

# Associate Paper

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## China's Uighur Strategy and South Asian Risk

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### Key Points

- China's policies that target the Uighur minority and their Islamic faith continue amid limited international response.
- While Xinjiang's geographic location is beneficial to China's Belt Road Initiative, the Uighur repression could trigger militant groups on the adjoining Pakistani and Afghan borders.
- The Islamic State in Khurasan group could utilise the situation to entice other militant groups to overcome their ideological differences and join it in its fight against Chinese repression.
- China's crackdown on the Uighurs could backfire against its Han population in Xinjiang and possibly elsewhere in China.

### Summary

China's Muslim-minority Uighur community, who reside in Xinjiang province of north-western China for the most part, currently face a crackdown that the Chinese authorities claim targets separatist elements. The province has been an immense asset for China. It has a key geographic location, bordering Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Russia, Mongolia and Pakistan. It also holds huge energy and mineral [resources](#) that make up a large part of China's total resources. The province's importance is further enhanced by President Xi's legacy project, the Belt Road initiative (BRI), its geographical location making it China's gateway to Central Asia and the Middle East of that major undertaking.

The ethnically Turkic Uighurs are distinct from the majority Han Chinese community, which partly accounts for them being targeted by China. A United Nations human rights panel suggests that hundreds of thousands, possibly even [millions](#), of Uighurs have been incarcerated in "re-education" internment camps.

## Analysis

The international reaction to the Uighur repression so far has been weak. Officials and religious leaders of Muslim-majority countries in South-East Asia, Central Asia and the Middle East have provided little public reaction, leave alone condemnation. In fact, the topic is barely mentioned in the media of Muslim-majority countries. This can be explained in part by China's growing economic ties that have allowed it to expand its influence in those countries. Yet another approach by Beijing to gain further leverage was to raise those relationships to strategic partnerships, such as when it offered US\$23 billion in loans and financial aid to various countries of the Middle East after meeting 21 foreign ministers of Arab nations at the [China-Arab States Cooperation Forum](#) (CASCF) that Beijing hosted in July this year. China sought to ensure the region's stability in order to safeguard the BRI through the region by providing those loans.

While China can benefit from Xinjiang's strategic location, that advantage could be reversed if it is examined in terms of the province's proximity to the Afghan and Pakistani borders, a region that is a known sanctuary for large numbers of insurgent and militant groups. One of those groups, the Islamic State in Khurasan (ISK), poses a particularly worrying threat. ISK follows the model used by Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), recruiting fighters by purveying a strict version of Islamic teachings. It relies on rhetoric about re-uniting Muslims under the banner of a caliphate in Khurasan, a historic region that includes parts of Central Asia, Pakistan and Afghanistan, all of which border Xinjiang.

While the number of attacks conducted by ISIS in the Western countries is declining, this should not overshadow the rising number of attacks in other parts of the world, including Central and Southeast Asia. Fighters who left Iraq and Syria after ISIS's losses in those regions went to places like Libya, Central Asia and Southeast Asia. Since then, t countries in those regions have witnessed increasing numbers of attacks conducted by individuals who claim to be members of Islamic State (IS), the current name of ISIS. These radicals may no longer have physical control on the ground in Iraq and Syria but still exist as a scattered force that seeks a region as a base from which they may proclaim the return of the Caliphate. The numbers of Central Asian fighters who were in Iraq and Syria are significant and their return to their countries of origin should underline the possibility of the existence of sleeping cells that could be activated when required. Not only that, the fighters returning to Southeast and Central Asia would be stationed next door to Xinjiang and willing to join a fight that claims defending fellow Muslim brothers who are living under Chinese repression.

Since 2016, the Chinese authorities have adopted measures that target the Islamic faith of the Uighur community. These include hindering their prayers and fasting during Ramadan, forcing them to abandon their beliefs in God, to comply with the rules of the Communist Party and spreading Islamophobia. Uighur leaders perceive those actions as a strategy aimed at abolishing the Islamic faith from the province. It is inevitable that the news of those repressive measures will spill over Xinjiang's borders and spread among the public of the neighbouring countries as well as those people who share religious and family ties with the Uighurs of Xinjiang. As the Muslims of Xinjiang province continue to be mistreated by the Chinese authorities, the people of bordering countries watch in frustration, which stems in

large measure from the absence of any public condemnation or support of the Uighurs by international Muslim organisations and individuals. That frustration will only be inflamed further by the blatant disregard of the Uighurs' plight by the Muslim public in other parts of the world.

