V. China's international counterterrorism cooperation

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The issue of terrorism has been high on China's agenda since the outbreak of ethnic-related violence in Urumqi, the capital of China's Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, in 2009. Ethnically and religiously motivated attacks have become more frequent both in Xinjiang and other parts of China, Consequently, China's concern about the potential spillover of terrorism and other forms of violence from Afghanistan and Pakistan have intensified, especially since the 2014 withdrawal of most troops deployed through the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). Furthermore, in July 2014 the leader of the Islamic State (IS) group, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, described China as a legitimate target for attacks. China has responded with a two-pronged strategy of furthering the economic development of the poorer Western regions (including Xinjiang) and expanding the security forces. Due to the expansion of the security forces, China now spends more on internal security than on the official defence budget.¹ Internationally, these developments have prompted China to seek increased regional security cooperation to secure its borders and to stabilize its neighbours in Greater Central Asia—especially Pakistan. The threat of Chinese citizens joining militant groups such as IS to fight in Iraq and Syria might also provide a motivation for China to deepen its counterterrorism cooperation with Western partners.

Violence in Xinjiang and Chinese fears of regional instability

Since 2013 the number of violent clashes and terrorist attacks in China have increased, mostly in Xinijang, but also in other parts of the country. Overall, about 400 people were killed in Xinjiang-related violence, both within the region and in other parts of China between April 2013 and November 2014.2 Much of this violence is attributed to the many Muslim, ethnically Turkic Uyghur inhabitants of Xinjiang who oppose what they describe as economic and social discrimination and political oppression at the hands of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and ethnically Han Chinese immigrants from China's Eastern provinces.3 In June 2013, a clash between government security forces and protesters in Turpan, a city in the

 $^{^{1}}$ China has not released an official figure for its domestic security spending in 2014, unlike it did in 2011-13, when those numbers were higher than the official defence budget. Martina, M., 'China withholds full domestic-security spending figure', Reuters, 5 Mar. 2014.

² 'China: eight sentenced to death over Xinjiang attacks', *The Guardian*, 8 Dec. 2014.

³ See e.g. 'Why is there tension between China and the Uighurs?', BBC News, 26 Sep. 2014, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-26414014>.

east of Xinjiang, claimed the lives of 35 people.4 On 28 October 2013, 3 people were killed and 39 were injured in Beijing when a car drove into a crowd of tourists at Tiananmen Square; the Chinese state media alleged that Uyghur extremists carried out the attack.5 The level of violence remained high throughout 2014. Three attacks took place at train stations. On 1 March 2014, attackers armed with knives killed 29 and injured 130 people at a train station at Kunming (the capital of Yunnan Province in Southern China).6 On 30 April 2014, 3 people were killed and 79 wounded in a bomb and a knife attack at Urumqi railway station.⁷ On 21 August 2014, a knife attack at a railway station in Guangzhou, Guangdong Province, left seven people injured.8 On 22 May 2014, a bomb attack on a street market in Urumgi left 31 people dead and 94 injured. The deadliest incident of the year took place in Shache County (also known as Yarkant) in Xinjiang on 28 July 2014, when 37 civilians and 59 attackers were killed in an assault on a major road and government facilities.10 Two days later at Id Kah Mosqueat (the main mosque in Kashgar, Xinjiang), an imam, who was considered to be loyal to the CCP leadership, was killed. 11

The Chinese authorities have regularly attributed these attacks to the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) and the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP). ETIM often claims responsibility for, or expresses support for, attacks in China. Chinese officials routinely also allege the involvement of unspecified foreign forces in these attacks. After clashes in Urumqi in 2009, Chinese officials claimed that the attacks had been instigated by external groups of non-state actors and particularly singled out the World Uyghur Congress, based in Munich, Germany. Some commentaries in the

⁴ 'Why is there tension between China and the Uighurs?' (note 3); and Choi, C.-Y., 'Death toll from Xinjiang attacks rises to 35', South China Morning Post, 28 June 2013.

