

## Theory-Testing Uyghur Terrorism in China

by Andrew Mumford

### Abstract

*Analysis of terrorism perpetrated by Uyghurs inside China and the presence of Uyghur fighters in the warzones from Afghanistan to Syria has been divided as to whether such violence constitutes the alignment of Uyghur groups like the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) and the Turkestan Islamist Party (TIP) with the broader constellation of global jihadi organisations pushing an extremist religious cause, or if it is representative of a more inward-looking push for the secession of Xinjiang province. Testing the causes, conduct and organisational structure of Uyghur terrorism against prevalent theories in the field, this article argues that Uyghur terrorism actually constitutes a hybrid model of modern terrorist group in which religious discourse is used to underline the push for a separatist agenda.*

**Keywords:** China, Uyghur, Xinjiang, Terrorism

### Introduction

Uyghur terrorism is not easy to categorise given the predominant paradigms in contemporary terrorism studies. The religious rhetoric used by groups such as the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), its successor group the Turkestan Islamist Party (TIP), and the presence of some Uyghurs in contemporary warzones from Afghanistan to Syria has encouraged a portion of analysis to suggest that this constitutes a Chinese contribution to the global jihadist threat. Yet the limited size of the Uyghur presence in jihadist groups outside of China, and indeed the targets of attacks within the country, have prompted counter-arguments that point not to an outward-looking international jihadist agenda but to an inward-looking separatist one that is bent on self-determination for the Uyghur people. This mixed picture has bifurcated the academic literature on terrorism in China (or Chinese terrorism more generally). Having to determine whether Uyghur violence is either separatist or jihadist begs the question of how it can be best theorised in order to help explain the phenomenon.

It is the aim of this paper to better understand terrorism in modern China by theory-testing Uyghur political violence inside and outside the country against prominent theories of modern terrorism, including the instrumental v. psychological debate, David Rapoport's four waves theory, as well as against attempts to contemporise his work by sign-posting to a possible 'fifth wave'. This article is therefore not just about the state of terrorism in China but an assessment of what the Chinese case tells us about the state of modern terrorism. This subject arguably combines two of the most influential factors shaping twenty-first century international politics: the rise of China as a global superpower and the proliferation of non-state violence.[1]

Surprisingly little of the growing literature on terrorism in China engages with the phenomenon from a theoretical perspective.[2] Much of the literature is concerned with either analysing the repressive nature of Chinese counter-terrorism policies[3] or understanding the nature of Uyghur nationalism.[4] Ultimately this paper argues that a hybrid assessment of Uyghur terrorism is most appropriate because it is too nationalist to be considered part of a 'fourth wave' of terrorism, not millenarian or web-savvy enough to be 'fifth wave', not organised enough to be instrumentalist, and not accessible enough to withstand credible psychological interpretations. This is the multivariate platform on which theoretical explanations of modern Uyghur violence arguably stand. It is not the purpose of this theory-testing exercise to dismiss the intellectual foundations of the theories themselves – each has its own merits and strong scholarly credentials that have advanced the field in important ways. Instead, this article aims to highlight that the empirical base of our knowledge about terrorism from ethnic Uyghur groups indicates a complex picture that negates singular explanatory frameworks.

This article will firstly offer some background detail on the state of current terrorism inside China, and then engage in turn with leading theories in the field in order to stand the Uyghur case up to their main tenets. It

ends by reasserting the case for a hybrid theoretical assessment of terrorism in China given the absence of a strong fit with any one theoretical model.

