China quietly confronted a predominantly indigenous insurgency in the country’s far northwest for over two decades by increasing the security forces’ capability to respond to incidents with less brutal methods and simultaneously investing political and financial capital in hardening society to insurgency’s call. Although far from perfect, China’s tactics evolved to meet the insurgency’s new challenges and China nevertheless remained focused on the long-term project of transforming society’s vision of the future, one tied to the Chinese state’s promise of security, rights and opportunity. Under separatist and Islamist banners, and with inspiration and a few direct links to the global jihad, riots, ambushes, bombings and assassinations in trickle and deluge threatened the government’s grip on the massive region of northwest China known as Xinjiang, the ‘new frontier’. Possibly hundreds of China’s Uyghurs, Xinjiang’s once predominant ethnic minority, trained at a camp in Tora Bora, Afghanistan, and probably elsewhere in the region specifically intending to return home and wage a new jihad, a new fight against the Chinese government. China, for its part, prevented the nascent insurgency from gaining momentum by acting early and forcefully, constantly refining its approach down the spectrum of violence and increasingly relying on social methods, thereby limiting the insurgency from escalating into what could have become the country’s Chechnya, Gaza, Afghanistan or Iraq (e.g. Chinese Communist Party, author unknown, 2005; Gladney 2002).

After greatly reducing the prevalence of insurgency in mainstream society, Chinese authorities now face problems on both ends of the spectrum of violence: society’s increased demand for civil rights, a demand that if met would increase the state’s longevity, and terrorist plots, a direct challenge to the state’s power that Chinese authorities apparently remain intent on confronting with tactical suppression and strategic integration – with Chinese characteristics. It is unclear if Chinese authorities, seemingly more comfortable fighting terrorists than wrestling with public demands for redress of grievances, have come to grips with the nature of the current political landscape, but judging by the continued calls for investment and education perhaps Chinese leaders sense that the next move is theirs as they press forward transforming society in Xinjiang.

The evolving insurgency in Xinjiang

The gruesome separatist attacks that rocked cities and villages across Xinjiang in the past two years, and the increased plotting and propaganda activity – including by al-Qaeda associated
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militants outside China – though a poignant reminder of the continued contest, to date have failed to set the region alight. In the days surrounding the opening ceremonies for the 2008 summer Olympics in Beijing, an event some commentators trumpeted as celebrating China’s emergence as a pre-eminent global power, two men in Kashgar slept in a parked truck overnight, poised for morning, according to international press reporting. In the early hours of 4 August the pair found their mark: a military police formation out for their morning jog. The pair struck the formation with deadly simplicity, mowing their truck into the paramilitary crowd then reportedly wielded knives and lobbed a few home-made grenades among them, which killed at least 16 and injured as many (e.g. Wong 2009: A5, A8).

The Olympics opened on 8 August without incident far to the east of Beijing, an event to which we will soon return; however events in Xinjiang continued to simmer. Insurgents in the following days reportedly attacked other police and government facilities and a local trade centre, as well as security volunteers manning rural checkpoints. These attacks are visible symptoms of the lingering idea of insurgency within society, yet to understand the strength of the idea within society writ large we must also investigate the claimed or planned and disrupted plots, to the extent possible with the information available from international media reporting, Chinese official statements and insurgent media.

As the 2008 Olympics approached, the al-Qaeda allied Turkestan Islamic Party (listed by the United Nations as the East Turkestan Islamic Movement – ETIM, and also known as the East Turkestan Islamic Party – ETIP; the name ‘East Turkistan’ referencing the Xinjiang region) publicly asserted its intent to attack (Turkestan Islamic Party 2008; Xinhua 2008; Haq 2009) China’s major cities to disrupt the Olympics and warned fellow Muslims to avoid the Olympics to not get injured in the planned attack. According to press reporting of China’s ambassador to Pakistan and United Arab Emirates court proceedings, the group also targeted Chinese interests abroad from Pakistan and the Middle East (Islamabad Jinnah 2008: P10; Hassan 2010).