⁵ '北京天安门金水桥暴恐案一审宣判 3人被判死刑' [Beijing Tian'anmen attack: 3 condemnations to death], *China Daily*, 16 June 2014, http://cnews.chinadaily.com.cn/2014-06/16/content_17590220.htm.

^{6 &#}x27;At least 29 dead, 130 injured in Kunming violence', Xinhua Net, 2 Mar. 2014, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/indepth/2014-03/02/c_133152792.htm.

⁷ Kaiman, J., 'Rail station blast kills three in Xinjiang, China', *The Guardian*, 30 Apr. 2014.

⁸ 'Seven slashed in knife attack in China's Guangzhou: state media', Reuters, 21 Aug. 2014.

⁹ 综合消息: 国际社会强烈谴责乌鲁木齐恐怖袭击' [Report: the international community strongly condemns the Urumqi attacks], Xinhua Net, 23 May 2014, http://news.xinhua.net.com/world/2014-05/23/c_1110819662.htm>.

^{10 &#}x27;张春贤主持会议通报莎车县严重暴力恐怖袭击案件情况' [Zhang Chunxian chairs meeting related to the situation in Shache after the terrorist attack], Xinhua Net, 3 Aug. 2014, http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2014-08/03/c_1111909909.htm; and Zuo, M., '37 civilians and 59 'terrorists' died in Xinjiang attack, China says', South China Morning Post, 3 Aug. 2014.

¹¹ Martina, M. and Blanchard, B., 'China says Islamist militants kill pro-Beijing imam in Xinjiang', Reuters, 31 July 2014.

¹² Xu, B., Fletcher, H. and Bajoria, J., 'The East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM)', Council on Foreign Relations, 4 Sep. 2014, http://www.cfr.org/china/east-turkestan-islamic-movement-etim/p9179.

¹³ Evidence shows Rebiya Kadeer behind Urumqi riot: Chinese gov't', Xinhua Net, 9 July 2009, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2009-07/09/content_11676293.htm.

Chinese state media even linked the attacks to al-Qaeda.¹⁴ While the links between domestic rebellion, foreign involvement and global terrorist groups cannot be substantiated, Chinese concerns about a potential spillover of terrorism from neighbouring countries—in particular from Afghanistan and Pakistan-have risen, especially with regard to the partial withdrawal of ISAF forces from Afghanistan in 2014.15 Uvghur extremists are known to have fought with the Taliban and other Islamist groups (e.g. the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), TIP and ETIM) in Afghanistan and Pakistan for several years.¹⁶ Central Asian countries—such as Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan-have significant Uyghur communities as well. China fears further cooperation between Uyghur and like-minded foreign groups, as well as the spread of separatist and jihadist ideas through the Internet.17

In addition to pursuing a harder line within Xinjiang, China is also seeking international partners, both regionally and globally, in its fight against separatists and jiahdists. Chinese Premier Li Keqiang called for greater Asian–European cooperation against terrorism during his trip to Europe in October 2014.18 Furthermore, during the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in Beijing in November 2014, President Xi and US President Barack Obama discussed closer cooperation in counterterrorism activities. Prior to the summit, Obama was quoted as saying 'terrorist groups like ETIM should not be allowed to establish a safe haven in ungoverned areas along China's periphery', thereby acknowledging China's own counterterrorism interests.19

In addition to its counterterrorism efforts in Xinjiang, China aims to strengthen the region's economic development by using it as a gateway to Central Asian markets and energy resources. China's 'Silk Road Economic Belt' initiative, which was first announced by President Xi during his Central Asia trip in September 2013, seeks to enhance stability and economic growth in Xinjiang and in the neighbouring Central Asian states, According to President Xi, friendly cooperative relations with its Central Asian neighbours are a foreign policy priority.²⁰ China has already made con-

²⁰ Lain (note 17).

¹⁴ Wu, C., 'Urumgi riots part of plan to help Al-Qaida', China Daily, 16 July 2009.

