

Teemu Naarajärvi

University of Helsinki

War on Terror with Chinese Characteristics?

Introduction

The collapse of the Soviet Union was a tumultuous event for Inner Eurasia. Giving birth to five new Central Asian republics, it also gave hope—even if a false one—to other ethnic groups seeking sovereignty that the collapse of empires of the early 20th century might continue. The end of the Communist superpower and the according rise of nationalist sentiments did not go unnoticed in the neighbouring People’s Republic of China. Throughout the 1990s, the relationship between the state authority and some ethnic minorities in China were edgy, to say the least.

This article discusses the nature of Uighur separatism in China’s western Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region as viewed by Chinese official media in an international context. That is, how did Uighur separatism “become” international in Chinese discourse? The article also describes how China resisted the separatism, especially in the international arena. It argues that while defending its sovereignty over an area internationally acknowledged as Chinese territory, China used the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 terrorist strikes in New York to promote its own agenda. Using limited evidence, China linked the Uighur nationalists and separatists with international terrorism in general and thus made Uighur separatism a less likely object of Western sympathy.

For primary research material, the paper uses *Huanqiu Shibao* (*Global Times*), a Chinese newspaper with an international orientation. During the 1990s and early 2000s, when *Huanqiu Shibao* was published solely in Chinese, it was the foremost newspaper to specialize in international affairs. Being a party-led newspaper published under the *People’s Daily*, it also included an “official” viewpoint.

Uighur Separatism

To a large extent forgotten in the early years of the 21st century, the Uighur movement returned to the international spotlight in the summer of 2009 with the riots of Urumqi. This time the focus was on the situation of the Uighur people, not only in their “own” region but also elsewhere in China. Until then, headlines in the West about Uighurs had primarily concerned acquitted prisoners of Guantanamo Bay, with the United States trying to release them in a way that they would not face a risk of deportation to China. For the Chinese government, these people were terrorists (even though the US military admitted that they had been arrested on false pretexts). Their arrests in the early 2000s would probably have never taken place, had the US not agreed to add (and not persuaded the United Nations to add) some Uighur separatist organisations to the list of international terrorist organisations.

China has understandably shown little tolerance for Uighur separatism or nationalism in the region. Combined with the heavy emphasis on state sovereignty by the Chinese, this is partly because Xinjiang was, together with Tibet, one of the last regions to be “liberated” in the early 1950s and likely has the strongest separatist movement in China today, with support from a large percentage of the local population. The heavy immigration of Han Chinese from the eastern and central parts of China, however, has resulted in significantly changed demographics: the percentage of ethnic Chinese in the Xinjiang population has risen dramatically. The change can be seen also from a different point of view: in 1900 the population of Xinjiang province was only two million, whereas now it is approximately 20 million. The increase consists mainly of Han Chinese. (Rudelson 1997: 37–8; Wu 2006)

The altered demographic landscape has led to a polarization of sentiments. The Han people, who identify themselves as Chinese citizens, feel no need to change the current situation and see the separatists as terrorists and religious extremists. The Uighurs, who have lost their previous position of dominance in the province, feel increasingly threatened and desperate. The collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, which led to the establishment of surrounding Central Asian republics, gave Uighurs some hope for change. But they soon realised that their fate would not follow the same path. This led to several riots (for example, in Barkul and Kulja/Yining in the middle of the 1990s). Chinese authorities clamped down hard on the rioters and arbitrary detentions continued for a long time afterwards. (Amnesty 1999)

As already mentioned, the Chinese paint the separatists of Xinjiang as terrorists. Terrorists, together with separatists and religious extremists, comprise a set of major security threats known in China as the “Three Evils” (HQSB 19.6.2001). In Xinjiang, all of the “Three Evils” are alleged to be found in the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), which is the biggest and most active of the Uighur nationalist movements. The Chinese have filed as ETIM-related terrorism nearly all incidents of any nationalist or separatist nature. The actual

nature of ETIM is still somewhat unclear, seeing that there are several different separatist movements working for Uighur independence (Wang 2003: 575). However, the view of the Chinese government is that all of these various movements are operating under the ETIM umbrella and that they are all terrorist organisations.

According to frequently cited Chinese studies, the ETIM was responsible for approximately 200 terrorist strikes that have led to the deaths of 162 persons between 1990 and 2001 (State Council 2002; see also Li 2005: 287). Although nobody can deny that most of these incidents occurred, it is very likely that many of them were individual attacks with no relation to organised separatist movements. Moreover, in comparison to Al Qaida and its large scale suicide attacks, one has to wonder about a terrorist organisation with a kill ratio of only 0,8 people per strike. The Chinese definition of terrorism argues that there are different types of terrorism in the world and that 'different countries are fully in the position to specify further in the light of terrorism within their own boundary [sic]' (Li 2005: 286). Although one cannot deny the rights of a state to defend itself, this kind of 'open doors' definition of terrorism seems rather opportunistic, especially when coined exactly when the Global War on Terror was being declared.

