

China and Russia: Common Themes in Counter-Terrorism

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ROBERT POTTER, MAY 30 2013

An interesting foreign policy aspect of the situation in Xinjiang is the region's place within the wider global war on terrorism. When compared to the conflict in Chechnya, one can find a number of interesting similarities in the central governments' narrative of the issue. However, in order to find them, it is first worth engaging in a short discussion of both conflicts.

According to Remi Castets, starting in the 1980's, the region saw an increase in religiosity amongst its mostly Islamic population. This in turn led to the formation of student groups and to the beginning of protests. Following the student activism of the eighties, the nineties saw an increase in radicalism within the population, which led to both arson and sabotage. These actions then culminated in bombings and assassinations[1].

These actions fit within two very distinct narratives. The first is the desire of many within Xinjiang for increased independence from the central government in Beijing, for freedom of religion and political reform. The second narrative is that the violence within Xinjiang has been linked to outside groups. During the eighties, the government in Beijing relaxed restrictions on adherents traveling to Mecca as part of the Hajj Pilgrimage. According to Castets, this facilitated the development of links between some of those who undertook the Hajj and the global Islamist movement[2].

For the government of the People's Republic of China (PRC), its response can be divided into two distinct foreign policy phases. The first response was to remain quiet about activism and violence attached to the Uyghur population within Xinjiang. Within this response, it is clear that the PRC was favoring the first narrative of the violence, seeing it as an internal matter and attempting to avoid international attention. This policy coincided with the independence of many former Soviet Republics as the USSR broke down. However, after the September 11 terrorist attacks on the United States, the PRC switched to a new policy in which the attacks were described inside the context of the global war on terror[3]. Although the degree to which Uyghur activism within the PRC can be described within this second narrative is open to interpretation, the PRC has recognizably shifted its foreign policy strategy on the matter. According to Castets, the vast majority of Uyghur activist groups do not have links to a global Islamist movement. However, the PRC favors an interpretation of this activism, which minimizes the first narrative and favors the second[4]. The clear PRC preference for this second narrative constructs an international situation where they appear to be operating in a more global conflict. This conflict carries different responsibilities for a state to be considered a rational actor, since if it is a global conflict with regional characteristics, then a significant component of the conflict cannot be resolved regionally. If the opposite is the case, then the PRC faces an internal problem, with a primarily internal solution. If the PRC were interested in avoiding responsibility for solving the conflict, then it follows naturally that they would have a preference for the second narrative.

In the case of Russia, the situation is also somewhat complicated. According to the work of Brett Garvia, Russia has followed a similar pattern to that of the PRC. Within Chechnya, there are also two separate narratives at work also. The first is a discussion of the national right to self-determination of the Chechen people, which is offset by a Russian claim of a right to protect their territorial integrity[5]. As an example of this the Russians themselves expected the original Russian intervention into Chechnya to be interpreted as an act designed to maintain the territorial sovereignty of Russia[6]. Similar to the PRC case, after the terrorist attacks on September 11, the narrative evolved. The

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emphasis on territorial integrity continued, but it was combined within a new narrative that included the wider war on terrorism. The Russians, as opposed to the Chinese, have been very successful in gaining a level of assistance from the United States in their counter terrorism efforts[7]. The Chinese for their part have not. Although China has shown an interest in developing increased cooperation, the US has major reservations about the threat PRC authorities pose to the local populace. Human rights abuses are common and the United States is worried that the PRC is using the international aspect of the conflict to justify their previous policies[8]. The United States describes aspects of the Uyghur cause as being based on legitimate causes[9]. As a sign of the lack of cooperation, Uyghur's captured in Afghanistan have not been returned to China[10]. The Human Rights aspect, in this circumstances has clearly undermined international support for China's efforts, which explains why they would favor the second narrative over the first.

Within these two examples we can see a common narrative of casting internal strife within a more global context. The political advantages for both sides in terms of delegitimizing their opposition are obvious, but the question remains as to how credible this is. In the case of Russia, terrorism within the Chechen conflict goes back to the mid 1990's. However, as in the case of Xinjiang province, there was very little connection between the Chechen separatist leadership and any wider global jihad. For example, Aslan Maskhadov was a former member of the red army and aligned more closely to communism than he did to an international jihadist network[11]. Although the political leadership of Chechnya at the time of September 11 was mostly working within the narrative of self-determination, a hybrid between both was well developed at the activist level of the conflict. For example, the Movsar Baryayev gang, although dedicated to the cause of national self-determination, was also inculcated within the ideology attached to the global war on terror[12]. This internalization of wider Islamist ideology networked some of the larger organizations into a Wahhabist financing stream[13].

As such, within the Russian example, the two narratives are both explicitly true. There are terrorist organizations operating within Chechnya, which are also pursuing the goal of national self-determination. This Russian Government, particularly under President Putin has also repeatedly shown a preference for the second narrative[14]. Much like the PRC, Russia is interested in having its own internal conflicts viewed as part of a wider conflict. Both states however, have jettisoned the nuance that, in each case, there is also an issue of self-determination at work: One which develops a level of sympathy for such efforts and casts them in a much harsher light than if the situation is not generated by primarily regional factors. From this, we can see that the division of narratives links directly to legitimacy and that Russia and China both share a common view of how to argue for their respective positions.

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[1] Remi Castets, "The Uyghurs in Xinjiang – The Malaise Continues," *China Perspectives* 49 (2003): 33–6.

[2] *Ibid.*, 40.

[3] *Ibid.*, 43.

[4] *Ibid.*

[5] Brett A. Garvie, "Chechnya and Russia: Conflict and Self-determination" (DTIC Document, 2002), V.

[6] Carlotta Gall and Thomas de Waal, *Chechnya: Calamity in the Caucasus* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 158.

[7] Garvie, "Chechnya and Russia," 25.

[8] Shirley Kan, *U.S.-China Counterterrorism Cooperation: Issues for U.S. Policy*, CRS Report for Congress

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(Washington D.C.: Congressional Research Service, July 2010), 5.

[9] Ibid., 6.

[10] Ibid., 7.

[11] "Russia: How the War on Terrorism Did Putin a Favor - TIME," accessed May 24, 2013, <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2093529,00.html>.

[12] "Terrorist Organization Profile - START - National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism," accessed May 24, 2013, http://www.start.umd.edu/start/data_collections/tops/terrorist_organization_profile.asp?id=3639.

[13] "Terrorist Organization Profile - START - National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism," accessed May 24, 2013, http://www.start.umd.edu/start/data_collections/tops/terrorist_organization_profile.asp?id=3732.

[14] "Russia: How the War on Terrorism Did Putin a Favor - TIME."