



Chinese General: Anti-Chinese Uyghurs are in Syria's Anti-Assad Force

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Abstract

ISIS in Syria is becoming a hot-button issue in Sino-Turkey relations. In an effort to install a Sunni Islamist regime in Damascus by supporting anti-Assad groups that include anti-Chinese Uyghur separatists, Turkey's Erdogan risks crossing China's red lines on fomenting Xinjiang instability and secession. As such it is important for US, Turkey and regional stakeholders to redress this China blind spot in current Syrian policy and prevent it from spilling over into a broader conflict between Ankara and Beijing.

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Analysis

A 9 April article in *Today's Zaman*¹ revealed that Turkey had provided 100,000 fake Turkish passports for ISIS to give to militants who want to join jihad.

According to the story, Nurali T., a Uyghur Turk working for ISIS, has an office in Istanbul's Zeytinburnu district and issues passports at \$200 each. More than 50,000 Chinese Uyghurs have allegedly travelled through Thailand and Malaysia and entered Syria after staying a day in Istanbul. The latest flare up in China-Turkey relations over this issue was in November 2014, when Beijing accused Ankara of promoting "illegal immigration"² for Uyghur refugees caught in Thailand.

While 50,000 may perhaps be an exaggerated number, Chinese Uyghurs have indeed been documented to join various rebel and jihadi groups fighting Assad over the past four years, including *Al-Nusrah Front*. Chinese counter-terror officials have also expressed concern that Uyghur militant groups such as ETIM and TIP have been recruiting from among the 25,000 plus Uyghur diaspora in Istanbul.

In October 2012, Chinese government officials including Major General Jin Yinan³ from the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) National Defense University, first disclosed that Chinese militants belonging to "East Turkestan terrorist organizations" were joining anti-government rebels in Syria.

Then Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesman Hong Lei warned that these anti-Chinese groups in Syria "seriously harms China's national security" as well as regional peace and stability, and counter-terror officials estimate there are about 300 Chinese fighters in ISIS, as well as additional militants in other rebel factions such as the Free Syrian Army.

Anti-Chinese rebels in Syria

These Chinese claims were corroborated by visual evidence in March and April 2013, when the first videos of the Chinese rebels emerged. One of them was released by *Liwa al-Mujahideen al-Ilami* (the Mujahideen Media Battalion), and showed a Chinese militant proclaiming that the Muslims and Arabs would now attack the "Chinese economy" in revenge for China and Russia supporting Assad politically, economically and militarily. Another was released by the user "Al-Nusrah Front"⁴ entitled "Prayer by a Chinese Jihadist in the Land of Epics [The Levant]"

The main anti-Chinese militant group is the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) that carried out several attacks in Xinjiang and praised or claimed ones including the suicide car bombing in Beijing's Tiananmen Square in October 2013, mass stabbing attacks at Kunming and Guangzhou train stations in 2014, and double suicide bombings at the train station in Urumqi, Xinjiang's capital. In February 2014 TIP issued a video offering "advice" to fighters in Syria and several months later featured its fighters in Syria.

According to Jacob Zenn in an October 2014 *China Brief* article, these anti-Chinese militant groups in Syria issuing anti-Chinese propaganda, appears to support General Jin Yinan's statements that "East Turkistan jihadists organizations are taking advantage of the Syrian civil war to obtain experience and raise the profile of Xinjiang among jihadists from other theatres."

¹ http://www.todayszaman.com/national_report-more-than-100000-fake-turkish-passports-given-to-isil_377534.html

² <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/11/28/us-china-turkey-thailand-idUSKCN0JC0X920141128>

³ http://mil.cnr.cn/jmhdd/gfsk/wgf/201211/t20121101_511278541.html

⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6BSAwhjLmi8>



Zenn also observed that “if the Syrian government were defeated by the rebels, this could provide more opportunities for Uyghur and other anti-Chinese militants to train with victorious rebels groups, such as ISIS, for attacks on China.”

This threat is real: in July 2014 ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi called for jihad and declared war against countries that “seized Muslim rights,” naming China first in a line of 20 countries. In the video, al-Baghdadi referenced Xinjiang numerous times and asked Chinese Muslims to plead allegiance to him, even threatening to occupy part of Xinjiang that appeared on ISIS’s caliphate map. *Al Qaeda* followed suit a few months later in October when it declared war on China and issued its English-language magazine *Resurgence*, with a section entitled “10 Facts About East Turkistan” critical of China’s Uyghur policies in Xinjiang.

China’s Redline: Syrian anti-Chinese militants and Xinjiang instability

For China, Xinjiang stability is an absolute red line, and as Zenn observed “China has the capability to respond with political and possibly military force to combat ISIS should it seek to pursue this goal.”

