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**POLICY
BRIEF**

TERROR OVERSEAS: UNDERSTANDING CHINA'S EVOLVING COUNTER-TERROR STRATEGY

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SUMMARY

- International terrorism has emerged in recent years as a direct threat to Chinese nationals living overseas. As China's footprint becomes increasingly global its exposure to the risk of terror attacks has increased too.
- China's approach to international terrorism is becoming militarised. This trend has the potential to accelerate if Chinese nationals are victims of new attacks overseas.
- Although China is an active and responsible player in the UN with clearly expressed priorities and an interest in protecting its citizens overseas, it is not taking a strong role in leading and shaping the UN's counter-terrorism agenda.
- The EU should take stock of the ongoing transformation of China's approach to explore a modest upgrade of its current policy of cautious engagement.
- When engaging with China the EU should make clear that an overly politicised approach will be an obstacle to cooperation, and be upfront in setting the conditions of cooperation. The EU should not underestimate what China has to offer but shouldn't make big compromises either.

In November 2015, the Islamic State group (ISIS) announced that it had executed a Chinese citizen for the first time. A few days later, the Al-Murabitoun jihadist group – later affiliated with Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb – attacked the Radisson Blu Hotel in Bamako, Mali, killing 22 people, including three Chinese nationals working for the state-owned China Railway Construction Corporation. International terrorism has emerged in recent years as a direct threat for Chinese nationals overseas. A compilation of open source data shows a total of 18 attacks causing 40 deaths of Chinese nationals overseas in the past decade. China's global footprint means that it has global exposure to terrorist risks. Meanwhile, China's ambitious plans for Eurasian integration, which involve a new wave of outward investment and a new wave of Chinese citizens settling overseas, mean those risks are likely to increase in the coming years.

Since the beginning of the US war on terror, Chinese diplomacy has consistently criticised the international community's militarised response to Islamist terrorism. China has rejected involvement in large multinational military coalitions in Afghanistan and against the Islamic State. China's nationalistic media have not only lambasted the US war on terror, but occasionally even promoted a narrative that holds the West responsible for Islamist terrorism, blaming excessive Western military intervention in the region for not only the explosion of terrorist attacks globally, but for the rise of ISIS as well.¹

¹ Chen Shilei, "West's hypocrisy over terrorism causes political instability in Middle East", *Global Times*, 26 January 2016, available at <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/965763.shtml>; Liu Xin, "Groundless US report claims China's policies making Muslims join IS", *Global Times*, 22 July 2016, available at <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/995827.shtml>.

Two key concepts have underpinned China's diplomatic posture on terrorism: "double standards" and "tackling the root causes". At the G20 summit in Ankara last year, soon after the November terror attacks in Paris, Foreign Minister Wang Yi stated: "China holds that joint forces should be formed to fight against terrorism, and that both the symptoms and root causes of the issue should be addressed. Double standards shouldn't be allowed".² "Double standards" is coded language referring to Western criticism of China's actions in Xinjiang, signaling that what matters most to Beijing is international endorsement for its own domestic counter-terrorism policies. This is their overarching priority in terms of national security, compared to which overseas risks are clearly a secondary concern. The reference to "root causes" indicates China's preference for policies addressing factors that often encourage radicalisation, such as a lack of economic development and social justice.

Although this narrative has hardly changed, this policy brief indicates a "militarisation trend" emerging in China's counter-terrorism strategy overseas. In December 2015, the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress passed a new counter-terrorism law that, among other provisions, allows the army and armed police to engage in counter-terrorist missions abroad.³ The scope of these missions are not precisely defined, in order to enable maximum flexibility during future crises. This law has the potential to lead to a dramatic change in the use of Chinese military power overseas. Other signs of such an evolution, driven by China's changing stance on its "overseas interests" (海外利益), include new developments within the PLA in terms of doctrine, training, equipment, basing and diplomatic activity.

In response to the emergence of new threats, China's approach to international cooperation is also changing. China's own problem with foreign fighters has resulted in diplomatic efforts to develop intelligence cooperation with new partners, including in Europe. China is attempting to establish a counter-terrorism dialogue with the European Union, but these efforts have so far been unsuccessful. There are very strong normative differences keeping China and Europe apart on key definitions and approaches.

China frames terrorism as one of "three evils" (三股势力) alongside extremism and separatism, which has resulted in Europe approaching counter-terrorism cooperation with China from a human rights angle, making it difficult to disentangle domestic terrorism in China from the threat that international terrorism poses to both European and Chinese citizens. This obstacle is likely to structurally limit the potential of Europe-China cooperation on counter-terrorism. Although some EU member states are pursuing a policy of engagement with China, this has not resulted in any concrete benefits for European security. China is not a key partner in solving Europe's terror problem.

² "Chinese FM calls for united front to fight terrorism", *Xinhua News Agency*, 16 November 2015, available at http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-11/16/c_134819141.htm.

³ "Anti-Terrorism Law of the People's Republic of China", *Xinhua News Agency*, 27 December 2015, available at http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2015-12/27/c_128571798.htm.

This policy brief argues that the EU should pursue a policy of cautious engagement, but wait for further moves from China before shifting towards greater cooperation. It also predicts that Chinese requests for cooperation will become more focused and less formalistic as China continues to adjust its overseas counter-terrorism strategy to a changing threat environment.

The growing Chinese exposure to terrorism overseas

Attacks against Chinese nationals by international terrorist groups remain relatively rare, but two new trends can be discerned.

First, Chinese nationals are increasingly subject to the same risks as other foreigners. The majority of attacks listed in the table represent cases where Chinese nationals have been the victims of collateral damage rather than primary targets, such as in Boston, Bamako and Brussels. This is important because one narrative prevalent in Chinese media reports is that international terrorism is targeting the West in retaliation for the latter's hostile policies in the Middle East. However, the distinction between developed and developing countries, or between the West and the rest, no longer applies to indiscriminate terrorist actions conducted in metropolitan centres. Consequently, the idea that China can benefit from "non-interference" looks increasingly untenable, even in China. As military analyst Zhao Chu argues, the "cautiousness" and the restraint of Chinese policy towards international terrorism has done nothing to prevent the hostility of groups like Al-Qaeda and ISIS.⁴ This is the result of China's rise as a great power with a global footprint – Chinese nationals are traveling across the world to settle, for business opportunities or for tourism. Approximately 128 million Chinese traveled overseas in 2015, compared to only 280,000 in 1982.⁵

Many Chinese citizens live in countries that are frequently targeted by terrorists: for example, there are 3,000 Chinese nationals in Mali, 65,000 in Nigeria and more than 10,000 each in Iraq and Pakistan.⁶ An article in a leading Chinese academic journal concluded that 3,969 Chinese companies have registered in the so-called "arc of instability" (动烫弧) which delineates the geographical region extending from Afghanistan and Pakistan to the Sahel area.⁷

Secondly, tension and violence in Xinjiang has attracted the attention of several Islamist terrorist groups. In his first message as the so-called Caliph of the Islamic State, Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi listed China among the countries in which "Muslim rights are forcefully seized" and called on

⁴ Zhao Chu, "Point of View: New Understanding of Paris Attacks and China's Cooperative Counter-Terrorism", *BBC China*, 19 November 2015, available at http://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/simp/world/2015/11/151119_china_paris_attack_military.

