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Thailand's Uighur Refugees: Security Implications for Southeast Asia

By Stefanie Kam

Synopsis

Thailand recently deported more than 100 Uighur illegal refugees back to China, triggering criticisms from Turkey and US, as well as the UN and human rights groups. The legalistic perspective of the media skirts the existential threat posed by the illegal traffic of Uighur refugees to the security of Thailand and Southeast Asia.

Commentary

THAILAND RECENTLY deported 109 Uighur refugees back to China, a move that was met with international criticism and questions concerning the legal status of the Uighurs as illegal migrants or refugees. Thailand defended its decision on the grounds that it was a third country, and to show that it would keep some Uighur refugees, it rejected Beijing's request to return all of the Uighur refugees in Thailand's detention camps.

The decision to deport the Uighur refugees sparked widespread protests in Turkey, with which the Uighurs share linguistic, cultural and ethnic ties. Both the Thai embassy in Ankara and the consulate in Istanbul were attacked and had to be temporarily shut. The US and the UN expressed strong concerns that the deportations were in violation of international law, while human rights groups like the Uighur American Association condemned the deportation of the Uighur Muslims.

Security Implications for Southeast Asian countries

While the debate mainly centred on the legal aspects of the Uighur migrant issue, these reactions skirted the security implications for Thailand and Southeast Asian countries posed by an influx of Uighur refugees into the region.

In recent years, Uighur Muslims have travelled via Southeast Asia to Turkey with the ostensible hope of escaping the unrest in Xinjiang and resettling in Turkey. In the past, claims by China's Uighurs, a majority of whom are Muslims, of marginalisation and of a curtailment of religious freedoms, have driven their grievances against the Chinese state. This was underscored by a recent ban on students and state employees to fast during the Islamic holy month of Ramadan.

While these Uighur refugees may arrive in Southeast Asia with grievances towards China's treatment, there is the danger that some of them may be clandestinely using Southeast Asia as a gateway to travel to Syria and Iraq. As evidence, in January 2015, China detained nine terror suspects who were Uighurs, and ten Turkish nationals accused of helping them in an attempt to travel to Syria. In July 2013, Chinese official media reported that a Uighur militant who studied in Istanbul and fought with the Free Syrian Army (FSA) in Aleppo had returned to Xinjiang and was arrested for planning to carry out "violent attacks" in China.

Within this group, there are also a handful of Uighur militants who come to the region with the deliberate intention to link up with Southeast Asian militants. Recently, an Indonesian court sentenced three men from China's Uighur Muslim community to six years in prison on charges of conspiring with Indonesian militant Islamists: Ahmet Mahmut, aged 20, Altinci Bayram aged 29, and Tuzer Abdul Basit, aged 23 were arrested in September 2014 in Sulawesi for using fake Turkish passports. The Uighur immigrants planned to meet with Santoso, the leader of a terrorist group known as the Eastern Indonesia Mujahideen, better known as Mujahidin Indonesia Timur (MIT).

Notably, MIT is one of the few groups in Indonesia that has pledged allegiance to the Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria (ISIS). This incident supports China's claims that Uighurs have crossed the Turkish border into Syria and Iraq to fight for the transnational jihadist movement ISIS, on the pretext of being native Turkish citizens.

The existence of jihadist transnational networks, particularly linked to ISIS, highlights the potential for these refugees – given their political resentment – to become co-opted and radicalised by Islamist militant groups seeking to recruit and expand their networks across the region.

Thailand is home to many displaced persons including the Rohingya from Myanmar. Thailand will bear an increasing burden to provide refuge for a growing number of refugees. This will lead to deteriorating living conditions for the refugees, which will serve to aggravate their resentment and may cause them to turn to militancy and terrorism to vent their anger and frustrations. The Uighurs have expressed fear to return to China because of the repercussions they may face due to their leaving their home country. In addition, the longer the Uighur refugees are left in shelters, the greater their risks of contracting communicable diseases, which may also expose the local population in Thailand to public health risks.

Mitigating challenges of the Uighur refugee Issue

In light of these security implications, there is a need to improve socio-economic conditions, including the camps of these Uighur refugees, so as to safeguard them against becoming radicalised by militants and terrorist groups.

For its part China has much convincing to do to deal with international criticisms of its treatment of the Uighur Muslims. It will need to reassure the international community, that its treatment of Uighur Muslims is not a source for driving Uighur Muslims out of the country.

There needs to be more enhanced security co-operation between Thailand and other Southeast Asian states, particularly those affected by the threat of terrorism and militancy, including Indonesia, which serves as a breeding ground for jihadist militancy in the region.

Finally, enhanced cooperation and collaboration in the area of counter-terrorism between China and the affected Southeast Asian countries, will serve to deter terrorists from expanding their manpower by radicalising refugees, prevent the flow of militants travelling from Southeast Asian countries to Turkey and then on to Syria, and thereby ameliorate the situation posed by the influx of increasing numbers of Uighur refugees into this region.

Stefanie Kam Li Yee is an Associate Research Fellow at the International Center for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (ICPVTR) at S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.

Nanyang Technological University
Block S4, Level B4, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg