

International Counter Terrorism Cooperation Efforts in Handling the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM)

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Abstract: *This article aims to analyze and describe counter terrorism efforts that have been carried out through international cooperation in the handling of East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) terrorist organization. This study applies a qualitative method with secondary data collection to produce a descriptive analysis. The concepts used are terrorism and counter terrorism. The results of this study show the ETIM landscape spread across the Middle East, Central Asia, and Southeast Asia as well as international counter terrorism efforts to overcome them. One of the international counter terrorism efforts that have been carried out is through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) with the assistance of the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS).*

Keywords: *counter terrorism, East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), terrorism, Uyghur*

I. INTRODUCTION

The East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) has been categorized by the Chinese government as an ethnic separatist, terrorist and religious extremist movement which are generally combined together under the term 'the three evils'. This fact can be observed by the existence of ETIM's motivation which is driven by the separatist desire of the Uyghur ethnic group who wants to liberate the autonomous region of Xinjiang from Chinese state power. In addition, ETIM is also driven by the spirit of religious extremist groups because the majority of the Uyghur Muslim community in Xinjiang wants to form an Islamic state there (Wang, 2003). The ETIM organization is then categorized into a nationalist-separatist movement which later evolved into terrorism due to its political actions. The act of terrorism is considered by ETIM to accelerate the achievement of the goals of the nationalist-separatist group. (Laqueur, 1999).

Coinciding with the rise of the War on Terrorism campaign pioneered by the United States, ETIM has actually been categorized as a terrorist group by the Chinese government for a long time after the 9/11 incident on September 11, 2001 (Reed & Raschke, 2010). At that time, ETIM already had connections with Al Qaeda and Osama bin Laden which made it an ally of the most prominent terrorist organization in the Xinjiang region.

Over the last two decades, ETIM militants have spread across Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria and other countries in the Middle East, and without exception, the Central and Southeast Asian regions. The presence of ETIM is considered to have become a major threat to international counter terrorism cooperation. Security experts in the Global Times said that there are likely several hundred ETIM members living in Afghanistan today and whether the Afghan Taliban will live up to its promise to crack down on ETIM is uncertain. In 2016, Counterterrorism Special Detachment 88 of Indonesia (Densus 88) managed to arrest three terrorists from Uyghurs in North Sumatra who were proven to have established network with the Santoso terrorist group in Sulawesi (Malau, 2016). This shows that the diaspora threat of the ETIM terrorist organization has spread globally and requires special attention not only by the Chinese government but also the international community at large.

Thus, this research will further analyze the distribution landscape of ETIM terrorist organization members and sympathizers globally, while also focusing on the challenges faced by the international community in overcoming them through elaboration of various comprehensive counter terrorism efforts carried out via international cooperation.

II. RESEARCH METHODS

This study applies a qualitative research method. Qualitative methods are used to provide interpretive understanding towards a phenomenon whose scope is included in the discipline of international relations (Klotz & Prakash, 2008). In line with the research context, the qualitative data obtained were then used to analyze the focus of the research, namely counter terrorism efforts carried out by actors at the international level in dealing with the terrorist and separatist organization East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM). This study also uses secondary data obtained from books, scientific articles, and other valid data sources from the internet such as online news and official documents on the results of organizational trials at both the regional and international levels. By using the concepts of terrorism, counter terrorism and foreign policy in the form of international cooperation, these data are then analyzed to produce a qualitative interpretation on the object of research.

III. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

1. Terrorism

Terrorism is an act of violence that has political motivation with the aim of producing a disruptive effect on society and government (Viotti & Kauppi, 2013). Through acts of violence, terrorists spread fear and threats both to the wider community and to the state government. In addition, acts of terrorism can be carried out in an organized manner as sub-national groups that are considered non-state actors. There are at least three factors that cause an act of terrorism according to Viotti and Kauppi, namely as follows:

a. Psychological Factors

Focusing on the socio-psychological experiences experienced by each individual terrorist. This experience can be in the form of past events such as acts of violence directed at them or exile behavior so that it has an impact on their psychological condition or mental health.

b. Ideological Factors

This factor refers to the beliefs held by a terrorist group. They believe that each of them is a "true believer" who thinks that by overcoming certain obstacles or threats that are not in line with their beliefs would create a better society.

c. Environmental Factors

Within this factor there are two sub-categories that explain the causes of an act of terrorism, namely complaints and a culture of violence. Complaints can be interpreted as causes originating from individual dissatisfaction with a condition of the government of their country, while a culture of violence refers to the normalization of high-level intercommunal violence that has been experienced for years to become a reference for such behavior.

