

Giovanni Nicotera\*

## Development and Fate of Muslim Radicalism in China\*\*

### Abstract

*The economic growth and development delivered by the Chinese Communist Party to its people have not brought peace to Xinjiang. On the contrary. After decades of relative tranquillity that had followed the founding of the People's Republic, violent extremist attacks have been carried out by Uyghurs on and off not only in this northwestern region, but in several other provinces, regions and municipalities. For several reasons, the Uyghurs have felt left behind as they have seen their liberties and traditions threatened and trampled. In addition, an unstable Central and South Asian environment, together with the possibility of travelling, available to some of them in the past and the opportunity to learn on the Internet, all have contributed to the radicalization of this ethnic group. As a result, some of them have decided to resort to violence. Beijing could have revisited its overall policies against ethnic minorities to assess where they have failed, but it has chosen instead an alternative strategy based on control and on the use of force. This strategy appears to be successful in keeping in check violence and restoring peace in the restive region, but brings with it probably the end of an old culture.*

**Keywords:** Xinjiang, Uyghur, OBOR, radicalism, minorities, artificial intelligence, administrative detention.

### 1. Introduction

Quetta, the capital of Balochistan province, Pakistan, 24 May 2017, two Chinese citizens working there as teachers are abducted and few days later killed by members of the Islamic State. What may seem a minor, though very tragic, incident in an unstable region, becomes particularly relevant because Quetta is placed across the forthcoming China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which is at present the major project under the One Belt One Road initiative. Its relevance, however, is much greater than that as it adds up to other recent incidents, thus contributing to forming a growing chain of violence against Chinese citizens in China and abroad<sup>1</sup>.

Particularly surprising was the suicide bomb attack against the Chinese embassy in

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<sup>1</sup> Previously Fan Jinghui, a former middle-school teacher in Beijing and freelance advertising consultant was killed in Iraq, in November 2015. Fan was the first Chinese citizen to be killed by the Islamic State.

Kyrgyzstan's capital Bishkek<sup>2</sup> where, on 30 August 2016, a van exploded after ramming through its gates killing the driver and injuring three local staff. According to Kyrgyzstan's<sup>3</sup> security services (GKNB) the suicide bomber was an ethnic Uyghur member of the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, an extremist separatist organization that China, together with few other countries including the US and the European Union, consider a terrorist organization.

Only by reading these and other recent events jointly, the entire significance of what is happening becomes evident. China can no longer enjoy the benefits that globalization bestowed upon her without paying the price that comes with it: in order to continue growing China needs, like other global players, to venture abroad, thus becoming more visible and exposed to today's dangers, from terrorism to piracy, from ethnic conflicts to wars.

But the problem for China is more complex than it is for the other powers that developed before her. China in fact hosts a conspicuous Muslim minority, part of which is dissatisfied with life under Beijing's rule and is becoming more radicalized. In today's interconnected world this radicalism can more easily reach out to, and combine forces with, more radical and violent foreign Muslim movements such as ISIS, Al Qaeda and the Taliban. This new scenario increases the chances that Chinese citizens and interests become now targeted by Muslim radicals both within and beyond China's borders.

## **2. History of attacks attributed to Muslims in China**

Until a few years ago attacks carried out by Muslim extremists against Chinese citizens had taken place mainly in China's north-west province Xinjiang. Lately, other provinces, regions and municipalities have been affected too. It is a real game-changer, but it was not always like that.

The period 1949-1980 was a peaceful one at least in respect to religion-motivated terrorism. A country leaving behind two wars - one against Japan and the other against the nationalist Guomindang, poor and isolated, and led by a powerful Communist Party could not have possibly given birth to the kind of violent terrorist actions we see today. In those days the only violent actions were those perpetrated by the Party\State against its own citizens through several movements from the Great Leap Forward to the Cultural Revolution<sup>4</sup>. Later, with Mao's death, people's time and attention was devoted to rebuilding, feeding and healing the nation.

Things started to change in the 1990s when sporadic, though mostly minor, incidents began. One, however, stood out and marked this decade: on 25 February 1997, in Urum-

<sup>2</sup> It is not the first time that Chinese officials are targeted in the city, with two shot dead in 2000 and a consul and his driver killed in 2002 in incidents that authorities blamed on Uyghur militants.

<sup>3</sup> Agence France-Press, "Uyghur militant behind attack on China's embassy in Kyrgyzstan named by security service", *South China Morning Post*, Available at: <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2016322/kyrgyzstan-blames-chinese-embassy-attack-uygur-jihadis>, (accessed on 06/09/2016).