China and the Global War on Terror

The September 11, 2001 terrorist strikes in the United States and the Global War on Terror that followed made the situation even worse for the Uighurs. If their plight had previously attracted at least mild attention from the US and the EU, as Muslims they could now expect even less help from Western countries. Quick to exploit the situation, the Chinese government wasted no time in publishing the results of their own research: the Uighur separatists were not only terrorists but also closely linked to Al Qaida and the Taliban of Afghanistan. As the United States had a grave need for partners while expanding its war on terror, it was willing to consider Chinese lobbying; during the autumn of 2002, the ETIM was added to the United Nations' list of terrorist organisations. Below I will present a more detailed description of the events that led to this decision.

Unlike ETIM or its possible relationship with other terrorist organisations, the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and Osama bin Laden's Al Qaida were well known to the Chinese public in the late 1990s. Although one can also find even earlier articles on Afghanistan, Al Qaida's strikes on US embassies in Eastern Africa in August 1998 generated new interest in Osama bin Laden in China. For example, the newspaper *Huanqiu Shibao* followed the story closely. Between 1999 and 2000 the paper ran 14 articles on the Taliban, terrorism and Osama bin Laden. The trend continued in 2001, with nearly twenty articles appearing before the terrorist strikes of September 11.

Reading the articles that appeared in *Huanqiu Shibao*, it quickly becomes evident that Xinjiang-related terrorists or separatists such as ETIM are not mentioned. The Taliban regime, harbouring of foreign combatants, or protecting Osama bin Laden are not linked even once to Uighur separatism prior to the autumn of 2001. By the end of summer 2000, due to other terrorist activities in the Central Asian republics, the countries of the region decided to join forces against the Islamic networks which were funding Islamic activities and were influenced by the situation in Afghanistan (HQSB 1.9.2000). When China joined with the other countries, it did not appear to be specifically worried about Uighur activities but about Islamic fundamentalism in general, as represented primarily by the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). The concern for China at this point was the stability of its Western neighbours.

The terrorist strikes of September 2001 obviously created new interest in Al Qaida, much like what happened in the summer of 1998 when Al Qaida attacked the US embassies in Africa. However, attention this time was much more intense; the focus of *Huanqiu Shibao* shifted more to general geopolitics, as the United States initiated military actions in Afghanistan. The presence of US troops in Central Asia was naturally a sensitive issue for China. After an initial success there, the US was also accused of thirsting for Central Asian oil. (HQSB 9.11.2001a) The issue of China's containment is a common theme in Chinese politics, and had been brought up in *Huanqiu Shibao* only half a year earlier (HQSB 18.5.2001).

In October 2001, the leaders of Asia Pacific gathered at an APEC meeting in Shanghai. Although this was an economic forum, the participants also discussed terrorism and published a rare statement condemning terrorism and pledging mutual cooperation (APEC 2001). Furthermore, Presidents George W. Bush and Jiang Zemin held private discussions. In a joint press conference, Chairman-President Jiang said that they had reached "a consensus" on counter-terrorism, along with many other issues. According to President Bush, "President Jiang and the government stand side by side with the American people as we fight this evil force." (White House 2001)

The following month saw the war on terror opened on a new front: in a mid-November issue of *Huanqiu Shibao*, President Jiang Zemin revealed that the ETIM, demanding the independence of Xinjiang, belonged to an international terrorist network (HQSB 16.11.2001). Prior to this, there had been no mention in *Huanqiu Shibao* of alleged links between ETIM and Al Qaida. The ETIM was not even mentioned in an article describing the "Three Evils" and the deteriorating security situation in Central Asia, published shortly before (HQSB 9.11.2001b). Significantly, the Chinese government made a direct leap from the ETIM to Al Qaida without even trying to first explain how it might be linked to the IMU (which was known to have bases in Afghanistan).

On January 21st 2002, the Information Office of the State Council released an article called "'East Turkistan' Terrorist Forces Cannot Get Away with Impunity." The article accuses "East Turkistan" forces of bombings, assassinations,

attacks on police and government institutions, poisoning and arson, establishing secret training bases, and raising money to buy and manufacture arms and ammunition, as well as plotting and organizing disturbances and riots to create an atmosphere of terror. The article also names “East Turkistan” forces as a terrorist organization and as an “important part of his [Osama bin Laden’s] terrorist forces.” (State Council 2002)

The release of the article could have not been better timed. The very next day (January 22nd 2002), the United States condemned terrorism in Xinjiang and other parts of China, saying that China has also been a victim of international terrorism. Although the US statement does not mention ETIM by name, it doesn’t have to. For Chinese readers, the connection is clear: ETIM is working together with Al Qaida to destroy both the United States and China. After this, any action towards Uighur separatism would need no other grounds. Over the following week, *Huanqiu Shibao* explained all this, describing ETIM and bin Laden as “a gang” (*yihuo*). (HQSB 28.1.2002)

