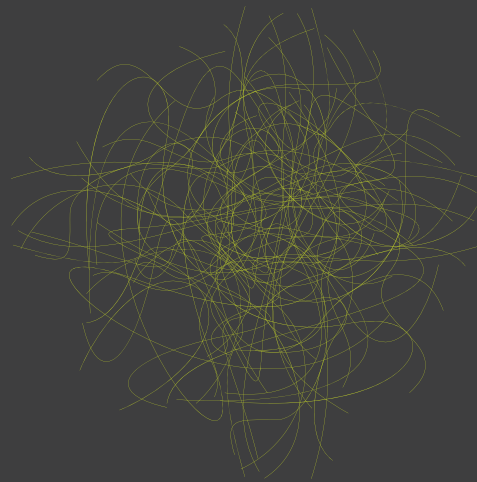


**Sources of Tension
in Afghanistan and
Pakistan: A Regional
Perspective**

**Transition in
Afghanistan:
Filling the
Security Vacuum
– The Expansion
of Uighur
Extremism?**

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TRANSITION IN AFGHANISTAN: FILLING THE SECURITY VACUUM – THE EXPANSION OF UIGHUR EXTREMISM?

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This paper aims to map out as clearly as possible the current threat from Uighur extremist groups in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and ascertain whether these groups will develop into a regional threat over the next few years.

It will be argued that Uighur Sunni-*jihadi* groups in Afghanistan and Pakistan are unlikely to be able to fill the security void in either country after the West's withdrawal. Traditionally, these groups have struggled to gain traction within the global *jihadi* community. China has also done an effective job of building regional relationships that means local governments would block their ascension into power. Furthermore, the number of Uighur militants remains marginal, suggesting that, at worst, they might be able to take control of some small settlements.

The paper will outline what is known about the current state of the Uighur Sunni-*jihadi* community in Afghanistan and Pakistan; present the available information on their operations; highlight what the Chinese state is doing regionally (and – briefly – at home) to mitigate the threat, and offer concluding thoughts on the likelihood of a major Uighur threat emerging in either Afghanistan or Pakistan, post-2014.

BACKGROUND

The Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region lies at the centre of the Eurasian landmass. It constitutes one sixth of the territory of the People's Republic of China. The Uighurs, who are predominantly Sunni Muslim, are one of China's fifty-five recognised ethnic minorities. They speak an Eastern-Turkic language related to Uzbek and claim to be the original inhabitants of Xinjiang – a territory referred to by many Uighurs as "East Turkistan". Regionally, Uighur diaspora communities can also be found in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Pakistan (which are estimated to be approximately 300 Uighur families, according to recent research undertaken by anthropologist Alessandro Rippa¹). Smaller Uighur communities can be found elsewhere around the world, including a substantial diaspora in

1. Alessandro Rippa, 'From Uighurs to Kashgari,' *The Diplomat*, December 20, 2013 <http://thediplomat.com/2013/12/from-uyghurs-to-kashgari/?allpages=yes>

ethnically proximate Turkey, where the government has taken a particular interest in their cause.²

Maintaining control over Xinjiang is a paramount concern for the Chinese government, which values the territory for its resources, geopolitical position and as an integral part of the modern Chinese nation-state. Indeed, maintaining control and power over the entire Chinese landmass is key to the Chinese Communist Party's justification for staying in power. Yet, lacking an independent state of their own like other Central Asian populations, Uighurs have long chafed under Chinese rule. Uighurs have had some semblance of independence twice during the twentieth century in the form of the first and second East Turkestan Republics (1933-1934) and (1944-1949) – although both were short-lived and the second was largely a client-state of the Soviet Union. Shortly after the ascendance to power of the Chinese Communist Party in 1949, the Second East Turkestan Republic was absorbed into the newly established People's Republic of China (PRC).

Nevertheless, the historical entity of East Turkestan lingers in Uighur narratives of the region, and today, many Uighurs in Xinjiang continue to resent rule from Beijing. Having watched neighbouring countries in Central Asia receive independence after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Uighurs now live within what some perceive to be foreign borders, while an ethnically and linguistically different people rule over them from far away. This has fed a narrative of disaffection that is amplified by low levels of attainment and prosperity. These factors combine to create a tense social environment that periodically erupts into inter-ethnic violence. Individuals frequently lash out against the Chinese state, sometimes through terrorism linked to Uighur Sunni-*jihadi* networks outside China, but increasingly through violence in response to discrimination and state oppression.

Both of these groups (the external Sunni-*jihadist* network and the domestic disaffected) pose a threat to the Chinese state, but they seem, for the most part, two distinct communities with very different regional impacts. For those with grievances against the state and who are unable or unwilling to leave Xinjiang (either for financial reasons, difficulties in attaining passports or other reasons), the result is direct attacks against the Chinese state or population at home – something that does not have significant regional repercussions, except to the extent that it affects Chinese assessments of its borders and the degree to which neighbours will help deal with individuals who might flee across borders. The central question of this paper is whether groups outside China might pose a threat to the region in the future.

In the years following 9/11, China has often been accused by analysts in the West of framing Uighur resistance within the global 'war on terror' to legitimise and divert attention away from its oppressive policies in the region.³ In a 2004 study, James Millward concluded that of the fifty or so attacks listed in a 2002 State Council report about Uighur extremism in Xinjiang, only one could definitively be called terrorism - (as opposed to simply criminal). Millward concludes that most attacks, which were conducted against police and security forces, appeared to be spontaneous acts of frustration with authorities, rather than premeditated, politically motivated violence.⁴

