The East Turkistan Islamic Party (E.T.I.P.)

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This study investigates the motives, history, leadership, impact, and future of the East Turkistan Islamic Party (E.T.I.P.), a little-studied ethno-nationalist separatist terrorist organization in China’s Xinjiang province. Basing findings on existing literature, original Chinese news reports and press releases, and firsthand interviews with experts, it concludes that while E.T.I.P.-proper does not pose a significant threat to U.S. national security, issues surrounding it present significant foreign policy problems vis à vis China and the human rights community. However, ETIP members in Pakistan are likely cooperating with known enemies of the United States, and the United States should continue its CT efforts against them without infringing on China’s sovereignty.
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I. Overview and Literature Review

ETIP, or the East Turkistan Islamic Party, is a religious ethno-nationalist terrorist organization, made up of Uighur separatists who aim to establish a fundamentalist Islamic state in the West Chinese province of Xinjiang. In the United States, it is known largely for its connection to Al Qaeda, its threats against the 2008 Beijing Olympics, and its members detained in Guantanamo Bay. However, in China, ETIP is considered a serious threat to the internal security of the country.

The study of active terrorist groups will always be a murky subject, but ETIP takes “murky” to a new level. Members of ETIP are Uighur Muslims; however, much further information, such as education level, structure, or community support, even the size of the organization, is tightly guarded by the PRC. Unfortunately, little unclassified research or reliable data exists concerning this group. As a result, this study’s conclusions are largely based on news articles, questionable Chinese press releases, and conversations with experts in the State Department. The book ETIM: China's Islamic Militants and the Global Terrorist Threat by Todd Reed and Diana Raschkewasalso extremely helpful in gaining a wide understanding of the organization as a whole.

II. Background: Xinjiang

Xinjiang, called “East Turkistan” or “Uyghurstan” by the native ethnic Uyghurs, is physically and culturally isolated from the rest of China. Located in the Taklimakan Desert and bordering states such as Pakistan and Kazakhstan, the provincial capital is closer to Baghdad than it is to Beijing. The Uighur ethnic group, no longer the majority in their homeland (due to the “Develop the
West” (西部大开放) program that encourages Han Chinese to move there), have their own language and practice Islam.

The PRC severely limits the rights of Uyghur Muslims living in Xinjiang; for example, Muslims cannot join the Communist Party and are therefore restricted from holding positions of power, children can be arrested for praying, and prominent members of the community are often arrested indefinitely under vague charges. On one memorable occasion, Chinese security forces took over a major mosque and turned it into a pig slaughtering facility. In other parts of the country (notably Taoyuan County, Beijing, and Xi’an), members of the Uyghur diaspora gather in certain neighborhoods, which the government promptly demolishes without warning when it discovers them.

III. ETIP Profile

Name. The names “East Turkistan Islamic Movement” (ETIM), “East Turkistan Islamic Party” (ETIP), “Turkistan Islamic Party” (TIP), and “Islamic Party of Turkistan” (IPT), “East Turkistan Party of Allah” (ETIPA), and “East Turkistan Liberation Organization” (ETLO) have all been used to describe the same group, similar groups, and/or overlapping groups. Though U.N. and U.S. blacklists only recognize “ETIP” and “ETIM” as equivalent, it is largely accepted that due to translation errors and poor organizational structure, ETIP, ETIP, TIP, and IPT all probably refer to the same general group formerly led by HasanMahsum, and that ETIPA and ETLO are separate, though allied, organizations. Additionally, some have referred to ETIP as the successor of ETIM. In this analysis, these groups will be referred to collectively as ETIP.

History and Evolution of Attacks. The group today known as ETIP was founded in the early 1990s, when it focused on stabbing imams that it felt were cooperating too closely with the PRC.
After 9/11, it shifted its focus to bus bombings within Xinjiang. The PRC claims that ETIP also frequently incites riots in Xinjiang, but it is difficult to determine which, if any, of these riots were inspired by ETIP, which were spontaneous, and which were “riots” at all.

In 2008, it released a video threatening to attack the Beijing Olympics; according to the PRC ETIP only ended up causing relatively-minor mayhem back in Xinjiang, but according to ETIP itself it succeeded in bombing buses in both Kunming and Shanghai.