### ***Terrorism in Xinjiang: A Brief History***

Located in the far west of the country, Xinjiang (which is officially called the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, or XUAR for short) is China's biggest province, whose terrain is mainly either desert or mountain range. To trace the historical antecedents of contemporary Uyghur violence would mire the reader in centuries of conflict, repression and reprisal.[5] Its modern manifestation is the by-product of a combustible mix of nationalism, separatism and religion. Only fully integrated into Beijing's political sphere after the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, Xinjiang's Sunni Muslim, Turkic-speaking Uyghur population constitute 44% of the province's population today.[6] After the end of the Cold War Beijing simultaneously loosened the ideological grip of communism and moved to strengthen the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). In political terms this set loose a new wave of ethnic nationalism among the Han majority, resulting in a backlash of non-Han resentment across the provinces dominated by minorities.[7] The Uyghurs of Xinjiang were foremost among those minority groups to respond through acts of resistance, resenting what they perceived was an attack on their religion, language and ethnicity.[8]

The East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) was founded in 1989 by Ziyauddin Yusuf with the aim of separating Xinjiang from China which could then be governed by Islamist precepts. Yusuf believed that the Turkic-speaking people of Central Asia should be free from either Soviet or Chinese control. This pan-Turkic ideology, infused with Islamist theology, was spurred by the defeat of the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan by the mujahedeen and foreign jihadist fighters. Yet after the collapse of the USSR most Central Asian satellite states such as Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan achieved their independence. ETIM attempted to wrestle Xinjiang from China by the use of extremist violence to achieve its political aim of an independent state – East Turkestan.

But to the ruling cadre in Beijing the issues of Uyghur separatism and Islamic extremism were, and still are, two sides of the same coin.[9] This interpretation is a deliberate ploy by the CCP to elicit international sympathy for their fight against what they perceive to be networked pan-national Islamist violence. Such a depiction of ETIM activity seemingly justified their domestic crackdown on religious and political activity and simultaneously delegitimised calls for greater Uyghur autonomy.[10] Citing fears of Islamist violence (concerns easily related to by the West) was a Trojan Horse for enhanced repression of Uyghur separatism. As such, in the years after the 9/11 attacks on the United States, the Chinese government forwarded three main justifications for its actions against Uyghurs: first, detained Uyghurs were being supported by Islamist groups, notably al-Qaeda; second, Uyghur groups were peddling a violent Islamist ideology that was undermining the Chinese state; and third, that this had international ramifications and that action was in line with the broader aims of the 'Global War on Terror'.[11] This counter-terrorism rhetoric was amplified in the years running up to the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games when YouTube videos started to emerge in 2006 indicating that ETIM had undergone a transformation and was now branding itself as the Turkestan Islamic Party (TIP). These videos by TIP members promised a renewed wave of domestic terrorism, although very little direct evidence exists as to their operational capabilities rendering their claims of responsibility for some acts of violence dubious.[12]

Given the mutual fears of mass catastrophic terrorism at a major sporting event and the shared narrative of global jihadist threats, the authorities in Beijing were given a metaphorical free pass by the West to instigate an internal crackdown on terrorist suspects in Xinjiang. It is only in recent months, nearly two decades after the 9/11 attacks, that Western political and media scrutiny has returned to Chinese counter-terrorism policy and practice. In May 2014, the government of Xi Jinping launched a renewed 'Strike Hard Campaign against Violent Terrorism' in Xinjiang (previous 'Strike Hard' campaigns had been instigated in the 1990s), scaling up its military presence in the region and introducing stringent restrictions on freedom of movement and assembly.[13] Since then, the number of people placed under arrest increased three-fold compared to the previous five-year period, with Human Rights Watch accusing the Chinese government in September 2018

of overseeing a system of “mass arbitrary detention, torture, and mistreatment of Turkic Muslims”.[14] Media reports focussed on evidence heard by the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination in August 2018 of the detention of up to one million Uyghurs in ‘political education camps’ under the auspices of countering terrorism.[15]

This article does not aim to explain this draconian Chinese counter-terrorism response in Xinjiang – this has been done excellently elsewhere.[16] Instead it argues that we must make further headway in trying to understand the phenomenon of Uyghur terrorist violence in the first place. This requires a more vigorous theoretical assessment of what it represents in terms of cause, conduct and consequence. Thus, a systematic exercise in theory-testing is appropriate in order to shed much-needed light on a conflict that is still making headlines globally because of China’s illiberal approach to countering terrorist activity.[17]