The Turkestan Islamic Party had been nearly silent in the years since international forces entered Afghanistan in late 2001, capturing or killing an unknown number of the group’s members alongside Taliban, al-Qaeda and other allied fighters (Tenet 2007: 221), 22 of whom were imprisoned at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, according to the US Congressional Research Service (Kan 2006). Five remained at Guantanamo Bay the time of writing. The Turkestan Islamic Party since before 9/11 received sanctuary and training for possibly hundreds of fighters in Afghan and other camps and perhaps received modest financing and material support from its al-Qaeda and Taliban allies, according to a published interview with the group’s emir (Haq 2009).

Despite the cross-border and international nexus, Xinjiang’s insurgency remained fundamentally indigenous: local people focusing on a local fight even as they travelled abroad in search of shelter from security service pressure and paramilitary training, and as in many similar fights, elements of Xinjiang’s insurgency reportedly received external support from like-minded militants. While directly benefiting from the cauldron of global jihad, the Turkestan Islamic Party apparently quietly had maintained its focus on returning home to become the vanguard of jihad in Xinjiang. The group’s silence persisted after the Turkestan Islamic Party’s founding emir and an unknown number of followers died in military activity in Pakistan in late 2003.

By early 2007 the group appears to have reconstituted at least enough strength to attempt terrorist activity inside China. According to Chinese authorities, the People’s Armed Police (PAP) in January of 2007 raided a mining facility being used by terrorists with unspecified international ties near the country’s borders with Afghanistan and Pakistan and the PAP killed 17 group members (e.g. Wayne 2007a, 2007b). Police in January 2008 raided a safe-house in Urumqi that reportedly housed 17 individuals, at least some of whom police suspected of having
ties to the Turkestan Islamic Party’s leaders abroad and, at the group’s inspiration or direction, plotting an unspecified attack against the Olympics (Eturbonews.com 2008).

By April of 2008 China claims that its security forces had disrupted a Turkestan Islamic Party plot to attack Chinese cities with poisons and explosives. The Turkestan Islamic Party, for its part, in May 2008 publicly claimed to have bombed buses in Shanghai and Kunming and threatened further attacks to disrupt Beijing’s hosting of the Olympics in August. It is unclear if the Turkestan Islamic Party in fact conducted the bus bombings; however, the group’s threatened attacks targeting China’s major cities did not materialize, probably indicating that the Chinese security forces had indeed gained the upper hand.

To step back for a moment, perhaps a few words on insurgency are in order. Insurgencies most tangibly are composed of people generally acting in groups to resist an idea – usually a political regime embodied by a government. Armed struggle is the element that most visibly distinguishes an insurgency from political movements, and in some cases insurgencies have matured to the point where there is a single or a few predominant groups leading the contest for power and influence against the standing regime. In Xinjiang, it is nearly impossible to reliably track across the past two decades the progress of probably many local groups as they formed, pursued elements of armed struggle (i.e. plotting, preparation, attack), and then dissolved or returned underground under security force pressure. This epistemological problem is largely due, I believe, to the difficulty of collecting data on the formation and dissolution of groups contesting the Chinese government’s hold on power, a problem exacerbated by the country’s historically tight media controls, paucity of reporters, and possibly social-systemic or cultural norms of altering and embellishing accounts to influence and not simply inform the audience.

At least seven additional potentially violent groups are identified by Chinese, American or scholarly sources as conducting activities in Xinjiang spanning the insurgent’s tactical spectrum, and it seems highly likely that a new group or groups – to-date unnamed in international media coverage and unpublicized past Chinese Internet and media controls – participated in the violence of the past two years. Specifically, there is insufficient information to identify the affiliations – if any – for example, of the two individuals police killed and 15 detained in a January 2008 raid against an Urumqi safe-house suspected of plotting a possibly separate attack against the Olympics; the Uyghur woman detained in March 2008 aboard an airplane flight accused of attempting to blow up the airliner (eturbonews.com 2008), or the groups that conducted attacks in August 2008 across Xinjiang (AFP 2008).

