

CHINA'S CRITICAL POLICY AREAS ON THE EVE OF THE 19TH CHINESE COMMUNIST PARTY CONGRESS

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ABSTRACT

In October 2017, the Chinese leadership is being reshuffled at the 19th national congress of the Chinese Communist Party. Now is the time to assess the first term of President Xi Jinping. During his first five-year mandate, Xi has concentrated political power to a level unseen since Mao Zedong. In the space of five years, the new leader has launched significant political reforms and foreign policy initiatives, with the result of firmly establishing China as a major power on the international stage. This research paper is based on the presentations given during the June 8th 2017 conference held at IRSEM on the theme "Five years of Xi Jinping: China's political development." At the conference, seven international experts coming from top academia and research centers examined a series of policy areas where China's paramount leader has left his mark. This paper draws on their presentations to explain the critical issues at stake in the upcoming political transition.

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The consolidation of authoritarian politics

Five years ago some observers were still pointing to the liberal forces that might reshape China. Today, the focus has turned to the instruments that Xi Jinping has used to gain and maintain political power while stifling opposition. Xi has consolidated his personal power at the same time as he strengthened the power of the party. Both at home and abroad, Xi governs in crisis mode, insisting on the need for China's security, which is allegedly at risk¹.

However new Xi Jinping's leadership style may be, the reforms he launched pursue the policies initiated by earlier leaders. For decades the Communist Party has blurred the boundaries between regime security and national security. China's current president has used institutions to consolidate this authoritarian position. Xi Jinping's lengthy, ongoing anti-corruption campaign pursues state officials even beyond China's borders. Created in 2014, the National Security Council deals with domestic and external threats under the same institutional umbrella.

To bolster his status as Head of state, Xi Jinping has made efforts to provide international leadership at a time when the Western concert of nations is showing signs of weakness. He has taken the lead in two particular areas of global governance: climate change mitigation and increased transportation connectivity across continents. Thus he has proposed a Chinese vision of international relations as an open set of exchanges and responsibility-sharing, at a time when populism and a temptation to close down borders are shaking the West, from the election of Trump to Brexit to the resurgence of nationalist parties across Europe.

Despite commitment to free trade and to the Paris climate agreement, the kind of leadership that Xi Jinping incarnates is the politics of the strongman. This is most obvious in domestic politics. Behind his anti-corruption campaign, Xi has also conducted institutional reforms concentrating power in the hands of the party leadership as opposed to the party committee and the state apparatus, as Jérôme Doyon² argues. This recentralization of political power hardly guarantees more efficacy in policy implementation however. When looking at a specific area such as environmental protection, Genia Kostka³ demonstrates that despite important new laws and regulations, the diversity of local interests has the biggest impact on policy outcomes. Finally, Xi Jinping has made two sectors of the economy a priority in his national security strategy: the nuclear domain and the cyber domain. Both sectors entail a high level of technological research and development and also large markets to grab, while remaining prior elements of national security, Nicola Leveringhaus⁴ and Candice Tran Dai⁵ respectively explain.

In foreign affairs, Xi Jinping has demonstrated a will to provide leadership in global governance. Gudrun Wacker⁶ outlines what she calls China's "new foreign and security activism", from a historical change of rhetoric to an intense schedule of old and new international summit meetings, to the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative intended to improve Eurasia's connectivity. After thirty years of a "low-profile" foreign policy, observers have asked whether China is attempting to reshape global order. Rosemary Foot⁷ explains that the sheer size of the country is enough for China inadvertently to change the international balance in several sectors, not least in the areas of trade and carbon emissions as China has become a more developed and a consumer society. More intentionally, Xi Jinping's government seems to favour an inter-state system based on forms of hierarchy. Overall, Foot argues, China presents a conservative power. Yet today's increasingly open and connected world also presents China with significant threats, as Rémi Castets⁸ shows in his study on the opportunities that the Syrian conflict has offered to Chinese jihadis.