¹⁵ Li, W., '中巴阿反恐合作将进一步深化' [China-Pakistan cooperation will be deepened], Shijie Zhisi, Vol. 23, 2014, http://www.xzbu.com/1/view-6346104.htm (in Chinese).

¹⁶ Mir, A., 'Chinese rebels operating camps in Waziristan', The News, 27 Apr. 2013, http://www. thenews.com.pk/Todays-News-2-173855-Chinese-rebels-operating-camps-in-Waziristan>.

¹⁷ Lain, S. 'China's strategic presence in Central Asia', China in Central Asia, 20 Oct. 2014, http://chinaincentralasia.com/2014/10/20/chinas-strategic-presence-in-central-asia/; and 'Regional body to establish anti-terror unit', China Daily, 10 June 2014.

Chinese Ministry of Commerce, 'China urges concerted Asian-European efforts to fight terrorism, epidemics', 18 Oct. 2014, http://english.mofcom.gov.cn/article/zt_premierlikeqiang/news/ 201410/20141000765988.shtml>.

¹⁹ 'Interview: Obama expects to meet Xi on relations, major issues', Xinhua Net, 10 Nov. 2014, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2014-11/10/c_133779558.htm.

siderable investments in infrastructure and energy projects, such as the Central Asia–China Gas Pipeline, investment in Tajikistan's highways and the Kazakhstan–China oil pipeline.²¹ While projects such as the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 'China–Pakistan Economic Corridor' might serve Chinese economic and political interests in the region, some Chinese analysts acknowledge that stronger economic involvement could endanger Chinese citizens (e.g. workers and engineers) by sending them into politically unstable regions and crisis zones.²²

Chinese regional security cooperation

China continues to keep a regional focus on international counterterrorism cooperation, and it is increasingly involved in organizations and multilateral efforts involving its Central Asian neighbours. China is mainly pursuing regional security through the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), pushing for an enlargement of the organization to include Iran and Pakistan and potentially Afghanistan.²³ The SCO's founding statutes call for cooperation against the 'three evil forces'-namely terrorism, separatism and extremism—with the aim of enhancing regional security cooperation in Central Asia, as well as supporting economic integration for greater regional stability. In addition, the SCO's Regional Counter-Terrorism Structure (RCTS) promotes intelligence cooperation, and conducts counterterrorist training and information exchange.24 Since 2005, SCO member states (China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan) have held seven joint military drills—called 'peace missions' the majority of which had the official aim of strengthening the counterterrorism capabilities of the participating militaries.²⁵ While these exercises might allow the PLA to build on its participation in Russian-hosted counterinsurgency training in Chechnya, some analysts doubt their counterterrorism value given their large scale and the use of heavy equipment and artillery.26 Closer cooperation in counterterrorism activi-

²² Li, W., '单巴阿反恐合作将进一步深化' [China-Pakistan cooperation will be deepened], Shijie Zhigi, Vol. 23, 2014, http://www.xzbu.com/1/view-6346104.htm (in Chinese).

²⁴ Sometimes also referred to as the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS).

25 'China to lead regional anti-terrorism drill "Peace Mission—2014", Global Times, 24 Aug. 2014, http://www.globaltimes.cn/daily-specials/peace-mission-2014/.

²⁶ Kuo, K., 'How China develops its counterterrorism capability', *The Diplomat*, 11 Nov. 2013, ">http://thediplomat.com/2013/11/how-china-develops-its-counterterrorism-capability/1/>.

²¹ The Central Asia-China gas pipeline currently consists of three lines that connect China with Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Construction is currently underway for a fourth line that will connect China with Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC), 'Flow of gas from Central Asia', [n.d.], https://www.cnpc.com.cn/en/FlowofnaturalgasfromCentralAsia/FlowofnaturalgasfromCentralAsia2.shtml; and Lain (note 17).