The contemporary insurgency in Xinjiang probably began in Baren, near China’s border with Pakistan and Afghanistan, in 1990, with protesters challenging the Chinese state’s claims to legitimate rule and placing authorities on notice, some protesters fielding religious messages to further support their separatist calls. Although unrest in Xinjiang predated the People’s Republic of China, the dream of insurgency awoke in the 1990s as a new wave of terrorism rose internationally in the Afghan war’s wake. Insurgency infected society and began severing the state from the people. According to a Western diplomat then serving in the region, a band of insurgents crossed into Xinjiang once the Soviet threat was neutralized in Afghanistan, only to be repulsed with relative ease using military and diplomatic tools.

Violence in Xinjiang itself persisted at a low level throughout the 1990s, including occasional rioting, attacks against military and government facilities, bombings of buses and public spaces, and a few reported assassinations or attempts (e.g. United States Department of State 2004; Millward 2004; Dillon 2004). Portending a more enduring threat, some young local men, along with their closest friends, fled China and what they perceived to be suffocating security force pressure and ultimately pursued a path of violence to, in their view, defend themselves from an invading,
predatory Chinese state. If China’s claims about the Turkestan Islamic Party’s activities in the past two years are correct, then it appears that young men from a new generation continued to pursue this path of seeking shelter and training abroad for armed resistance at home.

Taking the trends of insurgency as an organic whole, Xinjiang’s dynamic and evolving insurgency outlived successive leaders and a generational shift in operatives, and even the transformation of the insurgency’s organizational milieu: the Turkestan Islamic Party has apparently persisted since at least the late 1990s, yet other smaller groups have formed and dissolved.

Nevertheless, some readers clamour for numbers, in a belief that they might be explanatory. Body and incident counts are a flawed indicator of an insurgency’s strength despite the seeming ease and attractiveness to quantifying the armed struggle because not only is the data usually flawed (skewed by honest collection constraints, bias, or intentional manipulation to influence perceptions), there is potentially a significant time lag between actors joining the cause and taking deadly action. China in 2002 asserted that over 200 attacks occurred in recent years that killed at least 160 people and wounded 440 (Information Office of the State Council 2002; People’s Daily 2002). Add to this the August 2008 attacks – in which possibly three dozen security forces and local officials were killed or wounded, and the August 2010 reported vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices in Aksu that killed seven and injured 14 (BBC 2010). It is unclear if Chinese officials would include the two killed and others wounded in the January 2008 Urumqi safe-house raid or the officially reported 197 killed and over 1,000 wounded in the July 2009 ethnic rioting (Anna 2010: A20; Cha 2009a: A8; Cha 2009b: A9). If the 2009 riots are seen as demands for the government to fulfil its responsibilities to provide justice and security for Uyghurs and Han alike, then – no matter how heartbreaking and tragic the spiralling violence – this event marks a new phase and must be excluded from violence intended to challenge the state’s authority.

Beyond any measurable ‘hard facts’ of body counts, let alone economic development or political progress, society’s deep perceptions of power and security – future even more than present, and informed by the past – are the constant and immeasurable centre of gravity. To overcome a myopic focus on terrorist attacks isolated from the full political context in which these individuals act and the meaning they hope to create, we must also examine the other side of the political struggle in Xinjiang.

Ethnic rioting tore through southern Urumqi, the regional capital, after police intervened in a protest against the brutal and organized killings of two Uyghur factory workers by their Han counterparts far to the east in Guangdong province. A video posted online (Cha 2009a: A8; Cha 2009b: A9), showing the slow evil of the murderous beatings and seeming government inaction, spurred the outrage, and probably tens of thousands of people eventually took to Urumqi’s streets demanding justice. In successive waves of violence, Uyghur mobs attacked Han and then Han mobs attacked Uyghurs. In the end, the ethnic violence killed 197 people and wounded at least 1,000 more. A prominent US-based political dissident claimed, and Chinese officials strongly denied as ‘fabricated’, that 10,000 people had disappeared into police custody with little trace (Branigan 2009; Cara 2010). The carnage was a heartbreaking human tragedy of a protest – that demanded equal justice and protections for Uyghurs as for other Chinese people – gone horribly awry.