I DOMESTIC POLITICS

Although China is facing daunting economic challenges on the eve of the XIXth party congress, including pressing reforms of state-owned enterprises and a mounting level of debt, politics are likely to trump much-needed economic debates when the congress meets in October 2017. Leading up to the congress, Xi Jinping is using the same method that he used to assert his political power in the economic realm: the centralization of decision-making authority⁹. This section examines the use of this method in two areas of domestic politics that have been priority items on Xi

1 You Ji, "China's national security commission: theory, evolution and operation", *Journal of Contemporary China* 25: 96, 2016, p. 178-196.

2 Associate Fellow, European Council on Foreign Relations.

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4 Lecturer in War Studies, King's College, London.

5 Vice-President of Asia Centre, Paris.

6 Senior Fellow, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik in Berlin, Germany.

7 Senior Research Fellow, Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Oxford.

8 Director, Department of Chinese Studies, University of Bordeaux Montaigne.

9 Barry Naughton, "The general secretary's extended reach: Xi Jinping combines economics and politics", *China Leadership Monitor* 54, September

The party under Xi: evolution of the cadre system¹⁰

After Xi Jinping gained the status of “core leader” in 2016, the personalization of political power became a major topic among China observers¹¹. For many, there has been a tension between President Xi Jinping's personal power and the power of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Strengthening the power of the “core” can go together with strengthening the power of the party and local officials however.

Xi Jinping has increased the coercive power of the party even as he consolidated his personal power. In 2013, a few months after taking office, the Chinese president launched an anti-corruption campaign which is still ongoing. At the end of 2016, 120,000 lower-level and about 150 higher-level cadres of the party-state had been condemned. In 2016, the 6th plenum of the 18th Party Central Committee (hereafter 6th plenum) also established a new set of agencies, the supervision committees, to consolidate the anti-corruption work of the party, in addition to the already existing Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI). Now tested in three provinces, Beijing, Shanxi and Zhejiang, the supervision committees integrate the administrative departments in charge of corruption prevention with the public prosecutor's offices in charge of investigating officials. Directly under party control, these new and powerful committees have oversight on government structures that enforce anti-corruption, thus expanding the power of the party.

Institutional change has consolidated the anti-corruption campaign. In the past five years, institutional reform has simultaneously put pressure on officials and given more power to local Party leaders to the detriment of collective leadership. A set of regulations issued at the 6th plenum emphasize the role of meetings called “democratic life meetings” that state officials are required to attend at least once a year. The purpose of these meetings is for officials to perform public self-criticism and also to signal misbehavior apparent in their colleagues' management of public affairs.

The Party-state is decentralizing and concentrating decision-making power. The power of local party leaders over personnel selection has increased. The dossiers examined for promotions are increasingly circulated internally, rather than through the more open selection processes developed under Hu Jintao. In addition, objective rules such as the fulfillment of policy targets lose importance in each cadre's dossier, therefore the promotion of cadres has become less transparent. As a result the CCP is less and less attractive to the younger generations. The age criterion for cadre selection, which had been a major factor for preserving the vitality of the Party since Deng Xiaoping, is currently under threat, which could limit turn-over within the system. Evidently concerned with the consolidation of his personal power, Xi Jinping's political tactics focus on the short term, at the risk of jeopardizing the long-term authority of the Party. The following example of environmental governance illustrates the problems attendant to the new concentration of power in the Chinese polity.

Central-local relations: recentralization and environmental governance in China¹²

China's leadership in global climate change mitigation since the Paris agreement of 2016 has tended to hide the difficulties that the CCP has had with environmental politics at home. Given the size of the country and fiscal decentralization, there is an implementation gap in environmental governance. Under Xi Jinping, the central government has issued laws, sanctions and binding local environmental targets to enforce stricter environment protection regulation¹³. Despite greater central control, local autonomy remains significant. China's level of development varies dramatically from province to province and the poor jurisdictions prioritize the economic interest over the environment.

