Security and Islam in Asia: Lessons from China's Uyghur Minority

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Highlights

• The international community pays regular attention to the issue of Islam in the Middle-East, but tends to forget its salience in Asia.
• Islam in Asia will partly shape the security development of the continent in the decades to come.
• The Uyghur issue highlights the economic and cultural marginalisation of China's Muslims.

The death of Osama Bin Laden in May 2011 has once again put the media spotlight on Al-Qaeda. The movement's weakening due to the loss of its main leader does not amount to its elimination: Al-Qaeda has become a brand, mainly targeting the international community, and several scattered movements will continue to lay claim to it, whether situated in Europe, the Maghreb, Yemen and the Sudan, or Indonesia. Al-Qaeda's weakening does not settle the political and social conflicts which have served as its background. There is hoped however that the erroneous prism constituted by the US-led 'war on terror' waged after 11 September 2001 will be abandoned. This 'war' contributed to the overlap of an internationalised Jihadi movement with situations of local tension in which Islam was, to very diverse degrees, claimed as a narrative by which to explain the conflict. The idea that every conflict affecting Muslim populations had a more or less direct link to international terrorism distorted Western readings not only of the situation in Afghanistan and Iraq, but also of the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, of that between Tamils and government forces in Sri- Lanka, as well as, the understanding of Pakistan's domestic frailty due to the emergence of its own Taliban movements.

The international community pays regular attention to the Islam issue in the Middle-East. Today it is in a better position to understand the lack of unity that characterises radical Islam in the Maghreb, Mashrek and the Persian Gulf, and has realised the importance of social and political questions (radical Islam is a response to social marginalisation and political repression). 'Counter-terrorism' measures thus cannot remain limited to a military perspective, nor efface differences between insurgents in the name of their common 'enemy' status. However, the international community tends to forget the salience of the Islam issue in Asia. The three largest Muslim countries in the world are in Asia (Indonesia, Pakistan and Bangladesh), and India has larger Muslim minorities than the entire Bangladeshi population (130 million compared to 112 million). If the Pakistani situation is the most troubling for the international community, other Muslim countries in Asia have also been weakened: Indonesia has entered a period of political turmoil in which Islamic movements are trying to increase their influence; India's Muslim minority remains politically and socially marginalised while the geopolitical situation in Kashmir is still tense; and Bangladesh has to confront immense internal problems, with the impact of climate change adding to its endemic poverty.

In the context of China's rise to power, it is important for Asia's general stability to look at the Chinese experience of managing Islam, especially the Islam extant among restive national minorities such as the Uyghurs. The July 2009 ethnic riots in Xinjiang – the largest ethnic riots between the Uyghurs and the Chinese Han majority since 1949 – demonstrated the gravity of the situation. Renewed violence in the region in late July 2011 confirmed that the problem is far from resolved. China has successfully adopted the American discourse of the 'war on terror', and, like other authoritarian regimes, has set up an entire ideological arsenal which equates any dissent movement to international terrorism. A look at the Uyghur issue, however, enables us to grasp more precisely the mechanisms of transformation of Asia's Muslim societies. Understanding the evolution underway may help the international community avoid the errors of interpretation in its counter-terrorism strategies that it made in the Middle-East, and put it in a better position to shape security scenarios across Asia.

The Chinese Strategy in Xinjiang

Since the 1990s, and even more so today, the Chinese authorities have been obsessed by the country's internal stability. Three concerns stand out. The first is to manage social tensions by continuing to lift the Chinese peasantry out of poverty and satisfy the demands of the middle classes. Each year, the number of localised peasant riots is in the hundreds. Added to this is the discontent of the industrial workers, whose living conditions have deteriorated; the arrival of hundreds of millions of migrants to mush- rooming cities; the disappointment of the educated youth unable to find good work opportunities; and the expectations of the new Chinese bourgeoisie.

The second concern is linked to the political system and managing the generational change of the political elites. The fourth Hu Jintao's generation of leaders, which succeeded the first three of Mao, Deng Xiaoping and Jiang Zemin, will yield its place to the fifth generation in 2012-2013 during the next Communist Party Congress. But the young generations of Chinese elites, fully integrated into globalised mechanisms, tend to push for China to have a more nationalistic voice in the world, which frightens the older generations, who are partisans of a wait-and-see policy towards the United States. The third concern is to reduce ethnic tensions in Xinjiang and Tibet, and continue improvements in cross- Strait relations.

