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China and the Uighurs

What lies behind the unrest involving Muslim Uighurs in China?



Where did the unrest take place?

The Xinjiang autonomous region lies in China's north-west, bordering central Asia. Covering one-sixth of the country's total territory, it is a vast but sparsely populated area with about 19 million inhabitants. Some 8 million are Turkic-speaking Uighur Muslims, concentrated in the south of the region around cities such as Kashgar, known to the Chinese as Kashi, which lies 2,500 miles from Beijing. The Uighurs (pronounced Wee-gurs) make up about 45% of Xingiang's population.

Increasing controls on religious and cultural activity, large-scale Han Chinese migration and economic marginalisation have all played a part. The proportion of Han Chinese inhabitants rose from 6% in 1949 to about 40% by 2000 and migrants had begun to spread from cities into rural areas, where they found themselves in competition with Uighur communities for water and land. Many Uighurs complain that they have not

benefited from the region's economic development and have found it harder to access government grants and bank loans.

Has the region ever been independent?

In 1933 Turkic rebels declared independence and created the short-lived Islamic Republic of East Turkestan. It was reabsorbed into [China](#) the following year. In 1944 the Second East Turkistan Republic was created, but it became a Chinese territory again in 1949. Some Uighurs are nostalgic for these phases of independence.

Has the area seen recent acts of violence?

Xinjiang has experienced sporadic outbursts of separatist activity and general anti-government protests. Days before the Olympic games last year, [16 Chinese policemen were killed in a raid on a paramilitary border police](#) headquarters in Xinjiang. No group claimed responsibility. Violence peaked in 1997, with fatal bus bombings and riots after a peaceful protest was suppressed. Experts believe the ensuing security crackdown halted the violence but exacerbated underlying tensions.

Amnesty International alleges that as many as 200 Uighurs were executed between 1997-99, and claims the crackdown has continued. This year it accused the Chinese government of mounting an aggressive campaign that led to the [arrest and arbitrary detention of thousands of Uighurs](#) on charges of "terrorism, separatism and religious extremism".

Are separatist terrorist groups behind the unrest?

Chinese state media often blames the East Turkestan Islamic Movement for stirring violence and planning attacks. But there are several groups that tend to be labelled as ETIM. Experts claim that China is exaggerating the threat posed by the group, which has been deemed a terrorist group by the UN and the US. While there is evidence of links between ETIM and al-Qaida, most analysts believe those connections are historic and several believe they were exaggerated.

More than 20 Uighurs were imprisoned in the Guantánamo Bay detention camp after being captured by the US in Afghanistan. Albania accepted five of them in 2006, Bermuda accepted four last month and the Pacific island of Palau will take the others.

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China is helping Afghanistan set up mountain brigade to fight terrorism

China is helping Afghanistan to set up a mountain brigade in the country’s north to boost counterterrorism efforts, the Afghan embassy in Beijing said on Wednesday.

But “there will be no Chinese military personnel of any kind on Afghan soil at any time”, the embassy said in a fax to the *South China Morning Post*. The embassy said the Afghan government appreciated China’s assistance and that the countries’ militaries were working in close coordination, without giving further details.

Sources close to the Chinese military earlier told the *Post* that China had funded and started building a training camp for Afghan troops in Afghanistan’s isolated Wakhan Corridor – a narrow strip of inhospitable and barely accessible land extending about 350km from the northern Afghan province of Badakhshan to China’s Muslim region of Xinjiang.



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One of the sources said that once the camp was completed, the People's Liberation Army was likely to send troops there, but the embassy denied the claim, saying no Chinese military personnel would be stationed in Afghanistan.

In Beijing on Wednesday, Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Hua Chunying also dismissed the claims.

The war-torn Central Asian country has become increasingly important for China's own security, as well as President Xi Jinping's "Belt and Road Initiative", a huge trade and infrastructure plan.

China set up its first overseas military base last year in Djibouti, a facility Beijing describes as a military logistics outpost for resupplying Chinese vessels on peacekeeping and humanitarian missions in the Indian Ocean.

The sources close to the military, who spoke on condition of anonymity, also told the *Post* the Afghanistan outpost would have a different role than the Djibouti base because it was located close to Xinjiang, which Beijing sees as the main source of the "three forces" – separatism, terrorism and extremism – behind a series of violent attacks in the region in recent years.

"Construction of the base has started, and China will send at least one battalion of troops, along with weapons and equipment, to be stationed there and provide training to their Afghan counterparts," one of the sources said.

He said that it was unclear when the PLA planned to open the camp and that it was considered a "costly but worthwhile project".

Russian news agency Ferghana News reported in January that Beijing would finance a new military base in Badakhshan after defence ministers from the two countries agreed last year to work together to fight terrorism, citing General Davlat Vaziri from Afghanistan's defence ministry.

At the time, China's defence ministry [denied it had a plan to build a "military base" in Afghanistan](#), but said Beijing had provided aid and support to its neighbour as part of security cooperation efforts, including counterterrorism operations.

Beijing-based military expert Li Jie said that China had ramped up its anti-terrorism measures but that it also needed to work with other countries in Central Asia and the Middle East.

"If they're going to eliminate the so-called three forces, they need to go to their power bases and take them down," Li said.

"But since the PLA is not familiar with the terrain, and with life in Afghanistan, bilateral cooperation is the best way to get win-win results."



China has extended more than US\$70 million in military aid to Afghanistan in the last three years, researcher Ahmad Bilal Khalil, from the Centre for Strategic and Regional Studies in Kabul, said in February. He added that Beijing feared that instability in the neighbouring country could threaten its growing economic interests across the region.

Song Zhongping, a military analyst in Hong Kong, said the camp would benefit both the Chinese military and its Afghan counterparts.

“A key function of the training base will be to strengthen anti-terrorism cooperation and military exchanges between Beijing and Kabul, which is also part of their efforts to stop separatists from infiltrating Xinjiang,” said Song, a military commentator for Phoenix Television.

“Afghanistan is very weak on counterterrorism, and the authorities there are worried about a Taliban resurgence, but they can’t do anything about it without help from the US, China and other countries.”

Song added that China and Afghanistan had agreed to work together to fight terrorism because of concerns about the East Turkestan Islamic Movement joining forces with the Taliban.

Beijing has blamed the ETIM – a separatist group founded by militant Uygurs – for violent attacks in Xinjiang.



Li Wei, a counterterrorism specialist at the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations, said that in addition to providing military support, Beijing had also increased economic cooperation with Afghanistan, which is rich in natural resources, with more than 1,400 mineral deposits.

“Defence and [economic] development have always been the basis for mutual benefit,” Li Wei said. “That’s because if both sides just focus on security cooperation, it won’t be a sustainable relationship.”

Afghanistan has been an observer member of the China-led regional security bloc the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) since 2012.