In wealthy provinces, the central state's strengthened interest in environment protection has overlapped with

2017.
10 Section based on Jérôme Doyon's presentation at the June 8, 2017 IRSEM conference entitled "Five years of Xi Jinping." For more detail see Jérôme Doyon, "Discipline and punish, Party power under Xi", *China Analysis*, March 2017.
11 "Behind the Personality Cult of Xi Jinping", *Foreign Policy*, March 8, 2016; "Beware the cult of Xi", *The Economist*, April 2, 2016.
12 Section based on Genia Kostka's presentation at the June 8th, 2017 IRSEM conference entitled "Five years of Xi Jinping." For more detail see Genia Kostka and Jonas Nahm, "Central-Local Relations: Recentralization and Environmental Governance in China", *The China Quarterly*, August 2017.
13 "Decision on some major issues concerning comprehensively deepening the reform", 2013.

local bureaucratic interests. In this favorable context, it has had the positive effect of integrating grassroots agencies within local governments. The new central laws and targets have had a creative effect at the local level when some communities organized in order to benefit from their implementation. The city of Baoding (Hebei province) provides a good example of such innovative governance mechanisms. There, a constellation of professional communities have joined forces to implement Beijing's pilot plan to establish low-carbon zones. Similarly, in Guangzhou (Guangdong province), the central directives on sustainable urban development supported a preexisting effort to mitigate greenhouse gases.

The party-state's focus remains economic development however, and wherever the two domains are in conflict, economic development trumps environmental protection. This is most apparent in the state's toleration of state-owned enterprises not enforcing environmental regulation. Another problem hindering efficient implementation of new environmental regulation is the negative dynamic that the central state entertains with lower levels of government. Whenever it is not in the interest of central officials to implement a new policy, the easy solution for Beijing is to blame local agencies for being inefficient, even when the latter would actually be willing to work on the issue.

The systematic opposition between central and local governance does not work in the context of environmental governance. The centralization of environmental policy-making has had positive effects on China's record of ecological preservation. New financial transfers and a higher order of priority allocated to the fight against pollution in Beijing has raised awareness of the issue among local cadres. Yet, the diversity of interests across Chinese provinces produces a diversity of outcomes. When it is not in the interest of Beijing that a given environmental policy is implemented (for instance because it would hinder economic development) by contrast, shifting the blame on local officials is a convenient solution.

II SECURITY ISSUES

Xi Jinping has made two sectors of the economy security priorities, thus bringing them at the top of his political agenda: the nuclear domain and the cyber domain.

Nuclear weapons policy and diplomacy under Xi Jinping¹⁴

Xi Jinping has understood that nuclear deterrence has entered a critical time, the first time perhaps since the end of the Cold War when it is once again a priority in the national defense policy of great powers. Indeed, the PRC is the only country among the five members of the UN Security Council to be engaged in increasing the size of its nuclear force¹⁵. Beyond the major changes to China's nuclear arsenal that Xi Jinping has inherited, overseen or embarked upon, he has also stepped up China's nuclear diplomacy.

Under Xi Jinping, the Chinese nuclear arsenal, that mostly comprises land-based weapons, has undergone an important bureaucratic face-lift. Established in 1966 as the Second Artillery Corps, the institution in charge of Chinese nuclear forces had, up to now, only had the status of a "branch" of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), by contrast with the ground, air, and naval forces. In 2015, Xi renamed this institution the "rocket force", thus elevating it to the level of a service, on a par with the army, the navy and the air force. Two long-awaited changes in the arsenal initiated by Hu Jintao have taken place under Xi: the creation of multiple independently targetable reentry vehicles (MIRV) for intercontinental ballistic missiles and the deployment of nuclear armed submarines in the South China Sea.

Alongside these significant additions to the arsenal, Xi Jinping is the first Chinese president to address the issue of nuclear safety. In 2016, China published a white paper on the topic of nuclear emergencies for the first time. Both international and domestic factors have brought the issue of nuclear safety to the fore. Internationally, the Fukushima nuclear disaster in 2011 and Obama's international Nuclear Security Summit in 2010-2014 played a role. Nuclear safety is a condition necessary to expand the civilian nuclear sector of the economy, which is currently a major area of indus-

14 Section based on Nicola Leveringhaus' presentation at the June 8, 2017 IRSEM conference entitled "Five years of Xi Jinping."

15 Eric Heginbotham, Michael S. Chase, Jacob L. Heim, Bonny Lin and Mark R. Cozad eds., *China's evolving nuclear deterrent*, RAND Corporation, 2017.

trial investment in the People's Republic of China (PRC).

Xi has also made nuclear security a marker of China's international standing. Xi Jinping's personal participation in President Obama's Nuclear Security Summit signaled his commitment to the protection of nuclear assets from a range of security threats. In 2015 he launched a centre for regional excellence in nuclear security and the issue featured on the agenda of the National Security Commission's first meeting.