In the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR), Beijing's strategy is a carrot-and-stick policy. The carrot is the economic development of Xinjiang. US$300 billion of investments are planned up to 2015. The stick is the threat to eliminate any elements considered to be potentially subversive. The central government has officially undertaken to reduce the gap between GDP per capita in Xinjiang and that of the coastal provinces. In 2010 the government decided to charge a new resource tax of 5 per cent on all oil and gas produced in Xinjiang to boost provincial revenues by 25 per cent. The US$300 billion of investments will be used mainly for development projects in Southern Xinjiang, focusing on strategic sectors such as infrastructure, transport and fostering foreign investments. One of the most important measures foresees turning Kashgar into a special economic zone based on the model of Shenzhen in the Guangdong region. The face of Kashgar, a Uyghur-dominated city with heavy national symbolism for the Uyghurs, is set to be transformed into a modern multi-ethnic city by 2020.

However, the Tibetan riots of spring 2008, the bomb attacks at Kashgar during the 2008 Olympic Games and the July 2009 ethnic riots in Xinjiang have confirmed the inadequacy of the Chinese strategy. Investing massively in the local economy and infrastructure is not enough to defuse secessionist tensions and identity conflicts. In the years to come, Beijing will have to avoid causing tension with its preferential policy of land attribution, a particularly sensi- tive issue given the process of Han Chinese agricultural colonisation. The success of Chinese policy will depend on its ability to enable the Uyghur to benefit from these economic reforms and the dividends they reap, and to stop them being marginalised in their own province.

Islam in Xinjiang

There are multiple meanings to 'being Muslim'. For an entire section of the Uyghur elite, most of whom are based in Urumqi, Islam is above all a central element of their national identity. Their social promotion was made possible thanks to a partial linguistic and cultural Sinicisation in the Chinese administrative and university system, but they wish to maintain specific identity elements, religion probably being the most important. What is at stake is therefore not faith per se, but individual and collective identity. In the more remote rural regions of Xinjiang, in particular in Kashgaria and the major conservative cities of the south in the Taklamakan Desert, Islam is above all seen as the embodiment of tradition: it regulates social relations; the rites of passage of birth, marriage and death; gender relations; relations within the family; the respect of youth toward their elders. Here too, religion is intrinsically linked to culture.

But this old paradigm, in which religion and culture intersect, has been undermined by the arrival of Chinese modernity. This modernity is, as with every modernity, disruptive in principle, but

also because it is perceived as foreign, since it basically favours the Han Chinese. Thus, the Uyghurs who wish to integrate into Chinese economic dynamism not only have to accept cultural Sinicisation, but also find themselves in increased competition with Han migrants who arrive from the central regions of the country. Added to acculturation, then, is the sentiment of foreign domination. Those who remain outside of Chinese dynamics are marginalised both culturally and economically, and have even seen their socio-economic situation deteriorate with the arrival of the Hans, who possess the fertile lands and are given priority for employment in industries and services.

The reactions to these social transformations are multiple. Some Uyghur accept the Chinese strategy and seek reconciliation, considering that they have no future other than to integrate into the Chinese system and therefore to acculturate themselves partially to it. Others want to resist in cultural terms and consider that the two flagships of Uyghur identity to be preserved are its language and religion. In this perspective, the official Islam controlled by the Chinese authorities (theological training in state institutions, nomination of imams, the monitoring of sermons before they are read in public, etc.) is partially accepted, on the condition that the imams are Uyghurs (and not, for example, Hui, i.e. Muslim Hans) and that the pressures are not excessive. For the pauperised rural youth, who are marginalised from the Chinese strategies of modernisation, Islam presents itself as a response, in a more fundamentalist version. Fundamentalism is understood as a literal reading of the holy texts, a strict respect for traditional thought, and the rejection of Chinese administrative control over religious practice and of the pro-Chinese patriotic discourses of the official imams. Islam is thus lived as a bastion of resistance to acculturation, but equally as a withdrawal to communitarian values for those at the margins of the 'Chinese mirage'.

The most engaged groups, which represent a statistically small minority, seek strategies of internationalisation of their cause. These strategies are of two orders. Some play the card of autonomy and/or secessionism, and seek to harmonise their strategies with those of the Uyghur diaspora, mostly represented by the World Uyghur Congress, led by Rebiya Kadeer. But this diaspora is not uniform: the Uyghur who have fled China are often suspected of being in the service of Beijing; those settled in Arab countries or partisans of Saudi Arabia are considered to be too Salafi; the community in Turkey is often accused of being too pan-Turkist; and that of Central Asia too turned toward Europe and too secularised; and so on. The Congress calls for the self-determination of the Uyghur people through peaceful means. Its classification as a terrorist network by the Chinese government lacks any raison d'être.