### ***Uyghur Terrorism: Instrumental vs. Psychological Explanations***

The emergence of the field of terrorism studies brought with it two broad schools of thought: the instrumentalist approach and the psychological approach. From an instrumentalist point of view, Martha Crenshaw argued that the recourse to terrorism is a logical strategic choice willingly chosen by groups to further their political agenda. Terrorism thus has, Crenshaw posits, a ‘collective rationality’.[18] Such a strategic choice approach requires the de facto presence of an identifiable organisation and leadership structure capable of fostering rational intra-group discussion. No such coherent structures exist in the Uyghur case given the flimsy coherence of ETIM and the absence of key figures around which the cause revolves when the group evolved into TIP. It is difficult to see how terrorism in Xinjiang can be the product of rational strategic choice when there is no organisational structure to foster the fomentation of such a strategy. Furthermore, there is also a noticeable strategic diversity, possibly even confusion, in the Uyghur case. There is no central, unifying strategic objective. Acts of terror are depicted by the Chinese authorities as an admixture of separatism, jihadism, and Uyghur nationalism. [19] Compounding this is the absence of any effective communications strategy from TIP, beyond sporadic YouTube videos that attempt to claim credit for the perpetration of attacks.[20] Conceptually, strategic choice theory is of limited use explaining Uyghur violence due to the absence of a discernible group structure to hold rational strategic debates and the fragmented nature of strategic objectives inside the community of violent Uyghurs.

Conversely, psychological explanations of terrorism posit, as Jerrold Post has done, that individuals “are driven to commit acts of violence as a consequence of psychological forces and that their special psycho-logic is constructed to rationalize acts they are psychologically compelled to commit.”[21] Innately using bifurcated rhetoric dividing ‘us and them’, terrorists are, according to Post, united by common personality traits, including a damaged sense of self, often the result of childhood psychological trauma. Such individuals become drawn to terrorist activity precisely to commit acts of violence because it offers a sense of self-significance that bounds the individual’s entire identity and self-worth. Yet there are still similar restrictions in making the case for a psychological approach to explain Uyghur violence as there are for an instrumentalist one. The main one is methodological. It is very difficult for terrorist researchers to access detained Uyghurs for interview as a means of asserting their psychological motives, given restrictions placed on the region by the authorities. This does not mean, however, that Beijing may not be guilty of fomenting terrorism in Xinjiang through its own repressive counter-terrorism policies. Terrorists may not be born, but they can be made. The policy consequences of state counter-terrorism will have a psychological effect on individual Uyghurs, but we are not yet at a stage of methodological confidence to make those assertions accurately.

### ***Terrorism Inside China: Which ‘Wave’?***

David Rapoport’s ‘four waves theory’ of modern terrorism has been a terrorism studies industry standard explanation of the evolution of modern political violence in the years since its publication.[22] To briefly recap,

Rapoport described the modern history of terrorism as having four distinct but over-lapping ‘waves’, each with their own defining set of common tactics and motives: the Anarchist wave (1880-1920); the Anti-Colonial wave (1920-1960); the New Left wave (1960s-1979); and the Religious wave (1979-onwards). Rapoport’s theory has heavily influenced post-9/11 studies of terrorism as a global phenomenon and still retains utility as a conceptual benchmark against which to interpret the characteristics of terrorist groups. So how does Uyghur terrorism fit into this theory?

