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China Aims for A «Win-Win» with Islam

PEPE ESCOBAR

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The Chinese-driven New Silk Roads – or One Belt, One Road (OBOR), in their official denomination – are spiraling out in all directions. The new Eurasian land bridge – from the port of Lianyungang in Jiangsu to Rotterdam; the Mongolia-Russia corridor; the Central Asia-West Asia corridor; the Indochina peninsula corridor; the Pakistan corridor; the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar corridor.

OBOR is all over Eurasia – and that means it's also all over the Arab world. Take the recent 7th ministerial meeting of the China-Arab Cooperation Forum in Doha. Chinese Foreign

Minister Wang Yi described the cooperation as a model for the developing world. In a message President Xi Jinping – to the delight of GCC delegates – stressed Beijing wants to push strategic ties much further. That means, essentially, via OBOR.

Beijing has had its share of problems – to put it mildly – in dealing with the lands of Islam. Already in 2104 Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, leader of the phony Daesh «Caliphate» proclaimed, «*Muslim rights are forcibly seized*» in China. In 2015, the AKP in power in Turkey was enraged by China's handling of Xinjiang; there were violent protests in Istanbul. Recently, a media center linked to Daesh began directly addressing Uyghurs as well as Hui – Chinese Muslims – releasing a four-minute nasheed in fluent Mandarin regimenting Muslims to «wake up» and overcome «a century of slavery».

The Gulf looks East

In the GCC petromonarchies, meanwhile, amidst a toxic mix of outright paranoia in relation to all things Iran; frustration that the jihad in Syria is not leading to regime change; the rise and rise of the proverbial «anti-American sentiment»; and the very palpable threat of domestic upheaval, the only sign of relief is that with China, it's all business as usual.

Take, for instance, Dragon City, a Chinese megamall in Muharraq, the third-largest city in Bahrain – where the Shi'ite majority population is kept under total repression by the Sunni royals. Dragon City is a key hub in OBOR, connecting a host of Chinese companies to Gulf markets and beyond, especially Africa.

And it goes way beyond a mall. China – in the forefront of green energy, especially via its solar panel companies – is bound to set up factories, employing cheap local labor, not only in the Emirates in the Gulf, but also in Morocco.

China is already Turkey's third-largest trading partner. Ankara may be a NATO member and may be – for all their recent spat – part of the US security umbrella. Yet what matters for Chinese trade interests is that Turkey is also a key node of OBOR.

Meanwhile, inside China, the go-to place is Yinchuan – and its convention center that biennially hosts the China-Arab States Expo, a love fest for countless businessmen from China and the Middle East. In Yongning, south of Yinchuan, the action centers on a sumptuous theme park to be finished in 2020; the \$3.7 billion World Muslim City – complete with Folk Culture Street, convention center and, what else, high-end hotels.

Ningxia's tourism bureau enthusiastically promotes the China Hui Culture Park as a «Sino-Arab cultural bridge» that can «*promote all aspects of Sino-Arab exchange and cooperation*». It does not hurt that the park is an «AAAA national tourist site».

Yinchuan is the capital of an autonomous region governed by the Hui. The Hui are closely related to the majority Han Chinese – in language and ethnicity. So they speak fluent Mandarin – unlike most Uyghurs. There are roughly 10.6 million Hui in China (roughly 0.8% of the overall population), compared to 10.1 million Uyghurs. So the Hui are in effect the largest of the ten Muslim nationalities inside China. I have very fond memories of visiting Hui communities in the late 1990s on the edge of the ancient Silk Road. Compared to the Uyghurs, the Hui are way more assimilated; after all, unlike the Uyghurs, they have not had to deal with a relentless Han settler influx.

Time to mingle

Prime Minister Li Keqiang, addressing CCP notables in Xinjiang two months ago, de facto acknowledged, on the record, the ultra-touchy subject of Uyghur culture under pressure mixed with the lack of jobs in Xinjiang; *«Let the people, especially the young, have something to do and money to earn»*. He's substantially on the mark when he stresses, *«Xinjiang's development and stability... have a bearing on nation and ethnic unity and national security»*.¹ If Xinjiang is not in peace, OBOR will go nowhere.

