

## **CHINA: THE SECURITIZATION OF THE UYGHUR ISSUE AND ITS GEOPOLITICAL IMPLICATIONS**

*By Edoardo Camilli  
Independent Consultant*

The Xinjian Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) remains one of the most troublesome provinces in China. Officially established on October 1, 1955, the XUAR has a history of separatism lead by the Uyghur minority, who managed to establish the “East Turkistan Republic” in two successful occasions in 1933-34 and 1944-49. Uyghurs are a Turkic-ethnic minority whose population is present not only in China’s western province but also in countries like Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkey, Russia and Ukraine. Their identity is, therefore, a mixture of Pan-Turkism and Pan-Islamism ideologies, being Sunni Islam their religion.

Clashes between Uyghurs and Chinese security forces are quite frequent. Recently, on January 24, 2014, about 12 people were killed in an attack in Xinjiang’s Aksu prefecture that involved the use of Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs). Considering that XUAR is of strategic importance for China, due to its energy and mineral resources, it is easy to understand the reasons behind Beijing’s increasing securitization of the Uyghur’s’ issue.

Since the 9/11 attacks perpetrated by Al Qaeda on the Unites States’ soil, the Chinese government has started perceiving Uyghurs as a Trojan Horse for radical Islamism. On January 2, Chinese Ministry of Foreign affairs criticized the US for sending Uyghur inmates from Guantanamo to Slovakia. He said these Uyghurs were terrorists who represent a serious security threat. In fact, Beijing sees Uyghurs separatist

movements, like the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, as a challenge to the national unity. Therefore, stricter security measures and societal controls have been applied in the XUAR in order to contain such a threat.

Nevertheless, this policy is bringing about a sort of “societal security dilemma”, in which any increase in China’s security is perceived as a threat to the Uyghurs’ identity and vice versa. This special kind of domestic security dilemma is causing a vicious cycle of rising tension in the province, which can have a strong impact on China’s domestic security, as well as on its regional and global interests.

From a regional perspective, the internationalization of the Uyghur issue might impact China’s relations with its neighborhood on a diplomatic level, as well as putting Beijing’s interests under the attention of radical Islamist groups. In fact, one should take into account that XUAR borders five countries whose population is predominantly Muslim, namely: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan. Countries like Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are seriously concerned about China’s intentions in the region with regard to territorial and demographic expansions and economic influence. In addition, they are equally concerned about Chinese mistreatment of Uyghurs in XUAR, which is cause of cross-border tensions from time to time.

Furthermore, any crackdown against radical Uyghurs could easily spill over across the Muslim community in Central Asia as well as worldwide. This could be particularly important considering the fact that China may play an increasing role in Afghanistan following the US withdrawal this year. Increasing investments in oil and gas infrastructure could flow from Beijing to the war torn country, where China is planning to build a pipeline in the north of the country to extend its pipeline network in Central Asia. The project, as well as Chinese workers in the country, could become a preferential target for Taliban and Al Qaeda terrorists, in case these groups decide to embrace the Uyghur cause.

The same could happen in other countries worldwide that have presence of radical Islamists. In this case, China’s interests could be targeted not only in its immediate neighborhood but also in the Asia Pacific region, in the Middle East and in Africa.

Over the past two years, Chinese infrastructures and employees have come under attack in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Egypt, Ethiopia, Ghana, Niger, Nigeria, Pakistan, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tanzania and Yemen. Of course, not all these attacks were perpetrated by Islamist groups, nor they were directly related to the Uyghur issue. Nevertheless, the internationalization of their cause among radical Muslim groups worldwide could bring about a substantial hike in attacks against Chinese interests with a more political connotation than those perpetrated so far.

© ESISC 2013