⁵ "Overall Situation of Consular Protection and Assistance Outside China", Consular Protection Service of the Chinese Foreign Ministry, 5 May 2016, available at <http://cs.mfa.gov.cn/gyls/lsgz/ztzl/ajztqk2014/t1360879.shtml>.

⁶ MOFCOM country reports/investment guides 2014/2015, available at <http://fec.mofcom.gov.cn/article/gbdqzn/>.

⁷ Liu Qingtian and Fang Jincheng, "The New Development of Terrorism and Its Influence on China", *Guoji wenti yanjiu* (Journal of International Studies), Autumn 2015.

Selected overseas terror attacks against Chinese nationals (2004-2016)

Year	Country	Chinese nationals killed	Details
May 2004	Pakistan	3	Three Chinese citizens killed and nine injured in a car bomb explosion in Baluchistan, Pakistan.
June 2004	Afghanistan	11	A Chinese sponsored construction site is attacked. 11 workers killed and four wounded.
October 2004	Pakistan	1	Two Chinese engineers taken hostage. After five days of failed negotiations, Pakistani military intervention results in one release and one death.
November 2005	Jordan	3	Three academics from China's National Defence University are among 57 killed in Al-Qaeda bomb attacks in three luxury hotels.
February 2006	Pakistan	3	Three Chinese engineers killed by gunmen in Baluchistan. The Pakistani government condemned the killings as an "act of terrorism".
July 2007	Pakistan	3	Unidentified gunmen killed three Chinese workers in Peshawar in retaliation for Red Mosque siege.
February 2012	Pakistan	1	Part of the Pakistani Taliban claims responsibility for killing one Chinese national in revenge for China's killing of Muslims in Xinjiang.
August 2012	Afghanistan	Unknown	The Taliban launched a rocket attack on Mes Aynak where a Chinese company was planning the construction of a major copper mine and a variety of other infrastructure projects.
April 2013	United States	1	A Chinese national is among three killed when bombs explode near the Boston marathon finish line.
June 2013	Pakistan	9	Gunmen in Pakistan's northern mountains shot and killed at least nine climbers. Three of those killed were Chinese.
September 2013	Kenya	1	A terrorist attack in a Nairobi shopping mall killed one Chinese national killed and injured another.
May 2014	Cameroon	1	Ten Chinese citizens went missing after Sinohydro facility attacked by Boko Haram militants in Waza, close to the Nigerian border. One Chinese national among ten killed.
May 2014	Malaysia	0	In two separate cases Chinese nationals are kidnapped by Abu Sayyaf and then released.
August 2015	Thailand	5	Five Chinese tourists die when a bomb explodes at the Erawan Shrine, a highly popular site for Chinese tourists. There is speculation but no confirmation that the attack was launched in retaliation for the deportation of illegal Uyghur migrants back to China.
November 2015	ISIS controlled areas	1	The Islamic State announces the execution of M. Fan Jinghui after having advertised a "Chinese prisoner for sale" in September.
November 2015	Mali	3	Three executives of the state-owned China Railway Construction Corporation are among the hostages killed in a terrorist attack at the Radisson Blu hotel in Bamako, Mali.
March 2016	Belgium	1	A young Chinese entrepreneur is killed in the Islamic State's suicide attacks at Zaventem airport.
June 2016	Mali	1	Al-Qaeda attack that killed one Chinese peacekeeper and injured four others.
August 2016	Kyrgyzstan	0	Suicide bomb attacks Chinese Embassy in Kyrgyzstan, three local staff members injured.

ISIS soldiers to “take revenge”.⁸ In the same message, he disclosed, for the first time, that Chinese nationals had joined the ranks of ISIS. In 2015, propaganda material released by the group featured Chinese nationals.⁹ This explicit focus on China contrasts strongly with Al-Qaeda’s initial reluctance to target China. The influential jihadist theorist Abu Musad Al-Suri has written about the Taliban’s decision to prohibit attacks targeting China and Chinese interests; a policy that was upheld by Osama Bin Laden, who saw US-China rivalry as a strategic opportunity.¹⁰

However, Al-Qaeda abandoned its restraint towards China in the mid-2000s and is now also openly targeting the country. The foundation of the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) in Afghanistan and Pakistan’s tribal areas following the death of their esteemed Uyghur leader Hasan Mahsum in 2003 was an important turning point. Recruiting younger activists who favoured violent action and working in close association with Al-Qaeda networks, TIP facilitated the gradual transformation of Al-Qaeda’s narrative on China.

The first hostile statement reportedly came from the group’s second in command – Ayman al-Zawahiri – in December 2006.¹¹ But the group’s shift in approach reached maturity in 2008-9, with the Beijing Olympics providing a timely opportunity for international visibility, and the riots in Urumqi in July 2009 making global headlines. Reports suggested that Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) had threatened to attack Chinese interests in the Maghreb and that an attack against a convoy in Algeria had, in fact, occurred.¹² In October 2009, Al-Qaeda operative Abu Yahia Al-Libi called on Uyghurs to launch jihad against China and expel the “infidels” who were occupying their homeland.¹³ More recently in October 2014, Al Qaeda’s media organisation released articles calling for operations against Chinese interests worldwide, in retaliation to China’s policies in Xinjiang.¹⁴

The table in this paper shows attacks affecting Chinese nationals. These have been concentrated in a few key countries – Afghanistan, Pakistan, Nigeria and some attacks in the Middle East.

Of all the terror attacks of the past decade, only a minority have been in direct retaliation to Chinese policies. The July 2007 attack in Pakistan came in response to China’s public

call for the government in Islamabad to carry out an assault on the Red Mosque, in an episode that led many in China to conclude that naming and shaming was counter-productive.¹⁵ The August 2015 attack in Bangkok was allegedly conducted in retaliation for Thailand’s forced return of illegal Uyghur migrants to China. Two Uyghur men were charged for the attack and pleaded not guilty. The details of the case remain under investigation and few details have emerged since the charges were made.¹⁶ AQIM claimed responsibility for the June 2016 attack against the Chinese peacekeeping mission in Mali, saying that its al-Mourabitoun division launched an operation against “crusader occupation forces”.¹⁷

At the same time, a major cause of concern for Chinese security services is the increase in the numbers of Uyghurs who have joined jihadist organisations in Syria and Iraq. The phenomenon is not new: in the 1990s, a small number of Uyghurs joined armed groups in Afghanistan and Pakistan. This quickly became a priority for Chinese security services and led to the first strong push to develop international cooperation – both through the creation of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and the bilateral cooperation channels with states in Greater Central Asia. The latter included a rapprochement with the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and strong cooperation with Pakistan.¹⁸

But the conflicts in Iraq and Syria have raised the problem to a new level. Estimates of the number of Uyghurs who have travelled to the region vary greatly. Chinese officials have only commented publicly on the issue once, in 2014. China’s special envoy for the Middle East, Ambassador Wu Sike, said that 100 Chinese nationals were fighting alongside ISIS. An article published by authors affiliated with the Public Security Ministry mentioned that there are 300 East Turkistan pro-independence fighters with ISIS.¹⁹

The leaked internal list of Islamic State fighters features around 200 Uyghur fighters, most of whom had traveled from China through Malaysia and Turkey.²⁰ Analyses based on the registration records of foreign fighters joining ISIS found that 114 Chinese Uyghurs had joined between mid-2013 and mid-2014.²¹ International media have reported that the numbers of foreign fighters of Uyghur origin in Syria has grown from a few hundred to a few thousand over recent years. However, it is the Al-Nusra front that has taken in the most, illustrating the closeness between the Turkistan

8 “Islamic State Leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi Encourages Emigration, Worldwide Action”, SITE Intelligence Group, 1 July 2014, available at <https://news.siteintelgroup.com/Jihadist-News/islamic-state-leader-abu-bakr-al-baghdadi-encourages-emigration-worldwide-action.html>.