The separatist agenda of groups like ETIM and then TIP, as well as the subsequent crackdown by the central authorities, has ensured that there are overtones of anti-colonialism to the Uyghur struggle. This brings with it echoes of Rapoport’s ‘second wave’. Beijing acknowledged that between 1990 and 2001 there were over 200 incidents of Uyghur violence that killed more than 160 people, injuring 440.[23] Since then the pattern of terrorism inside China has, according to Philip Potter, indicated two broad trends: 1) terrorist attacks are a response to “broader geopolitical circumstances and strategic opportunities (e.g. 9/11 and the Olympics)”; 2) “tensions and grievances can remain dormant for significant periods of time only to flare dramatically.”[24] The 9/11 attacks in America marked a watershed moment in Beijing’s approach to Uyghur violence inside China. Two months after the Twin Towers attack the Foreign Ministry explicitly stated that ETIM was under the control of Osama bin Laden and that Uyghur fighters had received training in Afghanistan.[25] The launching of a global ‘War on Terror’ by President Bush furnished Beijing with an opportunity to change its approach to Uyghur violence by framing such incidents as their own domestic struggle against terrorism. A crackdown on the activities of ETIM ensued, resulting in a dip in violence. Yet one of the ‘dramatic flares’ observed by Potter occurred in 2014. A series of three knife attacks at train stations in Kunming, Urumqi and Guangzho in the spring of that year left 32 people dead, whilst a bomb in Urumqi in May 2014 killed a further 39 persons. This denoted a distinct tactical shift by militants away from hitting government and military targets and towards softer civilian targets, notably at transport hubs that are the mainstay of Beijing’s economic and infrastructural plans for Xinjiang.[26] After these attacks President Xi Jinping vowed that government counter-terrorism policy would be “long-term, complicated and acute.”[27] But it would be churlish to theorise the Uyghur struggle as ‘anti-colonial’. Not only does it fall decades after Rapoport contended that the ‘anti-colonial’ wave had crested, but it would also be reductionist to equate domestic acts of terrorism with a fight against a perceived imperial power. Uyghur terrorist targeting has shifted away from symbols of Beijing’s political and military presence, and there is a notable lack of anti-imperialist language in Uyghur terrorist discourse.[28] Separatism is not de facto anti-colonialism by another name.

### ***Terrorism Outside China: Uyghurs as ‘Fourth Wave’ Jihadists?***

Assumptions as to the predominant religious motivation of Uyghur violence have held sway within the authorities in Beijing, begging the question of whether Rapoport’s religiously-inspired ‘fourth wave’ of terrorism is a more apt model to apply.

Most Uyghurs practice Hanafi Islam, the jurisprudence of which allows for non-Arabic languages to be used in prayer and is also suffused with other pan-Asian religious influences including Sufism and Buddhism.[29] Yet it is misleading to interpret Uyghur’s Muslim faith as an indication of their belonging to the ‘fourth wave’ of religiously-motivated terrorism. They are not millenarian in their faith (a key tenet of Rapoport’s typology). Their grievances are not motivated by faith outright but by a combination of local governmental restrictions on their worship as well as their wider ethnic and national identity. Indeed, there does not appear to be much homogeneity in the political demands of Uyghurs, with calls ranging from equality with the Han population to demands for complete independence of Xinjiang province.[30]

Assessments as to the quantity and motive of Uyghurs fighting with Islamist groups outside of China vary wildly. Alarmist reports emanated from the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs in June 2014 suggesting that there were up to 1,000 Chinese jihadists receiving training at a paramilitary base in Pakistan, with an additional (but undetermined) number fighting alongside other jihadi groups inside Syria.[31] Clarke and Kan put the number of Uyghur fighters inside Syria and Iraq at somewhere between 100-300, arguing that organisations

like TIP have become “a noticeable part of the constellation of globally active jihadist terror groups.”[32] Yet despite the acknowledged presence of Uyghurs joining ISIS and Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (formerly the al-Qaeda affiliated al-Nusra Front) in Syria this is more likely to be a sign of Middle Eastern jihadist groups fostering recruitment channels from southeast Asia to perpetuate the fight in Syria and Afghanistan rather than a sign of an imminent extension of activity from Uyghur foreign fighters into China itself. TIP has no known independent operational capabilities outside Afghanistan where its small number of members are based.[33] Further evidence pointing to a lack of desire by Uyghur militants to return to China to commit attacks is firstly their willingness to appear in propaganda videos, thus revealing their identity to the Chinese authorities (two Uyghurs appeared in an online ISIS video in March 2017), and secondly the way such foreign fighters have often sold their homes and possessions in Xinjiang in order to finance their travel to Syria and Afghanistan. Many bring their whole families with them.[34]

