

THE UIGHUR CONNECTION

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

On October 26, columnist Irfan Husain asked in the Dawn: “So why the deafening silence across the Islamic world when around 1.5 million Muslims in China’s Xinjiang province have been forced into vast ‘re-education centres’?” It is indeed unforgivable that the world should abandon the Uighur Muslims but of late, there have been some protests at least. Yet, the tragic fact is that the Uighur, as a small Muslim community in China, have responded to the stimulus of al Qaeda in the region and come to Pakistan in gangs to attack the country’s “deviation” from true Islam.

Other Muslim states are also scared of them. Uzbekistan is hounded by an Uzbek Islamist outfit that not too long ago was based in Pakistan along with the al Qaeda-led Taliban and Punjabi terrorists. Afghanistan was Islam’s other boiling cauldron and Uzbekistan was facing all the heat from it. Totalitarian Uzbekistan gave a drubbing to Tahir Yuldashev, the Uzbek terrorist who fled to Pakistan with his warriors. Pakistan kowtowed to him till he was killed by an American drone. The Central Asian states are scared of what the Uighurs together with the al Qaeda and ISIS may do to them.

Uighurs made up a part of the terrorist group of Yuldashev, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). The Uighur outfit was called the Islamic Jihad Union (IJU). The al Qaeda in Syria also had a lot of Uighurs fighting on its side. One was Abu Omar al-Turkistani, who was killed in a US drone strike in Idlib Province. He began fighting in Afghanistan after migrating there from Xinjiang sometime before the US invasion.

Abu Omar fought in the Battle of Tora Bora before fleeing to Pakistan, where he was arrested and held for a decade. After his release he went back to Afghanistan and joined the IJU. He spoke multiple languages — including Pashto, English, and Russian — and this enabled him to become a IJU commander — a position retained till 2015, when he migrated to Syria to join the jihad there. In July 2016, al Qaeda chief Al Zawahiri, who was hiding somewhere in Pakistan, praised the Muslims of “East Turkistan” for their dedication to “waging jihad around the globe”.

The Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP), a largely Uighur jihadist group, affiliated to the al Qaeda, operates in Afghanistan and Syria. Its latest video from Afghanistan shows the spoils taken from the Afghan military — Afghan military vehicles, including several Humvees, and weapons, including M16 and M4 variant rifles. It put up a similar video in 2018. In 2015 too, the outfit boasted about its “victories” with videos. A training camp’s photograph indicated it was not a temporary fixture.

The China Metallurgical Group Corporation has bought a controlling stake in the Aynak copper field — one of the largest copper fields in the world — in Logar province for \$3 billion. China’s largest oil company has won the rights to exploit the first oil field to be tendered in northwestern Afghanistan. This could bring the Chinese into a confrontation with the Uighurs in Afghanistan.

China knows what is in store for its Belt and Road project in the region. With the Americans gone, the Taliban will oust India from Kabul, penetrate a vulnerable Pakistan and look to conquering the Xinjiang region to “raise the Uighur from slavery”. Pakistan is not too clear about what will happen next. It is fencing its western border but is not capable of pushing back the religious radicalism of its middle class and the army.

That China is worried is clear from the FATF decisions under its presidency. China is using

strong-arm methods to control the Uighur on its territory and forcibly change their minds — something that has not worked historically. Pakistan is scared too and has succumbed to China's persuasion inside FATF to control its own homegrown terrorists which it used as non-state actors in its proxy war with India.

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