9 Edward Wong and Adam Wu, “ISIS Extends Recruitment Efforts to China With New Chant”, the *New York Times*, 8 December 2015, available at http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/09/world/asia/isis-china-recruitment-chant-mandarin.html?_r=0.

10 Brian Fishman, “Al-Qaeda and the rise of China: Jihadi geopolitics in a post-hegemonic world”, *The Washington Quarterly*, 34:3, June 2011.

11 Martin Wayne, “Al-Qaeda’s China problem”, *Asia Times*, 27 February 2007, available at <http://www.atimes.com/atimes/China/1B27Ad01.html>.

12 Tania Branigan, “Al-Qaeda threatens to target Chinese over Muslim deaths in Urumqi”, the *Guardian*, 14 July 2009, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/jul/14/al-qaeda-threat-china-urumqi>.

13 Inal Ersan, “Prepare to fight China, Qaeda figure tells Uyghurs”, *Reuters*, 7 October 2009, available at <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-qaeda-china-xinjiang-idUSTRE5961A120091007>.

14 Zachary Keck, “Al-Qaeda declares war on China, too”, the *Diplomat*, 22 October 2014, available at <http://thediplomat.com/2014/10/al-qaeda-declares-war-on-china-too/>.

15 Andrew Small, *The China-Pakistan Axis: Asia’s New Geopolitics* (London: C. Hurst & Co Publishers Ltd, 2015).

16 Wassana Nantam, “Uyghur, Chechen tourists placed under surveillance”, *Bangkok Post*, 7 April 2016, available at <http://www.bangkokpost.com/news/security/924901/uyghur-chechen-tourists-placed-under-surveillance>.

17 Adama Diarra, “Al-Qaeda says conducted Mali raid that killed China peacekeeper”, *Reuters*, 1 June 2016, available at <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mali-security-un-idUSKCN0YN3TG>.

18 Interview with terrorism expert, London, May 2016.

19 Li Benxian, Mei Jianming and Ling Yunxiang, “The establishment of the National Security Council-led China anti-terrorism mechanism”, *Guoji wenti yanjiu* (Journal of International Studies), Autumn 2015.

20 Interview with senior counter-terrorism analyst, London, May 2016.

21 Nate Rosenblatt, “All Jihad is Local, what ISIS files tell us about its fighters”, *New America*, Summer 2016.

Islamic Party and Al-Qaeda.²² Chinese experts in the track two dialogues quote a similarly high figure; this may include people of Uyghur ethnicity with a third nationality and who have never lived in China.²³ However, the involvement of TIP in setting up exfiltration channels to Syria is confirmed by various sources, including by TIP itself in its propaganda material emerging from the Syrian theatre. China has never released information regarding the return of ISIS-trained fighters to its territory.

In sum, the recent increase in the frequency of attacks, the greater exposure of Chinese nationals globally, the emergence of ISIS and the fact that the deteriorating situation in Xinjiang has attracted the attention of some Islamic terrorist organisations have changed the threat assessment in Beijing, prompting adjustments in China's counter-terrorism policy. As a result, overseas risks now form a major part of China's strategic calculus regarding terrorism.

China's counter-terrorism diplomacy at the UN

China advocates a leading role for the United Nations in all matters of international security, and the issue of international terrorism is no exception. In his remarks at the G20 summit after the November 2015 attacks in Paris, Foreign Minister Wang Yi suggested that a "united front should be formed" to bring the UN's leading role against terrorism into "full play".²⁴ This principled position runs through all statements released by top Chinese leaders. In May 2016, on an international trip to Grozny, Chechnya to promote counter-terrorism cooperation in Russia and Europe, Meng Jianzhu, the head of China's Public Security Commission, refined the "united front" argument, stating: "the international community should put aside minor differences, and strengthen dialogue and consultation within the framework of the United Nations, in a bid to seek a common ground in the fight against terrorism".²⁵

In practice, China's contribution to the work of the United Nations against terrorism takes place at three different levels: the Security Council, the sanctions committee, and the Counter-Terrorism Committee (CTC). Each has its own role and function: high-level diplomacy at the UNSC; investigations and monitoring of specific individuals and entities at the sanctions committee; and capacity-building in third states through the CTC. China is an active player on these three fronts but rarely takes major initiatives.

China's counter-terrorism diplomacy at the UNSC centres on Xinjiang-related terrorism. The Council is a powerful platform on which to publicise Chinese position on "double standards", "root causes" and the leading role that the UN

should take. In April 2016, China promoted an open debate on countering terrorism during its presidency of the Council. The concept paper drafted by China lists the country's more pressing priorities: the problem of "double standards", stemming the flow of foreign fighters, cutting financial transactions and preventing terrorists from using the internet and social media.²⁶ This last point is highly controversial and would deserve a full research paper addressing the issue of counter-terrorism within the debate on cyber security and cyber freedoms. China seeks support from the international community for strong action to cut internet channels that promote terrorist ideology. But there is clearly more at stake than surveillance of the online activities of radicalised individuals, such as: the criteria governing censorship, what qualifies as illegal content, the penalties associated with viewing jihadist content, and beyond this, fundamental questions of principle about state intervention on internet access.

China's approach to the UN's ISIS (Da'esh) and Al-Qaeda Sanctions Committee is shaped by the Xinjiang issue. Its main focus has been on getting a number of specific individuals and entities placed on the sanctions list. In September 2002, China managed to get the East Turkestan Islamic Movement listed for its association with Al-Qaeda.²⁷ In October 2009, China obtained the listing of Abdul Haq Al-Turkestani, a TIP leader who allegedly died in a 2010 US drone strike in North Waziristan, although there are also reports that he re-emerged in 2014.²⁸

China has sometimes worked on behalf of friendly states in greater Central Asia to suggest the listing of individuals and entities, but the sanctions list does not include the source of proposed individuals or groups, as attribution is highly sensitive. At the same time, China has also used the Committee to pursue a diplomatic objective linked to Xinjiang, by doing favours for Pakistan. There have been several instances where China has blocked the listing of specific individuals and entities on behalf of Pakistan by placing a hold on sanctions committee meetings. This was the case last April when China prevented the listing of Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM)'s chief, Masood Azhar.²⁹ Last year in July, China also blocked a clarification request raised by India to the Sanctions Committee after Pakistan released Zaki-ur-Rehman Lakhvi, a leader of Lashkar-e-Taiba who was involved in the 2008 Mumbai attacks.³⁰ The fact that China's counter-terrorism diplomacy sometimes prioritises bilateral cooperation with Pakistan over the larger interests of the global struggle against terrorism contradicts its stated goal of giving the UN a leading role in CT affairs.

26 "Letter dated 1 April 2016 from the Permanent Representative of China to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General S2016/306", United Nations Security Council, 14 April 2016, available at http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_pv_7670.pdf.