2. Yitzak Shichor, 'Ethno-diplomacy: The Uighur Hitch in Sino-Turkish relations,' Policy Studies, The East-West Center, number 53, 2009 <http://www.eastwestcenter.org/fileadmin/stored/pdfs/ps053.pdf>
3. Amnesty International, 'China's Anti-Terrorism Legislation And Repression In The Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region', March 2002, <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/ASA17/010/2002/en> ; Sean Roberts, 'Imaginary Terrorism? The Global War on Terror and the Narrative of the Uyghur Terrorist Threat', PONARS Eurasia Working Paper, Institute for European, Russian and Eurasian Studies (IERES), March 2012, <http://www.gwu.edu/~ieresgwu/assets/docs/ponars/RobertsWP.pdf>; Michael Clarke, 'Widening the net: China's anti-terror laws and human rights in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region', The International Journal of Human Rights, 14(4), 2010.
4. James A. Millward, 'Violent separatism in Xinjiang: a critical assessment', Policy Studies, East-West Center Washington, number 6, 2004

Uighurs in Xinjiang maintain a range of grievances against the government, some of which have led to violence. Historically, Xinjiang's lack of genuine autonomy, despite being accorded this right under state law, has continually exposed it to radical politics in China over the past sixty years.⁵ It has also allowed the authorities in Beijing to implement policies aimed at the assimilation of the Uighurs into the Chinese nation-state. These policies, which have been dissected by a number of Xinjiang scholars, include encouraging Han Chinese immigration to alter the region's ethnic population balance, unbalanced exploitation of Xinjiang's abundant natural resources, strict state control over religion and culture, and the predominance of Mandarin language in schools, universities and other public institutions.⁶

The effect of these policies has been exacerbated by a feeling among Uighurs that they are being marginalized in the region's economic development and are the target of racism and discriminatory hiring practices. Yet the Chinese response over the past decade to Uighur resistance in Xinjiang has been uncompromising, with so-called 'Strike Hard' law enforcement campaigns a regular occurrence in the region since the 1990s. The region's security budget has increased substantially over the past decade and tighter restrictions placed. Intrusive measures such as house-to-house searches, the placing of informants in mosques and neighbourhoods have increased, and penalties for expressing grievances against the state have been made more severe.⁷

The net result is that China now faces a dual track problem. On one hand, there is a growing community within China that chafes under Beijing's rule and occasionally lashes out against the state with violence. On the other, there is an external community who have grouped together under a Sunni-*jihadist* banner, and who are, for the most part, located between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

OVERVIEW OF UIGHUR TERRORISM

Traditionally, Uighur Sunni-*jihadist* groups have focused on China, although they have also appeared on the battlefields of other Sunni-*jihadist* movements in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Central Asia and more recently Syria. Their rhetoric, as evident through videos and other material, is replete with classic Sunni-*jihadist* propaganda on the persecution of Muslims (Uighurs in particular), and calls for global *jihad* and uprisings in China.⁸

The size, scope and capacity of the groups outside China are unclear. A *Reuters* report from 2014 placed the figures at around 400 in Pakistan and 250 in Afghanistan – although these numbers cannot be independently verified.⁹ Chinese experts usually quote figures between 50 and 200.¹⁰ The area in which these groups operate appears to stretch between Afghanistan and Pakistan – a contiguous space within this context. This assessment is based on the situation prior to 9/11 when Uighur groups were indeed based in Afghanistan, before moving across the border into Pakistan as part of a general exodus of *jihadist* groups after the American-led attack on the Taliban in 2001. From bases in Pakistan, Uighur groups continue to produce a regular digest of radical material and videos, and appear to occasionally participate in attacks across the border in Afghanistan.

5. Gardner Bovingdon, 'Autonomy in Xinjiang: Han Chinese Nationalist Imperatives and Uyghur Discontent', *East West Center, Policy Studies* 11, 2004
6. See Dru C. Gladney, 'Representing Nationality in China: Refiguring Majority/Minority Identities', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 53(1), 1994; Arienne M. Dwyer, 'The Xinjiang Conflict: Uyghur Identity, Language Policy, and Political Discourse', *East-West Center Washington*, 2005; Graham E. Fuller & Jonathan Lipman, 'Islam in Xinjiang', in *Xinjiang: China's Muslim Borderland*, ME Sharpe, 2004. For an overview of the Xinjiang problem, see Graham E. Fuller & S. Frederick Starr, 'The Xinjiang Problem', *Central Asia-Caucasus Institute*, Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies, 2004.
7. Andrew Jacobs, 'Tiananmen Attack linked to police raid on mosque in Xinjiang,' *New York Times*, November 7, 2013; Massoud Hayoun, 'Uighurs at Xinjiang mosque have to face China flag,' *Al Jazeera*, September 18, 2013; 'Tightening the screws,' *Economist*, November 4, 2013
8. Recent videos have included calls of support for the Rohingya Muslims in Burma and fighters in Syria.
9. The figures on the Pakistani side were provided by intelligence sources, while on the Afghan side, supposedly Taliban sources. Saud Mehsud and Maria Golovnina, 'From his Pakistan hideout, Uighur leader vows revenge on China', *Reuters*, March 14, 2014, <http://in.reuters.com/article/2014/03/14/pakistan-uyghurs-idINDEEA2D08U20140314>
10. Author interviews

Beyond this, there has been a growing fusion between the various Central Asian Sunni-*jihadist* groups, with individuals sharing training camps and media outlets. Chinese experts highlight what they call the ‘re-networking of regional terrorist groups’.¹¹ At the same time, the Chinese government has reportedly applied pressure on the Pakistani government to ban a number of Central Asian terrorist groups (including the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, the Islamic Jihad Union and the East Turkestan Islamic Movement), which suggests that China does not see the threat constrained to either Afghanistan or Pakistan.¹² Uzbek analysts, on the other hand, point out that the largest Uighur group call themselves the Turkestan Islamic Party (*Hizb al Islam al Turkestani*), which highlights their vision for a territory that stretches beyond the borders of today’s Xinjiang – considered only to be only ‘East Turkestan’.¹³

Therefore, while it seems likely (based on video releases and the occasional death of TIP members in territory controlled by the *Tehrik e Taliban Pakistan* through drone strike or other executive action) that Uighur Sunni-*jihadist* groups are predominantly based in Pakistan, their operational area is probably cross-border. Furthermore, in the same way that other Central Asian groups that are based in Pakistan’s lawless Federally Administered Tribal Area (FATA) appear to be moving through Afghanistan,¹⁴ it is likely that Uighur groups are moving in the same way. This theory was substantiated in a brief interview conducted by *Reuters* with the current leader of Uighur militant groups in the region, Abdullah Mansour, who confirmed that his group’s presence stretched across Afghanistan and Pakistan.¹⁵

UIGHUR MILITANT ACTIVITIES PRE-9/11

It was only after 9/11 that Beijing started to state publicly that Uighur Sunni-*jihadist* terrorist groups based in Afghanistan posed a threat in Xinjiang.