2. Counter Terrorism

Counter terrorism is an effort formulated to combat or prevent acts of terrorism. Counter terrorism can also be interpreted as an action by a certain group or military group that is deployed to prevent attacks and eradicate terrorist networks. According to Viotti and Kauppi (2013), there are at least four approaches to dealing with terrorism, which are as follows:

a. Eradication of the underlying causes of acts of terrorism

The underlying causes of acts of terrorism as explained in the previous section are often rooted in social, economic, and political dissatisfaction such as cases of poverty and corrupt government. This will cause specific complaints in society which will then be used by terrorist

movements such as ETIM to increase the number of sympathizers and members. Therefore, even though these demands are met does not guarantee that it will reduce acts of terrorism, at least this approach can be used as a reference for predicting the motivation behind an act of terrorism.

b. Counter attack or retaliation against acts of terrorism

This approach focuses on the deployment of military attacks against terrorist organizations and their supporting countries with the assumption that the use of military force will eliminate terrorist bases thereby preventing further terror attacks. In the process, the government must first be able to trace members of terrorist organizations and their operational bases. Tracking can be done either by using satellite technology or intelligence placements that infiltrate into the membership of the organization. It should also be noted that the deployment of military force against countries supporting terrorist organizations must be carefully considered to prevent escalation of conflicts between countries.

c. Enforce the rule of law

Enforcing the rule of law is of course an important pillar for the smooth running of international counter terrorism policies in order to succeed on realising the intended impact. The government can enforce the rule of law in two fundamental ways, namely by unilateral domestic efforts and international cooperation efforts.

d. Encourage international cooperation

Departing from the previous approach, it is felt that international cooperation should be made as an integral part of counter terrorism efforts to eradicate terrorist networks. In this case, counter terrorism cooperation can be achieved through diplomatic support, disclosure of intelligence information, security training assistance, law enforcement, and joint military operations.

IV. LANDSCAPE OF THE EAST TURKESTAN ISLAMIC MOVEMENT (ETIM) TERRORIST ORGANIZATION

There are several factors that need to be considered to explain why ETIM was able to regain their momentum in Central Asia and Xinjiang since the 1990s. First, after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, the region of Xinjiang which had previously been heavily oppressed by colonialism began to seek a new identity and direction (Roi, 2000). However, independence from the Soviet Union did not immediately translate into a push for democracy, a market economy, or western culture. On the contrary, Islamic revival is widespread in the region (Rashid, 2017).

Second, the creation of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan in the early 1990s sent a clear message that an Islamic state is possible in Xinjiang. Third, despite centuries of Chinese domination, the Uyghur people still maintain their culture. During the 1980s, China started to open its doors to the world. Since then, ethnic Uyghurs have been allowed to make the pilgrimage to Mecca, which is one of the six pillars of Islam. Many young Uyghurs who make pilgrimages bring back new understandings of their religion and cultural identity.

Fourth, after years of economic failure and corruption, many people have come to believe that Islam can provide a pathway to reduce poverty and create new economic development. Fifth, many Uyghur youths joined the Mujahidin (Afghan resistance movement against the Soviet Union) groups thereby creating networks with the Taliban and Al Qaeda. Since the early 1990s, ETIM has shifted its focus from political and religious independence to the establishment of a real Islamic state through violence.

There are at least eight main power sub-groups that are classified as diaspora of the ETIM terrorist network:

1. Eastern Liberation Organization
2. East Turkestan International Committee
3. United Committee of Uygur Organizations (Central Asia and Xinjiang)
4. Central Asian Uyghur Hezbollah (Kazakhstan)
5. Turkistan Party (Pakistan)
6. East Turkestan Islamic Movement (Afghanistan)

7. East Turkestan Islamic Resistance Movement (Turkey)
8. East Turkestan Youth League (Switzerland).

As for the other five smaller organizations:

1. East Turkistan Islamic Party
2. East Turkestan Opposition Party
3. The Shock Brigade of the Islamic Reformist Party
4. East Turkestan Allah Party
5. Uyghur Liberation Organization.

