

THE KUNMING ATTACK AND THE RISE OF TERRORISM IN CHINA

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On Saturday, March 1, a group of knives-armed assailants attacked civilians at the Kunming train station, Yunnan province, killing 29 people and wounding more than 140. Some of the attackers were killed during the action, while others were arrested in the days after. Although Chinese authorities have blamed Uighur separatists, given the fact that a flag similar – although not exactly alike – to the East Turkestan Islamic Movement’s (ETIM) was found at the scene, no group has officially claimed responsibility for the attack.

The incident occurred right ahead to the National People's Congress and, consequently, raised high security concerns about further terrorist attacks. Security measures have been strengthened to secure public transport networks in main cities, while authorities are planning to revise the counter-terrorism strategy. Therefore, the consequences of the Kunming attack on China’s security cannot be downplayed.

In fact, Chinese’s media have started referring to the incident as “China’s 9/11”; a game changer in terrorists’ modus operandi that will bring about radical reforms in China’s anti-terrorism policies with tougher controls over minority groups and the internet. Obviously, Uighur separatists have been put on the spotlight and it should come as no surprise, therefore, that early speculations about their possible involvement in the disappearance of the Malaysia Airlines flight MH370 have started circulating on international media.

On the domestic side, Chinese authorities will increase their crackdown on Uighur separatists, which risk exacerbating the social conflict with the wider Uighur community in Xinjiang. So far, the first measures adopted regard ID registrations for Kunming residents buying gasoline at gas stations. The measure concerns exclusively the purchase of gasoline in tanks other than cars'. In addition, new restrictive measures on the use of internet are expected. According to the Xinjiang's party secretary Zhang Chunxian terrorists had used VPNs (Virtual Private Networks) to overcome the Great Firewall to access jihadist videos by using foreign proxy servers. Moreover, on March 7, Reuters reported that police have warned users of microblogging site Weibo (a sort of Twitter) against posting "misleading" comments on the Kunming incident.

One thing to be taken into account is that the threat posed by domestic terrorists is no longer confined exclusively in Xinjiang but also in other provinces, like Yunnan, where they can easily carry out trafficking activities along the borders with Vietnam, Laos and Myanmar. This "geographical expansion" might bring about a force-to-space overstretching of Chinese security forces. This could be particularly true if in coming months terrorists will start adopting al Qaeda-like tactics involving the use of Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) and suicide bombings to hit soft targets in different locations all across China as well as abroad.

In this regard, the US withdrawal from Afghanistan is likely to create new opportunities for terrorist groups in China to establish new links with other organizations in Central and South-East Asia, from whom they could obtain training, funding and supplies, as well as safe heavens in foreign countries.

What we can expect in the future is a deterioration of the security situation in China driven by an action-reaction vicious cycle generated by terrorists' sake for more visibility and Chinese authorities heavy hand response. Terrorists could step up their actions by targeting civilians, energy infrastructures and mining sites stocking explosives, foreign interests in China and Chinese interests abroad. At the same time, Chinese authorities will take more restrictive measures; hence increasing ethnic tensions and social unrest.

In addition, we could witness the formation of other terrorist organizations, not necessarily linked to ETIM but sympathizing with their cause, who are influenced by Jihadist groups in South East Asia like Jemaah Islamiyah and Abu Sayyaf. In this regard, we should not downplay the fact that the only organization claiming responsibility for disappearance of the Malaysia Airlines flight MH370 came from an unknown group called “Chinese Martyrs’ Brigade”, whose authenticity has yet to be verified.

In conclusion, the Kunming attack is likely to have a way larger echo than expected and it could influence China’s domestic security and its international relations in Central and South East Asia. If this is the case, then China’s nightmares concerning the internationalization of the Uighur issue will become true.

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