These claims were made public for the first time in a State Council document submitted to the UN in 2001 entitled “*Terrorist Activities Perpetrated by Eastern Turkistan Organizations and their Ties with Osama bin Laden and the Taliban*.”¹⁶ In it, the Chinese government alleged that the “*East Turkistan force has a total of over forty organisations*” engaged “*to varying degrees*” in violent terrorist activities, both within China and abroad in Afghanistan, Uzbekistan and Chechnya. The Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) is singled out by the document for being “*a major component*” of the Al Qaeda terrorist network. The group’s leader, Hasan Mahsum, is claimed to have met and received \$300,000 in financing from Osama bin Laden.¹⁷ In January 2002, the PRC government released a second State Council White Paper entitled “*East Turkistan Terrorists Cannot Get Away with Impunity*”. Although now dated, it is the most definitive list available of terrorist attacks allegedly perpetrated in Xinjiang in the pre 9-11 era, detailing a number of different Uighur militant groups other than ETIM, and was the Chinese government’s first admission that it faced organized anti-state violence in Xinjiang.¹⁸

According to a number of Western academic studies, including those by James Millward (2004) and Sean Roberts (2009), both State Council documents display numerous inconsistencies and unsubstantiated allegations on the level of the Uighur terrorist threat in Xinjiang.¹⁹ Many of the sta-

11. Interview, London, December 2013
12. ‘Pakistan bans three extremist outfits on China’s request’, *The News*, 24 October 2013
13. Authors’ interview, London, November 2013
14. Christian Bleuer, ‘Instability in Tajikistan? The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and the Afghanistan Factor’, Central Asia Security Policy Brief number 7, 2012
15. Saud Mehsud and Maria Golovnina, ‘From his Pakistan hideout, Uighur leader vows revenge on China’, *Reuters*, March 14, 2014, <http://in.reuters.com/article/2014/03/14/pakistan-uighurs-idINDEEA2-D08U20140314>
16. The Permanent Mission of the People’s Republic of China to the UN, ‘Terrorist Activities Perpetrated by Eastern Turkistan Organizations and their Ties with Osama bin Laden and the Taliban’, 2001, <http://www.china-un.org/eng/zt/fk/t28937.htm>
17. The Permanent Mission of the People’s Republic of China to the UN, ‘Terrorist Activities Perpetrated by Eastern Turkistan Organizations and their Ties with Osama bin Laden and the Taliban’, 2001, <http://www.china-un.org/eng/zt/fk/t28937.htm><http://www.china-un.org/eng/zt/fk/t28937.htm>
18. James A. Millward, 2004, pp.12
19. See James A. Millward, 2012

tistics cited by the 2002 white paper (such as the figure of 162 civilian deaths from Uighur terrorism in the 1990s) are stated without much supporting evidence or are otherwise unexplained. The document does not clarify why many of these attacks – which are small-scale, low-casualty incidents involving stabbings of police and civilians – are classed as “terrorism” and not simply acts of criminality or spontaneous outbursts of ethnic grievance. The document is also clumsy in its description of Uighur terrorist organizations. Some attacks are attributed to a vaguely defined “*East Turkistan terrorist organization*”, while others, blamed on known organizations such as ETIM, are not substantiated with evidence.²⁰ The picture that the document paints of a long-standing, organized group of networks wreaking havoc in China is at odds with events on the ground, where the drivers of violence are less clear.

The United States’ designation of ETIM in 2002 as a “terrorist organization” affiliated with Al Qaeda added significant credibility to the State Council document. The U.S. decision has since been criticized as an attempt at securing Chinese support for the War on Terror and NATO mission in Afghanistan.²¹ This charge bears some credibility, as the U.S. statement draws on the same figures cited in the 2002 White Paper.

Yet, despite the questionable veracity of Chinese claims over Uighur terrorism within Xinjiang, there is evidence that Uighur groups existed in Afghanistan prior to 9-11 that were intent on launching attacks in China. In his autobiography “*My Life with the Taliban*” Abdul Salam Zaeef, a founding member of the Taliban who also served as Ambassador to Islamabad, alleges that a delegation of ETIM leaders met with Mullah Omar in Kandahar to request support for their activities in China. The ETIM delegation was rebuffed, and told not to aggravate Beijing (although the Taliban continued to provide them with sanctuary).²² These events are corroborated by Abu Musab al Suri, the al Qaeda strategist who, in his 1600 page magnum opus, “*The Call to Global Islamic Resistance*”, says:

‘The jihadists of Eastern Turkistan went back to their homeland and recruited mujahidin who were brought back to Afghanistan and trained in military tactics, which were to be used against the Chinese government [...] this group recognized Mullah Omar as the official imam [...] the Taliban ordered the East Turkistan group to cease their attacks against China. The Taliban wanted friendly relations with China as a way to counter the American threat.’²³

Whether Uighur groups in Afghanistan during this time were responsive to Mullah Omar’s decrees or simply incapable of launching attacks in China is unclear. Either way, ETIM’s situation stands in contrast to Osama bin Laden, who disregarded his Taliban’s hosts request to not use the territory of Afghanistan as a base for attacks elsewhere, as seen through the 1998 US Embassy bombings in Nairobi and Dar Es Salaam, the 2000 attack on the USS Cole in Yemen and the September 11, 2001 attacks on New York and Washington.