27 "Narrative summaries of reasons for listing: East Turkestan Islamic Movement", United Nations Security Council, 7 April 2011, available at https://www.un.org/sc/suborg/en/sanctions/1267/faq_sanctions_list/summaries/entity/eastern-turkistan-islamic-movement.

28 Bill Roggio, "Turkistan Islamic Party emir thought killed in 2010 reemerged to lead group in 2014", *The Long War Journal*, 11 June 2015, available at <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/06/turkistan-islamic-party-emir-thought-killed-in-2010-reemerged-to-lead-group-in-2014.php>.

29 "At UN, China blocks India bid to ban JeM chief Masood Azhar", the *Indian Express*, 1 April 2016, available at <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/at-un-china-blocks-india-bid-to-ban-jem-chief-masood-azhar-pathankot-attack/>.

30 Smriti Kak Ramachandran, "China blocks bid for U.N. action on Pak. over Lakhvi", *The Hindu*, 3 July 2015, available at <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/china-blocks-bid-for-un-action-on-pak-over-lakhvi/article7347637.ece>.

22 Mohanad Hage Ali, "China's proxy war in Syria: Revealing the role of Uyghur fighters", *Al-Arabiya*, 2 March 2016, available at <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/perspective/analysis/2016/03/02/China-s-proxy-war-in-Syria-Revealing-the-role-of-Uyghur-fighters-.html>.

23 Author's interviews, Beijing, January and April 2016.

24 "Chinese FM calls for united front to fight terrorism", *Xinhua News Agency*, 16 November 2015, available at http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-11/16/c_134819141.htm.

25 "China's top security official calls for concerted anti-terror efforts", *Global Times*, 25 May 2016, available at <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/985032.shtml>.

At the UNSC Counter-Terrorism Committee - created to support the construction, by all member states, of a robust legislative and institutional framework to implement UNSC resolutions on terrorism — there is nothing particularly distinctive about China's input, given the cooperative nature of the Committee's work. There are cases in which China has followed up bilaterally after specific needs were identified by a CTC delegation on an assessment visit, as the CTC does not have proper capacity-building instruments.³¹

In sum, although China is an active and responsible player in the UN with distinctive priorities, it is not taking a strong role in leading and shaping the organisation's CT agenda, nor has it been particularly dynamic in contributing intelligence to monitor global terrorist networks. As one European official put it, China "makes tactical use of the UN in practice, and strategic use only rhetorically".³² In addition, China's emphasis on the UN is determined in large part by strategic considerations that go beyond terrorist risks: pushing for the UN to take a leadership role is also about "avoiding certain countries [using] the terrorist threat to advance their strategic interests, contain their rivals and extend geopolitical control".³³ Putting it more bluntly, one expert argued that China's decision to engage at the UN was about countering the US unilateral approach.³⁴

The militarisation of China's counter-terrorism strategy abroad

In practice, China pursues its counter-terrorism strategy largely outside the UN system, through a mix of multilateral and bilateral channels, and relies increasingly on military power as a tool. This is in line with new guidelines making the protection of the country's "overseas interests" a foreign policy priority and a mission of the People's Liberation Army. This new outward-looking policy is the result of a decade-long evolution that was formalised in official policy documents in 2012-13.³⁵

The counter-terrorism law

The cornerstone of China's new approach is its first counter-terrorism law. Although the primary goal of the legislation is to reinforce the legal arsenal of the public security apparatus of the state, there are also foreign policy motivations and implications. In a media interview, Liu Yuejin, a senior counter-terrorism official at the Ministry of Public Security, made clear that one of the goals of the CT law was to promote international cooperation.³⁶

Indeed, the law is now the key legal text framing China's international cooperation against terrorism. It contains five

articles listing the areas in which China seeks more exchanges with foreign partners: intelligence sharing; judicial and law enforcement cooperation; and the monitoring of financial operations of terrorist organisations. Another significant aspect of the law is its attempt to clarify legal definitions and policy practices for an international audience — especially in the West, where public opinion and media coverage remains skeptical regarding terrorism in China. Some human rights and media organisations have pointed to abuses linked to terrorism convictions.³⁷ Others have challenged the narrative that structured terrorist cells operate in Xinjiang, depicting violence as a reaction to oppression and religious suppression.³⁸ In that regard, China aims to modernise the standards of its legal system and improve its transparency in order to legitimise existing law-enforcement practices for an international audience and to present international cooperation as based on a clear legal framework.

But the international dimension of the law is not only about seeking the endorsement of the international community. Its provisions on the use of military power overseas could be a potential game-changer. Article 71 sets the stage for future operations in purposefully vague language: "The Chinese People's Liberation Army and Chinese People's armed police forces may assign people to leave the country on counter-terrorism missions as approved by the central military commission." Chinese military officers are evasive regarding the nature of future missions but note that the door is open for new approaches that involve them.³⁹ "Assign people" (派员) could mean anything from sending individuals on diplomatic fact-finding missions to deploying military units of varying sizes.

The nature of military involvement may vary greatly. At the bare minimum, China could do more of what it does already. The People's Armed Police forces, under the combined command of the Ministry of Public Security and the Central Military Commission, already have elite Snow Leopard commandos stationed in Afghanistan and Iraq to protect Chinese embassy staff.⁴⁰ Some Chinese analysts argue that this provision of the law refers to UN Peacekeeping Operations and the Gulf of Aden anti-piracy mission. It could also refer to existing military exchanges in the areas of education, training and intelligence, or even describe existing joint exercises with foreign militaries.⁴¹

China has a record of formalising changes in new policy or legal documents after they have already taken place in practice. In the case of terrorism, however, new legal language was not needed to provide a formal basis for past decisions

37 "China: State Security, Terrorism Convictions Double", Human Rights Watch, 16 March 2016, available at <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/03/16/china-state-security-terrorism-convictions-double>.

38 The French correspondent of the weekly *L'Obs* had to leave China after her visa was not renewed and a strong campaign was mounted in criticism of her coverage of Xinjiang. The incriminated article: Ursula Gauthier, "Après les attentats, la solidarité de la Chine n'est pas sans arrière-pensées", *L'Obs*, 18 November 2015, available at <http://tempsreel.nouvelobs.com/attentats-terroristes-a-paris/20151117.OBS9681/apres-les-attentats-la-solidarite-de-la-chine-n-est-pas-sans-arriere-pensees.html>.

39 Various interviews, Beijing, April 2016.

40 "中國海外人質營救 雪豹突擊隊並不合適", *Takungpao.com*, 26 August 2014, available at <http://news.takungpao.com.hk/world/watch/2014-08/2694885.html>.

41 Various interviews, Beijing, April 2016.

31 Various interviews, June 2016.

32 Various interviews with European officials, May 2016.

33 Liu Qingtian and Fang Jincheng, "The New Development of Terrorism and Its Influence on China".

34 Interview, Beijing, April 2016.

35 Jonas Parelló-Plesner and Mathieu Duchâtel, *China's Strong Arm, Protecting Citizens and Assets Abroad* (London: Adelphi, 2015).