The network of Islamic ex-fighters, who have taken part in one or more regional conflicts, has survived since the 1990's and remains significant because of the alliances they have forged with regional governments and organisations based on common interests. Most importantly, that network has tried through the years to have its own territory where it can claim power and authority. IS made this objective attractive by portraying a utopian Islamic State. This goal and the ideology they espoused echoed farther than that of any other terrorist organisation before them and attracted more individuals to their cause than those such as Afghanistan, Chechnya or even the American war on Iraq. Using Iraq as a case in point; al Qaeda failed to establish a presence on the ground. On the other hand, the Iraqi government's failure to rebuild the state led to the rise of ISIS in 2014. Claiming the capture of Mosul in Iraq was the starting point for ISIS to spread its influence internationally. It spread its cells around the world to entice different groups to join it in its endeavours. Their attempts were successful, as many groups favoured joining ISIS over former favourites like Al Qaeda. Presenting Abu Bakr al Baghdadi as the caliph combined with calls to join the Caliphate echoed globally and resulted in more than 40 terrorist and insurgent groups declaring allegiance to Islamic State.

Terrorism is familiar in Pakistan and Afghanistan, where many resident terrorist and militant groups were among the first to pledge allegiance to IS. Khurasan, which spreads over parts of Central Asia, Pakistan and Afghanistan, has become the predominant area for the relocation of IS members since the downturn in their fortunes in 2017. The main issue that allowed IS and other terrorist organisations to form was the weakness of the government in Iraq, its inability to manage its territory and its failure to containing the influence of IS. Similarly, both Afghanistan and Pakistan have long had insecure regions that have effectively been under the control of terrorist groups that made them unsafe. The ineffectiveness of security forces in those regions, along with the high number of terrorist groups, has led ISK cells to rapidly grow into a network that spans Pakistan's four provinces and its four federally-administered territories, and in the eastern and northern parts of Afghanistan. ISK used an intensive media campaign to raise enough publicity that attracted locals and regional radicals to join them and expand the network's area of influence.

ISK calls have resonated the most in [Baluchistan](#), Pakistan's largest province, which is located in its south-west. It utilised the poor and under-developed conditions of the province to create a safe haven there. Moreover, the province witnessed several insurgent Baluch nationalists who aspired to separate from Pakistan. That overall situation has served ISK well since the insecurity and ethos of separatist tendencies are commonplace in the province. ISK has advanced its network by creating sub-networks, each of which focuses on one task, such as recruiting, finance and logistics. Currently, the south-eastern territories of Afghanistan are ISK's new targets. The area has the perfect conditions that assist ISK - it shares borders with Pakistan, the Afghan government has almost no influence in those areas and active militant groups control those areas. These conditions not only are ideal to expand ISK's influence, but

the existing groups, especially the Taliban, share its ideals and will likely join ISK. It is in this atmosphere that the importance of the Uighurs case comes to the fore; it ignites the sentiments of locals, who empathise with the Uighurs. When local governments are incapable of reflecting their citizens' calls or empathising with their grievances, radicals easily infiltrate local communities and recruit members to their cells.

The global neglect of the Uighurs will resonate among locals who already feel alienated. Rising global calls against Islam, furthermore, become increasingly relevant as those give rise to perceptions of a direct attack on Muslim beliefs. That attack, according to these people, requires an act of defence. This reasoning will allure them to join any agency that presents itself as a defender of their cause. By illustrating the oppression of Muslims in Xinjiang as a part of an international move against Islam, the cause will transform from a local matter into a global issue that will attract foreign fighters to join it. That could become the fertile ground that a group with a hard-line ideology like ISK seeks. The Uighurs' distress could mutate into a rallying call that attracts radicalised and radical-leaning individuals to unite near the Chinese borders in an attempt to free their Uighur brothers from repression.