It's open to endless debate to what extent Han settlers will be willing to «mingle» more with native Uyghurs; as for private companies turbo-charging investment in Xinjiang, that is a given considering multiple OBOR-related opportunities ahead.

The heart of the problem is not so much the official – accommodating – policy in Beijing; it's provincial CCP officials' paranoia, reflected on harsh crackdowns. The facts on the ground spell out mosques barred from calls to prayer; fasting forbidden during Ramadan; children under 18 banned from entering mosques; and the overall dismissal of Uyghur culture and language.

Provincial officials may justify these practices as connected to the spread of Salafi-jihadi terrorism – a certified Beijing nightmare. Precedents abound – starting with a smatter of Uyghurs fighting in Afghanistan under the Taliban (I saw and talked to quite a few in Panjshir valley prisons before 9/11).

Then the process developed into the former East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) – affiliated with Osama bin Laden and Mullah Omar – rebranding themselves as the Turkestan Islamic Party; Uyghurs fighting alongside the Taliban and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU); Uyghurs now attacking security forces in Xinjiang itself – using knives; and Uyghurs composing a sizeable jihadi contingent inside Jabhat al-Nusra, a.k.a. al-Qaeda in Syria, alongside Uzbeks and with a sprinkling of other Central Asian nationals.

None of this, of course, justifies what may be seen as collective punishment of over 10 million Uyghurs.

Still, the Uyghur-Salafi-jihadi connection does go way beyond – all the way to Southeast Asia, with Uyghur Salafi-jihadis active in Malaysia, Thailand and most of all Indonesia, where they

are aligned with a Daesh-affiliated group based in the jungles of Sulawesi and led by Abu Wardah Santoso, the most wanted man in Indonesia.

Any sort of military offensive to stop Daesh in its tracks is not an option for Beijing, as Wang Zhen, from the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, explains. China does not have a military base in the Middle East; and a military offensive against just a few hundred Uyghurs does not make sense.

That «foreign religious influence»

Beijing is very careful to spin the best possible Sino-Arab cultural links. A new, comprehensive China Arab Policy paper was released only four months ago – tied up with Xi's state visits to Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Iran. Beijing is directly engaged on a multiple soft power offensive featuring everything from Chinese language training in the Middle East to more spots for Arab students to study in China.

Yet, in parallel, the threat of «foreign religious influence» – shorthand for Salafi-jihadism – remains. Chinese Muslims are very much wary of receiving any kind of favors from Saudi benefactors – as much as official Beijing-Riyadh relations may not be in jeopardy.

The heart of the matter is that for Beijing, OBOR – or the upcoming, Great Eurasian Emporium – trumps everything, as it is bound to progressively place China at the heart of a new system of global trade, wherever the American, NATO-on-trade deals, TPP and TTIP, may lead (or crash).

An OBOR sideshow is the set up of the first Chinese military base outside of its borders, in Djibouti, alongside American and French bases. Djibouti is crucial because it is astride the Maritime Silk Road linking the Middle Kingdom to all those vital markets via Suez all the way to the Mediterranean.

Beijing anyway never ceases to accrue political capital. The Arab League may not account for much, but secretary-general Nabil Elaraby's review of the relationship has been nothing short of glowing; *«China is the only major state in the world that always supports Arab rights and causes because they are rightful. China does not side with any party over another and it always seeks the common good»*.

Well, Beijing can't go wrong with its trademark mix of support for state sovereignty; noninterference in any nation's domestic affairs; and that by now notorious emphasis on *«a new type of international relations featuring win-win co-operation»*, which implies no fabrication and/or demonization of «enemies». Compare it with Exceptionalist's warmongering rhetoric – and acts.

Needless to add, Beijing's increasing soft power all across the lands of Islam rattles plenty of sensitive nerves in the Beltway. And as long as China keeps improving its already peerless

trading position – and massive infrastructure/development projects all across OBOR – these nerves are bound to remain rattled.