<sup>4</sup> During the decade that goes under the name of Cultural Revolution, ethnic minorities, including the Uyghurs, suffered particularly with their religion, culture and language being targeted

qi, bombs exploded on three buses causing 9 dead and 74 injured. After that China enjoyed again two decades of relative tranquillity only to be awakened on 5th July 2009 when, always in Urumqi, a large-scale rioting by Uyghurs was suppressed with 184 lives lost and 1,100 injured<sup>5</sup>. The Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (XPCC),<sup>6</sup> led the crackdown, which the Uyghurs consider a massacre. Notably, the incident was characterized by odd modalities with some of the attackers utilizing syringes believed to be infected with HIV, and it had long-lasting consequences on life in China with the interdiction of several social networking services and other restrictions on online social media which continue to the present day.<sup>7</sup>

Since then there has been an escalation in violence. In 2011<sup>8</sup>, in 2012<sup>9</sup>, in 2013, and particularly in 2014<sup>10</sup>, ethnic Uyghurs carried out numerous attacks. The years 2013 and 2014, in particular, are to be remembered as, for the first time in the history of the PRC, the attackers targeted major Chinese cities (Kunming in Yunnan and Guanzhou in Guangdong) and even the capital Beijing where the attack took place right in Tiananmen square<sup>11</sup> one of the most protected sites on the planet, few hundred metres away from the Ministry of Public Security and from Zhongnanhai where the Chinese leadership live.

The scale and the extension of the range of attacks caught the authorities by surprise, forced them to review the intelligence and surveillance *apparata* and made their prevention job more difficult because as of now attacks could occur anywhere. In fact, despite the clamour raised by this event, few months later, on 1 May 2014, three people were killed and 79 injured when assailants stormed Urumqi's south railway station just as President Xi Jinping was completing a tour of the region and security measures should have been at their peak. This last attack is also relevant as it may be considered the first in China whereby the attackers employed both explosives and a suicide technique. Modalities witnessed before only in Afghanistan, Pakistan and in the Middle East are now being tested in the second economic power. Though no group claimed responsibility, Beijing put the blame on the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM).

### 3. The origin of the problem

The Uyghurs live primarily in the Xinjiang Autonomous Region (XAR). One-sixth of Chi-

5 D. Eimer, "As China reels from 184 deaths in Urumqi riots, a beaten woman fears for her husband", *The Telegraph*, 11 July 2009, Available at: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/china/5805352/As-China-reels-from-184-deaths-in-Urumqi-riots-a-beaten-woman-fears-for-her-husband.html>, (accessed on 11/12/2017).

6 The XPCC (*xinjiang shengchan jianshe bingtuan*) originates from the fusion of the 1st army corps and the 22nd army corps. Led by General Wang Zhen it brought Xinjiang back under China's control and was for many years in charge of establishing and defending agricultural settlements and garrisons for those Han population settling down in Xinjiang. Today it is a paramilitary organization with production and paramilitary tasks.

7 Facebook, Instagram, Google were from then on not available in the PRC.

8 In 2011 three attacks took place respectively in Hotan, Kashgar and Pishan with 27 dead and 51 injured.

9 On 29 June 2012, an attempted hijacking of flight Tianjin Airlines 7554 took place right after taking off from Hotan airport causing 2 dead and 14 injured.

10 Attacks took place in Bachu, Beijing, Aksu, Kunming, Kirghilik-Kashgar, Tibet.

11 On 28 October 2013, in Tianmen square, Beijing, a vehicle carrying three Uyghurs hit an old bridge and exploded, killing all the three onboard and two tourists and injuring 38 others.

na's territory, landlocked, covered with mountains, deserts, and grasslands, this region is more similar to a Central Asian country than to rice fields of southern China, cradle of China's civilization.

They are a Turkic ethnic group with features different from the Han and ranging from Caucasian to Mongolian, that practices mostly Sunni Islam, and speak a Turkic dialect. They are not the only Muslim group in China however, with the other one being the Hui who are more numerous (20 million vs. 8 million), and not concentrated in only one region like the Uyghurs and, most importantly, they are ethnically Han unlike Uyghurs.