Indeed, Osama bin Laden seems to have seen the Uighur plight as one that could be disregarded at times. In a 1998 interview, bin Laden appeared to call for an alliance with the Chinese government against the United States.²⁴ Yet in 2005 he reportedly accepted Abdul Haq, the then leader of ETIM as a member of the al Qaeda *Shura* Council.²⁵ This sug-

20. James A. Millward, 2004, pp.13

21. Yitzak Shichor, ‘Fact and fiction: a Chinese documentary on eastern Turkestan terrorism’, *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly*, 4(2), 2006

22. Abdul Salam Zaeef, ‘My Life with the Taliban’, Alex Strick von Linschoten and Felix Kuehn (eds), 2010

23. See Abu Musab Al-Suri, ‘The Call to Global Islamic Resistance’, 2004.

24. Brian Fishman, ‘Al-Qaeda and the Rise of China: Jihadi Geopolitics in a Post-Hegemonic World’, *The Washington Quarterly* 34(3), 2011

25. Security Council Committee pursuant to resolutions 1267(1999) and 1989 (2011) concerning Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities, 2011, <http://www.un.org/sc/committees/1267/NSQE08802E.shtml>

gests that he was aware of the Uighur cause and willing to provide tacit support for it.

Although impossible to confirm through other sources, according to the UN Sanctions Committee, ETIM used bases in Afghanistan to launch a number of attacks in China in May 1998, February 1999, March 1999 and May 1999 – incidents that resulted in 140 deaths and 371 injuries.²⁶ These figures reappear in *Xinhua* reporting from 2003, which presented information from the Chinese authorities about the leadership of Uighur groups in Pakistan who had previously operated from Afghanistan.²⁷ However, none of this information is independently verifiable and a number of scholars (Roberts in particular) have highlighted the dubiousness of these claims. It is also doubtful whether Uighur groups would have had the ability to ignore Mullah Omar's request that they refrain from launching operations against China, as they lacked the independent resources that allowed Osama bin Laden to undertake operations against the wishes of his Taliban hosts. Suffice to say that the Chinese government experienced incidents at home throughout the late 1990s and was keen to attribute them to Uighur dissidents or separatists – something that at least suggests that China was thinking about the problem a great deal.

Training camps in Afghanistan figure again in the accounts of Uighurs incarcerated in Guantanamo Bay who were captured in the post-American push into Afghanistan to eject the Taliban. Focused on capturing the foreign fighters aligned with al Qaeda in Afghanistan at the time, the US offered rewards for foreign prisoners leading to numerous individuals getting swept up and ultimately sent to Guantanamo Bay (where some still linger today). According to the U.S. Combatant Status Review and Administrative Review Boards, most of these Uighurs (of which there were around twenty) were based in a training camp outside Jalalabad.²⁸ Hasan Mahsum and Abdul Haq, identified in the 2001 State Council document, were alleged to be the leaders of this camp.²⁹

Detainees described the camp as crude, unsophisticated and more of a halfway house for asylum seekers from Xinjiang on their way to third countries such as Turkey. Most detained Uighurs said they had arrived in Afghanistan because of the persecution they had faced from Pakistani authorities. The accounts of the Guantanamo detainees of their experience in Afghanistan are summarized by Xinjiang scholar Michael Clarke as follows: (i) most had not heard of the ETIM prior to being brought to Guantanamo; (ii) most had arrived in Afghanistan via Kyrgyzstan and Pakistan in 2000 and 2001; (iii) most had stayed at a Uighur camp outside Jalalabad which contained up to fifty Uighur families; (iv) according to one detainee, most received minimal training only with small arms; (v) the Uighurs received little or no assistance from Al Qaeda or the Taliban.³⁰

This account of events is corroborated by an interview undertaken by *Radio Free Asia* with Hasan Mehsum, the leader of ETIM, in which he denied links with al Qaeda or the Taliban. "*ETIM has absolutely no relationship with Osama Bin Laden, and we have never received any help from him. All our activities are entirely directed at liberating East Turkistan territory from Chinese invaders, to drive the Chinese invaders out of that land,*" Mehsum said.³¹ In an interview with the *Wall Street Journal* in 2004, Mehsum's deputy, Abdulla Karijaji, also admitted that ETIM gained permission from the Taliban and Al Qaeda to establish bases in Afghanistan, but that ETIM

26. Security Council Committee pursuant to resolutions 1267(1999) and 1989 (2011) concerning Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities, 2011, <http://www.un.org/sc/committees/1267/NSQE08802E.shtml>

27. 'Terrorist Forces Must Absolutely Not Be Allowed to Disrupt National Security and Social Stability' *Xinhua*, December 15, 2003, in FBIS-CHI-2003-1215

28. Sean Roberts, 2012, pp. 10

29. Security Council Committee pursuant to resolutions 1267(1999) and 1989 (2011) concerning Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities, 2011, <http://www.un.org/sc/committees/1267/NSQE08802E.shtml>

30. Michael Clarke, 2010, pp.21

31. Brian Fishman, 2011, pp. 50

did not receive funding from either group and that both sides had a tense relationship due to the Uighurs' focus on attacking China and Al Qaeda's emphasis on global jihad.

The Guantanamo accounts from Uighur detainees also suggest that none bore negative feelings towards the United States or showed sophisticated awareness of the global *jihad*. As one account reads, "*a billion Chinese enemies, that is enough for me; why would I get more enemies?*" Interviews conducted by Xinjiang scholar Sean Roberts with former detainees in Albania supported this narrative, with all detainees refuting claims that they had ever sought to harm the U.S. – although they did display significant animosity towards the Chinese state.³²

None the less, these stories do not always tally with other versions from the ground. In early 1999, a young radicalized Briton named Saajid Badat reported going to Afghanistan and attending a camp outside Kabul that was run by 'Turkistanis' or 'Uighur Chinese, people from the western province of China' as Badat puts it. According to Badat's account, he ended up in the camp because he knew one of the trainers there – 'Nasser al Amrati' a name that suggests Gulf origins.³³ Taken alongside the fact that Badat had a long history with *jihadist* groups (meeting figures such as Osama bin Laden, Abu Hafs, and Sayf al Adl) and ultimately ended up almost carrying out a suicide bombing for al Qaeda on an airplane with a device in his shoes, it is likely that Uighurs in the camp had some contact with al Qaeda or the Taliban and that the two were able to operate without the tensions suggested above. It is also possible that there is a bias to the reports from Guantanamo Bay and elsewhere, as the Uighurs there may have had an interest in distancing themselves from al Qaeda in the eyes of their American captors. However, the consistency of the message from a variety of sources does suggest that the priority for the group has always been the struggle against China.