In November 2013, a Uyghur crashed his car into Tiananmen Square, killing three tourists and his family inside of the car. The PRC blamed ETIP for planning and executing this attack; however, while ETIP praised it as a “jihadi operation”, ETIP has not claimed responsibility for this attack. Some experts suspect that this might have been a lone wolf operation inspired by the Uyghur jihadi movement but not planned by ETIP.

On July 5, 2009, riots broke out in the capital city of Urumqi, resulting in, according to Chinese official figures, 197 deaths and more than 1,770 injuries. The incident was Xinjiang’s deadliest period of unrest in decades. The PRC publicly blamed “Xinjiang terrorist-separatists” (新疆恐怖分子) for inciting the violence.

On March 1, 2014, state media blamed the same “Xinjiang terrorist-separatists” for a knife attack at the Kunming train station in Yunnan province, in which 29 civilians were killed and 143 were injured. This was by far the deadliest terrorist attack ever carried out in China. It is near-impossible to determine with the information available exactly which “Xinjiang terrorist-separatist” group is responsible – and, because ETIP and related groups have not shown the capability for a significant attack outside of Xinjiang province, the international community has debated whether or not Xinjiang terrorists were responsible. However, intelligence indicates that
ETIP members training in Pakistan prefer long knives, the type of weapon used in the Kunming attack. If ETIP was responsible for an attack this deadly, in a province 3000 miles away from its home base in Xinjiang, it would prove that the organization is much stronger and much more ambitious than previously thought.

Leadership. It is generally accepted that HasanMahsumformed ETIPin 1993 and, when he was killed in late 2003, was replaced by Abdul Haq al Turkistani (also known as MaimaitimingMaimaiti). On February 12, 2010, US Predators destroyed a compound that was being used as a training camp in a village near Mir Ali in North Waziristan, Pakistan, killing Abdul Haq al Turkistani and four other terrorists. It is rumored that AbdulShakoor succeeded Abdul Haq as leader of The East Turkistan Islamic Party after this strike.

Location. ETIP and related Uighur militants are separated by location; though many are concentrated in Xinjiang (XUAR), there seems to be a fairly sizeable contingent located in Pakistan.

In 1997, ETIP coordinated with the Taliban to establish a training camp, run by Abdul Haq, in the Tora Bora Mountains in Afghanistan’s Nangarhar province. When the United States invaded Afghanistan in 2001, this base was moved to Pakistan’s Federally Administered Tribal Area (FATA). Though Pakistani Interior Minister Rehman Malik claimed that the 2010 drone strike that killed Al Haq had effectively shut down ETIP’s operations in Pakistan, intelligence suggests that ETIP continues to train in North Waziristan. Estimates suggest that there are currently anywhere from 200 to 1000 ETIP members training alongside other terrorist organizations, including the Islamic Jihad Group (Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan) and the Haqqani Network, in the Mir Ali region of North Waziristan.
Because of the apparent disorganization of ETIP and the harsh terrain of the region, it is unlikely that ETIP in XUAR and ETIP/ETIP in North Waziristan have the means for substantial communication and it is therefore probable that they are splintering off into two similar, yet distinct, groups.

*Connections to Other FTOs.* Having a base in an area dominated by terrorist groups certainly allows ETIP to form connections that it would be denied had it stayed isolated in Xinjiang. Though few details on funding exist, analysts speculate that while mostly funded by the Uyghur diaspora, ETIP might receive limited funding from Al Qaeda; it is likely that ETIP leadership met with Osama Bin Laden in Afghanistan in 1999 and that possible funding was discussed.

ETIP also has worked with the same media organization that Al Qaeda uses. ETIP’s rhetoric increasingly resembles that of Al Qaeda; it has shifted from focusing solely on the crimes of the People’s Republic of China to advocating for a “global jihadi movement” against the forces of Western imperialism and the infidels, and that every Muslim is required to join the fight.

However, former ETIP members claim that there is substantial tension between ETIP and Al Qaeda. While Al Qaeda sees the West as the primary enemy, ETIP targets China, which they refer to as “the near enemy”. After the US joined China in joint counterterrorism initiatives after 9/11, ETIP began to see the US as complicit in Chinese repression but still not as its immediate foe. Analysis suggests that the change in rhetoric is not a fundamental shift in ETIP’s goals and targeting, but instead is an attempt to appeal to Al Qaeda for support.