Al-Qaeda senior leader Abu Yahya al-Libi publicly responded to ethnic rioting with a video message posted to al-Qaeda’s al-Fajr web forum in October 2009 titled ‘East Turkestan: The Forgotten Wound’, the first al-Qaeda senior leadership media statement devoted entirely to China. Al-Libi made a clear case for defensive jihad – the theologically less controversial defence of attacked and oppressed Muslims – and called for a media campaign to educate Muslims abroad about the situation in Xinjiang, and for those Muslims to support their ‘brothers’ in Xinjiang with every means.
It is a duty for Muslims today to stand by their oppressed and wounded brothers in East Turkestan, stand for brotherhood and faith, and support and aid them with everything they can. Let the first steps in doing so be a wide, concentrated, and continuous media campaign in order to let the Islamic nation know the truth about what is going on over there, and expose the pagan Chinese imperialists who pretend to be gentle and forgiving in front of Islamic people in order to protect their interests.

(Abu Yahya al-Libi 2009)

Al-Libi used what he assesses as the Chinese oppression in Xinjiang as a further indictment of the illegitimacy of ‘apostate governments’ that are friendly with China and already in al-Qaeda’s sights, probably an opaque reference to countries already at odds with al-Qaeda like Pakistan, Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia and Turkey. Continuing, Al-Libi then addressed the people of Xinjiang and advised them to carry weapons and rely on God’s aid in the face of the Chinese ‘invaders’.

Apostate governments appease it while it draws its claws and fangs in order to secretly tear up that remote section of our nation and inflict on its people all kinds of torture and punishment. Let our brothers in Turkestan know that there is no way for salvation, or any method to remove oppression and injustice, except for an honest return to their religion, holding on to it as much as possible, serious preparation for the cause of God the Exalted, carrying weapons in the face of the harsh invaders, patience, sacrifice, depending on God the Exalted.

(Abu Yahya al-Libi 2009)

Al-Libi with the October 2009 video statement began the media campaign; the consequences of China’s new taint for ‘apostate’ governments or Muslims’ widespread willingness to take up arms within China as al-Libi urged has yet to materialize. Interestingly, however, al-Libi appears to have a solid sense of Xinjiang’s reduced insurgent proclivities and varying levels of religiosity.

**Countering insurgency in Xinjiang**

Chinese leaders – enabled by their core constituents’ seemingly infinite support for securing Xinjiang – endeavoured to fundamentally reshape society in Xinjiang with grassroots institutions and police work. Chinese authorities looked to economic development to solve unrest in the long term, however the increased material wealth and reduction of absolute poverty in Xinjiang has yet to draw its desired impact. The conventional wisdom holds that China simply, repeatedly crushed opposition to its rule with force alone. Chinese security forces have in fact responded brutally to repeated challenges to the state’s rule, yet the counterinsurgency’s effectiveness across the past two decades increased as Chinese authorities reduced security force brutality – an ongoing project, the success of which is due in large part to the creation and professionalization of services and units trained specifically to suppress angry mobs or interface with peaceful families. International watchdog organizations such as the United Nations and Human Rights Watch assert that torture and summary executions persisted in Xinjiang, if greatly diminished in frequency (Khan 2005; Human Rights Watch 2005 and 2006). Simply stated, these symptoms of an un-free political system are present to varying degrees throughout the country and should not be falsely attributed causal import. Society in Xinjiang today at times loudly demands that the government provide civil rights and justice, at times quietly looks to a future tied to a changing Chinese state.
Insurgency – a form of warfare and politics – fundamentally is a contest for enemy and core constituent political will. Countering an insurgency without the will to act is impossible, no matter how rich the country, capable the forces, or necessary the fight. Conversely, effective counterinsurgency is possible only with the core’s political will – a set of deep beliefs and preferences held by society. Here we must make a distinction from public opinion, which is both ephemeral and subject to the fast machinations of politicians, opinion leaders and events. Political will then is a shared enduring emotion within society, a subterranean reservoir that sustains a polity across tumultuous events. Insurgency is the struggle for this centre of gravity, and a state can not long persist in the fight nor likely persist at the helm if it loses the core through perceived inaction or incompetence.