36 "To Combat and Prevent Terrorism in Accordance with Law - Liu Yuejin, Counterterrorist Commissioner of the Ministry of Public Security, answers questions on hot topics of anti-terrorism law", *Xinhua News Agency*, 26 February 2016, available at http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2016-02/26/c_1118174553.htm.

on sending troops overseas on UN missions. Some Chinese commentators argue that the purpose of the law should be taken at face value: it will facilitate the participation of the PLA in international coalitions against terrorism. According to CICIR Researcher Li Wei — China's most well-known counter-terrorism expert and long an advocate in Chinese media of adopting a CT law — the law will make international coalitions a “new trend of international cooperation against terrorism”. In Li Wei's opinion, the application of the law will depend on the attitude of the government of the country targeted by the coalition — China still seeks to prevent unilateral military interventions, and there will need to be a clear request from the host country for the PLA to get involved.⁴² Similarly, in a study of the prospective impact of the law on overseas missions, the School of Terrorism Studies at Northwestern University concludes that military action overseas is inevitable: “necessity and prudence” should be the two guidelines for future operations, which should be very precisely targeted, very limited in time and supported by the host country and international society.⁴³ Far from being a mere instrument of law-enforcement at home, the CT law is another milestone in China's evolving thinking regarding the use of military power overseas.

The PLA's capabilities to conduct CT operations overseas

There is little doubt that the PLA has the capacity to contribute to the sort of military operations that have been conducted by international coalitions in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria. The white papers on National Defence Policy have remained silent on the issue, apart from stating that the protection of Chinese interests overseas is part of the PLA's mission. However the *Science of Military Strategy* — less authoritative, but written by the Academy of Military Science — mentions a role for the PLA Navy and Air Force in counter-terror strikes overseas.⁴⁴

Some Chinese experts see the People's Armed Police, rather than the PLA, at the forefront of China's future operations overseas because of the former's domestic expertise.⁴⁵ This will, however, depend on the type of mission, and there is no reason to exclude the possibility of joint task forces bringing together elements of the PLAN, PLAAF and PAP. The PLA possesses expeditionary capabilities and although the PAP has specialised units, it does not have a monopoly on them. In contrast to many countries that have a dedicated chain of command for counter-terrorism, the PLA and the PAP have a myriad of units operating independently of each other and without a unified command.⁴⁶ The People's Armed Police, has several counter-terrorism units operating domestically and is now authorised by law to be sent on CT missions overseas.

42 “专家：《反恐法》保障中国军队境外打击恐怖主义”，*Yangguang junshi*, 28 December 2015, available at http://military.cn.cn/gz/20151228/t20151228_520954476.html.

43 “中国反恐法中境外武力反恐行动的两个原则性规定”，Anti-terrorism Information Network, 18 March 2016, available at: <http://cati.nwupl.cn/Item/8376.aspx>.

44 “Strategy Studies Department, Academy of Military Science”, *The Science of Military Strategy* (战略学), 2013.

45 “依法提 高武警部队反恐效能”，Fazhi Ribao, 7 June 2016, available at: <http://epaper.legaldaily.com.cn/fzrb/content/20160107/Article10005GN.htm>.

46 Liu Qingtian and Fang Jincheng, “The New Development of Terrorism and Its Influence on China”, *Guoji Zhangwang*, no. 4, 2015, pp. 70–84.

The PLA is undergoing a comprehensive modernisation programme. With regards to terrorism, in addition to Special Forces, what matters most is the construction by the PLAN and the PLAAF of an expeditionary capacity. China has limited experience of engaging in expeditionary operations but is rapidly acquiring the capacity to carry out missions such as expeditionary strike groups and special operations anywhere in the world.⁴⁷ While it is beyond the scope of this paper to analyse the full spectrum of PLA capabilities that can support expeditionary operations, it is worth detailing some equipment decisions to illustrate the depth of ongoing changes.

The modernisation of the Chinese Navy and Air Force is driven by territorial disputes in East Asia and the Taiwan issue. Equipment decisions, including on the aircraft-carrier program, have been taken in the context of China's regional priorities. The PLA Navy is permanently patrolling the Gulf of Aden on anti-piracy missions and will soon benefit from permanent logistical facilities in Djibouti. A key question for expeditions overseas is the transport of troops. The PLAAF received the first of its newly developed long-range Y-20 heavy transport aircraft in June 2016. The aircraft significantly increases the PLA's capacity to mount expeditions far from China's shores, and China's aviation industry representatives have told the media that the PLA would need 1,000 Y-20 aircraft to fulfil its missions.⁴⁸ A plan to commission even a hundred would signal clear ambitions to play a major international role. In February 2016, the PLAN commissioned its fourth Yuzhao class landing platform dock vessel, with rumours that four additional units are to be built in Shanghai.⁴⁹ These two platforms will considerably strengthen the PLA's capacity to deploy troops far away from Chinese territory.

The Chinese arms industry has a major programme of manufacturing drones, the key weapons platform of the US war on terror. This includes UAVs with the capacity to carry out a variety of missions, including reconnaissance and precision strikes. The US Department of Defence estimates that by 2023 the PLA will have thousands of drones deployed, including for counter-terrorism operations.⁵⁰ Whilst regional priorities, border security (in the case of reconnaissance drones) and commercial opportunities in the global marketplace explain China's considerable investment in drones, having this capacity creates new options and affects policy decisions. In 2014, Chinese media reported the first successful drone strike on a terrorist target during the joint SCO exercise Peace Mission.⁵¹

These developments occur at a time when China has reversed its longstanding position on overseas bases. Commenting on

47 Oriana Skylar Mastro, “A global expeditionary People's Liberation Army: 2025–2030” in Roy Kamphausen, and David Lai (eds), *The Chinese People's Liberation Army in 2025* (Carlisle: US Army Strategic Studies Institute, 2015).

48 Richard D Fisher Jr, “China needs ‘more than 1,000’ Xian Y-20 transport aircraft”, *Jane's Defence Weekly*, 7 June 2016, available at: <http://www.janes.com/article/61026/china-needs-more-than-1-000-xian-y-20-transport-aircraft>.

49 Andrew Tate, “The PLAN commissions fourth Type 071 LPD”, *Jane's Defence Weekly*, 3 February 2016, available at <http://www.janes.com/article/57683/the-plan-commissions-fourth-type-071-lpd>.

50 Elsa Kannia and Kenneth Allen, “The Human and Organizational Dimensions of the PLA's Unmanned Aerial Vehicle Systems”, *China Brief*, 16, Spring 2016.

51 “中国陆军 – ‘和平使命 2014’ 联合反恐军事演习：2014年08月26日 中国空军察打一体无人机首次参演”，YouTube, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ERBhnn8PajI>.

China's decision to build its first permanent overseas base in Djibouti, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said that China was "trying to build some necessary infrastructure and logistical capacities in regions with a concentration of Chinese interests" to respond "to actual needs and the wishes of the countries in question". This suggests that Djibouti is a turning point with regards to bases rather than an exception.⁵² Although the primary function of the base will be to support naval escorts in the Gulf of Aden, other military engagement possibilities are also being discussed in the Chinese strategic community.

Bases could also be used to provide logistical support and a safe trans-shipment location for non-combatant evacuation operations. The PLA Navy used Djibouti in this way during the evacuation of 600 Chinese nationals from Yemen in March 2015. Up until now, most of China's evacuations have been conducted by civilian transport companies, sometimes under military protection provided by the host nation. This was the case in Iraq in June 2014 when the expansion of ISIS forced China to evacuate nationals from the northern part of the country to safety in Baghdad.⁵³ In Djibouti, China will have personnel deployed close to Camp Lemonnier, which hosts the US Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa, a hub for US counter-terrorism operations in the Gulf region.

