



Countering terrorism: an area for EU-China cooperation?

by Mathieu Duchâtel and Alice Ekman

Ever since the release of the 2013 ‘EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation’, counter-terrorism officially features in bilateral meetings. The section on peace and security, for instance, states the need to ‘hold special consultations on issues of anti-terrorism at an appropriate time’ – and talks were indeed held at the October 2014 ASEM meeting. The EU statement released after that summit declared that China and the EU ‘reviewed the situation in the Middle East, northern Africa and the Sahel [...] and agreed to increase cooperation to counter the common threat of extremism and terrorism in these regions’.

Despite such statements, however, no concrete roadmap for bilateral cooperation in this area has yet materialised. Although normative differences continue to represent a serious obstacle to greater cooperation, they are not insurmountable given the common interests shared by both actors.

Indeed, they can be circumvented if counter-terrorism cooperation is framed as a human security issue focusing on the protection of European and Chinese nationals overseas and if elements of arms control are taken into consideration. In these two areas in particular, the

EU and China can take small steps together in order to make an effective contribution to the international fight against terrorism.

Perception gaps

Significant differences exist in the way terrorism is understood in China and the EU at a theoretical, analytical and practical level. At a theoretical level, China and the EU employ different language when referring to the threat of terrorism. Official Chinese discourse is centred on the so-called ‘three evil forces’, namely separatism, extremism and terrorism. And while in China ‘terrorism’ is perceived to be inextricably linked to the independence movement in Xinjiang, Europe considers separatism a distinct issue.

In light of the recent attacks in Europe, terrorism is increasingly understood by Europeans also in the context of protecting values, especially freedom of expression. For example, in a speech at a summit on Countering Violent Extremism at the White House, on 19 February, EU High Representative Federica Mogherini said that “security is not the only issue at stake”, and that “the terrorists in Paris and Copenhagen targeted our freedom of speech”.



At an analytical level, explanations of what motivates terrorist attacks differ greatly. Chinese analysts have traditionally blamed ‘Western interference’ in the Middle East – especially US policies – for attacks against European and American targets. Some even go as far as to suggest that they are legitimate acts of retaliation. Although the arguments of some Chinese analysts have become more nuanced of late, such assumptions – which are considered false by many in Europe – remain widespread among the general public.

Following the January 2015 attacks in Paris against *Charlie Hebdo* and a Jewish supermarket, which led to 17 fatalities, a number of Chinese editorials and opinion pieces accused the French press of being too free, lacking respect for Islam and of deliberately adding fuel to the fire. On 19 January, an op-ed in the English version of *Global Times*, a state-run newspaper, entitled ‘Free speech mania may intensify clashes’, called on Europe to ‘back off somewhat’, given that ‘it is more difficult for Muslims to change their faith than for Europe to adjust its understanding of the free speech.’

At the same time, Europe is often accused of paying insufficient attention to the terrorist threat posed by pro-Xinjiang independence groups. The Chinese 2014 White Paper on policy towards the EU, for example, specifically mentions ‘double standards on counter-terrorism’. Many in Beijing believe that attacks that take place on Chinese territory are misrepresented in Europe, with blame attributed to ethnic tensions or quotation marks used unfairly when describing ‘terrorist’ attacks. This viewpoint stood out in sharp relief after the March 2014 knife attack in Kunming train station, in which 31 people were killed and 141 injured.

Differences in action

At a practical level, China and the EU have turned to very different policies in combating terrorism. The policy debate in Europe revolves not only around increasing surveillance, but also on the key role that moderate Muslims can play in the condemnation and isolation of extremist elements, as well as on

the importance of inter-faith dialogue. Several EU member states are currently emphasising the role of credible religious voices, improving the training of imams and working with religious communities to battle extremism.

In China, there are no signs of a similar strategy emerging with regard to the Muslim Uighurs in Xinjiang (who make up around 45% of the province’s population), and several Uighur intellectuals – who would be considered moderate voices in Europe – have been jailed by the Chinese authorities. The policy debate in China often focuses more on the economic development of Xinjiang, a province which is largely propped up by state investments, so as to improve living conditions and overall levels of satisfaction. It also traditionally features, albeit to a lesser extent, affirmative action initiatives (bonus points given to minority students applying to university, exemption from the One Child Policy etc.) to help promote the integration of ethnic minorities.

Another major difference surfaces in attitudes towards foreign policy and the use of force overseas. Several EU member states have contributed to the international coalition against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in the Middle East, whereas China prefers to invoke the principle of non-interference and keep a low profile internationally. With terrorist attacks in China on the rise over the past two years, the government drafted a law at the beginning of 2015 that seeks to counter the threat by strengthening the state’s surveillance powers.

A clause of the draft enabling the Chinese administration to send forces abroad to undertake counter-terrorism missions if approved by the host nation could, at first glance, be seen as an opportunity for the EU and China to join forces in counter-terrorism operations overseas under the UN banner. But this prospect remains unlikely even if the law is passed (it is currently on hold, and the third reading of the draft is still to take place) given China’s long-standing policy of non-intervention and the fact that Beijing has, so far, firmly resisted greater involvement in the ongoing conflicts in Syria and Iraq.

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The human security dimension

All these divergences are likely to continue to shape bilateral relations between Beijing and Brussels. But in light of the proliferation of powerful terrorist groups and networks and the rise in attacks in China and Europe, both also have an interest in trying to identify a common language and shared priorities on which to base future cooperation. Despite political differences, counter-terroring terrorism is, first and foremost, about protecting the lives of civilians: a human security perspective, therefore, might help highlight possible areas of joint action.

