

ISAS Brief

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New Security and Public Order Measures in Xinjiang: Concerns of Instability in CPEC's Key Region in China

Under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a collection of infrastructure projects is currently under construction throughout Pakistan, including the Karakoram Highway, which is expected to link Rawalpindi to Kashgar, the Uyghur cultural capital. The CPEC has, however, put the spotlight on Xinjiang, China's Muslim majority province plagued with ethnic unrest. Beijing recently imposed several security and public order measures which are likely to further add to the instability in the province.

Silvia Tieri¹

On 3 May 2017, the China Daily reported that drones would be deployed to conduct surveillance activities in China's Xinjiang province. Jerla Isamuddin, Xinjiang's Deputy Chairman, reportedly declared that China would use drones, and put up barbed wires and security cameras along the border to limit incursions by Islamist militants from neighbouring states. He also called for increased cooperation in the region in the fight against Islamic terrorism.² The declaration came about a week after news on a ban, extended on the population of the Muslim-majority Chinese province, on a list of traditional Islamic baby names which are

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² http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2017-05/02/content_29158788.htm; and <http://english.cctv.com/2017/05/03/ARTIAHE2HETRVnVGWToqTHkW170503.shtml>.

considered to be overly religious, ergo potentially fuelling separatism. The measure seems to be the enforcement of a new Act, approved a month earlier, which also include a ban on excessively long beards and veils in public places.³

Are the use of drones and the ban on baby-names related? Probably yes. Regardless of the reasons, both actions seem to be the latest in a series of responses by the Chinese government in the face of unrest in the province.

Beijing has been trying for decades to normalise the situation in Xinjiang through forceful methods. The ban on names which sound “too Islamic” is part of a long series of measures aimed to contrast Uyghurs’ Muslim identity and way of life – an “exceptionalism” that, for the Han-dominated Chinese Communist Party (CCP), has always appeared as annoying and potentially dangerous. From the Uyghurs’ point of view, it is rather a matter of personal freedom, minority rights and self-determination. However, the CCP does not seem willing to accept this view.

Xinjiang is a remotely located province in North-Western China. Although lesser-known and different-looking compared to the industrialised Eastern coast, it has always played an important role in the geopolitics of the area. Once a hub of trade along the Silk Road, today, it is China’s gateway to Central and South Asia. Xinjiang is adjacent to countries of great economic and geopolitical relevance – it borders Mongolia to the East; Russia to the North; and Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India to the West.

Often forgotten by historians and the media, the region came to the fore with the emergence of the war on terror, after the September 11 attacks in the United States, that the Chinese government promptly joined. New attention drawn to international terrorism highlighted the existence of links between Xinjiang-based cells and other hotbeds in neighbouring countries, with infiltration into the province of militants and money to fund *madrasas*, and Uyghur youths recruited to receive training in neighbouring Islamic republics.

Xinjiang’s relevance from a domestic and international point of view has grown further

³ <http://www.thehindu.com/news/international/china-s-beard-veil-ban-in-xinjiang-comes-into-effect/article17758744.ece>; <https://www.dawn.com/news/1123661>; and <http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/china-bans-abnormal-beards-sets-rules-on-veils-in-xinjiang>.

following the development of China's close relationship with Pakistan. Sharing a border with Pakistan, the north-western province became the Chinese gateway of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Among the range of infrastructure projects promoted under the CPEC, the Karakoram Highway is expected to link Rawalpindi to Kashgar, the Uyghur cultural capital, passing through the disputed territory of Gilgit-Baltistan. The two parties have also pledged to build a railway which would expand the Pakistani railroad network, eventually connecting it to the Uyghur city.

At the conference on 'OBOR⁴ and CPEC from the Prism of China-Pakistan Bilateral Relations', in Islamabad on 2 May 2017, a senior Chinese diplomat and a Pakistani official reportedly declared that the two countries would shortly approve a "long term plan" for the CPEC,⁵ with the next meeting between the heads of the two states – Pakistan's Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and China's President Xi Jinping scheduled for 13 May 2017, immediately before the 'Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation' which will take place in Beijing on 14 and 15 May 2017.

While the CPEC projects start to take shape, the risk of instability continues to exist in Xinjiang, especially in the light on Beijing's perpetuated restraint on local customs and the various measures taken to control the Uyghurs.

The issue of the Uyghur identity is relevant, not only from a cultural-historical point of view, but also from a political perspective. It is fundamental to note that, in Xinjiang, the problem of Islamic extremism must not be read only as part of the wider phenomenon of international Islamism, to which nowadays, the East Turkestan Independent Movement (ETIM)⁶ is connected. In fact, it is also, and first of all, an extreme instrument of self-determination. The separatist movement aims to make of the province an independent state – East Turkestan – homeland for Uyghur Muslims.

The Uyghurs are not the only citizens of China practicing the Islamic faith. In fact, China has 10 main Muslim minorities, counting for more than 20 million people. The Uyghurs, however,

⁴ OBOR refers to the One Belt, One Road initiative of the Chinese government.

⁵ <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/201952-Pakistan-China-close-to-adopting-long-term-plan-for-CPEC>; and <https://www.dawn.com/news/1330502>.

⁶ Listed as a terrorist organisation by China and the United States. See <https://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/other/des/123086.htm>

have a peculiar characterisation. Besides being the biggest group (around 10 million), they are concentrated in a specific area (Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region). They have, consequently, maintained a distinct ethnic identity, which is not the case for the other smaller minorities, who co-inhabit Han-majority areas and, consequently, have been, to a good extent, assimilated.

Before the ban on names, Xinjiang authorities had repeatedly discouraged and prohibited *hijabs*, beards and even fasting during the month of Ramadan.⁷ Earlier, Xinjiang had been targeted by a campaign of cultural assimilation promoted by government-sponsored Han colonists, who settled in the region under the aegis of the campaign of “Open up the Great West”.⁸

Since the activities attributed to the ETIM have increased in recent years, such as the attacks that occurred in Beijing in October 2013, the situation remains delicate in Xinjiang. China’s recent moves, a few weeks before the CPEC-focused forum, highlights Beijing’s urgency and preoccupation in wanting to keep the situation under control, especially now that the region plays a fundamental role in the biggest Sino-Pakistan development project.

It is unlikely that ethnic tension will be neutralised by Beijing’s iron fist. On the contrary, it is likely that the situation in the region will be further exacerbated by recent measures by Beijing, with possible consequences on the implementation of CPEC projects and on the broader cooperation between China and Pakistan.

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⁷ <https://www.dawn.com/news/1263121>; <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/06/china-bans-ramadan-fasting-muslim-region-150618070016245.html>; <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/07/02/asia/china-xinjiang-ramadan/>

⁸ N Bacquelin, “Staged development in Xinjiang”, *The China Quarterly*, No. 178 (Jun., 2004), pp. 358-378, p. 358.