²³ Founded in 2001, current member states are China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Afghanistan, India, Iran, Mongolia and Pakistan are observers. Belarus, Turkey and Sri Lanka are dialogue partners.

ties was one of the themes of President Xi's visit to four Central Asian countries in September 2013.27 Additionally, during the CICA summit in May 2014, Xi called for a 'new Asian security concept' based on increased cooperation and 'zero tolerance' towards terrorists.²⁸

China's counterterrorism cooperation in Central Asia

In October 2014 an English-language magazine reportedly released by al-Qaeda referred to Xinjiang as 'occupied Muslim land' to be recovered by the Islamic Caliphate.29 According to media reports, there were 250 Uyghur militants in Afghanistan and less than 400 in Pakistan in March 2014.30 During the drawdown of ISAF forces from Afghanistan in 2014, China became more active in regional security and counterterrorism cooperation. China supports the 'Heart of Asia', or Istanbul Process, which works towards an Afghan-led and Afghan-owned peace and reconciliation process in the country. China demonstrated its willingness to take the initiative in this area by hosting the Fourth Ministerial Conference of the Istanbul Process, which was held in Beijing on 31 October 2014. At the meeting, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang stated that China 'supports peace and reconstruction in Afghanistan, and will help Afghanistan, not in words but with concrete actions, to enhance capacity-building for independent development'.31

China has intensified its bilateral relationship with Afghanistan. The new Afghan President Ashraf Ghani visited Beijing in October 2014, where he 'expressed the readiness and staunch support from the Afghan side in China's fight against East Turkistan Islamic Movement terrorist forces'.32 China also signalled its willingness to play a greater role in supporting the Afghan reconciliation process by reportedly hosting a delegation of Afghan Taliban officials in Beijing in December 2014.33 According to media reports, Afghan officials have also confirmed the extradition of 15 Uvghurs, who allegedly trained in military camps in Pakistan. In return, the Afghan

[Media: Xi Jinping announces no tolerance against terrorists] (note 27).

²⁷ The 4 countries visited were Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. '媒体: 习近平首次提出对恐怖主义零容忍' [Media: Xi Jinping announces no tolerance against terrorists], Beijing Qingnian Bao, 22 May 2014, http://news.ifeng.com/a/20140522/40403842_0.shtml.

²⁹ Griffiths, J., 'Al-Qaeda Magazine calls for Xinjiang to be "recovered by the Islamic Caliphate", South China Morning Post, 21 Oct. 2014.

³⁰ Mehsud, S. and Golovina, M., 'From his Pakistan hideout, Uighur leader vows revenge on China', Reuters, 14 Mar. 2014.

³¹ Full text: Speech by Premier Li Kegiang at Fourth Ministerial Conference of Istanbul Process on Afghanistan', Xinhua Net, 31 Oct. 2014, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2014- 10/31/c_133757532.htm>.

³² Martina, M., 'China says Afghan president vows to help China fight militants', Reuters, 29 Oct.

³³ Hodge, N., Totakhil, H.K. and Chin, J., 'China creates new avenue for Afghan peace talks', Wall Street Journal, 6 Jan. 2015.

Government expects China to use its influence with Pakistan to help start negotiations with the Taliban.³⁴

On a bilateral level, China has relied on Pakistan's support in its fight against Islamist groups such as ETIM, IMU and Islamic Jihad Union (IJU).³⁵ The Pakistani Army has led several strikes against the Taliban in Northern Waziristan, killing members of ETIM.³⁶

Like Afghanistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have also extradited Uyghurs to China based on allegations that they were involved in terrorist activities, and it seems that China has used its growing influence to urge these countries to more closely monitor their local Uyghur communities.³⁷

China as a counterterrorism partner for the West?