Regardless of the precise circumstances of the ETIM in Afghanistan, the group seems to have had links to other groups in the region and was able to operate, albeit under the constraints of not launching attacks from Afghan territory against China. The exact nature of the pre-9/11 attacks mentioned by the United Nations Sanctions Committee is not clear, nor is it clear whether these constituted a breach of agreement between the Uighurs and their Taliban hosts. Given that Uighur groups apparently continued to operate within Afghanistan, it seems likely that either the incidents did not receive coverage at the time so Mullah Omar did not learn of them, took place differently to as reported, or that the Taliban were willing to forgive them.

CHINESE GOVERNMENT RELATIONS WITH THE TALIBAN

Why the Taliban wanted to remain on good terms with the Chinese government is an interesting question. On one hand, they likely saw Beijing as a possible ally against America (an idea that was previously raised by Osama bin Laden, but which also appears in the writings of Abu Musab al Suri and other extremist authors).³⁴ Throughout the period of the Taliban's control of the country, China and Afghanistan maintained some level of communication. In one conversation in Kandahar described in Abdul Salam Za'ee's biography from December 2000, Mullah Omar as-

32. Sean Roberts, 2012, pp.9

33. Saajid Badat testimony, NYC, April 2012, Laura Trevelyan, "Shoe-bomber supergrass Saajid Badat testifies in US," BBC News, 23 April 2012, at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-uscanada-17820810>

34. See Brian Fishman, 2011

sured the Chinese Ambassador to Pakistan, Lu Shulin, that the Taliban “would not allow any group to use its territory to conduct any such operations” against China.³⁵ In return, Omar sought Chinese support in the UN against sanctions and formal political recognition.³⁶ Around the same time, the Chinese authorities lobbied the Taliban government not to destroy the Bamiyan Buddhas. According to Zaeef, the Chinese representative of UNESCO was among the most strident in calling for the Buddhas’ salvation.³⁷ None of these agreements appears to have been kept. The Taliban continued to allow Uighur groups to operate, China did not recognise the Taliban government or support the lifting of sanctions, and the Bamiyan Buddhas were destroyed.

Another aspect is the Chinese relationship with Pakistan. One of the Taliban’s major backers, Pakistan, has historically maintained a close relationship with China, with each seeing the other as a close ally. Pakistan was long eager for the Taliban government in Kabul to receive wider recognition and encouraging a warmer relationship between Beijing and the Taliban would have been part of this strategy - something that Beijing would have doubtless been willing to do, both for the specific strategic reasons highlighted above, but also out of respect for their Pakistani partners’ requests.

Nevertheless, highlighting China’s pragmatic approach to business, Beijing was apparently also willing to broach more mercantile matters with the Taliban. In 2000, Huawei and ZTE signed contracts to help develop telecommunications infrastructure around Kabul and Kandahar. Other discussions with Chinese firms focused on the refurbishment of old power stations in the country. In early 2001, a business delegation from Afghanistan visited Beijing to seek closer business ties and then on September 11, 2001 a Chinese delegation was reported to have signed a memorandum of understanding for economic and technical cooperation with Afghanistan. In an echo of China’s later interests in Afghanistan, signing on behalf of the Taliban was their Minister of Mining, Mullah Mohammed Ishaq.³⁸

POST-9/11

There is no clear evidence that ETIM or other Uighur militant groups knew in advance of the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States. Even among the hardened elements close to al Qaeda, there was little detailed information shared about the event prior to it taking place and it is not clear during this period if Uighurs had managed to integrate themselves into al Qaeda’s leadership structures at a high enough level. Consequently, it is likely that they would have been as surprised as the many other groups in Afghanistan at the time about the 9/11 attacks. According to the group’s own reporting in a video release from 2012, they moved into Pakistan’s “badlands” “along with our families and found shelter there in October 2001.”³⁹ Under the leadership of Hasan Mehsum, the group apparently established itself in Pakistan, where it appears to have wanted to continue its activities as before, although information is difficult to verify.

On October 2, 2003, Mehsum was killed in what the Chinese press described as a “joint anti-terrorism raid” with the Pakistani military.⁴⁰ As a result, the group he was leading appears to have ceased to exist - (Kariaji was in hiding when he gave the *Wall Street Journal* interview in 2004).⁴¹

35. Abdul Salam Zaeef, ‘My Life with the Taliban’, Alex Strick von Linschoten and Felix Kuehn (eds), 2010

36. Andrew Small, ‘Why is China talking to the Taliban?’, *Foreign Policy*, June 21, 2013, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/06/20/why_is_china_talking_to_the_taliban

37. Abdul Salam Zaeef, ‘My Life with the Taliban’, Alex Strick von Linschoten and Felix Kuehn (eds), 2010

38. John Pomfret, ‘China strengthens ties with Taliban by signing economic deal,’ *International Herald Tribune*, September 13, 2001

39. James Z. Adams, ‘Turkistan terrorists hurt Uyghur cause’, *Asia Times Online*, February 22, 2012, http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Central_Asia/NB22Ag01.html

40. China Daily, ‘Eastern Turkistan terrorist killed’, December 24, 2013, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/en/doc/2003-12/24/content_293163.htm

41. David S. Cloud and Ian Johnson, ‘In Post-9/11 World, Chinese Dissidents Pose U.S. Dilemma’, *Wall Street Journal* (Eastern Edition), August 3, 2004

However, another explanation can be found in material released by the Turkistan Islamic Party in 2009 (a successor group to ETIM discussed below), which claims that ETIM was in fact subsumed into the larger pool of Uzbek or other Central Asian *jihadists* that had migrated across the border into Pakistan in the wake of the NATO push to expel the Taliban and its allies from Afghanistan.⁴²

The next appearance of a Uighur militant group is in 2006, when Abdul Haq emerges in a video describing Mahsum as a martyr, and calling his new group the Turkestan Islamic Party (TIP, or the *Hizb al Islam al Turkestanī*). It is noteworthy that TIP propaganda material appears more religious in its tenor than that of ETIM, is produced in Arabic and has begun to be distributed through *jihadi* forums. Initially, the videos appear on YouTube, suggestive of an absence of connections or access to the main purveyors of *jihadist* material.