China’s anti-ETIM lobbying started to see results in the second half of 2002. In August, US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage visited Beijing. During his visit, the question of anti-terrorism was included in his discussions with Chinese authorities, and Armitage promised his hosts that ETIM would be designated a terrorist organization. (HQSB 29.8.2002) The US State Department carried through on Armitage’s promise immediately after his return; on September 3rd, it added ETIM to the United States Executive Order 13224. This order, which lists all of the organizations considered as terrorists in the eyes of the US government, had already included IMU in its first draft (published August 23rd, 2001). (USDS 2004) During this process, China further claimed that ETIM was allegedly plotting to bomb the US embassy in Kyrgyzstan. (HQSB 2.9.2002)

However, a statement from a US official or even from a state as influential as the United States is not the same as clear condemnation from the larger international community. One week later (on September 11th, 2002), the United States—together with Afghanistan, China and Kyrgyzstan—called for the United Nations to add ETIM to the list of Al Qaida-related organisations mentioned in United Nations Security Council Resolution 1267. The amendment of the resolution passed unanimously in the Security Council the following day, making ETIM a terrorist organisation in the eyes of the rest of the world. This was presented as a major diplomatic victory for China in the subsequent issue of *Huanqiu Shibao*. (HQSB 16.9.2002) Moreover, as further evidence of the links between ETIM and Al Qaida, *Huanqiu Shibao* reported—over a year later—that ETIM depended logistically on Osama bin Laden and financially on the narcotic trade. (HQSB 19.9.2003)

It is fairly reasonable to argue that the decision by the UN had no connection with current Uighur separatist activities. The fall of 2002 was a difficult time for organisations connected to any kind of Islamic movement with political aims in opposition to the global status quo. In fact, the extreme change

from China's previously negative attitude towards the condemnation of Iraq to its unanimous acceptance of Resolution 1441 in the United Nations Security Council only one month later supports speculation that the biggest obstacle to China's stigmatization of the ETIM had been the United States, which itself was obliged to find a way to convince China of the danger presented by Iraq. Somehow these two countries managed to find a way to break this deadlock during the fall of 2002. It is also important to bear in mind that even today the United States is not totally convinced of the terrorist nature of ETIM: in a later report by the Department of State, ETIM was categorised as a "Group of Concern" rather than "Foreign Terrorist Organisation" (USDS 2006: 229, 237).

Conclusions

The most suspicious aspect of the entire ETIM/Al Qaida/international terrorism imbroglio is that China made no assertion of any connection before the fall of 2001. The existence of bin Laden's terrorist network was known to everybody, and ETIM was more active during the 1990s than at any time thereafter. In fact, *Huanqiu Shibao* does not mention ETIM even once in 1996–2001, even though the deadly riots in Kulja/Yining took place in 1997. This strongly suggests that ETIM was not considered to be an international movement, even in China. Focused on international affairs, *Huanqiu Shibao* was at least somewhat interested in the Central Asian security situation; other articles dealt with terrorism in that region, though they examined different Islamic organisations than ETIM. In the end, China managed to use the post-9/11 momentum for its own purposes: China received international support while all Uighur separatists, blamed for being members of ETIM, lost it.

It is noteworthy that the final appeal to the United Nations to designate ETIM as a terrorist organization connected with Al Qaida includes Kyrgyzstan, another member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), as one of the signatories. The fact that the SCO had already been fighting the "Three Evils" before September 2001 gave extra weight to China's lobbying of the United States and the United Nations. Unfortunately for the Uighurs, nobody in the UN remembered (or at least didn't feel the need to raise the point) that the SCO's anti-terrorist activities, including those of the Chinese, had formerly been targeted at the IMU, not the Uighurs, and that the connections between these two organizations were vague.

In fact, the goals of the IMU and the ETIM are not really compatible. The IMU is accused of trying to create an Islamic caliphate that would encompass most of Central Asia (Cronin et al. 2004: 37). Although the goals of ETIM are sometimes described as being the same, it has been also suggested that ETIM is aiming instead for an independent Uighur state inside of China (Fletcher & Bajoria 2008). For some neighbouring countries (Uzbekistan, for example),

the Uighur question is largely irrelevant; those nations have no wish to irritate China by helping people that China has accused of separatism. Furthermore, the existence of violent Uighur separatists is not in doubt. The question is the extent of their organisations and the best means to deal with them. In the light of the events described above, China's actions (especially after 2001) seem too harsh.

After 2001, active Uighur separatism has been weak and sporadic. This is understandable, as the Uighur separatists themselves have been quick to realise how both China and other countries would react to their actions. However, many Uighurs still hope for a more extensive, if not complete independence. This hope is born out of the example of other Central Asian countries, as well as a feeling among the Uighurs of severe injustice. The only thing that many separatist Uighurs would accept is total independence, but in the eyes of the Chinese, both the people and the government, that is out of the question. Even more so after the violent riots in Urumqi in July 2009, it can be said that the future of Uighur-Chinese relations in Xinjiang looks very bleak and that one cannot expect any major changes in the near future. This is unfortunate, since although an independent Uighur nation may be more or less impossible to achieve, there are other options that would serve Uighur interests better than the present situation.

Abbreviations

APEC	Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation
ETIM	East Turkestan (Turkistan) Islamic Movement
EU	European Union
HQSB	<i>Huanqiu Shibao (Global Times)</i>
IMU	Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organisation
UN	United Nations
US	United States
USDS	United States Department of State

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