. Shirk, *China: Fragile Superpower* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Shirk, *The Political Logic of Economic Reform in China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); and M. D. Swaine and D. P. Henry, *China: Domestic Change and Foreign Policy* (Santa Monica: RAND, 1995).

25. While the US fixation on terrorism during the Bush administration was useful to China in some regards, other aspects of the "war on terror" have made the Chinese foreign policy establishment more uncomfortable. Most notably, Chinese decision makers have tended to object to the degree that it has served as the basis for US unilateralism, though they have done so strategically. See S. Shen, *China and Antiterrorism* (New York: Nova Science Publishers, 2007), 10–17.

26. The shift can be clearly seen in foreign policy position papers issued during this period. See, for example, "China's Position Paper on Enhanced Cooperation in the Field of Non-Traditional Security Issues" (2002), which states, "As for international cooperation on counter-terrorism, China supports an enhanced leading role of the United Nations in combating terrorism."

27. The frequencies in fig. 2 are substantially different from those available from Chinese sources, which typically combine riots and terrorism. In many ways, mass mobilization is a greater concern for Chinese security officials than small-scale terrorist attacks.

28. Suzanne Ogden, "Inoculation against Terrorism in China: What's in the Dosage?" in *Democratic Development and Political Terrorism: The Global Perspective*, ed. William Crotty (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2005).

29. Horowitz, "Nonstate Actors and the Diffusion of Innovations."

30. Prior to its emergence as a global power, China was heavily engaged in the affairs of a few countries in its immediate region that subsequently emerged as terrorist hotbeds, most notably Pakistan and Indonesia. However, these are exceptions that tend to prove the rule. In both cases, China maintained a low public profile despite its substantial engagement behind the scenes. Moreover, China consciously avoided maintaining military bases, engaging in resource extraction, keeping close public association with foreign leadership, or pursuing other types of engagement most likely to mobilize a terrorist response.

31. This is an extensive literature, but for two good examples, see D. Shambaugh, *Power Shift: China and Asia's New Dynamics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); and B. Zheng, "China's 'Peaceful Rise' to Great-Power Status," *Foreign Affairs* 84, no. 5 (September/October 2005).

32. Jessica Weiss, "Authoritarian Signaling, Mass Audiences, and Nationalist Protest in China," *International Organization* 67, no. 1 (2013).

33. Examples are the attack on the USS *Cole* in the Gulf of Aden and the earlier attack on the Marine barracks in Lebanon.

34. Similar regional engagement also has the potential to contribute to grievances. For example, China has been spending heavily in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, as well. They have built and repaired a lot of the national highway systems and built hydroelectric dams, among other projects. Indeed, there is some evidence that Chinese are illegally settling farming villages located next to the border with China by bribing local officials for residency permits.

35. Fishman, "Al-Qaeda and the Rise of China."

36. Paul B. Stares et al., *Managing Instability on China's Periphery*, (Washington: Council on Foreign Relations, 2011).

37. Congressional Research Service (CRS), *Al-Qaeda: Profile and Threat Assessment* (Washington: CRS, 2005).

38. Quoted in William M. Arkin, "Military Bases Boost Capability but Fuel Anger," *Los Angeles Times* Op-Ed, 6 January 2002.

39. Cass R. Sunstein, "Terrorism and Probability Neglect," *Journal of Risk and Uncertainty* 26, no. 2 (2003).

40. Walter Laqueur stated this relationship succinctly when he wrote, "the media are the terrorist's best friends . . . the terrorist act by itself is nothing, publicity is all." Quoted in R. F. Farnen, "Terrorism and the Mass Media: A Systematic Analysis of a Symbiotic Process," *Terrorism* 13 (1990).

41. D. Stockmann and M. E. Gallagher, "Remote Control: How the Media Sustain Authoritarian Rule in China," *Comparative Political Studies* 44, no. 4 (2011).