The extent to which the TIP has been able to launch attacks in China is unclear. Around the time of the Beijing Olympics in 2008, plots associated with the group seemed to rise. In March, an 18-year old Uighur woman travelling on a Pakistani passport was stopped from lighting a container filled with petrol on a China Southern flight from Urumqi to Beijing. Smelling the fumes, staff on the airplane overpowered her as she tried to light it in the toilet. According to a *Reuters* report, the suspect was the wife of a person that the Chinese government identified as an ETIM member, although the details of this connection were never clarified.⁴³ Pakistani authorities were quick to provide assistance and respond to Chinese concerns connected to the plot – something that they have demonstrated a consistent willingness to do over the years.

In May and July 2008, buses in Shanghai (one on May 5) and Kunming (two on July 21) were blown up, causing two deaths and numerous injuries. On July 26, five days after the Kunming bombings, a video emerged dated July 23 entitled “*Our Blessed Jihad in Yunnan*”, in which a figure called Commander Seyfullah claimed the bombings were TIP operations.⁴⁴ He also claimed incidents in Wenzhou and Guangzhou that took place on July 17.⁴⁵ The video has all the hallmarks of the group (it was released under the TIP’s “*Islam Awazi*” brand) but it lacked professionalism and it appeared on YouTube, rather than a mainstream *jihadi* outlet. Furthermore, the Chinese government rubbished the TIP’s claims, stating that the group was not responsible for the bus attacks or the Wenzhou incident, instead ascribing blame to ordinary civilians with political grievances. “Commander Sayfullah” was later identified as Emeti Yakuf, a senior figure in the organization who took on the role of spokesman for TIP. However, other reports are less clear about this identification, with some suggestions that Sayfullah may in fact be Abdul Haq.⁴⁶

Clearly on high alert, in early June 2008, the Chinese authorities passed information to their counterparts in the United Arab Emirates, identifying a Uighur living in Dubai as an ETIM member. According to Emirati court documents, Mayma Ytiming Shalmo was recruited in 2006 while in Mecca – possibly on Hajj. From here, together with the senior Uighur figure he met (identified only as ‘the number two’ in ETIM in court documents) he went back to Waziristan, where he was trained in explosives. He spent a year at the camps before, by his own confession, he returned to the Gulf with orders to launch an attack on a Chinese target in the

42. Jacob Zenn, ‘On the Eve of 2014: Islamism in Central Asia’, Hudson Institute, Center on Islam, Democracy and the Future of the Muslim World, 24, 2013, pp.76. <http://www.hudson.org/research/9824-on-the-eve-of-2014-islamism-in-central-asia>

43. Chris Buckley and Benjamin Kang Lim, ‘China plane attackers from Pakistan, Central Asia’, *Reuters*, March 20, 2008, <http://in.reuters.com/article/2008/03/20/idINIndia-32593620080320>

44. ‘Islamic Party of Turkistan, Our Blessed Jihad in Yunnan’, YouTube, August 11, 2008, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E6DLGShOnEg>

45. CBS Investigates, ‘IntelCenter: Islamic Party Threatens Olympic Games’, CBS News, July 25, 2008, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/intelcenter-islamic-party-threatens-olympic-games/>

46. Bill Roggio, ‘ETIP leader killed in February predator strike’, *The Long War Journal*, September 17, 2010, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2010/09/etip_leader_killed_i.php

UAE. Speaking neither Arabic nor English, Shalmo made his way through Saudi Arabia into the UAE, and recruited a diaspora Uighur in Dubai to purchase all the necessary elements to build a device.⁴⁷ The men were arrested soon after this but there were no claims from the TIP or any other group that linked the plot to them. The men received 10-year sentences, with the judge commuting the usually mandatory death sentence in the Emirates for cases related to terrorism, arguing that the plot was still at a very immature phase.

Thus far, therefore, the group's ability to launch attacks abroad was somewhat limited and the incidents that did take place were poorly organised. Yet the possibility of this changing seemed to emerge in 2009.

In the wake of the Urumqi riots in July 2009, a number of noteworthy developments took place. First, a prominent al Qaeda ideologue, Abu Yahya al Libi, released a video in October in which he highlighted the plight of the Uighurs. Around the same time, Sayfullah released another video in which he also threatened the Chinese government for its actions during the rioting. The significant thing about these releases was that they came out through the *al-Fajr* Media Center, a *jihadi* outlet with strong connections to al Qaeda. The addition of the *al-Fajr* imprimatur and Abu Yahya al Libi's video all highlight a growing proximity between the two groups.⁴⁸ In many ways, this close connection is not that surprising – Abdul Haq had been a member of al Qaeda's Shura Council 2005 and played quite an influential role in the tribal belt, but this notwithstanding, al Qaeda appeared to offer little support to the Uighur cause. Furthermore, TIP appeared to underperform.

In February 2010, Abdul Haq was killed in an American drone strike – though it is unclear whether he was the target, rather than simply being collateral damage.⁴⁹ In July 2010, police in Oslo arrested a Uighur, Mikael Davud, for being connected to an al Qaeda linked plot in Norway.⁵⁰ A connection with TIP came through the fact that Davud was a Uighur who had been in telephone contact with Commander Sayfullah. His name was also apparently mentioned in a phone call from Sayfullah that was intercepted in 2008 around the time of the Olympics.⁵¹

It was not until July 2011 that the group was able to claim a connection to an incident within China. In that case, a group of men launched an attack in downtown Kashgar in which they reportedly drove a vehicle borne bomb into a crowd before leaping out and slashing at police and other passers-by. The next day, an arson and knife attack was launched in a restaurant. Police killed almost a dozen assailants over the following two days with an unclear number of civilian casualties. Following the incident in September, a video emerged on the *jihadi* forum *al Shumukh*, purportedly showing one of the men identified as the ringleader by Chinese police, Memtieli Tiliwaldi, present at a TIP-run training camp in Waziristan. The video supports the Chinese government's claim that the cell was directed from outside the country (widely interpreted as being Pakistan).