The internationalisation of the PLA's military exercises

The increased militarisation of China's approach to the overseas terror risk is also evident in the evolution of the PLA's joint exercises and training with foreign militaries. Since the first exercise was conducted with Kyrgyzstan in 2002, counter-terrorism has become a powerful vector for the internationalisation of the PLA. According to the US Department of Defence's most recent report to Congress on China's military power, more than a third of the PLA's international joint exercises conducted in the past five years dealt with terrorism scenarios.⁵⁴

The central focus of joint exercises has been on border security, specifically along China's north-western frontier. China's largest joint exercises have been the annual Peace Mission exercises held under the banner of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. The 2014 Peace Mission, held in Chinese Inner Mongolia, involved 7,000 troops retaking a city seized by a terrorist organisation equipped with air power and armoured forces.⁵⁵ Such practices show that terrorism is not the only concern in China's CT joint exercises in the SCO framework: there is political signaling, diplomatic considerations vis-à-vis Russia and Central Asia, the PLA's training needs, and other goals. Indian military analysts have noted that CT exercises with

the PLA were more "symbolic than substantial" and aimed mostly at building trust.⁵⁶

But there is no doubt that these exercises on land provide valuable operational lessons for the Chinese military in case of future deployment on counter-terrorist missions. In particular, China's military relationship with Pakistan has had a very strong counter-terrorism component for more than a decade, with an emphasis on rapid reaction by Special Forces, and culminating last year in a seven-week-long joint training programme near Islamabad.⁵⁷ Indeed, many exercises have provided occasions to train Special Forces units in different environments.

In January 2016, the PLA Navy Marine corps took part in a training exercise that simulated a hostage rescue operation in the Gobi desert during the winter season – far away from Taiwan and the South China Sea, which are supposed to be its main theatre of operations.⁵⁸ In July 2016, commando units of the PAP took part, for the third time, in tactical drills with the Russian National Guard.⁵⁹ According to a description of these ongoing changes by expert Li Wei from CICIR, "at the moment the Special Forces are prepared for international anti-terrorism operations, but such operations must acquire permission from the [other] country".⁶⁰

But the military aspects of international counter-terrorism cooperation are not limited to China's northern and western borders. The Chinese military has regular exchanges with Thailand and Indonesia. The last exercise with Indonesia involved airborne troops of the PLA Air Force practicing anti-terrorism tactics, including parachuting.⁶¹ The Chinese Navy has held three exercises with its Thai counterpart, the latest in May 2016, involving its Marine Corps.⁶² The PLA Navy had another occasion to train on a terrorism scenario as part of a multinational coalition in May 2016 when a PLA guided missile destroyer under the command of the Brunei Navy practiced the release of a hijacked ship as part of the ASEAN Defence Minister's Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus) Maritime Security and Counter-Terrorism Exercise.⁶³

56 Ajay Sura, "India-China joint military exercise on 'counter-terrorism' on Pakistan border in November", the *Times of India*, 2 July 2014, available at <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/India-China-joint-military-exercise-on-counter-terrorism-on-Pakistan-border-in-November/articleshow/37650954.cms>.

57 "Pakistan, China to continue working against terror", *Dawn*, 16 September 2015, <http://www.dawn.com/news/1207284>.

58 "Marine Corps conducts first live-fire drills in the desert", *China Daily*, 26 January 2016, available at www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2016-01/26/content_23245627.htm.

59 "China, Russia launch joint anti-terror exercises", *China Military News*, 4 July 2016, available at http://english.chinamil.com.cn/news-channels/china-military-news/2016-07/04/content_7132187.htm.

60 "China's Special Forces need to extend overseas reach to safeguard interests, military mouthpiece says", *South China Morning Post*, 14 August 2016, available at <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2003775/chinas-special-forces-need-extend-overseas-reach>.

61 "Chinese, Indonesian airborne forces hold joint anti-terror drill", *China Military Online*, 27 October 2014, available at http://eng.mod.gov.cn/DefenseNews/2014-10/27/content_4547351.htm.

62 "China, Thailand start military exercise", *Xinhua News Agency*, 21 May 2016, available at http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-05/21/c_135377888.htm.

63 "ADMM-Plus counter-terrorism joint exercise kicks off in Brunei", *China Military Online*, 4 May 2016, available at http://english.chinamil.com.cn/news-channels/china-military-news/2016-05/04/content_7035127.htm.

52 "Foreign Minister Wang Yi meets the press", Chinese Foreign Ministry, 9 March 2016, available at http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1346238.shtml.

53 Yang Yingjie, "Stranded Chinese workers evacuated in Iraq", *Global Times*, 27 June 2014, available at <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/867741.shtml>.

54 "Annual Report to Congress, Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2016, Office of the Secretary of Defense, May 2016, pp. 105-106.

55 Daniel Urchik, "Looking towards the SCO Peace Mission 2016", *RealClearDefense*, 26 July 2016, available at: http://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2016/07/26/looking_towards_the_sco_peace_mission_2016_109623.html.

China's counter-terror training partners (2002-2016)



The PLA's counter-terrorist diplomacy

The PLA is also developing a singular role in the diplomatic aspects of counter-terrorism, promoting intelligence and border control cooperation, and thus circumventing the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. For example it was Admiral Sun Jianguo, deputy chief of staff of the PLA, who expressed China's "hopes to carry out intelligence cooperation with France on the issue of fighting terrorism" on the sidelines of a meeting in Singapore in June 2016.⁶⁴

In February 2016, the Chinese military launched a highly unusual diplomatic initiative. Chief of General Staff of the PLA Fang Fenghui traveled to Afghanistan and Tajikistan to promote the idea of counter-terrorism cooperation in a quadrilateral format – with these two countries, plus

Pakistan.⁶⁵ The initiative reflects China's concerns regarding the rise of ISIS in Afghanistan – an organisation that publicly threatens China and aims at geographical expansion. It also reflects the ongoing securitisation of China's policy towards Tajikistan, a country in which the security situation has deteriorated considerably since 2015 – the banning of the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan re-opened the wounds of the civil war. The scholar Long Xingchun from the Charhar Institute defends the idea of working in a quadrilateral format outside the SCO, and without Russia, by emphasising the flexibility of "smaller groups".⁶⁶

The initiative shows the PLA's clear dissatisfaction with existing cooperation mechanisms. Until now, cooperation has taken place multilaterally through the Tashkent-

⁶⁴ "China says it hopes for counter-terror intelligence sharing with France", *Reuters*, 5 June 2016, available at <http://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-china-france-security-idUKKCNoYR04B>.

⁶⁵ "China eyes deeper military ties with Afghanistan", *Reuters*, 20 April 2016, available at <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-afghanistan-idUSKCN0X105T>.

⁶⁶ Long Xingchun, "Smaller groups can better tackle terror", *Global Times*, 7 April 2016, available at <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/977634.shtml>.

based Counter-Terrorism Cooperation Centre under the SCO, and bilaterally with countries in Greater Central Asia. Initial information on this new and still-evolving mechanism suggests that it will focus on strengthened border controls.⁶⁷ Dissatisfaction with current mechanisms is shared by the State Council, with Chinese diplomacy at the 2015 SCO summit in Zhengzhou stressing the need to “increase coordination and communication in implementing the Border Control Cooperation Agreement among SCO members and speed up the signing of the anti-extremism convention”.⁶⁸

The PLA is also active in building the military anti-terrorism capacities of other countries through China’s defence missions abroad, in the form of military assistance and arms transfers (including sales and donations). This is particularly true in Africa.⁶⁹ China is emerging as an important partner of Nigeria in its military operations against Boko Haram.