China’s counterinsurgency in Xinjiang is enabled and driven by seemingly infinite political will derived from socio-structural and historical factors. Three key factors within the core’s society together build this critical resource: the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) primacy, the state’s pursuit of security, and the people’s demand for stability.

The CCP must counter insurgency in Xinjiang to maintain its jealously guarded primacy in China’s social structure, achieved through its own historic insurgent struggle against a brittle and corrupt regime. The CCP today sits atop a one-party state with the self-fulfilling need of maintaining power. At every level of government, from the grassroots up to the top leadership, the CCP has a concurrent and slightly more equal officer working in tandem with the corresponding state official. Communism itself in China has changed dramatically with the once lustrous ideals now tarnished and faded in eastern China’s large cities, yet the appeal of privilege and power endures. The Mao era’s economic communism has nearly vanished in China, replaced by a rough and rugged crony-capitalism. Political communism morphed into a new authoritarianism.

Political communism’s veneer of ideology wore thin, revealing a fundamentally authoritarian system: power for power’s sake. Maintaining its grip on the state’s power is the sole motivating force, and the sole ideology, left within the CCP. Countering Xinjiang’s insurgency bolsters the CCP claims of serving the national interest, providing viable, if not effective, leadership.

The state must rebuff Xinjiang’s insurgency because China perceives that threats in the inner periphery are multiple, linked, unitary: unrest in one area invites challenge in the next; if one area of China secedes the country will disintegrate. With details different in each case, China believes that Tibet and Taiwan (and perhaps other areas) have repeatedly come close to splitting from the mainland. Security is the fundamental job of any state; beyond preventing ‘renegade provinces’ from splitting, the state must provide internal stability. The question of stability is particularly important in China today because the people demand it; the Chinese people’s perceptions of domestic stability and steady progress towards a more healthy political life legitimize the state.

Insurgency in Xinjiang threatens the state by demonstrating the state’s inability to manage both unrest in the periphery and provide stability for the core demands. Because when states are perceived as weak, challengers rise and because of China’s unique socio-structural and political-historic factors, in this view if China is to survive the state must strongly confront insurgency in Xinjiang: failing this, not only would the periphery rupture but the core would rebel.

At times silently or alternately in blogs, quasi-official editorials and mobs in Xinjiang, the Chinese people demand that the state and the Party counter Xinjiang’s insurgency. While knowledge of Xinjiang’s troubles is limited even among the most educated in China’s east, and knowledge of Uyghurs’ social condition seems untouched even among many Han in Xinjiang, the Chinese people demand that their state hold the territory which it claimed decades ago. For the state to back-pedal on this would be to relinquish claims of legitimately representing the will of the Chinese people, and to relinquish its claim to the entirety of China. After decades of socio-political tumult, most prominently the self-inflicted wounds of the Great Leap Forward
and the Cultural Revolution, Chinese today are tired of unrest and crave security, security provided by a bold-fisted state if need be.

Chinese society demands that the Party and the state provide a stability which can bring progress at a measured pace, a pace which seems glacial to outside observers; the Chinese people repeatedly have suffered the disastrous self-inflicted effects of revolutionary movements. Not needing the details, the core society cries for movement – however incremental – towards the dream of a better, unified and freer future, and this is the primary reason the core society demands effective counterinsurgency in Xinjiang. Fear of an ethnic ‘other’ is a powerful contributing factor.