With the rise of IS in Iraq and Syria, China's domestic terrorism problem has become increasingly 'internationalized'.³⁸ Similar to European countries, China is facing the issue of its citizens travelling to Iraq and Syria to join Islamist groups. Already in October 2012, government officials claimed that members of ETIM and other Uyghur extremist groups had joined the rebel forces in Syria.³⁹ In March and April 2013 videos emerged featuring supposed Chinese jihadists criticizing the Chinese Government for supporting Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and declaring their fight against 'opponents of Islam'.⁴⁰ Further, in September 2014 photographs were published by the Iraqi Ministry of Defence claiming to show a heavily beaten Chinese national who was captured during a fight with IS.⁴¹ According to media reports, some of these Uyghur militants have travelled

 34 Shalizi, H., 'Afghans arrested Chinese Uighurs to aid Taliban talks bid: officials', Reuters, 20 Feb 2015.

³⁵ 'Pakistan bans three extremist outfits, on orders from China', Express Tribune, 23 Oct. 2013, http://tribune.com.pk/story/621400/pakistan-bans-three-extremist-outfits-on-orders-from-china/.

36 ·巴启动地面攻势打击塔利班' [Pakistan launches ground operation against Taliban], Xinhua Net, 2 July 2014, http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2014-07/02/c_126697471.htm; and 'Pakistani Lawmaker considers China's growing regional security role', Ghandara, 2 July 2014, http://gandhara.rferl.org/content/article/25443331.html.

³⁷ Implementation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights in Kazakhstan, A Parallel NGO Submission by Human Rights in China, 'Attachment D: highlighted cases of and forcible returns from Kazakhstan to China', 3 June 2011, http://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CCPR/Shared%20Documents/KAZ/INT_CCPR_NGO_KAZ_102_9345_E.pdf; and Beech, H., 'China's Uighur problem: one man's ordeal echoes the plight of a people', *Time*, 28 July 2011.

³⁸ See the discussion on the Islamic State in chapter 2 of this volume.

39 '金一南:美想推翻巴沙尔政权 或将陷入困局' [Jin Yinan: the US wants to change the Assad regime but it may face extreme difficulties], China Radio Network Military Channel, 1 Nov. 2012, http://mil.cnr.cn/jmhdd/gfsk/wgf/201211/t20121101_511278541.html>.

⁴⁰ Zenn, J., 'China claims Uyghurs trained in Syria', Asia Times, 15 July 2013, http://www.atimes.com/atimes/China/CHIN-01-150713.html>.

⁴¹ Wong, E., 'Iraqis identify prisoner as Chinese Islamist fighter', New York Times, 4 Sep. 2014.

to Iraq and Syria via Southeast Asian countries and Turkey. 42 In July 2014 China's former Middle East envoy, Wu Sike, estimated that around 100 Chinese—not only Uvghurs but also Han Chinese—have joined IS.43 In December 2014, another report in the Chinese state media claimed that there were around 300 Chinese nationals fighting for IS in Iraq and Syria.44

China fears that it might become a target of foreign terrorist organizations. In a speech by IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, released on 1 July 2014, he accused China of 'forcibly seizing' Muslim rights and claimed the presence of Chinese fighters within the ranks of IS. 45 Consequently, China is increasingly concerned about the threat posed by returning radicalized fighters. 46 Zhang Xinfeng, the director of the SCO Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure stated in September 2014 that 'every SCO member state has extremists... who are fighting in Syria and Iraq... These people have started returning to their homeland, which constitutes a major threat to regional security'.⁴⁷ Following a trip to the Middle East in July 2014, Wu Sike, told reporters that China is one of the countries that has 'suffered from terror activities. Solving the conflicts in Iraq and Syria will benefit China and the entire world'.48 After the terrorist attack on the French newspaper Charlie Hebdo in January 2015, President Xi declared that 'terrorism is an enemy of all mankind and a common threat to the entire international community, including both China and France' and that China would be willing to work together with other countries in counterterrorism cooperation.49

In the past, China and Western countries have had only limited cooperation on counterterrorism. For example, following the terrorist attacks on the United States of 11 September 2001, the USA attempted to enlist China in the fight against al-Oaeda. However, the cooperation remained limited

⁴² Page, J. and Peker, E., 'As Muslim Uighurs flee, China sees jihad risk', Wall Street Journal, 1 Feb. 2015; and Buckley, C., 'Chinese police kill 2 Uighurs fleeing to Vietnam, reports say', New York Times, 19 Jan. 2015.

