Southeast Asian Terrorism:
Rise of the Uighur Factor

By Bilveer Singh

Synopsis

Chinese Uighurs are adding a new dimension to the threat of terrorism in Southeast Asia. Battle-hardened, ideologically fortified and networking with Islamic State, the Uighur militants pose a new challenge to the region that can also complicate ties with China.

Commentary

A FEW DAYS prior to Christmas in December 2015, Densus 88, Indonesia's National Police counter-terrorism squad, arrested 11 militants who were planning to carry out bombing operations in Indonesia. Among them was an Uighur, arrested in Bekasi, in the outskirts of Jakarta. The Uighur was being trained to be a suicide bomber. Two of his compatriots escaped.

The trio is believed to have entered Indonesia in October through Batam, an Indonesian island south of Singapore, after transiting through Thailand and Malaysia. Earlier, another seven Uighurs entered Indonesia illegally with three of them believed to have joined Santoso's militant group in Poso. Indonesian security officials are investigating the arrested Uighur's link with the August 2015 Bangkok bombing by Uighurs that killed 27 people and injured 120. The arrest of the Uighur in Jakarta is part of a new development in the regional terrorist landscape with non-Southeast Asians, mainly through links with Islamic State, posing a serious security threat to the region.

The Uighur dynamics

Historically, Uighurs, originating from China's Xinjiang province, have never factored

in the Southeast Asian security landscape or in China-Southeast Asian relations. This is now changing. Turkish speaking, Uighurs are Sunni or Sufi Muslims, sharing kinship ties with people in Central Asia and Turkey. Since 1949, the Uighurs have accused the Chinese government of repression with the aim of marginalising the Uighurs in their homeland, through transmigration of Han Chinese who now constitute 40 percent of the population in Xinjiang. The Chinese government is accused of suppressing the Uighurs' language, religion, culture, garb and even cuisines.

The Chinese government has accused the Uighurs of the triple sins of separatism, extremism and terrorism, especially since the 1990s. The Chinese government have accused the Uighurs of wanting to establish the Islamic state of East Turkestan. The East Turkistan Islamic Movement has been accused of undertaking a 'jihad' in China, by colluding with international terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda in the past and now, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) or IS.

While in the past, the Uighurs have sought refuge in Malaysia and to some extent Thailand, increasingly, due to networking with ISIS Indonesia is becoming a destination of choice, mainly to partake in jihadi activities. The head of Indonesia's counter-terrorism agency, Saud Usman, identified two key routes used by Uighurs to enter Indonesia. The first is from South China to Myanmar, Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia (Riau, Java and then Sulawesi). The second is from China to Hongkong, Manila, Davao and Sulawesi.

Uighurs as a security threat in Southeast Asia

There are five dimensions of security threats from the Uighurs to Southeast Asia today.

1. *Intensification of Chinese Government clashes with ethnic Uighurs:*

Ethnically and religiously, the Uighurs are different from the majority Han Chinese and there have been rising discord between them. Xinjiang's economic prosperity has led to an influx of Han Chinese who also command the key political, military, police and economic jobs in the region. The Uighurs believe they are discriminated against, leading to intense conflict in non-economic areas including China's attempt to subdue Uighurs' social and religious practices, including banning of fasting during Ramadhan.

China has launched large-scale crackdowns on what is dubbed as Uighur separatism and terrorism, such as in 2009 in Urumqi, the regional capital where some 200 Uighurs are believed to have been killed. Since then, the Uighurs have retaliated with knife attacks in Xinjiang and elsewhere, including Kunming and Beijing. Besides souring ties between China and Muslim majority states, many Uighurs have also headed for Malaysia and Indonesia as asylum destinations.

2. *Intensification of Uighur ties and support for Islamic State:*

Many Uighurs, reportedly over 1000 fighters, are believed to be in Syria and Iraq. While some are fighting with the pro-Al Qaeda Jabhat al-Nusra, most are with IS.

Many of the Uighurs are supported and working closely with the Turkistan Islamic Party, which supports IS. Like the Southeast Asian jihadists organised under Katibah Nusantara, the Uighurs have also been involved in combat operations in Syria. The Uighur-IS nexus has led to radicalisation of the former, adopting extreme Salafist ideology, bent on takfirism and the establishment of the kilafah in support of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. This has meant that the threat of IS in Southeast Asia is conflated with the Uighurs.

3. *Rising conflict with Southeast Asia over Uighur repatriation:*

The third aspect of the Uighur-related issue is Beijing's demand for Uighur refugees in the region to be repatriated. As China does not accept the non-refoulement aspect of the International Refugee Convention, many Southeast Asian governments have been pressured to accede to China's demands. In 2009, Cambodia repatriated 20 Uighurs. In July 2015, Thailand repatriated 109 Uighurs. Malaysia, Myanmar, Laos and Vietnam have also done likewise. While China is able to use its soft power to exact compliance, it is also increasingly creating tensions as the repatriated Uighurs are believed to be severely punished for leaving the 'motherland'.

4. *Increasing Uighur support for Southeast Asian jihadi groups:*

A new aspect of the Uighur threat is the willingness of the former to support and join forces with jihadi groups in Southeast Asia. This is primarily the result of the foreign fighters' network that has been established in Syria and Iraq under the auspices of IS. One such case is the support the Uighurs have provided Abu Wardah @ Santoso, leader of the Mujahidin Indonesia Timur (MIT). Santoso has publicly agreed to accept 100 Uighurs as part of the MIT.

5. *Direct involvement of Uighurs in attacks in Southeast Asia:*

Uighur-related violence has also broken out in Southeast Asia, for instance the bombing of the Erawan Shrine in Bangkok in August 2015 that killed 27 tourists and wounded 120. Indonesian police has also charged four Uighurs for terrorism-related crimes.

Clearly, the rise of IS is changing the nature of the terrorism threat in Southeast Asia. While many more Southeast Asians have become fighters and supporters of IS compared to Al Qaeda in the past, the direct involvement of Chinese Uighurs in Southeast Asian terrorism adds an external dimension to the existing home-grown terrorist threat. It could also complicate ties with a rising China which may want to play a bigger counter-terrorism role in the region.

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