*Assessment.* ETIP poses little to no direct threat to US national security. As has been stated by the organization and its members many times, ETIP’s target is China, not the United States; at one point, ETIP and other, non-violent Uighur separatists reportedly once saw the United States
as a potential ally. Although ETIP is affiliated with the global jihadi movement, its concerns are primarily ethno-nationalist and it is therefore unlikely to re-focus its attention from China to the United States.

However, because ETIP members training in Pakistan might be becoming increasingly detached from ETIP in XUAR, they might help their jihadi allies there plan and conduct attacks against the United States under the banner of a different organization.

IV. Chinese Response to ETIP

*International.* After the Tiananmen Square attack in November 2013, Chinese foreign ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying called the group “the most immediate and realistic security threat in China,” and several Chinese government sources called the Kunming Railway attack “China’s 9/11.”

Chinese characterization of the group has more to do with manipulating international perception than legitimate threat assessment. When dealing with its allies, particularly when requesting counterterrorism aid, the PRC tends to exaggerate ETIP’s ties to Al Qaeda and the threat it poses to both internal and external security. Experts have theorized that the much-publicized “China’s 9/11” quote may have actually been aimed at criticizing the US for what the PRC claimed was a “weak” response to the incident in Kunming as opposed to China’s aggressive denouncement of the 9/11 attacks.

*Domestic.* The People’s Republic of China keeps a tight lid on information on Uighur separatism, and when it does release information it is usually skewed towards whatever program the PRC is trying to promote at the time. Its policy on Xinjiang is highly reminiscent of its policy
on Tibet; the PRC claims that any violence that may or may not occur within the province is China’s internal affairs, and therefore no one else has a right to information about it.

Internally, the PRC regularly censors information about ethnic separatism (which they call “splittism”) to avoid spreading “disharmony” and “ethnic imbalance”. When tensions rise in Xinjiang, the PRC adds terms such as “splittist” (分子) and “ETIM” (东突厥斯坦伊斯兰运动) to its countrywide censors; the term “Xinjiang Independence” (疆独) remains permanently censored throughout China. After a fatal car crash in Tiananmen Square that was blamed on terrorists in Xinjiang, authorities arrested all foreign journalists reporting on the incident, and the Central Propaganda Department told domestic news media that they “must strictly adhere to the Xinhua News Agency wire copy when reporting on the crash … must not produce any other reports or commentary … and must not place the relevant report on their front page or the home page of their Web site.”

In keeping with previous policy concerning Xinjiang terrorism, after the attack at the Kunming Rail Station in March of 2014 the PRC promptly censored words about the incident on domestic social media platforms and barred journalists from entering Xinjiang.

_Xinjiang_. China claims that any and all anti-PRC sentiment in Xinjiang falls under the banner of the “Three Evil Forces” (三股势力) – including terrorism, splittism, and religious extremism (in China, especially Xinjiang, Islam itself is often considered “religious extremism”). According to Human Rights Watch, the PRC uses the “Three Evil Forces” as political cover to retaliate against terrorist forces in Xinjiang by restricting nonviolent ethnic and religious rights.

When tensions are heightened, the PRC initiates what it calls “crackdowns” in the major cities in Xinjiang. Crackdowns usually consist of arresting those vaguely connected to Uighur separatism or culture (including famous Uighur authors, suspected Uighur rights activists, and Muslim
clerics), increasing the security presence in Xinjiang, raiding mosques, and restricting travel in and out of the region. After the 2009 riots, the central government cut off internet, text messaging, and international calling for the entire province of Xinjiang for more than ten months. More recently, following the Kunming attack, all Xinjiang Uyghurs living in the city of Xining, located in neighboring Qinghai province, were forced to identify themselves and register with the police department. These measures often incite outrage amongst the Uighur population.

V. ETIP and Foreign Policy

In addition to its unilateral internal crackdowns, China has also conducted several military counterterrorism exercises with Regional Anti-Terrorism Agency under the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), a political, military, and economic organization that consists of several Central Asian countries. In a vague statement to Chinese press, the Director of the SCO’s Executive Committee, Zhang Xinfeng, said that regarding terrorism in Xinjiang, the SCO “will soon develop a relevant working mechanism; push from various sides of the SCO to strengthen information exchange; verify relevant clues in a timely manner; strengthen the work on suspected personnel’s inspection, control, and arrest; and carry out joint actions according to the request of the responsible departments of the SCO member states.” Human Rights Watch has claimed that these SCO counterterrorism initiatives in the region violate international laws regarding human rights.