After Mao's death, at least for two decades, the Uyghur population had a relatively peaceful life, also enjoying some privileges such as a slightly higher salary than the majority Han<sup>12</sup>. While the salary was the same for all Chinese of equivalent function, the Uyghur were given a subsidy to buy lamb as they could not eat pork which was cheaper.<sup>13</sup> They were also granted daily work-breaks to pray and were allowed to rest on Fridays in respect of the day when Muslims across the globe gather to pray. The result was that they were working less than the majority Han, but got payed more and consequently the Han started to harbor resentment.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, they were allowed like other minorities to have more than one child. The Uyghurs considered such more favourable treatment a sort of partial compensation for the occupation of their land by the Han Chinese<sup>15</sup>. Indeed, from 60BC under the Han dynasty to 1949 with the foundation of the PRC, Xinjiang had been often but not always, a protectorate of imperial China, thus enjoying brief periods of independence.

Taking advantage of removal of travel restrictions that accompanied Deng's era, a few Uyghurs left Xinjiang to study religion in Saudi Arabia. When they got back they had mastered Arabic language and were indoctrinated in Wahabbism, an ultraconservative doctrine of Islam which is considered by many<sup>16</sup> to be inspiring the global terrorist movement from Al-Qaeda to ISIS. Such newly acquired knowledge allowed them upon return to replace the old mullahs who - like in other Communist countries - had managed to keep alive only a milder, secular form of Islam, so that Uyghurs overall could not be considered, until the return of these students, radical Muslims in any way.

But other events, besides the return to Xinjiang of these Wahabi scholars, played a role in what we can consider the beginning of this process of self-conscience and radicalization. Firstly, the 1989 defeat of the Soviet Army in Afghanistan showed to young Muslims, whether Arabs, Pakistanis, or also Uyugurs, that it is possible to win a superpower. Secondly, in the 1980s and 1990s Afghanistan had become a place where young Muslim extremists from around the globe could train – especially in the use of improvised explosive devices (IED) and other explosives - and fight through the inevitable contacts with

12 F. Sisci, "Radicalismi cinesi", *Settimana News*, 9 September 2017, Available at: <http://www.settimananews.it/religioni/radicalismicinesi/>, (accessed on 15/03/2018).

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

16 The European Parliament as well.

the Taliban, the teachers in Pakistan's madrassas and in Central Asia. Thirdly, the Internet offers today the possibility to learn and empower also to those unable to leave Xinjiang for going abroad, thus playing virtually the role that Afghanistan plays practically on the ground by putting in touch young jihadis from around the world. Lastly, the bond among them was easily forged as this youth, the Taliban, ISIS, Al-Qaeda, and ETIM all belong to Sunni Islam.

This neighbouring Central Asian radical environment, together with Beijing's rough application of laws and policies on minorities, triggered in the 1990's first attacks by Uyghurs in the PRC as we have seen before. It is in this period that Han and Uyghurs, formerly friendly neighbours, started to live separate lives. Old practices such as mixed marriages, previously allowed, started to disappear and several religious privileges so far enjoyed by the Uyghurs were abolished: Ramadan was prohibited and religious schools tightly controlled. New waves of migrant workers mostly ethnic Han started to arrive and settle there in separate enclaves watering down the already less numerous Uyghur population.

#### 4. China's assessment and response

Central level authorities are aware that their combined strategy of repression and improving of living conditions has failed, and are attempting to remedy the situation though measures taken are contradictory. Few appear liberal,<sup>17</sup> several are repressive and, moreover, measures are often applied superficially or insensitively by local officials. Some measures in particular, whether adopted occasionally or long term, have lately heightened the already tense situation. Among them it is worth recalling the imposal of travel restrictions and the return of passports, the collection of DNA samples<sup>18</sup>, an extensive police presence, a pervasive video surveillance and the use of administrative detention on a broad scale. To make things worst, the local Uyghur police has lost Beijing's trust and Chinese leaders now completely rely on ethnically Han public security and paramilitary forces. This local ethnic police had for long allowed Beijing to be close to the local population as far away as tiny villages and in touch with their hearts and minds, thus permitting the monitoring of moods, the prevention of offensive actions and the fine-tuning of policies if needed. In other words, an effective policing method<sup>19</sup> has today given way to a top-down, ethnically different and personally indifferent police force.

For long, but not anymore, China has failed to fully recognize that the reasons behind the deterioration of the situation in Xinjiang were of her own making and established instead that religion, and the influence exerted on the Uyghurs from extremists abroad, particularly from Pakistan, were to be blamed. As a result, in the early 2000s China started to support this country at the expense of India<sup>20</sup>. In exchange for China's support, Pakistan

17 For instance, President Xi Jinping's invitation to Han public servants and teachers to study the local language goes in the right direction.