Collective efforts to fight international terrorism seem particularly relevant today given the specific threat posed by ISIL. It is estimated that between 3,000-5,000 EU nationals have already joined the extremist group and some estimates suggest that this number could reach 10,000 by the end of the year. Several hundred Chinese nationals have also joined ISIL: according to a July 2014 estimate from China's special envoy on Middle East Affairs, Wu Sike, around 100 Chinese citizens have travelled to the Middle East for terrorist training and some have stayed on to fight. In December 2014, Chinese media claimed that there around 300 Chinese nationals currently fighting under ISIL's banner, but some foreign analysts believe that the true figure is more like 1,000. While most of these fighters are Muslim Uighurs from Xinjiang, Han Chinese from other provinces have also joined ISIL's ranks. And this phenomenon is not limited to Syria or Iraq: a senior Malaysian official quoted visiting Chinese public security officials as saying that more than 300 Uighurs had left China to join jihadist groups in Malaysia.

EU countries and China are fully aware that these terrorists represent a significant domestic threat in the event that they return. They also understand that ISIL and other terrorists groups, in addition to posing a physical danger, constitute a significant ideological threat given their capacity to attract new recruits through online propaganda and other channels.

The unprecedented presence of European and Chinese citizens among foreign fighters

in the Middle East and elsewhere (including Afghanistan and Pakistan) highlights the need to share intelligence with third countries, be it threat assessments or evaluations of security environments, as far as they concern potential European and Chinese targets. It could also mean comparing notes on particular groups (their strategies, structure, membership, operations) and on specific individuals. Such intelligence-sharing could start at a low level

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between embassy staff in third countries, but there is currently very little communication between Chinese embassies and EU delegations overseas. This represents a significant weakness, as contacts and exchanges can forestall problems and help when

crisis strikes, especially in the event of civilian evacuations.

During such evacuations, a lack of cooperation between states can prove costly. When nationals are evacuated from any country, states compete for sometimes scarce resources, such as transport or police escorts for convoys. Without prior consultation, there is a risk of zero-sum competition. At the same time, evacuations are a promising area for EU-China security cooperation. The 2011 evacuation of 36,000 Chinese nationals from Libya (during which several European countries provided logistical support), caught the attention of policymakers on both sides – but very few concrete plans have since materialised.

Terrorist threats offer additional incentives to explore the potential for such joint operations. Cooperation could start with exchanges regarding doctrine and tactics, analyses of past operations and lessons learned, and could also include contingency planning and crisis simulations. Even if this only indirectly addresses the terrorist threat, it would still represent a tangible contribution to human security.

The arms control dimension

Terrorism also acts as an incentive to strengthen exchanges and cooperation in the area of conventional arms and export controls. The attacks in France were carried out using weapons, such as AK-47 assault rifles and a rocket-propelled grenade launcher, which were



bought from an arms dealer in Brussels for less than €5,000.

The risk of attacks carried out by radicalised individuals – so called ‘lone wolves’ – is high as they are difficult to prevent. This puts arms control at the very core of any anti-terrorism strategy in Europe. As EU countries have much stricter regulations than the US with regard to the purchase of firearms, the key is to improve enforcement: for example, some 4,000 illegal weapons are seized in France each year.

This problem looms less large in China. The laws controlling firearms are extremely strict, with very few exceptions to the general prohibition of ownership by private citizens. To a large degree, this explains why terrorist attacks in China in recent years have mostly been conducted with other weapons such as knives. That said, there are occasional reports of arms being smuggled into China from Pakistan or Burma/Myanmar – and even of illegal factories manufacturing guns on Chinese soil.

The enforcement of such regulations is a domestic issue. EU-China relations in this field should instead focus on how to shape the international environment so that terrorists find it harder to gain access to illegal weapons, especially by strengthening the international regime governing transfers of conventional weaponry (in particular small arms and light weapons). The Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) is a useful instrument that Beijing should sign up to. And, even if doesn't join the ATT, China could cooperate with the EU to support capacity-building and assistance programmes in third states which lack the export control systems needed to effectively implement the Treaty.

Shared interests, practical steps

Although the EU's and China's approaches towards terrorism differ significantly, both Beijing and Brussels are well aware of the threat posed by ISIL and its affiliates. The group is seen to pose a major domestic security problem and a threat to the lives of their citizens and financial investments overseas. Europe has long represented a target for many terrorist organisations and is currently one of the top recruitment pools for ISIL. China was also listed as a target by ISIL recently and it is likely to suffer an increasing number of terrorist attacks in future perpetrated by international

terrorist organisations claiming to be acting in the ‘defence’ of Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang.

Once again, counter-terrorism could become a promising area of cooperation between the EU and China. However, distinct sensitivities and approaches, due in part to differences in their domestic political systems, prevent them from adopting a truly shared agenda. Both actors could thus start with small practical steps, outside of national territories.

For Europeans, the case for cooperation with China at the EU level requires some justification given that counter-terrorism falls within national competencies. The 2005 EU counter-terrorism strategy makes it clear that the EU sees its own role in terms of supporting and sponsoring intra-EU coordination and national initiatives. Yet the three areas mentioned above – intelligence-sharing, civilian evacuation, and arms and export control – are fields in which the Union could take the diplomatic initiative on behalf of its member states and help coordinate their efforts *vis-à-vis* China.

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