In countering ETIP in Afghanistan and Pakistan, the Chinese have depended on their Pakistani and American allies. In 2003, Hasan Mahsun, the former leader of ETIP, was killed by Pakistani security forces and his successor, Abdul Haq, is suspected to have been killed by a targeted US drone strike in 2010.
According to several experts, China also relies heavily on its historically strong relationship with Pakistan in countering ETIP and has pressed for Pakistan’s commitment in aiding China combat the “Three Evil Forces”. The details of this cooperation are unknown, but may involve as many economic programs as it does military ones.

The United States, already operating in North Waziristan, agreed to help China pursue its CT goals there. Though ETIP poses little threat to the United States, many policymakers in the United States government use joint US-China counterterrorism initiatives as a way to increase general cooperation and dialogue with Beijing. Some have expressed concern that this might alienate a group that does not target the United States and push them into the arms of other terrorist organizations in the region that see the United States as the primary enemy.

Disagreements on ETIP have proven to be a stumbling block in Sino-US relations. The United States helps fund the World Uyghur Congress, a nonviolent “international umbrella organization that promotes Uyghur human rights and a peaceful solution for the conflict in East Turkestan” based in Munich.” China characterizes the “splittist” World Uyghur Congress as being part of the “Three Evil Forces” and considers it a dangerous organization that promotes ethnic disharmony and therefore terrorism. The PRC uses this issue as an example of US hypocrisy in its counterterrorism initiatives.

In 2006, the United States captured 22 ETIP members in Afghanistan and sent them to Guantanamo Bay. During their interrogations, the US gained valuable information on ETIP, such as the names of its leaders, but also learned that ETIP had no plans to attack the United States. Once it became clear that the detainees weren’t a threat to the United States and would no longer be classed as “enemy combatants”, the issue transformed into a diplomatic problem. Though the US did allow Chinese interrogators brief access, the US refused to send them back to China,
where they would most likely be tortured and summarily executed. The US has been working on asylum negotiations for years, but finding them all places to live has been a slow and difficult process. However, the indication that the US would send them anywhere but China was a huge loss of face for the PRC, and they don’t hesitate to bring it up often in diplomatic negotiations.

In 2002, as a mostly symbolic gesture, the US placed ETIP/ETIM on two of its terrorist blacklists – Treasury’s OFAC and the TEL. However, the US failed to add ETIP to the Department of State’s FTO, which is, arguably, the most important one. This move came at a time when the United States was in the process of several important negotiations with China, including trying to persuade the Chinese to not use their veto power on the United Nations Security Council concerning the invasion of Iraq. It was later revealed that the US had greatly overstated ETIP’s deadliness and connection to Al Qaeda, and that its reports matched the PRC’s verbatim. Many China scholars claim that adding ETIP to two of the three blacklists was a diplomatic quid-pro-quo with China, and that not adding it to the FTO list was a deliberate move to moderate its response. Since then, the US has been backing away from its initial robust position with China against ETIP.

VI. Recommendations

The United States must carefully balance showing China that the US considers China a serious partner in counterterrorism issues, but not seeming to agree too much with China’s repressive policies. If the US were to keep its distance from China’s CT policies altogether it would risk major diplomatic backlash from the PRC, but too much complacency and cooperation and the US could cause the PRC to increase repression and crackdowns in Xinjiang, inviting major
backlash from the human rights community. Because it is extremely unlikely that ETIP in Xinjiang plan and carry out an attack against the United States, US policy towards ETIP and Uyghur issues should remain focused on maintaining this balance rather than on security related concerns.

However, ETIP members in Pakistan are likely cooperating with known enemies of the United States, and the United States should continue its CT efforts against them without infringing on China’s sovereignty.

As a result of the Kunming attack, Beijing will likely launch a harsh crackdown in Xinjiang and institute more hardline policies against Uyghur Muslims. When Xinjiang experiences unrest, it begins a vicious cycle of protests and government crackdowns; there is a strong possibility of this occurring in the months to come. Increased repression in Xinjiang alienates the local population and the wider human rights community, and encourages China to continue such policies. Therefore, the United States should not support these policies when they appear.

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