In March this year, at the annual parliamentary session in Beijing, secretary of the Xinjiang Regional Committee of the Communist Party of China Zhang Chunxian, proclaimed Xinjiang is to be the “core area”⁵ of the Silk Road Economic Belt. Unveiled in September 2013, the Silk Road Economic Belt is the centerpiece of Xi Jinping’s foreign policy and the “China Dream.”

Zhang further underscored that “core area” means a center of finance, communications, health, trade and logistics, culture and education as well as energy cooperation, with the operative word being “core.”

In Chinese parlance, emphasizing something as a ‘core’ interest means China would resort to military force when that red line is crossed. At the 2011 IISS Asia Security Summit, Chinese Defense Minister Liang Guanglie spelled out China’s core interests as the following:

“The core interests include anything related to sovereignty, stability and form of government. China is now pursuing socialism. If there is any attempt to reject this path, it will touch upon China’s core interests. Or, if there is any attempt to encourage any part of China to secede, that also touches upon China’s core interests related to our land, sea or air. Then, anything that is related to China’s national economic and social development also touches upon China core interests”.

Secretary Zhang emphasized the world “core” perhaps as a warning to Turkey and its encouragement of Xinjiang secession. Over the years anti-Chinese and anti-Turkey rhetoric has been escalating in both the AKP as well as Chinese Communist Party mouthpieces. Beginning in 2009 when Erdogan called China’s Xinjiang crackdown as “genocide” and Beijing responded by naming Turkey an axis of evil⁶, since eruption of the Arab Spring in 2011, Beijing has been issuing warnings to Turkey to crack down on Uyghur militants transiting its territory to train with Syrian jihadists. Titles like “War with Syria would be great mistake for Turkey”⁷, “Take fight to ETIM before threat grows”⁸, “Turks, Uyghurs held in smuggling, terrorism scheme”⁹ and “Turkey must distance itself from terrorists”¹⁰ abound.

⁵ http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-03/10/c_134055670.htm

⁶ <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/445195.shtml>

⁷ http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/indepth/2012-10/09/c_131895686.htm

⁸ <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/833525.shtml>

⁹ <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/901866.shtml>

¹⁰ <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/919296.shtml>



During the 2009 Xinjiang uprising, China deployed more than 100,000 troops to quell the unrest, and is reportedly stationing 100,000 Chinese troops in Xinjiang to support its local police force. In 2009 Erdogan also tried to internationalize the Xinjiang uprising by referring it to the UN¹¹, similar to its approach towards internationalizing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Unlike western countries, the PLA is the military arm of the Communist Party, not the Chinese state, and will take any threats to regime survival seriously. In October 2014, when an unauthorized mapping drone¹² flew too close to Beijing airport, China deployed 1,226 troops, 123 military vehicles, 26 radar technicians, two fighter jets and two helicopters to defend the city.

The most important part about Xinjiang stability is that it hosts China's nuclear warheads, the nuclear test site Lop Nur and elements of the Second Artillery Corps ("2nd Arty"), China's strategic missile force. During the Cultural Revolution, rival factions attempted to seize nuclear-related facilities in both Qinghai and Xinjiang. Should such instability occur again – probably on a scale even more substantial than 1989 – these weapons might become vulnerable to seizure by Uyghur militant groups. As such, any instability of Xinjiang and potential jihadists' access to China's nuclear arsenal is a red line for Beijing.

It is not clear if Erdogan, driven by his obsession of Assad-removal in order to promote his vision of installing Sunni Islamist regimes in the Middle East, is heeding China's warnings or fully understands Beijing's national security stakes in Syrian stability and Xinjiang territorial integrity. During the Korean War in 1950, US, Turkey and other allies had ignored Beijing's warnings not to get too close to the Chinese border, prompting Chinese troops to surge across the Yalu River into North Korea. When the war was halted by an armistice in 1953, more than 30,000 American soldiers and 741 Turkish soldiers had died.¹³ Therefore it might be prudent for Turkey, US and regional stakeholders to also consult with the Chinese regarding Damascus. As a permanent UNSC member with perhaps more stakes in Syria than the West, it might be helpful to work with the Chinese for a negotiated political solution to restore stability back in Damascus, so that the international community can then collectively pool their resources together to combat ISIS, the real scourge of modern humanity.

Remarks: Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.

¹¹ http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2009-07/09/content_11681745.htm

¹² <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/oct/23/china-deploys-troops-fighter-jets-unauthorised-drone-beijing-airport>

¹³ Michael Pillsbury, *The Hundred-Year Marathon: China's Secret Strategy to Replace America as the Global Superpower* (New York: Hemy Holt and Company, 2015), p. 4.