18 Benjamin Haas, "Chinese authorities collecting DNA from all residents of Xinjiang", *The Guardian*, 13 December 2017, Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/dec/13/chinese-authorities-collecting-dna-residents-xinjiang>, (accessed on 22/01/2018).

19 Such proximity police is also known as "community policing".

20 F. Sisci, "Radicalismi cinesi", *Settimana News*, 9 September 2017, Available at: <http://www.settimananews.it/religioni/radicalismi-cinesi/>, (accessed on 15/03/2018).

committed to control the Uyghurs on its territory and curb flows inside and outside its borders and to make sure weapons and explosives would not fall into their hands<sup>21</sup>. This cooperation between the two countries was not flawless and yesterday like today the role of the Pakistani government and of its security services in the fight against terrorism remains ambiguous. For instance, some Uyghurs were allowed to continue military training in Pakistan's province Waziristan. But the cooperation between the two proved useful in one important aspect: not only Uyghur's capabilities were curtailed, but sophisticated weapons and explosives did not fall into the hands of Uyghur militants as testified by the fact that so far Uyghurs for most of their attacks had to resort to basic offensive weapons such as kitchen knives, needles, black powder and gas tanks.

Overall, Beijing believes it has good reasons to keep a strong control over Uyghurs. Since 1991, when the USSR imploded also because of minorities' issues, China had kept a close eye on all ethnic minorities, and not only the Uyghurs, because most of them live on China's borders. If grievances from one of them grow into an armed insurgency, then they may fight for separation possibly leading – Beijing fears – to a break-up scenario similar to the last years of the Soviet Union and the initial ones of the Russian Federation.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, the events from 9\11 onwards, and in particular the threat of ISIS remnants moving towards Asia, strengthen their conviction that Muslim religion is a great danger to their society.

## 5. The present day

The Uyghurs have grown more conscious of their identity and rights, and do not see their conditions getting improved as it is steadily happening to their Han neighbours. This self-awareness and awakening is happening moreover in a completely different geopolitical landscape. With almost complete defeat of ISIS in Iraq and Syria, trained jihadi fighters are moving out of the Middle East and several are on the way towards Central Asia, South and South East Asia. Among them there are Uyghurs as well, this seems now beyond doubt,<sup>23</sup> and some may be attempting to re-enter China. In fact, according to Chinese government the number of these experienced fighters that were intercepted trying to re-enter rose, 16 times in 2017<sup>24</sup> with respect to 2016, though authorities failed to provide evidence and the exact number.

This completely new geopolitical scenario changes the size and potential of the enemy Beijing is confronting: no more a disgruntled, backward and isolated minority, but an aware and determined force with strong and dangerous connections abroad. The ingredients for a powerful explosion are almost all there. The ideology is now available local-

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21 Ibid.

22 China attributes the fall of the Soviet Union to a mix of weak control of its ethnic minorities on the borders and of satellite states in Eastern Europe, and to the launching political reforms before ensuring economic growth.

23 While the exact number of Uyghurs involved in fighting in Syria remains difficult to determine, it appears to have grown significantly since 2012.

24 W. Wu, "China saw 16-fold increase in returning jihadis in 2017, analysts say", *South China Morning Post*, 2 April 2018, Available at: <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2139983/china-saw-16-fold-increase-returning-jihadists-2017>, (accessed on 05/05/2018).

ly, barely contained by the limitations imposed by Beijing on mosque prayers, lessons in madrassas, the media and the Internet. The forces capable of carrying out the attacks are either available locally or they are closing in, and today they are being trained.. The main missing ingredient are those modern weapons and explosives which brought havoc not only in the Middle East and Central Asia, also in Europe lately<sup>25</sup>. Here in fact Beijing is still one step ahead of its adversaries: finding automatic firearms and sophisticated explosives is almost impossible. This, however, may change one day, also thanks to the forthcoming interconnectivity between China and the rest of the world as a result of the “One Belt One Road” project. The increase in transport connections and in transported cargoes will offer more opportunities for smugglers to ship illegal weapons, together with other illegal goods such as drugs or counterfeits, and, moreover, to smuggle-in trained fighters. Last but not least, dissatisfied and radicalized youth could resort to other attack techniques witnessed in Europe itself, where in the absence of firearms and explosives, civilian vehicles are stolen and utilized as ramming weapons.

The size of this threat may even increase as the problem is not just represented by some Muslim radicals, but also by the mix of growing Muslim radicalism within a minority and an overall sense of isolation, disappointment and resentment brewing among the majority. More members within this disgruntled majority may be tempted to join the minority and determine a further escalation of radicalism in Western China. And that could not stop there. If control measures on religion start to be applied on other so far untouched Muslim communities like the Hui<sup>26</sup>, they too could start harboring resentment and eventually one day resort to violence, though at present this seems very unlikely.

