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China's is on high alert against Jihadist terrorists re-entering the country

China is on high alert against trained jihadists re-entering the country after many people arrested in police crackdowns on suspected terrorists in Xinjiang — a border region that is mostly populated by people from the Uyghur Islamic group — were found to have returned from Syria with legal visas. Apparently, jihadists are returning to China via central Asia where the intense traffic of Chinese workers engaged in the “Belt and Road Initiative” makes it easier to enter the country.

Since the second half of 2015, the Islamic State has established new strongholds in Afghanistan, Libya and on the Sinai Peninsula in north-eastern Egypt.

Beijing claims that IS has been recruiting Uyghurs from Xinjiang and blamed forces such as the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) for plotting deadly attacks within China that have claimed hundreds of lives.

Imad Moustapha, Syria's ambassador to China, said last November that an estimated 5.000 Chinese militants, mostly Uyghurs from Xinjiang, were believed to have been trained in Syria.

The Kabul-based Pajhwok Afghan News has recently reported that two Chinese militants were killed in an anti-terrorism operation in Afghanistan's northeast Badakhshan province, a region close to the border with Xinjiang. It is estimated that 21 militant groups, including ETIM, have set up training camps in the Taliban-controlled areas of Afghanistan.

According to a NATO statement released in early February, US troops had carried out air operations to strike at Taliban training facilities in Badakhshan aimed to prevent the planning and rehearsal of terrorist acts by groups including the ETIM near the border with China and Tajikistan.

Raffaello Pantucci, director of International Security Studies at the Royal United Services Institute in London, said that while Beijing needed to be aware of the potential threat posed by jihadists returning to the country, there was nothing yet to suggest that any of them actually had. “While China clearly has something to worry about given the numbers of jihadists with links to China who have fought in Syria,

Iraq or Afghanistan, it is worth pointing out that so far China has not shown any evidence of foreign fighters making it back home,” he said. “Rather, we have seen these individuals killed abroad, or launching attacks against China abroad, suggesting that it is very difficult for people to return to China to try to launch an attack”.

As part of its efforts to counter the threat of terrorism, Beijing has increased its engagement with Afghanistan, and in recent months sought to ease tensions between the war-torn country and its neighbour Pakistan.

Elenoire Laudier – *Sinologist at Ca’ Foscari University, Venice, and at Melbourne University. Senior Analyst on China at NATO Defense College Foundation.*