Others, comprising an even smaller minority, have preferred to rally to the Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), created in the 1990s. Born of the discontent of the young talib (theology students), who are seeking to promote an Islamic state in the oases of Southern Xinjiang, the ETIM took the Afghan Mujahidin as its model but has no foreign support at present. Throughout the 1990s, some of its most internationalised members rallied to the cause of the Taliban, with extensions in Al-Qaeda. About twenty Uyghur were captured by American troops in Afghanistan and imprisoned in Guantanamo for collusion with Al-Qaeda. However, as the American expert Dru Gladney has explained, there exists a serious 'credibility gap' in relation to the ETIM, since most of the information sources about it issue from the Chinese government. Hence, the bomb attacks that have been conducted with regularity in Xinjiang, in particular during the 2008 Olympic Games, are officially attributed to the ETIM, but it is evident that the Chinese security services play an ambiguous role in the creation of evidence, and may have fomented some attacks that then were used to justify the 'war on terror'.

Islam as Ideology

The attention that the Chinese authorities bring to bear on questions of economic and social disparity can only be welcomed. Yet it is also accompanied by repressive measures in terms of religious and cultural autonomy, as well as the logistics of demographic colonisation. The Uyghurs suffer economic marginalisation, political submission, and religious and cultural discrimination, which does not give them much leeway in a Chinese state which presents itself increasingly as a nation-state. As with every religion, Islam can be seen as a driver of social mobilisation. It can work to

reinforce a nationalist ideology that is more secular than religious, underlining the Turkic and Islamic identity of the Uyghurs against a nationalising Chinese nation-state, or be promoted as an Islamic social and political order. While the first case represents a form of ideology of decolonisation, the second can be seen as an ideology of resistance against a global order considered unjust because it is impious.

The secessionist hopes of a part – a minority – of Uyghurs are nonetheless not realistic: Xinjiang has never been as integrated into the Chinese world as it is today. With about 15 per cent of proven Chinese oil reserves, and 22 per cent of its gas reserves, the region is of capital importance for China in its quest for new energy resources and will never be ceded. Increasingly many Uyghurs speak Chinese (Mandarin) and are integrated into the Chinese political and economic networks. Independence would not promote any development in a weakened geopolitical environment which includes Afghanistan, Pakistan and post-Soviet Central Asia. The future of Xinjiang will therefore be Chinese, but one in which the Uyghurs might also be able to benefit from greater cultural autonomy and better economic integration, presuming a drastic relaxation of Beijing's cen- tralising policies.

In addition, China cannot elude the phenomena of globalisation. Increasingly many young Uyghurs have re-connected with the rest of the Islamic world, the Umma. With the opening of the Karakoram highway, Pakistani traders have become particularly influential in Southern Xinjiang since the 1990s. The number of Uyghur traders and students able to travel to Muslim countries for pilgrimage or to study abroad has also increased, and those who have returned have often been influenced by the Deobandi, Salafi or Wahabbi interpretations of Islam. Certain Uyghurs have also tried to establish the Hizb ut- Tahrir from Central Asia. This phenomenon was a consequence of the errors committed by the Chinese authorities in their religious strategy. By delegitimising local traditions (Sufism and Ishanism, or Cult of Saints) and painting a retrograde image of ancient religious practices they unwittingly increased the support for more fundamentalist forms of Islam, forms that are perceived to be more in accord with modernity. Chinese religious repression is therefore short- sighted, since it will not be able to eliminate the connection between a part of the Uyghur and the Umma, and therefore the circulation of ideas on Islam as an ideology of resistance.

Conclusion

Asian Muslims are likely to have a hand in shaping the security environment of the continent in decades to come. A global shift in the relations between China and the Islamic world is also at work. China is a traditional ally of Pakistan, but also a central actor in post-Soviet Central Asia and Afghanistan, as well as an increasingly key partner of Iran and Saudi Arabia. Driven by the Chinese economy, Iran, the Arab Gulf countries and also Turkey are trying to highlight their Asian identities. Asia must therefore be conceived both in its relation to the Islamic world and as a region where Muslim minorities are set to play a growing role in the security balance.

What lessons from the Uyghur case can be applied to broader questions of instability across Asia? The continuing political repression in the region is a security concern to the extent that it fosters discontent and perhaps radicalism, even in the context of Asia's stunning economic success. Asian Muslims are often cast aside by the dynamism moving the continent. If the political repression and economic marginalisation of some groups of Asian Muslims continues, it will reinforce the divisions linked to a history of failed decolonisation. This social background risks fuelling literal readings of faith and the transformation of Islam into an ideology of resistance to a new world order where access to riches, and prospects for development, are unevenly distributed.

It would be ironic for such tensions to continue growing in Asia just when the 'Arab spring' has shown that the binary opposition between secular authoritarianism and an Islamic insurgency is obsolete. A Western focus on counter-terrorism narrowly defined does not make it possible to resolve issues as complex as these, nor to monitor social evolutions. The international agenda has to move toward a broader conception of security in Asia.

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