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The weakest links: Bishkek attack exposes security risks for Chinese projects in Central Asia

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The suspected terrorist attack on the Chinese embassy in Kyrgyzstan's capital Bishkek has yet again exposed weak links in security in Central Asia, a key focus of Beijing's energy and overseas investment agenda.

With the suicide bombing pointing to a resurgence in terrorist threats in the region, analysts have called on Beijing to weigh security concerns carefully as it rolls out its ambitious "One Belt, One Road" scheme.

The analysts said the timing of the attack was significant, coming just days ahead of the Group of 20 summit this weekend and the 25th anniversary of the 911 terrorist attacks in the United States.

Alexander Gabuev, a security specialist at the Carnegie Moscow Centre, said the attack showed terrorist threats in Central Asia were on the rise, and China had become a target.

"[The] recent development sets an important precedent. China can't feel secure about its citizens or installations in the region and needs to think about their security in a more comprehensive way," he said.

Li Lifan, a researcher at the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, also said Chinese personnel and China-backed projects would face greater security risks in the region.

"The attack will almost certainly have security implications for many Chinese projects in Kyrgyzstan and other Central Asian nations as they become the new linchpin of the 'One Belt One Road' initiative," he said.

[Kyrgyzstan vows to hunt down and punish organisers of suicide bomb attack on Chinese embassy \[1\]](#)

China has completed three pipelines pumping natural gas from Turkmenistan to Xinjiang via various Central Asian nations. A fourth pipeline passing through Kyrgyzstan is being built.

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Alexander Gabuev, Carnegie Moscow Centre,

Like other Central Asian nations which have been plagued by ethnic tensions and political instability, Kyrgyzstan, which borders Xinjiang, has a large Uygur community and is a hotbed for Islamic fundamentalism and other terrorist forces.

Li Wei, an anti-terrorism expert at the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations, said security conditions were set to worsen due to collusion between local fundamentalist movements and the exiled Uygur Muslim extremist groups.

Although China has stepped up security and counterterrorism efforts with Russia and Central Asian nations within the framework of the regional security alliance the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, "Islamic extremist forces, such as Isis, have accelerated infiltration into the region over the years, posing fresh security challenges and exacerbating the security situation in the region", Li said.

Both China and Kyrgyzstan condemned Tuesday's attack as an act of terrorism.

Kyrgyz President Almazbek Atambayev ordered a thorough investigation into the bombing, promising to take "all the necessary measures to protect the Chinese mission".

In a phone call with his Kyrgyz counterpart on Tuesday night, Foreign Minister Wang Yi asked Kyrgyzstan to "establish the truth as soon as possible, severely punish the culprits and prevent such an incident from happening again", according to a statement on the foreign ministry's website.

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Li Wei, anti-terrorism expert

China's Central Asia diplomacy can bring stability and growth [2]

Wang and Kyrgyz Foreign Minister Erlan Abdyldaev also agreed to deepen counterterrorism cooperation, especially against religious extremists, ethnic separatists and terrorists in Central Asia.

Foreign ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying said Beijing was willing to aid the investigation.

"We will work together with the Kyrgyz side to establish as soon as possible information about the people and organisation that had carried out this terrorist attack," Hua said.

Kyrgyz authorities said none of the Chinese diplomats was injured and all had been evacuated to a "safe place" in Bishkek.

The suicide bomber was killed at the scene when he rammed a van through a side entrance to the Chinese embassy. Three other Kyrgyz nationals working at the embassy were injured.

Li Wei said it could take investigators some time to identify the attacker, his motives and any link with extremist groups.

Although no group has claimed responsibility, both Chinese experts said they thought the Turkestan Islamic Party, a Uygur separatist group formerly known as the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, was behind the attack.

China and Kazakhstan sign \$2 billion in deals as Xinjiang party chief visits the Central Asian nation [3]

Professor Barry Sautman, of Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, agreed. He said it remained to be seen whether the bombing would herald more attacks.

The attack “follows a recent pattern, in which attacks inside Xinjiang appear to have declined due to the pervasiveness of security forces stationed across the restive region, while terrorists look outside the region for soft targets”, he said.

He said China should rapidly improve the situation of Uygurs and other ethnic minorities in Xinjiang, as well as exert pressure on states that “funnelled support for ‘religious extremists’ in Central Asia”.

Gabuev said given that Central Asia was not high on the US counterterrorism agenda, China should beef up cooperation with Russia and increase aid to the militaries of Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan, as well as making arrange to protect its own infrastructure projects and personnel.

“It needs to be noted that development brought by China is strengthening security in the region, but its impact is long term and the results are less visible,” he said.

Topics: Energy diplomacy

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