Since then, the TIP has not demonstrated an operational connection to any major plots in China or elsewhere. Yet throughout the period between 2010-2014 the group has continued to produce a fairly steady digest of videos and magazines under their *Islam Awazi* brand about its activities on the battlefield (as limited as they are in Afghanistan and Pakistan), training

47. Raffaello Pantucci, 'Uyghurs convicted in East Turkestan Islamic Movement Plot in Dubai', *Terrorism Monitor*, 8(29), 2010, [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=36656#Uxe2WvTV9FM](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews[tt_news]=36656#Uxe2WvTV9FM)

48. Militant Leadership Monitor, 'A Post-Mortem Analysis of Turkistani Amir Emeti Yakuf: A Death that Sparked More Questions than Answers', *The Jamestown Foundation*, 3(10), 2010, http://mlm.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=40043&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=551&cHash=e13aad198482b3c8c34129c423af1f6#UxeaSfTV9FM

49. It is worth noting that the announcement Haq had been killed was not made until September when then-Pakistani Interior Minister Rehman was visiting China. He used the opportunity to highlight how much his nation was doing to support Chinese counter-terrorism efforts.

50. Raffaello Pantucci, 'Manchester, New York and Oslo, Three Centrally Directed Al-Qaida Plots', *Combating Terrorism Center*, August 01, 2010, <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/manchester-new-york-and-oslo-three-centrally-directed-al-qaida-plots>

51. Associated Press, 'Norway convicts two men over al-Qaeda plot on Danish newspaper', *The Telegraph*, January 30, 2012, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/al-qaeda/9049416/Norway-convicts-two-men-over-al-Qaeda-plot-on-Danish-newspaper.html>

and recruitment of young and female cadres, or showing TIP members using or repairing weaponry. They also produce videos similar to those of the global *jihadist* movement, praising attacks elsewhere, celebrating new battlefields (such as Syria) or inviting al Qaeda spokesmen to speak in support of their cause. The connection with al Qaeda core also appears to remain strong, with the Pakistani media reporting in 2012 that Emeti Yakuf had become the senior figure for al Qaeda in Pakistan.⁵² He was also killed in August 2012 by a drone strike that may have been targeting him – something that would strengthen his credentials as having been a senior figure within al Qaeda core.⁵³

A TIP link to attacks in China emerged again in 2013 when the group's new spokesman, Abdullah Mansour released a pair of videos praising incidents that had taken place in China. These included an April 2013 incident in Bachu county during which 15 local police and officials were killed and an October 2013 incident in which a Uighur family drove a car filled with petrol into a crowd under the Mao Zedong portrait in Tiananmen Square. The group praised both incidents as *jihad*, but did not claim responsibility for them.⁵⁴

WHAT IS THE CURRENT THREAT TO AFGHANISTAN OR PAKISTAN FROM UIGHUR GROUPS?

The extent to which the threat inside China and the groups in Afghanistan-Pakistan are actually connected is difficult to gauge. So far, TIP has been unsuccessful in its efforts. The group and its goals have consistently been subsumed into those of others – be this prior to September 11, 2001 when the Taliban told them to not launch attacks against China – or after 9/11, when the group appears to have developed a closer (albeit largely symbolic) link to al Qaeda. Instead, the group appears to have merged with other Central Asian terrorist groups (individuals associated with TIP sometimes report being redirected to Uzbek-run camps), been absorbed into al Qaeda's global attack planning or anything but their cause of China. This may appear surprising; yet the reality is that this kind of merging of *jihadist* networks in Pakistan's "badlands" is common.

The question then becomes to what degree can this group – either by itself or as part of a broader community – pose a threat in Pakistan or Afghanistan?

Unable to carry out effective attacks in China, there is a question mark about whether the group might instead seek to launch attacks regionally in Afghanistan or Pakistan. Both scenarios are unlikely for a variety of reasons.

First, there is little evidence that the group has sought to launch regional attacks (even against Chinese targets). Second, the Chinese government has developed strong connections with other countries across South and Central Asia, all of which agree on the danger posed by sunni-jihadist groups and all of which are keen to cooperate with China. Second, given the relative weakness of Uighur lobbies among Afghanistan and Pakistan-based terror groups and a tendency among the global *jihadist* movement to provide only rhetorical support to the Uighur cause, it would be easy for local authorities to arrest and turn over any Uighurs they find at a

52. Bill Roggio, 'Turkistan Islamic Party leader thought killed in US drone strike', *The Long War Journal*, August 25, 2012, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2012/08/turkistan_islamic_pa_1.php

53. Militant Leadership Monitor, 'A Post-Mortem Analysis of Turkistani Amir Emeti Yakuf: A Death that Sparked More Questions than Answers', *The Jamestown Foundation*, 3(10), 2010, http://mlm.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=40043&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=551&cHash=e13aad198482b3c8c34129c423af1f6#.UxfGovTV9FM

54. Raffaello Pantucci, 'Tiananmen Attack: Islamist Terror or Chinese Protest?', *Jamestown Foundation, China Brief* 14(1), January 9, 2014, <http://www.refworld.org/docid/52cfe8f04.html>

Chinese request. Certainly, both Afghanistan and Pakistan have demonstrated a willingness to deport any Uighurs deemed by the Chinese to be troublesome.

This attitude stems from strong historical relationships, but also from a sense in both Kabul and Islamabad that China will be an important regional player in the near future and one with whom a good relationship is important.