The CCP imperative to retain its preeminent position in society and atop the state, the state’s daily attempt to avoid disintegration, and the people’s thirst for stability combine into unified purpose: Xinjiang’s insurgency cannot be tolerated. China writ large has not only a large reservoir of political will for confronting the insurgency, but the reservoir is refilling and expanding. The greater the challenge Xinjiang poses, the greater the core’s will and the state’s imperative to counter the threat.

The July 2009 ethnic rioting vividly demonstrates this process of political demand and will: Uyghur mobs – enraged by the state’s perceived failure to provide justice for an anti-Uyghur hate crime far to the east – turned against Urumqi’s Han residents. In response, Han mobs first demanded the police and state provide security and, when this sense of security was unmet, Han mobs took to the streets. Police ultimately restored order and apparently a perception of state-provided security balanced with fear in both populations. Xinjiang’s then top communist Wang Lequan first publicly weathered the political storm to show that the Party refused to be bossed around by anyone’s demands – Uyghur or Han – and then quietly moved on to other responsibilities outside the region. Urumqi’s Party Secretary Li Zhi lost his post in April 2010 after seemingly implausible rumours of needle attacks, again roiling not only the local but the core Han population’s sense of security (Ramzy 2010).

State and CCP officials at all levels in 2009–10 announced what they asserted as new aggressive measures to increase economic development in Xinjiang, intended to alleviate the root causes of unrest, as the flood of police and paramilitary presence gradually ebbed into normalcy. Top suspects still at large were publicly encouraged to turn themselves in to authorities as criminal investigations continued in the background, and at least 200 of the 1,500 suspects arrested ultimately stood trial, according to Chinese press and international media reports, for charges that included organizing crowds to cause bodily harm, vandalizing public property, arson, robbery and murder (BBC 2009). Nevertheless, local Public Security Bureau and PAP units in July 2009 reportedly were ill prepared for the ethnic rioting’s speed, scope and scale, possibly indicating that security forces had grown overly confident in their ability to pre-empt or contain threats (e.g. Cha 2009; Cara 2010).

China’s response to the July 2009 ethnic rioting coupled with the 2007–10 counterterrorism activity also demonstrates how China’s use of force to counter political violence in Xinjiang dramatically changed since 1990 and shifted overwhelmingly down the spectrum of violence in favour of a bottom-up approach. Probably a mix of human informants – either tipsters or infiltrators, China’s legendary full-court press to monitor all electronic communications in the country (Beiser 2010) – and alert officials enabled the police and security services to act against these reported camps, plots and cells before they could strike. When bombers eluded the dragnet in August 2008, the military crackdown prominent Western-based dissidents publicly predicted failed to materialize. In defence of Western-based dissidents, most have resided in the West for at least a decade and their impressions of China’s security activity in Xinjiang formed when brutal force was a faster default.
At first China employed brutal force as the primary tool to manage incidents because force was the single effective tool in the state’s kit, yet over time the state added to its repertoire less deadly and more nuanced security tactics as well as more effective social tools. The military’s role transformed from leading the charge against unrest to supporting – at first visibly and then fading behind the curtains – paramilitary and security forces. Increasingly capable forces at each level – national, regional and local – allowed China to push responsibility down the spectrum of violence to forces increasingly capable of adjusting their preparations to local conditions and responses to an incident’s specific demands.

Military and security forces can kill or capture insurgents, hypothetically removing troublesome elites from the battle-space or these same tools can coerce society into recalculating, rethinking, re-perceiving the situation’s balance of risks and rewards. Counterterrorism almost by its nature draws security forces at first into a capture/kill mind-trap: if only you could catch the bomb-maker/remove the operational commander the group would seemingly crumble. While some terrorist groups might implode without key members, most will not. China’s campaign began as an effort against troublesome elites and, if one were to consider the continued demonization of prominent political dissidents as orchestrating or instigating unrest and terrorism from abroad, then perhaps at least some elements of China’s security apparatus remain locked in this mental-trap (e.g. Ramzy 2010). This same scapegoating could also be seen as an instrumental attempt to isolate China from international pressure on what it considers its internal affairs, at the same time casting blame abroad for fundamentally internal problems. The problem then becomes that some officials might begin to believe their own rhetoric and mis-diagnose the fundamental problems with which they must ultimately deal.

