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CHINA UNDER THREAT

Uighur group poses biggest terror threat to Olympics

Muslim extremists from China's Uighur region have been trained by Al-Qaeda

By Rohan Gunaratna

Terrorism is the most serious threat to the Beijing Olympics, which begin on Friday.

Since the Black September organisation attack targeting Israeli athletes in the Munich Olympics in 1972, governments around the world have developed robust measures to protect the Olympic Games.

An Olympic Command Centre supported by an Olympic Security Committee was formed to implement the security strategy to protect the international venues which host the Olympics.

As is the tradition, the Olympic Security Committee has requested governments to post their representatives to Beijing to assess the threat to their Olympic teams as well as to the Games themselves.

Most governments have posted or assigned representatives from their security and intelligence services. Their primary focus is on the terrorist threat to their athletes as well as their VIPs.

The Olympic Security Committee in Beijing perceives a terrorist threat to the Olympic Games from four groups. Based on several studies conducted by the Chinese government, the Chinese security and intelligence community believes the threat comes from the following groups:

- Al-Qaeda
- East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM)
- Tibetan Liberation Organisation
- Falungong sect.

Of these groups, the pre-eminent threat to the Beijing Olympics stems from ETIM, which is located in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (Fata) of Pakistan.

The so-called Turkistan Islamic Party, which recently released a video calling for attacks in China during the Olympic Games, is just another name used by ETIM, which learnt from Al-Qaeda how to make propaganda videos.

Muslims from the Uighur region have travelled to Pakistan and Central Asia for terrorist and extremist training, where they have been exposed to the global jihad movement. For example, the two Uighur women involved in the March 18 attack on China Southern Airlines flight CZ6901 were controlled by a Pakistani militant group.

According to Chinese security officials, the 18-year-old Uighur girl, Turdi Guzalinur, who was supported by another Uighur girl in that operation, attempted to set fire to the aircraft, as it flew from Urumqi to Beijing, by burning fabric inside a washroom. She was stopped in time and the flight was diverted to Lanzhou.

The terrorist groups in South-east Asia do not pose a threat to the Beijing Olympics. The Abu Sayyaf group and Jemaah Islamiyah are strong nationally but cannot strike in North-east Asia.

Similarly, none of the Middle Eastern groups poses a threat to the Beijing Olympics.

The threat to the Olympics from the Tibetan Liberation Organisation and Falungong is small compared with the threat from ETIM.

ETIM's strategy

In contemporary times, Muslim extremists of the Uighur region of China have been demanding a separate Islamic republic.

Beginning in the early 1980s, a number of Uighur nationalist groups were founded with the goal of establishing an independent state of East Turkestan. The most resilient of the groups established is ETIM, which employs a two-fold strategy.

The first is to create a network of home-grown cells in China. By investing in anti-Chinese propaganda, ETIM plans to indoctrinate the Uighurs in Xinjiang and elsewhere in China, and to attack Chinese government interests globally.

The second strategy is to create dedicated ETIM units to infiltrate China and attack Chinese government targets in Xinjiang and elsewhere. But attacking high-value, strategic and symbolic targets such as the Beijing Olympics will give it even more mileage.

ETIM base in Pakistan

The Taleban, the ruling regime in Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001, wanted to create the ideal Muslim community in the world. The Taleban, therefore, invited Islamic movements worldwide to get their constituents to go to Afghanistan to build the perfect Muslim community.

ETIM arranged for the travel of Uighurs from Xinjiang province to Afghanistan. In the White Mountains of Afghanistan near Jalalabad and the Pakistan border, the group built a village exclusively for the Uighurs.

In addition to a few hundred cadres trained in Xinjiang, ETIM had about 900 to 1,000 Uighurs trained in camps in Afghanistan prior to 2001. They were mainly trained in Kandahar and Mazar-e-Sharif in basic military techniques, including weapons handling and guerilla warfare tactics.

Although some reports claim that the Chinese authorities are playing up the threat of ETIM to justify their policy of quashing dissent in Xinjiang, the evidence that the group trained in Afghanistan and Pakistan is overwhelming.

Three dozen ETIM members, including those trained by Al-Qaeda, were detained in Afghanistan and Pakistan after the United States-led coalition's intervention in October 2001.

