



## **Al Qaeda's China Problem** by Dr. Martin I. Wayne

Al Qaeda has a China problem, and no one is watching. Despite al Qaeda's significant efforts to support Muslim insurgents in China, the Chinese government has succeeded in limiting popular support for anti-government violence. The latest evidence came on Jan. 5, when China raided an alleged terrorist facility in the country's Xinjiang region, near borders with Pakistan, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan. According to reports, 18 terrorists were killed and 17 were captured, along with 22 improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and material for thousands more. Chinese reportage on terrorism is notoriously problematic, at times imprecise, or simply fabricated. For the skeptics, photos of the policeman killed in the raid were also released, showing emotional relatives amid a sea of People's Armed Police paying their final respects. Ironically, China's ability to successfully kill or capture militants without social blowback demonstrates the significant degree to which China has won the population's "hearts and minds," however begrudgingly.

China's successful efforts to keep the global jihad from spreading into its territory present a real challenge for al Qaeda. The organization reportedly trained more than 1,000 Uyghurs, a Turkic ethnic group that is predominantly Muslim, in camps in Afghanistan prior to 9/11. In late December, al Qaeda's number two, Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri, called for action against "occupation" governments ruling over Muslims, including reference to the plight of Uyghurs in western China. Yet despite this commitment of resources and rhetorical energy, Uyghurs across Xinjiang's social spectrum explain that violent resistance is no longer a viable path. Many Uyghurs in Xinjiang believe that insurgents worsen Uyghurs' plight by making the Chinese more fearful, thereby more repressive. Uyghurs today increasingly participate in the Chinese system as local government and Party officials, educators, informants, and police.

Since the end of the Soviet-Afghan war, China has been confronting the self-described threats of "extremism, separatism, and terrorism" in its Alaska-sized Xinjiang region in the country's far northwest. Where the region was once predominantly populated by Uyghurs, this group is now a minority in its own "autonomous region." The perception of economic discrimination as well as resentment at Chinese rule have helped fuel a low level insurgency in Xinjiang for nearly two decades. Local men who traveled to Afghanistan to fight the Soviets returned home with new skills and attempted to ply their trade. Young Uyghurs were inspired by the power of men, armed with Allah and AK-47s, to defeat a superpower.

Political challenges in Xinjiang took many forms: some Uyghurs worked for greater autonomy, others for greater political freedom or democracy, and still others sought secession from China. As in many similar situations with

Muslims fighting against local regimes, al Qaeda reportedly attempted to lend support by training fighters and funding a local affiliate, the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM). Uyghur groups fighting against Chinese rule assassinated local officials and engaged in bombing campaigns that reportedly included a 1997 explosion outside Zhongnanhai, the enclosed compound in Beijing where China's top leaders work. This period was separatism's high-water mark. The massive 1997 Yining riot involving over 1,000 Uyghurs, in which over 150 reportedly died from security force excesses, has not been repeated. While there has been ongoing low-level violence in Xinjiang since 9/11, Chinese government claims that this is the result of Uyghur separatists are suspect.

China's initial actions were brutal, and credible reports of security force excesses and torture persist. However, success came as China reduced the brutality of its repression and pulled the military out of direct confrontation with society. China built up more restrained, effective, and specialized police forces and tactics and reinvigorated political and educational projects in Xinjiang. The Chinese government purged separatist sympathizers from local governments and attempted to remove political dissent from religious worship. At the same time, availability of Uyghur language education was broadened and Beijing sought to expand economic development in Xinjiang, which was viewed as the key to success. Uyghurs in Xinjiang repeatedly explained in interviews that these changes made participation in the Chinese state more attractive, despite perceptions that economic opportunities primarily benefited the Chinese.

After an initial period of repression, China has used political means to keep the insurgency in Xinjiang to a remarkably low level. Beyond simply killing or capturing suspected insurgents, China has created a path for young Uyghurs – one achieved through participation in the system rather than fighting it. China's proactive approach, reshaping society from the bottom up, has been so successful that much of the current debate centers on whether China really confronts a serious threat of terrorism in Xinjiang.

Zawahiri's call to arms in late December and the People's Armed Police raid in early January highlight what some China-watchers miss in reading the latest Chinese defense White Paper: despite China's more confident role on the world stage, its primary concern is still internal security. The English language *China Daily* argued that the January raid in Xinjiang is a "wake-up call that the threat of terror is not only clear and present but more dangerous than ever."

The raid in Xinjiang upon a group taking mining explosives and building IEDs represents a threat similar to the attacks of Madrid and London: home-grown individuals, radicalizing, building weapons with supplies at-hand. Yet the most important fact is that China was able to stop this group

before it acted. According to government reporting, security forces have repeatedly interdicted arms and disrupted plots in this county, while insurgents have not recently been able to carry a single plot to fruition. This success is partly due to China's ability to provide an alternative path for Uyghurs which limits their willingness to support or tolerate violence.

The contrast between China's project in Xinjiang and U.S.'s actions in Iraq is stark: where China realized that local politics was a key factor for strategic effectiveness, the U.S. has focused on targeting an ever-growing pool of insurgents and terrorists. China's ultimate success in frustrating al Qaeda's designs on Xinjiang rests upon its recognizing and responding to the political nature of the threat.

*Dr. Martin I. Wayne is the China Security Fellow at the National Defense University's Institute for National Strategic Studies. The opinions expressed in this article are his own and do not represent the views of National Defense University, the Department of Defense, or the United States government. In 2005, Dr. Wayne conducted extensive fieldwork in Xinjiang; his book, "Understanding China's War on Terrorism" is forthcoming.*