In Lagos in 2014, Premier Li Keqiang promised to provide “any useful information acquired by China’s satellites and intelligence services” to assist Nigeria in the fight against Boko Haram.⁷⁰ The Nigerian Defence Ministry subsequently announced that an intelligence-sharing agreement had been concluded in December 2015.⁷¹ In 2016, video footage showed a Nigerian drone strike against a suspected Boko Haram base – the UAV was a Rainbow CH-3 drone of Chinese origin.⁷² Nigerian Foreign Minister Geoffery Onyeama has singled out China’s military assistance – among support from other partners – in describing progress made in re-establishing control over territory seized by Boko Haram in 2016.⁷³

Cooperation with other states where Boko Haram has a presence is less developed. However, the kidnapping of Chinese nationals in May 2014 has resulted in counter-terrorism cooperation gaining prominence on China’s bilateral agenda with Cameroon – especially in the form of arms transfers, with leading state-owned Chinese arms exporters positioning themselves as partners of Cameroon’s government.⁷⁴

67 Various interviews, Beijing, April 2016.

68 “Remarks by H.E. Li Keqiang Premier of the State Council of the People’s Republic of China at the Extended Session of the 14th Meeting of The Council of Heads of Government of Member States of The Shanghai Cooperation Organization”, 15 December 2015, *Chinese Foreign Ministry*, available at http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/zvjh_665391/t1328507.shtml.

69 Mathieu Duchâtel, Manuel Lafont-Rapnouil and Richard Gowan, “Into Africa: China’s Global Security Shift”, the European Council on Foreign Relations, June 2016, available at http://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/into_africa_chinas_global_security_shift.

70 “China pledges help to Nigeria’s hunt for Boko Haram militants”, *South China Morning Post*, 9 May 2014, available at <http://www.scmp.com/news/china-insider/article/1507498/china-pledges-help-nigerias-hunt-boko-haram-militants>.

71 “China Says Ready to Assist Nigeria in Fight Against Boko Haram”, *Bloomberg*, 10 December 2015, available at <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-12-10/china-says-ready-to-assist-nigeria-in-fight-against-boko-haram>.

72 “A fast growing club: Countries that use drones for killing by remote control”, *Los Angeles Times*, 22 February 2016, available at <http://www.latimes.com/world/africa/la-fg-drone-proliferation-2-20160222-story.html>.

73 “To Finish Off Boko Haram, FG Looks to China for More Weapons”, *This Day*, 13 May 2016, available at <http://www.thisdaylive.com/index.php/2016/05/13/to-finish-off-boko-haram-fg-looks-to-china-for-more-weapons/>.

74 “Coopération militaire: la Chine offre des armes au Cameroun”, *Camerpost*, 24 October 2014, available at <http://www.camerpost.com/cooperation-militaire-la-chine-offre-des-armes-au-cameroun-24102014/>, and “Lutte contre Boko Haram : la Chine veut vendre des armes au Cameroun”, *Camnews24*, 8 August 2015, available at: <http://www.camnews24.com/fr/economie/cameroun/49287-lutte-contre-boko-haram-la-chine-veut-vendre-des-armes-au-cameroun>.

China’s overtures to the EU on terrorism

As China explores new options in its response to terrorist risks overseas, what are the implications for Europe? Europe is a priority target for the so-called Islamic State and other Islamic terrorist organisations. According to Europol, the number of jihadist attacks in the EU increased from four in 2014 to 17 in 2015, leading to 150 deaths in 2015.⁷⁵

Europe needs international cooperation, but to what extent would a cooperative relationship with China benefit European security? The question is rarely approached from this angle for two reasons. First, China is not a priority partner on counter-terrorism compared to the US, countries in the Middle East and North Africa, Russia, India and Pakistan, because China is neither a source of terrorist threats nor yet a leading international actor on counter-terrorism. China can provide only a very limited amount of information on foreign fighters, which is Europe’s main concern. According to sources in Europe, existing channels are sufficient for one-off intelligence sharing when there is an immediate shared interest. Second, the diplomatic dynamic is shaped by Chinese initiatives, not European ones. The counter-terrorism dossier represents a rare example of China taking the initiative to develop security cooperation with Europe.

China has established counter-terrorism dialogues at various levels with France, Germany and the United Kingdom. Terrorism is also addressed in less specific formats, such as strategic dialogues on foreign policy. European participants note that it remains difficult to go beyond an exchange of general geopolitical assessments regarding terrorist risks and their causes. It is also argued in Europe that China has a very formalist approach to dialogue on terrorism: the format, the participants and the very fact that the dialogue takes place appear to take precedence over the content of the exchange.⁷⁶

Optimists suggest that this is a “phase of learning about our respective security cultures”. For them, engagement aims to create common ground on which to prepare substantive cooperation. This could occur at a later stage, when China adjusts its policies or when common threats rise to a level of importance and urgency that makes normative and political differences irrelevant. So far the most concrete outcome of these dialogues has been the listing by the Home Office in the UK of the Turkistan Islamic Party/ETIM as a proscribed international terrorist groups in July 2016; the announcement notes that the group operates in China, Central Asia, South Asia and Syria, with headquarters in Pakistan.⁷⁷

China has also requested the establishment of a dialogue on terrorism with the EU, so far without success. Meng

75 “European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report”, *Europol*, 20 July 2016, available at <https://www.europol.europa.eu/content/european-union-terrorism-situation-and-trend-report-te-sat-2016>.

76 Author’s interviews in European capitals, 2016.

77 “Proscribed Terrorist Organisations”, UK Home Office, 15 July 2016, available at https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/538297/20160715-Proscription-website-update.pdf.

Jianzhu, who is also the secretary of the Central and Legal Affairs Commission of the CCP, the body that oversees the Public Security Ministry, was in Brussels in May 2016 for talks with the EU about this request. The European Commission's paper on Chinese strategy states that the EU "should be open to cooperation with China on counter-terrorism subject to mutually agreed terms including a robust rule of law and human rights component".⁷⁸ The text makes clear that the EU is still searching for "common ground" with China on the issue.

The position in Brussels is that counter-terrorism discussions can easily take place in existing formats, such as the dialogue on defence and security, the annual strategic dialogue, the EU-China summit or the human rights dialogue. In fact, the EU – like China – tends to focus on domestic terrorism in China and does not treat threats in third countries as a separate matter. Another obstacle in Europe is institutional. Europol, the EU's law enforcement agency that assists member states in their fight against terrorism, has very strict restrictions on international cooperation and is thus not an interlocutor for China.⁷⁹

The crucial question is whether it is possible to distinguish domestic terrorism and CT in China from threats in third countries. China's prime reason for engaging Europe on terrorism remains domestic. The risk of attacks on Chinese soil, in or outside Xinjiang, determines China's approach to international cooperation much more than risks to which Chinese nationals are exposed overseas.