China’s counterterrorism campaign in Xinjiang began as an effort to remove troublesome elites yet the country’s approach quickly evolved into targeting society’s support for insurgency. Even as Chinese police disrupt successive terrorist plots and networks, and capture or kill leaders and operatives, regional officials announce increased economic development and orchestrate counter-messaging campaigns, which gain varying degrees of traction in society. China dampens and suppresses society’s support for insurgency through pressure.

Military and paramilitary forces are augmented, Uyghur residents assert, by the massive influx of ethnic Han from China’s east that now probably constitute nearly 50 per cent of Xinjiang’s population. Perhaps partially by design and part by default, across two decades, the force-mix in Xinjiang shifted from military to paramilitary and local security forces as the state professionalized and created new instruments of power, new instruments down the spectrum of violence and more capable of legitimately or at least tolerably interfacing with local society – in part due to increased local membership, and local knowledge, in these services.

As insurgency is violent politics, we must move past the myopic focus on the violence and see the political struggle as well. China found itself under increasing threat from the ideas of insurgency that had infiltrated the Party-state’s points of connection in society. These reportedly included local Party, government, educational and religious institutions. Local institutions are often the sole point of actual interface between society and government, and brief interactions even of single individuals can carry ripples of perception of the state’s nature and future non-linearly and far out through society. In many insurgencies the state’s position is also undercut by the combination of systemic corruption or simple incompetence hobbling effective interaction with society, a function needed to ultimately provide society that vision for a viable and convincing future path with the state and without actioned doubt.

China – under Wang Lequan’s leadership – re-examined and reconstructed grassroots Party, government and security institutions, and pressed outwards. Focused on the insurgency’s true ideational core, China strategically turned the social institutions of family, friendship, work-group
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and neighbourhood into counterinsurgency tools. A generation of educated Uyghurs has entered governance along with highly educated and less paramount ideological Han, and these officials and institutions began the long slog of professionalizing an expansive and far-reaching bureaucracy at all levels. The Party-state enticed and coerced social and work units to manage responsibility for members, police themselves in concert with the authorities: families for their sons and fathers; work-groups like schools or factories for their workers. By understanding society’s structure, the Party-state established and maintained pressure on the nascent insurgency and thus far has kept Xinjiang’s society from being set alight.

Long-term stability will depend on the degree to which China is able to craft, sell and deliver a positive vision of the future for Xinjiang’s society – a daily and local struggle waged not only, or even principally, by security forces but by educational, religious and cultural, economic, and governance policies. Together these elements reshape society’s perceptions of state and insurgent power and shape society’s hopes for the future, one intertwined with the state.

A functioning educational system provides the structure and much of the informational content society uses to filter their contemporary civic world. In Xinjiang, schooling presents a pathway up and out of villages and towns, and for some out of the region. Uyghur language curriculum is available in some schools, yet Uyghur families increasingly select Han language (Hanyu, also known as Mandarin) schooling and even extra-curricular English for their children to pursue college and business. Like Uyghurs entering the security forces, Uyghurs teach in Xinjiang’s elementary and high schools, presenting the state’s curriculum at times in the Uyghur language. The Party-state jealously guards two subjects in particular because of their political import, their ability to shape and reshape society’s perceptions and people’s understanding of their lives within the broader context of human experience and meaning: history and international affairs.

