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There are clear indications that the Chinese are stumbling in their effort to crush the Uighur struggle against the Han Chinese domination in Xinjiang.

The scrupulous semantics used by Chinese state-controlled media describe them as terrorists though the attacks lack the sophistication of modern day terrorism. It has not helped to cover up the Chinese failure to give confidence to the restive "minority" Uighurs who form a majority in Xinjiang Autonomous Region in China's Northwest.

The way the Chinese have handled the "terror" carried out in Beijing in October 2013 is a case in point to understand all that is wrong with Chinese approach to tackling terrorism

The "terror attack" occurred when Usman Ahmet, a Uighur driving a jeep ploughed into a crowd of people near the Tiananmen Square in Beijing on October 28, 2013 killing three people and injuring 39 others. The driver and his mother and wife who were in the jeep also died on the spot. According to initial report, some eyewitnesses said the jeep was being chased by someone; it was probably trying to get away from the pursuer

The three Uighurs facing death row were found guilty of "leading a terrorist group and endangering public security." Along with the driver of the fatal vehicle, they had "looked for guns and explosives in different places, watched terrorism videos and jointly planned terrorist acts such as blasts and killings in Beijing."

Two others were sentenced to life and 20 years in jail respectively for guilty of “participating in a terrorist group and endangering public security. Three more Uighurs were sentenced to five to 10 years imprisonment for “participating in a terrorist group.”

The Beijing attack was not as deadly as the explosive attack carried out in Urumqi market on May 22, 2014. Thirty nine civilians were killed and 94 others injured in the attack. But the Beijing attack typifies the Chinese way of handling separatist extremism that goes by the name of terrorism in China.

It also shows the increasingly innovative ways in which Uighur separatists had taken their “operations’ beyond the confines of Xinjiang and in this case to the national capital

. There is a problem with Chinese approach to unconventional warfare. In India where semantic niceties dominate the thought process on COIN, “extremism”, “militancy”, “insurgency” and “terrorism” often indicate how the state authority would like to handle the threat. However, to be fair to the Chinese, the fine line separating various types of anti-state violence is getting increasingly subsumed thanks to rise and spread of Jihadi terrorism worldwide.

But, by branding all acts of violence against the state as terrorism, the state response becomes heavy handed resulting in further alienation of the population. It also increases the dependence upon military strategies rather than evolving a holistic strategy to address political, sociological and economic issues that add substance to the Cause of separatism

. This is what appears to be happening in Xinjiang. The statistics on terrorist attacks from the years 2009 to date published in the Global Times is revealing. This year so far the Chinese have attributed six incidents to the Uighur terrorists in the first six months as against seven in 2013 and two, three and one respectively in the years 2012, 2011 and 2009. This confirms the Chinese fear that after 2009 Uighur separatism is once again gathering mass to stage a comeback.

There was no incident in 2010 presumably because of the strong military crackdown after the anti Chinese riots that rocked Urumqi in July 2009. Casualties in the riots were heavy - 197 people killed and 1700 others injured while 633 houses and 627 vehicles were damaged.

The style of operations and weaponry used now indicate Uighur separatism is yet to articulate itself powerfully to become a terrorist movement. Some of the acts like the Beijing jeep “attack” where a whole family perished, look more like an act of desperation than a suicide attack of the Jihadi kind. It also underlines the continuing determination of some in Uighur society to assert their will against the powerful and insensitive state machinery in spite of all odds

. Uighur extremism is also gaining more national visibility and making impact since 2013 - President Xi Jinping’s first year in office. Xi had a

first-hand exposure to it when one of the three Uighur separatist outfits - the Turkestan Islamic party - carried out a knife attack and bombing in Urumqi city railway station on April 30. Three people lost their lives and 79 others were injured in the attack.

More importantly, the attack was timed to coincide with the visit of the President to Xinjiang, destabilising the state for a while. So it was no wonder when Xi vowed to wipe out terrorism by making the state counter terrorism apparatus more professional and powerful at the regional and national levels

As though challenging the President, Uighur separatists carried out yet another explosive attack in Urumqi the very next month. It was even more deadly, killing 39 civilians and injuring 94 others. In its wake, the Chinese have launched a year-long crackdown on terrorism nationwide.

Now counter terrorism figures prominently in China's national security schemes. It also finds a place in joint military exercises - big or small - with a whole range of countries extending from Russia to India to Thailand and Sri Lanka to the US. Counter terrorism cooperation has become an important part of in China's bilateral discussions with heads of governments, particularly neighbouring countries including India.

At times the over emphasis on military approach has resulted in overkill; a typical example is the arrest of a prominent Uighur intellectual Ilham Tohti, a known advocate of non violence and supporter of dialogue between the ethnic communities, in January 2014. He is now held incommunicado in Xinjiang, facing a secret trial.

Despite these efforts, the Chinese seem to be running into trouble in handling Uighur separatism. Their intelligence agencies do not seem to have their ears to the ground to forewarn them of impending separatist strike. The successful execution of a daring attack in Urumqi during the President's visit is a case in point. This speaks of poor interface between the Han Chinese and the minority populations.

There is also a need to address the economic alienation of Uighurs from the Chinese development story. Chinese have a long tradition of settling disbanded units of Han Chinese dominated army in border regions. This practice has boosted the Han Chinese population in Xinjiang particularly in the 70s during the period of fractious relationship with Soviet Union

The Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (XPCC) originally formed out of the disbanded military settlers has emerged as powerful economic and semi-military government loose cannon. It has administrative authority over several cities and settlements and farms. It operates outside the control of the government of the autonomous region making a mockery of the much touted Uighur autonomy. Its exclusive preference for Han Chinese makes it a powerful external factor furthering the alienation of Uighurs

Thus over the years, despite a lot of lip service to national unity, functional relations between the Han Chinese immigrants and the Uyghur regional majority have not developed on equitable basis. This feeling of alienation was further compounded by the state's short sighted

restrictions on religious practices of Uighur Muslims in the wake of 2009 trouble. This is a dangerous trend as it could push the Uighur separatists into the arms of Taliban fundamentalism which is expected to rise in the wake of American troop pullout from Afghanistan this year. So time is running out for the Chinese to rethink their strategies in Xinjiang.

Basically Chinese have to adopt a holistic approach to include 'winning the hearts and minds of the people' as a part of the COIN effort. The Global Times editorial in 2013 had some sane advice on this. It said: "Winning the hearts of the public in sensitive areas has decisive significance. Xinjiang needs to mobilize people from all of society to launch an anti-terrorism fight...The July 5 riots in Xinjiang in 2009 left a deep scar between the Han and the Uighur. The estrangement between the two will be constantly used by extreme forces who have been trying to turn it into the deep-rooted social causes for their violent and terrorism activities there.

"The whole country should be dedicated to dissolving the estrangement, which is the key to Xinjiang's long-term stability. We should also make Xinjiang people acknowledge the harm of such estrangement and that extreme forces are violators of the interests of the Uighur people. Meanwhile, various places in Xinjiang should appoint a certain number of police from ethnic minorities. The Uighurs should be made to believe that they are trusted members of the Chinese populace."

We know from our own experience in Nagaland and Mizoram that no amount of military crackdown alone can uproot the feeling of alienation and separatism unless holistic efforts are made to nurture the feeling of inclusivity among the alienated so that they join the national mainstream.

This process requires a lot of patience and continuity. And Xinjiang is no exception to this. So one can only hope someone in authority take the Global Times advice to heart and put in an out of the box plan for Xinjiang. Otherwise the Chinese are going to find it more and more difficult in handling Uighur separatism.

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