China has not been able to dispel the sense that cooperation requests really aim at obtaining an endorsement of Chinese policies against domestic terrorism. Intertwined with this problem is the fact that China frequently requests the extradition of Uyghur militants operating in Europe on charges of terrorism without providing compelling evidence that these individuals are not just political militants. This is particularly true in Germany – the World Uyghur Congress is headquartered in Munich – but also applies to other European countries. This started after the 9/11 attacks and it appears that trust with European security services was damaged by these requests. In that sense, China's "three evils" terminology is damaging its cooperation with Europe. By prioritising the endorsement of its domestic approach to terrorist risk and the wider agenda of struggling against the Uyghur separatist movement, China decreases the chance that meaningful cooperation can emerge on common threats in third countries.

As a result, Chinese analysts are very pessimistic regarding the prospects for doing more with Europe. According to experts at China's Public Security Ministry, the goal of sharing intelligence with international partners on terrorist activities of East Turkestan pro-independence forces faces numerous obstacles because "the truth is that for specific national interests or goals, many countries are reluctant

⁷⁸ "Joint communication to the European Parliament and the Council, Elements for a new strategy on China", High Representation of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, 22 June 2016, available at http://ec.europa.eu/delegations/china/press_corner/all_news/news/2016/2016062204_en.htm.

⁷⁹ Author's interviews in European capitals, 2016.

to share intelligence with China".⁸⁰ In a media interview, Ji Zhiye, the director of CICIR – a Chinese international relations think tank – argues that it is almost "impossible" that the West will give up its "double standards" on China, which, in his view, represent the most important obstacle to greater intelligence cooperation on terrorism issues.⁸¹

Conclusion

The ongoing militarisation of China's response to international terrorism has the potential to accelerate if Chinese nationals are victims of new attacks overseas. An unprecedented conjunction of factors will shape the future choices of Chinese leaders with regards to the use of military power overseas: a new legal framework, a clear doctrine to protect Chinese nationals overseas, and the capacity of the PLA to carry out operations far away from Chinese shores. The progress of military cooperation within the SCO framework is also an important development. At the same time, the traditional brakes on China's involvement in international security affairs – the non-interference principle, the practice of cautiousness internationally, Deng Xiaoping's doctrine to avoid "taking the lead" (决不当头) – have all been weakened under Xi Jinping, who supports greater international involvement and tends to see military power as a foreign policy tool.

China will not easily cross the major threshold that separates using military power on operations other than war – such as evacuations, protective patrols, peacekeeping, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief – and joining a multinational coalition striking a terrorist organisation overseas or sending airborne units abroad to free hostages, whether in unilateral operations or with Pakistan or Nigeria. The course of future crises will determine the response of China's leaders and could precipitate dramatic changes, but the overall trend is already crystal clear. While China's traditional approach to international terrorism was forged around its criticism of the United States' excessively militarised response, China now appears to be moving incrementally in the direction of the US model, increasing the possibility that it might ultimately embark on a global program of military interventions, targeted assassinations and drone strikes. The lessons Beijing has drawn from the chaos in the Middle East are likely to prevent such an extreme scenario, but China may still incorporate some elements of US tactics into its military toolbox in the future. In turn, these evolving practices from China will entail new risks for Chinese nationals overseas.

The EU and member states facing severe terrorist threats have no need to prioritise counter-terrorism cooperation with China. China tends to use dialogues with Europe as photo opportunities to bolster support for its counter-terrorism policies at home, but the real stake for Europe is in confronting risks to Europeans at home and abroad. This has to be the starting point of any CT diplomacy involving China, and it means that China must consider what it has to

⁸⁰ Li Benxian et al, op.cit.

⁸¹ Jiao Tou, "中国反恐十年：反恐国际合作困难重重", *M4.cn*, 8 August 2014, available at <http://opinion.m4.cn/2014-08/1240875.shtml>.

offer. This is not to deny that China currently faces structural risks of terrorist attacks domestically. However, the UK's advocacy of policies such as the counter-radicalisation "prevent" initiative in China, and the EU's values-driven approach addressing how China combats terrorism at home, are separate to cooperation against common threats emanating from third countries.

For this reason, a policy of cautious engagement seems to be in Europe's best interests at the moment. As China is increasingly becoming an international military actor in counter-terrorism initiatives, it cannot be ignored. It therefore makes sense for the EU to deepen its exchanges with China. Europe has an interest in maintaining open channels and strengthening its understanding of changes and debates within China. While there is no need for Europe to take the lead, it is nonetheless important to come to terms with this new reality - that the militarisation of China's CT strategy overseas will increasingly affect the environment in which international terrorist organisations prepare their operations.

This raises two political questions for Europe. The first is how to isolate common security interests in third states from issues of obvious divergence and normative differences. This is a classic case of deciding to set aside differences to focus on common ground. With this, the ball is in China's court – Chinese diplomacy needs to be more narrowly focused on common threats in third countries to be persuasive. The second question is how to shape Chinese policies on counter-terrorism overseas. Despite its calls for dialogue and cooperation, China is in fact pursuing its own course, driven by the redefinition of its security doctrine to include the protection of its nationals overseas. China has much better partners than Europe; it already enjoys strong cooperation with Russia, Pakistan, and Nigeria, and state-owned Chinese companies are increasingly exporting armed combat drones to these partners. If the EU fails to cautiously engage, it risks being a passive observer of developments that affect its own security.

It is tempting to address counter-terrorism cooperation with China through peripheral issues. But European militaries have a strategic interest in burden-sharing with the PLA during future multinational coalitions against terrorist organisations. Getting China to be more active in the struggle against the trafficking of small arms and light weapons, and non-combat evacuation missions, are issues with clear links to the counter-terrorism agenda. Some officials in Brussels think that the most promising area for counter-terrorism cooperation is in promoting international crisis management and global governance. However, the developments described in the above analysis show that there is space to include four items more directly connected with the terrorist threat on Europe's diplomatic agenda with China.

Recommendations

Set the conditions of cooperation

The EU should launch discussions with the PLA about the conditions under which China could join military strikes against the Islamic State, in the context of the new anti-terrorism law and ongoing debates in China regarding the use of military power overseas. This discussion should not be left to bilateral Chinese-Russian talks. The EU should make use of the upcoming defence and security dialogue with China. EU member states involved in military action against the Islamic State should also pursue such discussions through their military missions in Beijing.

Set clear expectations

The EU should make clear it expects a less politicised approach from China at the UN sanctions committee: one focused on the global terror threat, rather than the Xinjiang issue and China's support for Pakistan. The UN sanctions committee is the appropriate channel for sharing analysis on foreign fighters and produces the list that is the key instrument to calibrate the international response to terrorism. European countries at the UN Security Council (France, the United Kingdom, Spain in 2016, Sweden in 2017-2018, Italy in 2017 and the Netherlands in 2018) should make use of their privileged position at the UN to push the issue.

Approach capacity-building as an area of mutual interest

The EU and member states should look for areas in which they can complement China in capacity-building efforts in third states. China's military assistance to third countries is not documented in detail; part of it proceeds through donations of military equipment, and information regarding training and exchanges is not centralised. Europe and China should brief each other on their bilateral CT initiatives through EU delegations and Chinese embassies in third countries. The element of competition, with regards to transfers of counter-terrorism military and safety equipment to third states, cannot be ignored – but there are greater security issues that should be given priority.

Don't underestimate what China can offer

China's contribution to the security of key transport infrastructure, especially aviation security, is a promising area for exchange. Many developing countries need to upgrade their safety standards. China has world-class airport security and can play a capacity-building role through ICAO and/or bilateral diplomacy to the benefit of the international community.

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