Although some of them are militant extremist groups involved in violent activities in densely populated areas, some others pursue political agendas through peaceful means.

ETIM has fulfilled at least three basic elements required for the classification of a terrorist organization. First, terrorism has a political purpose, which distinguishes it from ordinary criminal groups. ETIM has a clear political goal which is to separate Xinjiang from China and to create an Islamic state. Second, terrorism always uses violence or threats of violence, which include bombings, killings, arson, poisoning, and assaults. ETIM has used various methods of violence similar to those of certain Islamic fundamentalist groups. Third, the targets of terrorism are innocent unarmed civilians which include women, the elderly, children, as well as civilian government officials and institutions. Civilians were the main target of their activities, although the police, government officials and religious leaders also became victims in these incidents.

Ultimately, terrorist organizations have an interest in arousing public fear as part of their political goals. As an example of the case in early March 2008, ETIM carried out its operation in an attempt to kidnap foreign journalists, tourists and athletes to coincide with the holding of the Summer Olympics in China. They secretly manufacture explosives, identify technicians skilled in making weapons, search for possible suicide bombers and attempt to carry out acts of terror in Urumqi and other cities in China. On March 26, 2008, Chinese authorities arrested several members of the ETIM cell and seized large quantities of explosives, detonators and other explosive devices (UNSC, 2011).

ETIM has also set up numerous training camps in remote areas of Xinjiang. From 1990 to 1993, at least three training camps were detected in Basheriq, Yecheng County. An estimated 60 people completed their training and participated in explosions, killings, and robberies during this time. During 1998, Hasan Mahsum, the leader of the ETIM group, operated twelve training stations (cells) of 150 people in about 15 training classes, each with 8 to 10 members (Wang, 2003).

The terrorist organization ETIM also receives significant support from Al-Qaeda and the Taliban. Previously, Osama bin Laden had also sent his members to training camps for Al-Qaeda and the Taliban which were then made part of ETIM. After completing their training, ETIM members have traveled to Afghanistan, Kashmir, Russian Chechnya, and China to carry out acts of terror and other acts of violence. ETIM is also considering using Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan as transit routes for the illegal transfer of ETIM militants to China (Wang, 2003).

V. CHALLENGES AND INTERNATIONAL COUNTER TERRORISM COOPERATION EFFORTS IN HANDLING ETIM

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) was established in 2001 as a regional symposium to discuss issues related to terrorist activities in the region. Currently, the SCO has eight members: China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, India and Pakistan. In early 2002, the six foreign ministers of the SCO members met in Beijing for a one-day meeting where they reached consensus on important issues related to regional security, cooperation and further development of the organization. Since then, ETIM has initiated several international countermeasures against terrorist activities. It should be noted that the SCO joint statement clearly stated its organizational goals in six points:

1. SCO members believe that terrorism is not limited to any particular ethnic or religious group.

2. The war on terrorism must be separated from opposition to religion, freedom of worship, or any state or nationality.
3. Anti-terrorism campaigns must be carried out at regional, national and international levels with consistency and without double standards.
4. The United Nations (UN) and its Security Council must play a leading role in combating terrorism, adhering to the purposes and principles of the UN Charter and international law.
5. The scope of any action may not be extended arbitrarily without the consent of member states.
6. Any action must not interfere with the internal affairs of any country and must serve to safeguard the long-term interests of regional and world peace.

Within the framework of the SCO, China holds the assumption that it can rely on the support of other member countries in its campaign against the ETIM terrorist organization. In addition, China is also able to attract support from SCO partners as an effort to thwart both conventional and unconventional security threats and is able to eliminate or reduce external factors that interfere with the stability of its country (Bailes, & Dunay, 2007).

Beijing has also become an important instrument in the establishment of the Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure (RATS) which is the main counter terrorism center of the SCO (Tanner & Bellacqua, 2016). RATS's activities develop in several clear operational directions as follows: planning of a collective data bank related to terrorist, separatist and extremist organizations, both regarding their leaders, members, structures, operational networks and financial resources; contribute to commando training activities; as well as assisting in compiling international legal documents on the war against terrorism (Bailes & Dunay, 2007).