## 6. Conclusion

China is not facing a full-fledged terrorist campaign, but it is evident that today the CPC is up against a growing Muslim radicalism within China and a trans-nationalization of the Uyghur fight.

If China really wants to preserve peace in the North-West, prevent violence from spilling over other regions, letting alone ensuring safe passage for cargoes and people moving along the new Silk Road, it should fundamentally revisit the national policies towards ethnic minorities with specific attention towards religion and social integration.

In particular, Beijing should make sure that the Uyghurs become true beneficiaries of economic and social development as much as the majority Han is and reduce the growing gap.<sup>27</sup> Authorities should also see that Uyghurs get access to senior jobs in the public administration, including positions in the police and the regional government, and facil-

<sup>25</sup> Berlin, Paris.

<sup>26</sup> Reuters, “China’s Hui Muslims fear education ban signals wider religious crackdown”, *South China Morning Post*, 17 February 2018, Available at: <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/policies-politics/article/2133641/chinas-hui-muslims-fear-education-ban-signals-wider>, (accessed on 03/04/2018).

<sup>27</sup> The national government is in truth continuing the battle to reduce poverty, and not only part of ethnic minorities are still poor but also several millions Han still leave under the poverty threshold.

itate a return to the past of social mixing and interactions between Han and Uyghurs so that fears, anxiety and prejudice on both sides are reduced. More control on the hateful language and on the anti-Islam rethoric circulating on the Internet and a non-stigmatising press coverage would be additional pillars of a new succesful integration and appeasing strategy.

Will all of this happen? The reality on the ground and Beijing's firm ideas on the danger represented by minorities' settlements at the borders and by religion as an independent power from the Party, do not allow optimism.

It is likely that China will mainly resort to her wide arsenal of repressive and control tools: from administrative detention in re-education camps to close door trials, from the use of paramilitary force in tasks usually entrusted to civilian police to the latest weapon, the application of artificial intelligence (AI) in combination with surveillance.<sup>28</sup> The rapid increase in its use in Xinjiang and beyond, may finally bring about not only the end of privacy, but also convince even the more radical of them that there is no future for their fight. Uyghur radicals, facing almost certain identification even before carrying out their attacks, may decide to abandon the cause of separatism with some of them going back to ordinary civilian life and some eventually deciding to continue the fight in the name of Islam outside China's borders by joining terrorist organizations in Central, South and South-East Asia and the Middle East. The decrease in violent attacks in China these last months appears to anticipate this ultimate result.

In historic perspective Xinjiang seems today much closer to following the fate of Inner Mongolia – where a sudden influx of ethnic Han in the 1960s contributed to the depletion of the grasslands and to the end of the way of life of its shepherd population - and of Tibet where an ancient culture is fastly disappearing.

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28 Facial recognition, behaviour analysis, people counting, crowd density monitoring, stereoscopic vision.



*Guardian*, 13 December 2017, Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/dec/13/chinese-authorities-collecting-dna-residents-xinjiang>, (accessed on 22/01/2018).

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Ђовани Никотера

## **Развој и судбина муслиманског радикализма у Кини**

Апстракт

Економски раст и развој који је Комунистичка партија Кине омогућила свом народу није донео мир Синђангу. Напротив. Након деценија релативног мира који је уследио оснивањем Народне Републике, догодили су се насилни екстремистички напади Ујгура, не само у овом северозападном региону, већ и у неколико других провинција, региона и општина. Из бројних разлога, Ујгури се сада осећају занемареним и виде своје слободе и традицију угроженим. Поред тога, нестабилно окружење у средњој и јужној Азији, заједно са могућношћу да путују, која се некимма пружала у прошлости и приликом да уче путем Интернета, допринело је радикализацији ове етничке групе. Као резултат тога, неки од њих су одлучили да прибегну насиљу. Пекинг је могао ревидирати своје свеукупне политике према етничким мањина како би проценио где оне нису успеле, али је уместо тога изабрао алтернативну стратегију која се заснива на контроли и употреби силе. Чини се да је ова стратегија успешна у контролисању насиља и поновном успостављању мира у нестабилном региону, али са собом доноси вероватно и крај једне старе културе.

**Кључне речи:** Синђанг, Ујгури, ОБОР, радикализам, мањине, вештачка интелигенција, административни притвор