The presence of a small number of Uyghurs in conflict zones outside China will always stoke concerns as to the regional network being fostered by groups like TIP. For example, in September 2014 four Uyghurs were arrested in Indonesia, with another four arrested five months later, all on suspicion of liaison with the ISIS-affiliated Mujahidi Indonesia Timur in Central Sulawesi.[35] However, a small, yet dispersed, Uyghur presence across the Muslim world falls short of a global network of militant Uyghur jihadists. The sum parts in this case do not add up to a whole. Not only are the actual numbers of foreign fighters unverified, the actual pattern of activity by Uyghurs once encamped in third countries reveals an ethos discernibly more anti-China than pro-jihad. These two motives are distinct and should not be seen as two sides of the same coin. For this reason, Uyghur militancy is not strictly representative of Rapoport’s ‘fourth wave’ of modern terrorism.

### ***Uyghurs and the ‘Fifth Wave’ of Modern Terrorism***

Scholarly attempts to build upon Rapoport’s four waves have become a cottage industry in recent years. As the ‘War on Terror’ attempted to eliminate the threat of jihadist groups globally, academics have sought to make sense of the evolution of terrorism. In between the fall of al-Qaeda as a centrally-controlled organisation based in Afghanistan and the rise of the Islamic State’s self-proclaimed caliphate across Syria and Iraq three broad contending themes have emerged that purport to show how the religious wave identified by Rapoport has ended.

Firstly, Jeffrey Kaplan has argued that a fifth wave of modern terrorism has crested and it is “particularistic, localistic, and centered on the purification of the nation through perfection of a race or tribal group.”[36] Labelling this wave ‘new tribalism’, Kaplan aimed to highlight the local, as opposed to global, dynamics that led to terrorism with a particular emphasis on ‘racial or tribal mysticism’ as a motive.[37] Yet Kaplan’s ‘new tribalism’ fifth wave theory is not fully substantiated in the Chinese case. Kaplan outlines 17 ideal-type characteristics of this new form of terrorism, of which the Uyghur example barely complies with half (for example, Uighur groups do not use rape as a weapon, do not claim to establish some form of new calendar, do not believe in human perfectibility, do not place faith in the logic of genocide, and have not embarked on a campaign of apocalyptic violence).

Secondly, Jerrold Post et al have intimated that a fifth wave (a possible ‘tsunami’ even) will be social media-inspired acts of lone actor terrorism.[38] The internet has facilitated what has been labelled a ‘virtual community of hatred’, allowing for online radicalisation to inspire the next generation of political violence. This fifth wave hypothesis is also not really applicable in the China case mainly because of strong central government control over internet access inside the country. The online ‘community of hatred’ that Post holds as key to facilitating this wave is largely off-limits to Uyghurs because of nationwide web censorship.

Thirdly, Honig and Yahel argue that Rapoport’s fourth religious wave has been superseded by a fifth wave constitutive of what they label ‘terrorist semi-states’. These entities “control portions of a weak state’s territory... but still launch terrorist attacks against third party victim states.”[39] They point to groups like ISIS, Al-Shabaab, Boko Haram, Hezbollah and Hamas as examples of these territorially established groups that embrace a mix

of conventional and unconventional tactics. Yet this too is not fully applicable for the Uyghurs as their cause is nominally secessionist within the context of exceptionally strong central political control over the territory and governance structures of Xinjiang province. There is little chance of a 'state within a state' emerging. Honig and Yahel's model only really applies to instances where there is initial weak governmental control over the contested space. China has over the decades ensured a strong political, economic and military presence in Xinjiang, fostered by a programme of government-sponsored migration of ethnic Han into the province.[40]