History, when taught in a state school, directly combats the insurgency’s narrative of where society has been and where it is going. International affairs, when unfiltered by the state, are potentially contagious. Every society is in many ways a historically unique entity unto itself, its own structures, dynamics, tolerances and dreams; nevertheless, tactics and local society’s understanding of the fortunes of similar struggles abroad at key moments can seep and flood in. For example, while Uyghur society generally thus far has rejected the models of Chechnya, Gaza or Iraq for Xinjiang, Urumqi’s July 2009 ethnic unrest echoed the protests rocking Tehran earlier in 2009, thousands taking to the street in protest, demanding the government deliver justice promised and denied.

The Party-state’s religious and cultural policy in Xinjiang aimed to remove what the state considered political content and political challenge, and not necessarily aimed at blocking the average Uyghur’s pursuit of spiritual enlightenment. China trained imams, banned unauthorized gatherings, and the regime leveraged informants and spies to enforce its rules. Uyghur officials and social leaders are pressured to not publicly worship. Perhaps unique to China’s heavy-hand, people over 18 are allowed to study and worship openly, relatively freely, in sanctioned gatherings that the government could monitor, should it so choose. If cast in a more positive light, China’s actions countered support for one vision of political Islam, the one that yearns for a caliphate, by removing radical voices and empowering moderate ones.

Economic development – the government’s go-to answer for all of Xinjiang’s problems – probably was never, nor is it now, a crucial element in countering the insurgency. The government has doubled-down on this public strategy, perhaps believing it in earnest, and is pursuing ‘leapfrog development’ in Xinjiang, designed to rapidly advance the region’s standards of living and alleviate any economic-disparity causes for unrest (Xinhua 2010). Historically, the
Party-state’s economic policies built animus: tangibly showing the state’s power to build roads, skyscrapers and pipelines through the deserts, yet having little perceived benefit for Uyghur residents, making society’s vulnerability more salient.

Governance policies, the final element in China’s project to reshape society, enabled higher numbers and, most importantly, more educated Uyghur cadres to enter local and regional leadership posts. China has continued its project to bring more capable, less corrupt, socially knowledgeable cadres into leadership posts who can interface with society, represent society’s needs and the state’s demands. People across China, including society in Xinjiang, dream of a future where local tyrants are no longer unchecked. The task remains for the Chinese state on a daily basis to ensure the path to this dream runs through the state.

Xinjiang’s society today seems to anticipate a change in the nature of the Chinese state itself. Why support an insurgency that could unleash violent chaos, harsh Islamist dictates or increased state repression? Tyrannical government today can be suffered, at times challenged, to provide increased justice and minimal – if not equal – rights: just look at the freedoms of eastern China; witness the coloured revolutions of Central Asia.

China’s society-centric approach has to date suppressed Xinjiang’s nascent insurgency by acting early and comprehensively. Needlessly brutal measures wasted state energy and alienated potential allies, yet the counterinsurgents gained traction when China focused on responsibly interacting with Xinjiang’s society. The idea of insurgency, the dream of evicting the Han in favour of a new caliphate, has not disappeared. Insurgency episodically reappears when it perceives the state weakening, when it sees an opportunity or vulnerability.

The counterinsurgency too continues to evolve. Rather than focusing myopically on killing and capturing what inevitably turns into an ever expanding pool of terrorists, instead defining the struggle as a battle for the hopes and soul of society, and building and then refining security, governance and social tools, China increased the campaign’s effectiveness. China focused on the political nature of the threat. As governments internationally confront al-Qaeda – less an organization than a cause, a movement unified by the dream of avenging Islam’s dignity through bloodshed (e.g. Hoffman 2006) – they would do well to take a new critical look at China’s war on terrorism.

Notes

1 Disclaimer: the ideas and opinions in the chapter are the author’s alone and in no way represent the US government.

2 In an action reminiscent of the French headscarf controversy or more dated debates in Turkey, since 2000 Uyghur language education has been curtailed at the university level, being currently allowed only for courses in which the language is deemed directly necessary (such as Xinjiang’s history). Restrictions on beards and clothing also follow this pattern of forced acculturation as well.

Recommended readings

China's counterterrorism approach

References