China's relationship with Afghanistan is relatively nascent, with state owned firms investing heavily in two mining projects (a copper mine in Mes Aynak and an oil field in the Amu Darya basin). These two projects have been beset with difficulties, but at the same time hold promise for future success and prosperity. China is certainly seen as a major potential supporter for whichever administration comes into power in Kabul post-Karzai.

In Pakistan, China has shown itself to be a major investor and strong supporter. Islamabad has long cultivated a close relationship with Beijing, recognizing the economic benefits that such a relationship can bring. This belief is most clearly recently enunciated in the Kashgar-Gwadar Economic Corridor (also known as the China Pakistan Economic Corridor, CPEC) that connects China's westernmost city of Kashgar with the Indian Ocean. Traversing some of the Pakistan's most dangerous areas, the project will require substantial investment and effort, something that is more likely to come from China than Pakistan. Currently, it is possible to travel the route from Kashgar to the sea, but it is hoped that the economic corridor will improve the quality and capacity of the route. So far, there has been little evidence that Uighur groups have sought to disrupt this plan. Rather, it is instability in Pakistan more generally (specifically in the troubled province of Balochistan) that is likely to disrupt the project.

China has invested political and economic capital in both Pakistan and Afghanistan, albeit with a greater bias towards Pakistan. Yet China has also been able to maintain good relations with both: President Karzai continues to heap praise upon Beijing's regional role, while Pakistan remains a cornerstone ally of Beijing, and has shown willingness to extradite Uighurs of concern to China without hesitation. In some cases, Pakistan has apparently even undermined its own domestic interests in response to Chinese concerns – for example, the Lal Masjid incident of 2006 that many see as the crucible of the aggressively anti-state TTP, was in part a Pakistani government response to a Chinese demand to free female Chinese 'massage parlour' workers who had been kidnapped by zealous religious students in the Islamabad mosque. The Chinese government (among others, including the U.S.) demanded the Musharraf government take action, and the result was a raid by security forces that led to a pitched battle in the heart of Pakistan's capital, leaving 60 dead. The ultimate result of this attack (also likely driven by Pakistani government's desire to reassert authority over the religious students and their extremist leader, as well as freeing the Chinese nationals) was the emergence of the *Tehrik-e-Taliban e Pakistan* (TTP), a militant terrorist umbrella organization that continues to be at the heart of Pakistani government problems with extremism.

The point here is that it seems very unlikely that any official support will exist for Uighur separatists in either country, thus depriving the group of

the official support and *imprimatur* which would be required to establish a formal network, camp or control structure based in Afghanistan or Pakistan post-western troops withdrawal from the former.

FUTURE THREAT FROM UIGHUR GROUPS BASED IN AFGHANISTAN-PAKISTAN?

Given this rather unspectacular history, it seems unlikely that Uighur extremists have the capacity to fill the security vacuum that might emerge post-2014 in Afghanistan.

One possibility is that Uighur groups continue to be subsumed into a broader pool of Central Asian extremists and these groups collectively manage to exert power or take control in some part of Afghanistan – although this is more likely to happen in Central Asia. However, even in this scenario, it seems unlikely that the Uighurs would be permitted to drive the agenda. Notwithstanding the presence of Uighurs in the al Qaeda leadership, the group has proved unable to shape the organisation's agenda.

Nevertheless, it would be foolish to completely discount TIP. The group has proven itself to be resilient and occasionally able to launch attacks. As indicated earlier in this paper, it has also had some connection to global *jihadist* groups such as al Qaeda. Given the overall inaccurate reporting on the TIP and its operations, it is also possible that some events that are currently reported as being unconnected to the group are in fact directed by it. However, in the light of the leadership's eagerness to claim responsibility for incidents, it is unlikely that they would stay quiet. None the less, the circumstances of recent attacks in China are also unclear, which raises the obvious question of who is directing them. It is therefore also possible that the group is receiving less "credit" than it deserves. Furthermore, a successful attack in China with links to networks in Afghanistan or Pakistan would immediately complicate the bilateral relationships and prove destabilizing for the broader region.

What is clear is how the (current) Afghan authorities would react to the discovery of Uighur extremists in territory they control: namely their immediate dispatch to Beijing.⁵⁵ Of its neighbors, Afghanistan looks to China with the most longing eyes, optimistic that its giant neighbour will not only assist with massive economic investment, but also rein in Pakistani meddling. The Sino-Pak alliance is epic in its mutual rhetorical respect, and Afghan officials would likely want Beijing to deploy this influence to support their case against Pakistan, something that they would undoubtedly jeopardize were Chinese authorities to discover that dissident Uighur networks were operating with impunity on their territory.

CONCLUSION

The future threat from Uighur Sunni-*jihadist* groups in Afghanistan or Pakistan remains marginal at best.

The TIP does exist and continues to express its desire to launch attacks, but seems unable to translate this into practice. Its inability to secure any-

55. This statement is in part based on author interviews in Kabul 2012.

thing other than rhetorical support from international *jihadist* groups has left it isolated. Meanwhile, there is little evidence to suggest that the TIP is driving the current wave of violence within Xinjiang and elsewhere in China. A parallel struggle now appears to exist in which domestic violence led by angry Uighurs continues to escalate, while an external community of militants trains and fights alongside their Central Asian cousins, yet all the while unable to strike directly at China.

The net result of this is a domestic problem within China that continues to escalate, and an external problem that has had difficulty reaching into China. Uighur *jihadists* have appeared in Syria and in Afghanistan and Pakistan, but it is unlikely that they will be able to play a decisive role in any of these contexts. Reported numbers of Uighur militant numbers are limited to the low hundreds at most and beyond this, their track record and the willingness of countries in the region to acquiesce to Beijing's demands for clampdowns, suggest an environment that is not conducive or supportive of their struggle.

It therefore seems highly unlikely that in the post-NATO and Western withdrawal from Afghanistan, there is much chance that Uighur extremists will be able to take on a significant role in Afghanistan or Pakistan. They are more likely to continue to be a marginal subset within the broader Central Asian *jihadist* community, attempting to develop a stronger presence there that can, in time, be used as a launch pad to achieve their ultimate goal of liberating Xinjiang and establishing a Turkistani caliphate.

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