Turkey, Terrorism, and the Global Proxy War

While the world’s attention has been fixed on France in the wake of the Charlie Hebdo killings, the subsequent manhunt, and the political fallout from the incident, a number of important news items have quietly been pushed off the front pages of the world’s major newspapers, and out of the lead segments of television news programs all over the globe. In Nigeria, Boko Haram reemerges with a vengeance, committing one of the worst atrocities in the recent history of the region. In Syria and Iraq, the war against the Islamic State continues unabated. In Greece, an all-important election that could have dire implications for the future of the European Union is set to take place.

And quietly, with almost no fanfare from international media, reports surfaced from China indicating that Chinese authorities had arrested at least ten Turkish suspects alleged to have organized and facilitated the illegal border crossings of a number of Uighur [Muslim ethnic group in Western China] extremists. It has further been revealed that the Uighur extremists were planning to travel to Syria, Afghanistan, and Pakistan to train and fight with fellow jihadis.

While the details of the investigation have not been fully revealed as yet, the incident points to a much larger issue than simply a few Turks being involved in document forgery and illegal immigration. Rather, the story is still further evidence of a well-funded, well-organized international terror network operated and/or facilitated by the Turkish government and Turkish intelligence. From the hosting of extremist fighters along the Syrian border to providing material support to terrorists in China, Turkey has placed itself at the center of an international terror war aimed at countries that oppose NATO and stand in the way of the Neo-Ottoman vision that President Erdogan and Prime Minister Davutoglu have for Turkey.

What We Know and Why It Matters

According to the Turkish foreign ministry, the ten Turkish citizens were arrested in Shanghai on November 17, 2014 for facilitating illegal immigration. While the formal charges against them range from forging documents to actually aiding illegal migration, it is the larger question of international terrorism that lurks beneath the surface. Because of course, as the evidence seems to indicate, these Uighur immigrants were not merely traveling to see loved ones in another country. On the contrary, they were likely part of a previously documented trend of Uighur extremists traveling to the Middle East to train and fight with the Islamic State or other terror groups.

In fact, precisely this trend was exposed two months earlier in September 2014 when Reuters reported that Beijing formally accused militant Uighurs from Xinjiang of having traveled to Islamic State-controlled territory to receive training. Further corroborating these accusations, the Jakarta Post of Indonesia reported that four Chinese Uighur jihadists had been arrested in Indonesia after having travelled from Xinjiang through Malaysia. Other, similar reports have also surfaced in recent months, painting a picture of a concerted campaign to help Uighur extremists travel throughout Asia, communicating and collaborating with transnational terror groups such as IS.

Now, with these latest revelations regarding Turkish nationals being involved in the trafficking of extremists, it seems an invaluable piece of the terrorist transit infrastructure has been exposed. The lingering question of course remains: Why?
Why would Turkey—a country that has long sought to play both sides of the East-West divide (fast becoming a NATO-BRICS/SCO divide)—seek to destabilize China in this way? Why risk a potentially lucrative partnership with Beijing to help a radical fringe Islamist movement in Xinjiang?

**Turkey’s Ottoman Revanchism**

While Ankara’s policy of fomenting regional conflict through terrorism might seem counter-intuitive given Turkey’s economic and political interests today, and the importance of positive relations with non-Western countries, the policy actually makes perfect sense if seen from the Neo-Ottoman perspective.

Perhaps here it is critical to define “Neo-Ottoman” as simply the term used to describe the desire of Turkey’s current government to reunify the Turkic peoples spread from Istanbul, through Central Asia, and into Western China. As such, Erdogan and Davutoglu see the Xinjiang jihadis of the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM aka “The Chinese Taliban”) and similar groups, not as Chinese terrorists, but as Turkey’s lost children in desperate need of reunion with their historic homeland. Though of course such thinking smacks of neocolonialism, it is not entirely unpopular in Turkey, especially with the more conservative base of Erdogan’s support.

The political marketability of Turkish revanchism is critical to understanding why it is being pursued. Erdogan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP) have galvanized a wide segment of the population that has become ever more skeptical of the liberalism of the West, and its perceived pernicious effects on Turkish society. In turn this stokes a militaristic and aggressive foreign policy posture as Erdogan trades in the currency of “respect” and “honor.” As The Atlantic reported in 2013:

> But beyond foreign policy there lies a much more significant domestic transformation, one that is also driven by history. In that same speech, the foreign minister spoke of the need for a “great restoration” where “we need to embrace fully the ancient values we have lost.” Praising the historic bonds that connected the peoples of Turkey over the “new identities that were thrust upon us in the modern era,” Davutoglu maintained that the road to Turkey’s progress lies in its past - an assertion that has terrified the government’s detractors enough for them to make it a losing political platform each new election.

But when one considers precisely which countries and which peoples are affected by this Turkish revanchist thinking, the foreign policy fingerprints of the West—the US specifically—immediately become apparent.