### ***Conclusion: The Case for a Hybrid Theory***

The Chinese government has asserted that Uyghur groups are guilty of promulgating what it labels the 'three evils': terrorism, separatism and religious extremism.[41] This veritable shopping list of perceived crimes against the state reveals that even Beijing has a hybrid interpretation of what Uyghur violence represents – at turns jihadist, anti-communist, and nationalist. Terrorism perpetrated by Uyghurs is thus not easily categorisable, rendering any theoretical explanation somewhat of a hydra. It is too diffuse organisationally to be fully explainable from an instrumentalist perspective. Crenshaw's emphasis on strategic rationale is dampened in the Uyghur case by the scant evidence offered by either TIP members themselves or the Chinese security forces to back up claims of responsibility for attacks. TIPs claims via internet videos to be behind attacks, including an explosion at a factory in Guangzhou and bus bombs in Shanghai and Kunming in 2008 were largely uncorroborated, even by the security forces.[42] Research on Uyghur terrorism is too unsubstantiated methodologically to belong fully to the realm of a psychological explanation as advocated by the likes of Post. Restrictions imposed by the Chinese authorities on academic freedom of movement make access to interviewees very difficult, and ensures that much face-to-face interaction with Uyghurs (including those suspected of terrorism) is done predominantly with exiles who have fled China.[43] Furthermore, Uyghur terrorism lacks a comfortable fit within any of the identified 'waves' of modern terrorism identified by Rapoport and others due to its fusion of ethno-nationalist ideology and Islamic theology, not to mention the absence of genocidal violence and the online orchestration of terror acts.

Uyghur groups are of course not the only terrorist movement in recent history to combine a number of ideological motives. Hybrid is not a synonym for unique. What some might term 'old' terrorist groups exuded a mix of political catalysts. Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA), for example, was simultaneously socialist, separatist and Basque nationalist in its outlook. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE or the Tamil Tigers) imbued a similar concoction of revolutionary socialism and ethnic nationalism in the name of separatism. Even what some would label 'new' terrorist groups, including the recent iteration of the self-proclaimed caliphate of Islamic State, are hybrid entities in as much as they combine a profound religious agenda with a rejection of the Westphalian state system of sovereign borders. Yet what makes the Uyghur case stand out is, firstly, how the religious beliefs of the perpetrators have been seized on by the counter-terrorist state to manipulate global opinion to create a permissive environment for repressive responses, and secondly, how the political, media and academic assessment of political violence by Uyghurs oscillates between religious and secular motives. If the 'old' groups like ETA and LTTE were firmly secular groups, and 'new' groups like al-Qaeda and ISIS are undeniably religious in their motive, then Uyghur groups like ETIM/TIP fall between two stools analytically.

Understanding the violence occurring inside China, and Beijing's response to it, are of increasing international importance given President Xi Jinping's recent declaration that China had entered a 'new era' when it would "take centre stage in the world." [44] The abrogation of leadership on global issues and in international institutions by the United States under the Trump administration stands in stark contrast to China's willingness to shoulder more international responsibilities abandoned by the US. China's global strength is being pushed through the construction of the Belt and Road Initiative, the enhancement of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and contributions to United Nations peacekeeping missions. Consequently, it is essential to investigate how terrorism is framed in China as the experiences the Chinese government has gained are likely to be transplanted into its global security agenda. There is a growing literature on terrorism in China. However, theoretical perspectives are still largely missing from this pool. Explaining the nature of acts of terrorism perpetrated by Uyghurs is an

important endeavour. This article is just a first step towards initiating a bigger conversation in the field.

**Acknowledgments:** The author thanks Jon Sullivan and Yongliang Guo, as well as two anonymous referees, for comments on earlier drafts of this article.

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## Notes

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