Finally, in the past five years, Beijing has increased engagement in international nuclear regulation. China has long been under international pressure to ratify the Comprehensive Test Ban treaty, still to no avail. A new element of China's nuclear diplomacy, however, has been the criticism of other nuclear states such as Japan. Driven by self-interest as well as by an appreciation in China that it furthers the status quo and strengthens the institution and normative foundations of global nuclear order, this new engagement is a positive development for global nuclear governance as well as for China's own image within global nuclear order.

Cybersecurity in China: maintaining power and security in the information age¹⁶

The cyber domain presents challenges and opportunities to China's ruling Party. Since 2013, the cyber domain has become a critical security issue for China. In 2013, Edward Snowden made revelations about the NSA surveillance program only a few months after Xi Jinping took office. The same year, a joint US-China working group on cyber security met for the first time. In November 2013, the third plenary session of the 18th central committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) made the following statement: "the internet and information security have consequences for national security and stability which is a new global challenge that we must face."

Ever since China first connected to the internet in 1994, the CCP's cyber strategy has been dual. The Party-state has used the internet, and information and communication technologies (ICT) more broadly as a tool for economic modernization and as a tool for political control. Xi has pursued this strategy and broadened its implications. In the past, cyber regulation had focused on "information security", meaning content control, to mitigate criticism of the regime. Since Xi Jinping, policy documents regulating the cyber domain have gained a strategic edge, as evident in the National Cyberspace Security Strategy, the National Cybersecurity Law or the International Strategy of Cooperation on Cyberspace. China's official discourse on cyberspace now comprises a strong security and sovereignty dimension.

Beijing perceives cyberspace as a vehicle for threats, coming both from home and from abroad. Since the People's Liberation Army's "strategic guidelines" of 2004, the use of information technology in warfare has been a central component of China's military modernization. Even from the civilian standpoint, the internet poses a challenge to the political regime. The Party-state's main concept to deal with this issue domestically is network security review. In November 2016, China passed its first-ever law on cybersecurity, requiring that network products suppliers pass a review¹⁷. In addition, Beijing does not want to rely on foreign companies' ICT products. On the international front, China does not want to be under the influence of the US in cyberspace and it wants to counter the prevailing idea of a "China cyber threat."

China's cybersecurity has become closely linked with other national security priorities. The cyber dimension is progressively being integrated into China's national strategy for economic development because technology has become a benchmark for international competition. At the same time, the CCP is consolidating political leadership over cybersecurity issues.

¹⁶ Section based on Candice Tran Dai's presentation at the June 8, 2017 IRSEM conference entitled "Five years of Xi Jinping."

¹⁷ Debevoise and Plimpton, "China's network security law takes effect", June 9th, 2017, accessible at : http://www.debevoise.com/~media/files/insights/publications/2017/06/20170609a_chinas_%20network_security_law_takes_effect.pdf.

III FOREIGN POLICY

Xi Jinping faces an increasingly tense neighborhood, with the Korean peninsula and Taiwan as well as in the East and South China seas. In the management of each of these hot spots, Beijing claims to seek the region's political stability, while seeing the US as the ultimate challenger. The Korean crisis is a particular case in point: under great pressure from the Trump administration to cut off oil exports to North Korea, Beijing does not actually have the leverage to make Kim Jong-un change course. On the other hand, Xi has acquired a new voice on the international arena where China now wields normative power. It is on this new confidence, and the most serious threat that it faces, that this section focuses.

China's new foreign and security policy activism¹⁸

Since Xi Jinping took office in 2012, China's foreign and security policy has become pro-active. First, new rhetoric signals the Chinese leadership's ambition to raise its international profile. Xi Jinping is the first Chinese leader in thirty years to explicitly change Deng Xiaoping's long lasting principles for the CCP's foreign policy to "maintain a low profile and make some contributions". In 2016, Xi Jinping claimed that China had a consistent "approach" (zhongguo fang'an, sometimes translated as "Chinese solution") to many international problems such as climate change and global trade. The implications are that the CCP may now be willing to serve as a model for other countries to emulate.