42. S. Liu, "Structuration of Information Control in China," *Cultural Sociology* 5, no. 3 (2011).

43. Famous incidents include one involving Sun Zhigang, a migrant graphic designer, beaten to death by police. See H. Yu, "From Active Audience to Media Citizenship: The Case of Post-Mao China," *Social Semiotics* 16, no. 2 (2006). Another incident known as the "Wanzhou uprising" was in response to an encounter between a "lowly porter" and a "self-proclaimed" government official. See Y. Zhao, "Rethinking Chinese Media Studies," in *Internationalizing Media Studies*, ed. D. K. Thussu (New York: Routledge, 2009).

44. I. Weber and L. Jia, "Internet and Self-Regulation in China: The Cultural Logic of Controlled Commodification," *Media, Culture & Society* 29, no. 5 (2007).

45. Search terms used include *East Turkestan Islamic Movement*, 东突厥斯坦伊斯兰运动 (又称 "东突厥斯坦伊斯兰党"、"真主党"、"东突厥斯坦民族革命阵线"、"东突伊斯兰运动, 简称 "东伊运" ); *East Turkestan Liberation Organization*, 东土耳其斯坦解放组织, 简称 "东突解放组织", 最大的称为 "东突民族党"; ordinary Chinese refer to Xinjiang terrorist organizations by a shared abbreviation, *dongtu*, 东突; *terrorist attack*, 恐怖袭击; *terrorist*, 恐怖分子; *terrorism*, 恐怖主义; and *Xinjiang independence*, 疆独.

46. See “Experts Say Dongtu Is Not a Real Threat to the Olympics,” August 2008, [http://realtime.zaobao.com/2008/08/080811\\_05.shtml](http://realtime.zaobao.com/2008/08/080811_05.shtml).

47. See “What Should City Residents Do in the Event of a Terrorist Attack?” 8 July 2008, <http://news.qq.com/a/20080807/002669.htm>; and “Resident Terrorist Watch Manual,” 21 July 2008, <http://2008.163.com/08/0721/09/4HC9NMIQ00742KTQ.html>.

48. Search [tianya.cn](http://www.tianya.cn) from July to October 2008, keywords: *dongtu*, 东突; *terrorist attack*, 恐怖袭击; *terrorist*, 恐怖分子.

49. For example: “US Legislature Ruled that Dongtu are not Criminals—China’s Enemy is US friend,” <http://www.tianya.cn/publicforum/content/worldlook/1/186955.shtml>; “Dongtu 18 Years of Evil! The Lamentations of a Murdered Special Forces Officer,” <http://www.tianya.cn/publicforum/content/news/1/103812.shtml>; “Chinese Military: Even If Dongtu Has 300 Caves, Let’s Blow Them All Up!” <http://www.tianya.cn/publicforum/content/worldlook/1/189377.shtml>; “Multiple Cars Explode, By Terrorists,” <http://www.tianya.cn/publicforum/content/water/1/791085.shtml>.

50. Osama bin Laden was explicit about this strategy, as noted in “Transcript: Translation of Bin Laden’s Videotaped Message,” *Washington Post*, 1 November 2004:

It is easy for us to provoke and bait this administration. All that we have to do is to send two Mujahedin to the farthest point East to raise a piece of cloth on which is written al-Qa’ida in order to make the generals race there to cause America to suffer human economic and political losses without their achieving for it anything of note other than some benefits to their private companies. This is in addition to our having experience in using guerrilla warfare and the war of attrition to fight tyrannical superpowers as we alongside the Mujahedin bled Russia for 10 years until it went bankrupt and was forced to withdraw in defeat.

51. While many of the issues I discuss here have parallels in other areas of western China, such as Tibet, the primary focus here is on terrorist threats emanating from Xinjiang.

52. These patterns should be viewed with the caveat that all terrorism data, and particularly data on terrorism in China, is subject to selection biases and the particularly the problem of undercounting. Under certain conditions China has strategic incentives to obscure attacks. An additional cause for concern is the possibility that, due to the steady improvement in the quantity and quality of information coming out of China, this problem of undercounting is not consistent over time. This suggests a consistent downward bias of inconsistent magnitude.

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