Gaining control of the Afghan Pakistani borders could pave the way for ISK to join forces with the Taliban, which already controls more than half of Afghanistan, the rest remaining under weak government control. The expansion of their influence over Afghanistan will be crucial as it would provide all the advantages that ISK seeks. Geographically, Afghanistan's mountainous landscape is hard to navigate and will provide hiding spots for ISK fighters. Furthermore, some locations could make any ground operation against them virtually impossible. The area still has plenty of caves that are used by militants as hideouts. Added to that is the experience that local fighters gained by fighting against the Russians and then the Americans. The ongoing war against the Americans and the Afghan government makes it easier for members of ISK to persuade members of the local community to join them.

ISK is not be the first or the only voice that calls for the creation of Khurasan. Central Asia is witnessing a growing Pan-Turkism movement. As a political movement, Pan-Turkism calls for the unification of all Turkic people in the area stretching from the eastern Mediterranean Sea to Iran, Afghanistan, China and parts of Southern Russia. This ideology, and its overlap with the aspired-to Khurasan, could prove to be another way of attracting those who see the Uighurs as an oppressed Turkic population. Accordingly, the possibility of a more militant Pan-Turkism must be taken into consideration. It would not be the first time that the idea of a state predicated on a theocratic and Turkic identity has emerged in the region. The creation of the Islamic State of Yettishar (1865 – 1878), with its capital at Kashgar, which is in present-day Xinjiang, came about as the result of a series of uprisings in Xinjiang. The East Turkestan Islamic Republic, also known as the Republic of Uighuristan, rose in the 1930's, albeit that it was short-lived.

China's crackdown on the Uighurs in Xinjiang in the 1990's backfired and resulted in establishing the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) in Afghanistan and Pakistan. It has been suggested that the [first members of that group were Uighurs](#) who fled China at that time and pledged allegiance to the Taliban. It had its operations focused on China as it claimed responsibility for several attacks that ranged from mass stabbings to bombings. TIP claimed

that it was defending Muslim Uighurs but later it changed its loyalty to IS and moved its operations to Syria. Now that IS has lost ground there, the return of this group to its origins near Xinjiang's borders is just a matter of time. One of the major aspects for this group are its strong efforts to gain publicity, including the use of high-quality videos. TIP has shown that it is an IS-leaning group. If ISK declared its support for the Uighurs, that would be sufficient for TIP to join it. This partnership could transfer the ISK's operations into Xinjiang and the province's Han Chinese could be targeted. That is even more likely now that the Chinese government has forced Uighurs families to accommodate Han Chinese in their homes so that they may be better monitored.

IS may have lost the major part of the territory it once controlled, but that does not suggest the death of the idea that attracted large numbers of foreign fighters to its ranks, nor does that loss stop it from being re-established in another geographical locations that offer suitable conditions for a resurgence. As noted previously, the nominal Khurasan region provides everything that a group like ISK seeks. The real concern, however, is the possibility of the region being dragged into a new proxy war between regional and global powers. Recently, Washington expressed its [concerns](#) about the close relationship between Iran and the Taliban. While counter-intuitive, given their sectarian differences and the number of Shias killed by the Taliban, Iran's assistance to the Taliban could be a tactic to cause the American attempt to bring the Taliban to the negotiating table to fail. If that were to occur, it would imply the continuation of the existing chaos that benefits the ISK which, if the Taliban agreed to join it, could ensure its existence in the longer term.

The importance of the Uighur situation lies in the possibility of it being recast to serve the expansion of the ISK. This is especially the case in Afghanistan which, in turn, is under growing pressure from the thousands of unemployed Afghans returning from Iran as result of the latest American sanctions against that country. China's crackdown on the Uighurs in the 1990's backfired and resulted in the creation of the TIP, which then conducted attacks within China. Similarly, if the TIP finds safe haven in Afghanistan and Pakistan by aligning with the ISK, just as it previously did with IS, that could result in attacks against the Han Chinese in order to defend the Uighurs. The consequences of China's policies in Xinjiang could be the trigger that floods the region with turmoil. The combination of the factors described above could create a concrete foundation for another IS, one that potentially is more resilient than its predecessor in Iraq and Syria.

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