Second, China has become a venue of choice for major international forums. Under Xi Jinping, China significantly increased the density of international events it hosts, and has used them to launch new ideas. It has hosted already established summits such as the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation forum (APEC) in 2014 and the G20 in 2016. It has also revived and upgraded existing formats such as the Xiangshan forum and the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building measures in Asia (CICA).

An important example of China devising new international events was the World Internet conference that took place in Zhejiang province, in 2014, 2015 and 2016. At this conference, the Chinese government has promoted the concept of national sovereignty in cyber-space. The participation of entrepreneur Jack Ma and of Fadi Chehade, former CEO of the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) has raised the profile of this summit.

Third, Xi Jinping's signature foreign policy, One Belt, One Road (OBOR), is the most significant example of China's new activism. The ambition is to shape international discourse and remap Eurasia. The belt and road initiative has had tremendous international impact, by contrast with previous attempts at promoting Chinese visions of international relations such as the "harmonious world" catch phrase. Paradoxically, it is its vagueness that makes it work, as various Chinese actors and foreign countries can project their own interest on the initiative.

Despite its blurred contours, OBOR is backed up by a series of new institutions that provide it with appealing funds. To support the investments that OBOR entails, China created the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, the BRICS new development Bank, and the Silk Road Fund, in addition to the preexisting traditional development banks. It has also invested unprecedented resources in a large public diplomacy effort to promote OBOR in and outside China, through conferences and the May 2017 summit in Beijing, as well as cartoons and songs. The OBOR summit attracted 29 heads of state.

Will China undermine or destroy the "Western liberal order"? Rather than undermining the Bretton Woods institutions from which she benefited tremendously, China is modifying them to acquire a greater say in their norms, standards and rules. More active efforts to actually shape international norms are observed in yet unregulated fields such as cyber-space and outer space.

18 Section based on Gudrun Wacker's presentation at the June 8, 2017 IRSEM conference entitled "Five years of Xi Jinping."

How is China reshaping global order ?¹⁹

Often described as a pattern of behavior that sustains the international society of states, global order can alternatively be understood as a dynamic, multilayered phenomenon. Here global order is taken to mean the “rules of the game” that state actors refer to. However, this proposed definition is also problematic, as these international norms or rules can be contradictory (for instance state sovereignty often conflicts with the protection of human rights) and provide opportunities for interpretation.

China’s rise to great power status has had a series of unintentional effects. The rate at which China’s economy has risen is unprecedented. Considering the proportion of the Chinese population in the global population, the formation of a liberalized Chinese domestic market has had serious consequences such as: increased carbon emissions (China is now the biggest carbon emitter due to rapid urbanization); increased oil demand (China is now the largest importer of oil, an unwanted dependency); it has transformed the global supply chain as a result of new consumption habits in China. In addition, China has risen to the rank of second largest economy in the world and is the leading trading partner for many countries.

What are Beijing’s intentions as regards global order? China’s new leadership role since the advent of President Xi Jinping has included the provision of global public goods, and this is of course welcome. But in more specific terms, although China’s responses differ across different issue areas, China’s domestic interests often explain the country’s behavior on the international stage. Where global norms have a high policy impact at the domestic level, then the level of Chinese challenge to the global norm depends on the degree of congruence between its domestic values and the global norm.

Professor Zhang Yongjin has argued that at the UN, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) defends the legal sovereign equality of states²⁰ and that preference shapes much of its multilateralist behavior. Indeed, China adopts a state-centric approach in global governance. In the past decade or so, China has entered the policy debate quite substantially in two international policy areas, helping to shape the norms associated with these issue areas in ways that reflect its preferences: the debate about the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) and United Nations peace operations. In these two policy realms, China expresses a paternalistic view of the state and its role in the provision of global governance. It has advocated prevention rather than international action in response to atrocities in the framework of R2P, and has focused on state consent with respect to UN peace operations.

With increased power to shape the normative architecture of global governance, China wants better representation. Xi Jinping has brought this desire to the forefront forcefully. The People’s Republic of China is a deeply conservative actor attempting to shore up a hierarchical state-based order that reflects multipolarity, moving it away from the American-led order. China also faces threats however, and since the start of the Syrian conflict in 2011, homegrown terrorists have expanded their networks abroad.