In April 2006 at the RATS Council meeting, SCO members classified ETIM along with Al Qaeda, IMU, and Hizbut-Tahrir as a three evils organization whose operational activities are expressly prohibited within the territories of SCO member countries. Furthermore, RATS also continues to formulate and certify lists of individuals who are being sought by law enforcement agencies of SCO member countries. Confirmed individuals on the list are suspected or presumed to have committed terrorist, separatist or extremist crimes. (Bailes & Dunay, 2007).

In 2017 it was reported that SCO had foiled around 600 terror plots and extradited at least 500 terrorists through RATS. Furthermore, in May 2018, Pakistan hosted the first meeting of RATS experts and legal advisers from eight member countries with the intention of discussing regional terrorist threats and measures to address them (IISS, 2018).

Several positive cooperative actions have also taken place between China and the United States. The FBI set up a field office in Beijing with legal liaisons in charge of counterterrorism efforts and antiterrorist finance. Since ETIM was designated a terrorist organization, the Bank of China has received regular information from the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC), the Financial Crimes Enforcement Network (FinCEN), and the UN Security Council. OFAC provided the names of specially designated citizens and blocked persons to the Ministry of Public Security in China. The Bank of China's Xinjiang branch has tightened preventive measures to monitor traces of money laundering transactions within and outside the region.

It is important to realize that the war on terrorism cannot be carried out successfully at the expense of human rights violations. The two endeavors are often at odds and it is very difficult to draw a dividing line between them. From the view of the Uyghur people, who advocate religious and political independence, the allegation is that Beijing is using the war on terrorism to cover up a campaign meant to erode their culture and religion.

The Chinese government claims that its crackdown on terrorist activities is not directed at a specific ethnic group or a particular religion, but is directed at violent criminal activities and terrorism to better protect the common interests of the country's various religious and ethnic groups. The Uyghurs insist that the violent activities taking place in the region are a reaction to the government's brutal suppression and persecution. Chinese authorities argue that any separatist movement is treasonous and that crackdowns are justified to combat political and religious extremists, including the execution of accused pro-independence activists.

The current war on terrorism requires a multi-pronged approach. On the surface, religious and ethnic issues are the main focus. However, at a deeper level, improving economic and social conditions in Central Asia and Xinjiang will greatly reduce the public appeal of any terrorist group, including ETIM. Thus, the countries of Central Asia and Xinjiang must behave according to international standards in democratic development, economic development, and social responsibility (Rashid, 2017).

More regional and international cooperation should be encouraged to increase the effectiveness and commitment of the international community's war against terrorism and Islamic extremism. The SCO has set a good example and should seek more guidance from UN monitoring groups. Finally, the best way for Central Asian countries and China to limit ETIM's influence is to openly express it. Public education will increase their awareness of the nature of terrorist organizations such as ETIM. Additionally, it is critical for Central Asian countries and China to allow the practice of Islam and institute reforms that will address the ETIM movement in the region.

VI. CONCLUSION

There are several causative factors that can explain the emergence of the ETIM terrorist organization in Xinjiang, which then spread to other parts of the world. These factors started from the momentum of the Uyghur ethnic search for identity, which was previously under colonial rule by the Soviet Union and dissatisfaction with the political conditions that prompted them to develop an Islamic state in Xinjiang by using threats and violence as a source of fear directed at society and the government. Of course, this fact is not only a problem for the Chinese government alone, but also requires the attention of the international community at large in overcoming the diaspora of ETIM members who have spread widely in the Middle East, Central Asia, to Southeast Asia.

It is hoped that counter terrorism efforts can be carried out through international cooperation to increase the effectiveness of handling these terrorist organizations. SCO coordination through the central anti-terror agency, RATS, is considered a good form of international cooperation in dealing with various challenges of terrorism in the Central Asian region. In addition, the relationship between the Chinese government and OFAC, FinCEN, and the UN Security Council can also be used as an example of a proactive form of multilateral cooperation in counter terrorism efforts, particularly in supervising the development and movement of ETIM before carrying out terrorist activities.

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