

China: Uighur separatists blamed for railway station killings

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In an indiscriminate and violent rampage on Saturday evening, eight attackers armed with long knives and meat cleavers killed 29 travellers and employees at Kunming railway station in southwestern China. More than 130 other people were injured, some critically. Police shot dead four of the assailants, detained one and subsequently arrested the other three.

No organisation has claimed responsibility, but Chinese authorities blamed the terrorist attack on Uighur separatists from the northwestern province of Xinjiang. Police claim to have found “East Turkestan” insignia and flags at the scene of the massacre, and named the leader of the attackers as Abdurehim Kurban.

President Xi Jinping denounced the attack and called for “an all-out effort to punish the terrorists.” At the same time, amid fears in ruling circles of further ethnic unrest, particularly in volatile Xinjiang province, the state-owned media appealed for calm. “Don’t turn your anger for the terrorists into hostility towards an ethnic group. This is exactly what they want,” the *People’s Daily* commented.

Beijing fears that the US and its allies could exploit separatist sentiments to fracture China. These concerns have been heightened by the events in the Ukraine, where a fascist putsch, orchestrated and backed by Washington and Berlin, has ousted a regime aligned with Russia.

Saturday’s slaughter is the worst recent incident of Uighur-related violence outside Xinjiang, where tensions between ethnic Uighurs, a Turkic-speaking, largely Muslim minority, and Han Chinese migrants from eastern China, have been high for years. In July 2009, violent protests erupted in the provincial capital of Urumqi following the deaths of two Uighur workers during a brawl inside a factory in Guangdong province.

The official death toll was 197, mainly Han Chinese.

Ethnic turmoil tensions flared again in Urumqi during September 2009 when thousands of Han Chinese demonstrated over the failure of provincial authorities to crack down on a series of syringe attacks allegedly carried out by Uighur assailants. Over the past year, violent clashes in Xinjiang, blamed by Beijing on “separatists,” have claimed more than 100 lives. The only other recent incident outside Xinjiang occurred last October when a car containing three Uighurs exploded near Beijing’s Tiananmen Square, killing the occupants and two pedestrians.

In response to last weekend’s attack, the American embassy in Beijing issued a perfunctory statement on social media, condemning the “terrible and senseless act of violence in Kunming.” The US media, which is silent when it comes to dealing with the social and political roots of terrorist attacks in the US or Europe, focussed its attention on the plight of the Uighur minority in China.

The Chinese regime certainly bears responsibility for the sharp ethnic tensions in Xinjiang, where its promotion of Han Chinese chauvinism, police-state methods and marginalisation of ethnic Uighurs has generated resentment and hostility. The Uighur population has suffered social deprivation and systematic discrimination.

However, Washington has not the slightest interest in defending the democratic and social rights of the Uighurs. Rather, it is exploiting the issue to undermine the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime in Beijing. The implicit threat is that the US could drum up a “human rights” campaign on behalf of the Uighurs, Tibetans or other ethnic or linguistic groups to intervene directly into China—as it has just done in the Ukraine.

The US State Department promotes “Uighur rights” as part of its annual, selective compendium of “human rights” issues deemed useful to US interests. American propaganda arms such as Voice of America and Radio Free Asia, which has a Uighur-language station, routinely criticise Beijing’s actions in Xinjiang.

Just as it has longstanding links with the Dalai Lama and the so-called Tibetan government in exile in India, the US has ties with various Uighur exile organisations. The US government provides annual funds via the National Endowment for Democracy, widely regarded as a CIA front organisation, to the Uighur American Association and the World Uighur Congress, based in Germany.

Both these organisations deny any connection to the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), which Beijing blames for armed attacks within China. The US State Department placed the ETIM on its list of terrorist organisations in 2002, in exchange for Chinese support for the US-led invasion of Afghanistan.

The CIA undoubtedly has connections to the ETIM and other armed Uighur groups, however, going back to the 1980s when it funded a covert war inside Afghanistan to oust the Soviet-backed regime. The ETIM had linkages to Al Qaeda, which was a CIA conduit for Islamist fighters to join the anti-Soviet jihad.

In January, the last three of 22 Uighurs held by the US at Guantánamo Bay were finally released. Having detained the men without trial for over a decade as “terrorists,” American authorities rejected Beijing’s claims that they were ETIM members and that they should be returned to China. Instead the three were sent to Slovakia—on the grounds that they would suffer abuse inside China. Exactly what assets the CIA has inside the ETIM is impossible to know, but one cannot rule out CIA involvement in encouraging separatist violence inside China.

It is no accident that in the wake of the attack at Kunming, the American media has seized on the opportunity to once again propagate the cause of “Uighur rights.” The promotion of Uighur self-determination, alongside Tibetan demands for greater autonomy, is part of the far broader strategy of the Obama administration known as the “pivot to Asia”—a diplomatic offensive and military build-up throughout the region aimed at undermining the Chinese regime.



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