**The West Writes the Policy, Turkey Does the Dirty Work**

The more one looks at a map of the “Turkic peoples,” the more obvious it becomes that Turkish revanchism—or Neo-Ottomanism—is a foreign policy that is perfectly aligned with the US as its main targets are Russia and China. Indeed, such a conclusion becomes unavoidable when one considers that the Turkic peoples cut a wide swath across both Russian and Chinese spheres of influence. From the former Soviet Republics of Central Asia to Xinjiang in Western China, the Turkic population becomes a massive hotbed of potential terrorism, secessionism, and destabilization. Moreover, as the US formally exits Afghanistan (remaining informally in a variety of capacities, of course), its ability to directly influence and/or control events on the ground in Central Asia is diminished considerably.

The US has long supported terrorist groups throughout the Caucasus region as a means of destabilizing and otherwise controlling Russia, and stifling its political and economic development. The same is true in Xinjiang, China where the US has, through the National Endowment for Democracy and a number of other “democracy promotion NGOs,” financially and politically supported Uighur separatist groups for years. However, now that Turkey has become a regional player looking to assert its own hegemony, Washington seems to be perfectly content to allow precisely that strategy to play out to the detriment of Russia and China.

And perhaps a good indicator of precisely this thinking from the US comes in the fact that repeated, large-scale terror attacks in Xinjiang, and Western China generally, go almost unmentioned by the Western media. For instance, in May 2014, 31 Chinese civilians were killed in a terror attack on a market in Xinjiang. Almost triple the body count of the Charlie Hebdo killings, but barely a mention in the West. This is undoubtedly due to the fact that the West must always present China as the aggressor, never the victim of terrorism. Beyond double-standards, such hypocrisy illustrates the insidiously cynical mindset of Western “planners” who see any destabilization of China as a net gain for their hegemony.

**The US Wins When China and Russia Lose**
Ultimately it is geopolitics and economics that is dictating the Western (and by extension, Turkish) foreign policy agenda in Central Asia and China. It is an attempt to stifle the economic development of both Russia and China, and prevent the two powers from continuing on their dual paths of cooperation and regional integration. Seen in this way, Turkey becomes a giant wedge used to keep Russia and China apart, but also to keep China and Europe apart. There is much wizardry taking place behind the proverbial curtain.

In the context of China, Washington’s primary objective is to prevent it from expanding the infrastructure of its economic development not only in Asia, but especially to Europe. Primary among the Chinese grand projects is the ‘New Silk Road’ – an ambitious project that would link China and Europe via land using high-speed trains, new airports, and a vast distribution network. Such a development would transform global trade as China would no longer be forced to rely almost entirely on commercial shipping, a sphere dominated by the naval power and influence of the US.

A key linchpin in the New Silk Road is the western Chinese city of Urumqi, capital of Xinjiang province. As Duan Zixin, general manager of the Xinjiang Airport Group explained:

“We believe the new international airport in the regional capital of Urumqi will be operational by 2020, and will become one of the most influential aviation hubs in Central Asia... Our focus is to launch new routes connecting Xinjiang with key trade centers in Central Asia, East Asia, and Europe. It will be a Silk Road in the air.”

The expansion of airports, combined with the proposal to use Urumqi as a rail hub on the New Silk Road distribution network, has thrust Xinjiang into the center of China’s plans for global economic expansion. It is precisely this fact that has made the destabilization of Xinjiang a top priority for the US and its regional ally Turkey. By financing, training, and providing material support to ETIM and other extremist groups in the region, the West hopes to make Xinjiang not viable for economic development, thereby derailing China’s plans.

Similarly, Russia has begun implementing its major plans in Central Asia, specifically with the establishment and expansion of the Eurasian Economic Union – a regional economic union that includes Russia, Kazakhstan, Belarus, and Armenia, with Kyrgyzstan set to join this year, and Tajikistan having expressed interest as well. Considering the geographic immensity of the area covered by the EEU, one cannot help but see it as fundamental to the success of China’s ‘New Silk Road’. In fact, both Russian and Chinese planners have long since recognized this natural partnership and mutually beneficial development trajectory.

Recent massive energy contracts signed between Russia and China, including commitments to invest large sums in pipeline infrastructure development both in the west – where the Altai Pipeline not so coincidentally will terminate in Xinjiang – and the east, have made Washington increasingly nervous. Naturally, the US sees the potential inherent in such cooperation which ultimately could make even Europe an unreliable ally for the US; it will do anything it can to prevent Russia-China cooperation from being fully realized.

And so, Turkey is given more or less free rein by the West to pursue its Neo-Ottoman strategy using the same tried and true methods of the US: sponsoring terrorism, fomenting civil war, and breeding chaos for the purposes of ‘crisis management.’ This has led to countless deaths in Syria, and undeniably will lead to more in the future. It has created divisions and conflict in the Middle East, yet another net gain for the US and its closest regional allies, Israel and Turkey. It puts Russia and China directly in the crosshairs of the Empire. And, it would seem, that has always been the goal.

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