^{43.} 外媒: "东突"分子在中东受训 或在伊拉克参战, [Foreign media: Xinjiang independentists train in the Middle East, may be fighting in Iraq], Xinhua Net, 28 July 2014, http://news.xinhua net.com/mil/2014-07/29/c_126807627.htm>.

⁴⁴ Qiu, Y., 'Turkey's ambiguous policies help terrorists join IS jihadist group: analyst', Global Times, 15 Dec. 2014, http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/896765.shtml>.

⁴⁵ 'Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi encourages emigration, worldwide action', SITE Jihadist News, 1 July 2014, https://news.siteintelgroup.com/Jihadist-News/islamic-state-leader- abu-bakr-al-baghdadi-encourages-emigration-worldwide-action.html>; and 'A message to the Mujahidin and the Muslim Ummah in the month of Ramadan', from Amirul-Mu'Minin Abu Bakr Al-Husayni Al-Ourashi Al-Baghdadi. https://ia902501.us.archive.org/2/items/hym3_22aw/english.pdf.

⁴⁶ Also see the discussion on European foreign terrorist fighters in chapter 6, section III, of this

⁴⁷ 'Interview: SCO to further contain "three evil forces": official', Xinhua Net, 11 Sep. 2014, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2014-09/11/c_133635910.htm.

Bai, T., 'China at risk from Syria spillover', Global Times, 29 July 2014, http://www.global times.cn/content/873090.shtml>.

⁴⁹ 'Chinese president sends condolences to France over Paris terror attack', Xinhua Net, 8 Jan. 2015, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2015-01/08/c_133906246.htm.

to 'coordination at the U.N., intelligence-sharing, law enforcement liaison, and monitoring of financial networks'.⁵⁰ The USA agreed to label ETIM as a terrorist group in August 2002, but it refused to hand over 22 Uyghur detainees from the Guantanamo Bay detention camp to China.⁵¹ At present, significant obstacles to increased counterterrorism cooperation between China and Western states remain.

First, China insists on its traditional principle of non-interference. In September 2014 Wu's successor, Gong Xiaosheng, warned that international attacks on IS in Iraq and Syria 'must take into consideration the respect of the sovereignty and integrity of any state'.⁵² As a result, China supported the US-led airstrikes against IS in Iraq (because the actions were supported by the Iraqi Government), but simultaneously opposed foreign intervention against IS in Syria.

Second, Western analysts point to differences in the definition of terrorism and have concerns about China's human rights record with regard to ethnic and religious minorities, such as the Uyghurs.⁵³ Despite these obvious obstacles to cooperation, the increased terrorist threat, both within China and faced by Chinese nationals abroad, has the potential to significantly shape China's security policy towards increased international cooperation.

⁵⁰ Kan, S. A., 'U.S.-China Counterterrorism Cooperation: Issues for U.S. Policy', Congressional Research Service, 15 July 2010, https://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/terror/RL33001.pdf>.

⁵¹ The last three of the detainees were transferred to Slovakia in December 2013. The others had been sent to Albania, Bermuda, El Salvador, Palau and Switzerland. Savage, C., 'U.S. frees last of the Chinese Uighur detainees from Guantánamo Bay', *New York Times*, 31 Dec. 2013.

^{52 &#}x27;China deeply concerned about situation in Middle East: envoy', Xinhua, 19 Sep. 2014, http://www.china.org.cn/world/Off_the_Wire/2014-09/19/content_33560368.htm.

⁵³ See e.g. 'Should the U.S. cooperate with China on terrorism?', ChinaFile, 26 Sep. 2014, http://www.chinafile.com/conversation/should-us-cooperate-china-terrorism.