The Turkistan Islamic Party : the new opportunities (and constraints) of the Syrian conflict and their consequences on Uyghur jihadi networks²¹

Chinese Uyghur jihadi networks started to internationalize before the Syrian conflict, with the emergence of the East Turkistan Islamic Party (ETIP, best known under the name East Turkestan Islamic Movement or ETIM) in Afghanistan in 1997. After the 2001 NATO intervention in Afghanistan, three factors severely weakened the organization: internal dissensions, the split and exile of its islamonationalist wing and the death of its leader Hasan Makhsum in 2003. The new leader Abdul Haq reshuffled ETIM on the eve of the 2008 Beijing Olympics. Subsequently, it benefited from deeper integration into Al-Qaeda’s chain of command and pakistano-afghan jihadist networks. At the same time, Uyghur imams and some of those who had left ETIM in the early 2000s formed the East Turkestan Education and Solidarity Association (ETESA) in Istanbul. Officially ETESA advocates a quietist salafism. The older activists of TIP and ETESA socialized in the same Koranic schools in Xinjiang in the 1980s and both organizations support the establishment of an

19 Section based on Rosemary Foot’s presentation at the June 8, 2017 IRSEM conference entitled "Five years of Xi Jinping."

20 Zhang Yongjin, “China and liberal hierarchies in global international society: power and negotiation for normative change”, *International Affairs* 92, 2016.

21 Section based on Rémi Castets’ presentation at the June 8, 2017 IRSEM conference "Five years of Xi Jinping."

Islamic state.

They faced important challenges in addition to Beijing's crackdown. Indeed, the Uyghur diaspora, dominated by nationalist organizations favorable to democracy, were wary of the rise of salafi islam in the diaspora. At the end of the 2000s, the armed branch of this nebula, just like other foreign jihadi movements active in the area, was facing difficulties after their exile in Waziristan, the mountainous frontier between Pakistan and Afghanistan. In the mid-2010s, it finally withdrew from this area to redeploy in Eastern Afghanistan.

TIP's promotion of an Islamic state and of international jihadism contrasts with the democratic model and pro-American stance of the World Uyghur Congress, the umbrella organization federating Uyghur nationalism. In the early 2010s, the TIP had tried to send activists to Xinjiang to perform terrorist attacks and build up cells to attract young Uyghurs radicalized by Beijing's repression. Fifteen years after it dismantled the majority of islamonationalist terrorist cells in Southern Xinjiang, the People's Republic of China thus faced a new threat. Against a backdrop of increasing terrorist acts, Beijing's response, ever coercive, prevented the expansion of TIP cells in Xinjiang. The TIP chain of command located in the pakistano-afghan margins also suffered from continuous pressure coming from American drone attacks, Pakistani military operations and China's cooperation with its neighbors in the realm of counterterrorism.

The Syrian war has allowed TIP networks to grow rapidly in the Near and Middle East. In 2013, the TIP announced its participation in Jihad alongside the al-Nusra Front, Syria's branch of al-Qaeda. Establishing a branch in Syria has allowed TIP to benefit from elements of al-Nusra Front's financial, political and logistical support. TIP's propaganda allowed its Syrian branch to attract recruits from Turkey, China and other countries. Recruitment networks based in South-East Asia, Central Asia and Turkey look to attract Uyghurs who are under threat of extradition or lacking an identity document. TIP has used Turkey as one of its main platforms to channel funds and fighters (with their family) to Syria. ETESA networks in the diaspora and in Turkish society and most likely the government's benevolence as well, played a role in constituting Turkey into such platform. Although some Uyghurs joined the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, the TIP has remained loyal to al-Qaeda and Taliban leadership.

Actively involved in military operations in the North-West of Syria, the TIP is gaining legitimacy among the Jihadist movement and attracting new recruits among the disillusioned Uyghur youth. It participated in key battles such as al-Ghab, Abu al-dahur, Latakia or Aleppo. The TIP has constituted vast networks of solidarity with local and foreign fighters in Syria and has become an important jihadist movement in Northwestern Syria. This may facilitate China's anti-terrorist cooperation with new countries interested in targeting these networks.

Further reading

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