Videos and photographs of group members armed with AK-47 assault rifles, automatic rifles, machine guns, dynamite and incendiary devices were recovered. Safe houses in Afghanistan showed that they were engaged in the production of home-made bombs.

Today, the ETIM headquarters are located in Mir Ali, North Waziristan, Fata, along the 2,450km-long rugged border separating Afghanistan and Pakistan. Fata has emerged as an international sanctuary for global and local jihadists.

The numerical strength of ETIM in Fata and its adjacent province of North West Frontier Province (NWFP) is fewer than 40. However, the group is a lethal one for three main reasons.

First, although ETIM was established to create an independent Islamic state in Xinjiang, its avowed goal has changed in the last five years.

Under the influence of Al-Qaeda, it began to believe in the global jihad agenda. Today, the group follows the philosophy of Al-Qaeda and respects Osama bin Laden. Such groups that believe in the global jihad

agenda do not confine their targets to the territories that they seek to control. ETIM has become like Al-Qaeda: It presents a threat to Chinese as well as to Western targets worldwide.

Second, ETIM is integrated with the Islamic Jihad Union (IJU), a group under the direct influence of Al-Qaeda. IJU has attacked targets both in Uzbekistan and in Germany. IJU and ETIM have been trained by Al-Qaeda to conduct mass fatality attacks using home-made explosives. Their favoured model of attack is suicide operations.

Third, the IJU and ETIM operating in Fata are protected by Pakistani Taleban leaders. With the Afghan Taleban under Mullah Omar declining in strength, the Pakistani Taleban groups located in Fata and NWFP have become prominent.

Many of the Pakistani Taleban leaders have come together to form a platform for cooperation - the Tareek-e-Taleban (TTP). While IJU protects ETIM, the larger umbrella of protection for both IJU and ETIM is provided by TTP under Beitullah Mahsud.

The greatest threat to the Beijing Olympics thus stems from ETIM, IJU and TTP. To prevent attacks, it is essential for Beijing to develop a deeper understanding of the structures of each one of these groups, their operatives and their modus operandi.

Is Beijing ready?

Measures against domestic and international terrorism at the Olympics depend on four aspects. First, a comprehensive global database; second, access to sound and timely global intelligence; third, international partnerships; and fourth, a capable strike force.

As the leadership of ETIM is based in Pakistan's Fata, an all-weather partnership with Pakistan has helped China to fight terrorism.

Despite the reluctance of the US to assist, China is building its counter-terrorism capabilities with Israeli help. The professionalism of the Hong Kong police force, especially its security wing, has helped China.

The Chinese approach to counter terrorism is to build its own tactical and intelligence capabilities.

In addition, China has worked with regional and international partners. Since the formation in 2001 of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (a regional grouping comprising China, Russia, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan), its members have worked closely in fighting Muslim separatism and extremism.

This included setting up a regional counter-terrorism centre and an anti-terrorism centre in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, and a permanent Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure in Uzbekistan.

In 2002, citing evidence of plots to attack the US embassy and other public areas in Kyrgyzstan, the Chinese pressured the US to list ETIM as a terrorist organisation.

The Bush administration subsequently announced that it would freeze the group's assets in the US. On Sept 12, 2002, ETIM was listed as a terrorist organisation by the US Treasury Department.

China also pushed for the inclusion of the group on the UN list of global terrorist organisations on Sept 11, 2002, and put three identified terrorists on Interpol red notices. The Chinese government claimed then that ETIM had killed 166 people and injured 440.

Whatever the propaganda war Beijing is perceived to be playing, ETIM's capability to strike China should not be underestimated.

In the last five years, with Al-Qaeda training the group's members both in terrorist tactics and the conduct of propaganda, ETIM has come to resemble Al-Qaeda.

In the coming months and years, it will adopt Al-Qaeda's operational practices such as suicide attacks and

the targeting of high-profile events. As Al-Qaeda's ability to operate in China is limited, it could prepare the group's teams to infiltrate and attack China.

Therefore, the principal threat to the Olympics will not come from Al-Qaeda but from ETIM. As the group's members are familiar with the operational environment, ETIM poses a much more serious threat to China than Al-Qaeda.

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