

The War on Terrorism: China's Opportunities and Dilemmas

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By Jing-dong Yuan

I. Introduction

The following essay is by Jing-dong Yuan, Senior Research Associate, Center for Nonproliferation Studies, Monterey Institute of International Studies. Yuan argues that the US call for an international fight against terrorism causes a number of dilemmas for the PRC. He discusses the possible implications for the PRC's fight against Islamic separatism in Xinjiang, its position on state sovereignty, its concerns about US hegemonism, its attitude toward the UN, and its relations with states in South Asia and the Middle East.

II. Essay By Jing-dong Yuan

"The War on Terrorism: China's Opportunities and Dilemmas"
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As the Bush administration rallies the international community into a broad-based coalition to support a war on terrorism, China's reaction and posture are on the minds of U.S. policy-makers, security analysts, and the world media. In the aftermath of the tragedy on Black Tuesday, some see opportunities for Beijing to demonstrate its credentials as a responsible rising power and to mend the tattered Sino-U.S. relationship. Others criticize the lack of a clear Chinese endorsement of the U.S. call for a comprehensive war on terrorism that includes military action. China's moment of truth on terrorism will arrive in the coming weeks. China has strong reasons to get on the bandwagon of an international coalition readying for war on terrorism, but Beijing also has deep reservations over intervention and the use of force. China faces a dilemma similar to the one it faced a decade ago prior to the start of the Gulf War. In the end, Chinese responses--whether unequivocal support, tacit endorsement of U.S. actions, conditional support, or concerns voiced from the sidelines--will be

determined by its broader post-Cold War security agenda. This agenda emphasizes the importance of economic development, reunification with Taiwan, and the development of a multipolar international order.

New Opportunities

China's initial response to the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, DC was one of deep shock, sympathy, and condolences. Chinese President Jiang Zemin sent President Bush a telegram expressing China's sympathy. When the two presidents spoke on the evening of September 12, Jiang pledged Chinese readiness to strengthen dialogue and cooperation with the United States and the international community in joint efforts to fight against terrorist violence. These exchanges were followed by additional Chinese government statements reiterating Beijing's consistent stand against terrorism.

Beijing has strong reasons to express its condemnation of terrorism. China seeks to present itself as a responsible rising power on the world stage. Chinese leaders believe the selection of Beijing as the site for the 2008 Olympic Games reflects the international community's confidence in China's continuing reform and stability. China's pending admission to the World Trade Organization this month demonstrates China's commitment to embracing and upholding the rules of international trade and investment. A strong and forceful stand on international terrorism will put China in good stead in the community of nations. President Jiang Zemin's consultations with his Russian, British, and French counterparts, along with his conversations with President Bush, are part of China's efforts to build a positive international image. These efforts also help refute charges that China has "one foot in the terrorists' camp" due to arms transfers to states that harbor or sponsor terrorist groups and organizations. The Foreign Ministry's quick denial of any formal Chinese links with the Taliban government should also be viewed in this vein.

China also supports strong anti-terrorism measures due to concerns about its own vulnerability to terrorism in its vast northwestern territories of Tibet and Xinjiang. Since the late 1980s, Muslim separatists in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region have posed an increasing threat to China's territorial integrity. Xinjiang makes up one-sixth of China's total land area. This vast but thinly populated (16.6 million) region holds potentially large oil deposits (though these are unconfirmed) and China's nuclear weapons testing site. In recent years, Muslim separatist movements have increasingly resorted to violence, including bomb explosions, assassinations, and street fighting. The central government has responded to the unrest with unrelenting resolve. Islamic fundamentalist elements in Central Asia, Afghanistan, and the Middle East have reportedly trained some of the individuals responsible for these attacks. More worrisome, such attacks have begun to spread to major cities like Beijing, Wuhan, and Guangzhou.

As China faces a rising tide of terrorism and separatist movements within its own borders, the government has adopted specific approaches in dealing with the issue. The first has to do with prevention. This involves domestic legislation and sweeping crackdowns on terrorist activities by law enforcement agencies. Another approach is to isolate and demonize separatist groups. The government has depicted them as evil forces and defended its sometimes heavy-handed approach to separatist activities as necessary to protect the social and economic stability of minority regions. Beijing has combined these repressive tactics with efforts to co-opt leaders of minority groups.

Internationally, China has sought closer cooperation with the governments of the Central Asian republics. Anti-terrorism has become a major focus of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization that includes China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. The six member states have already announced the establishment of an anti-terrorism center. A September 14 statement by the six prime ministers condemned the attacks on the United States and reiterated the Organization's

resolve to fight terrorism.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization is a critical part of Chinese efforts to stem and eradicate external links to domestic separatist and terrorist cells. Beijing has also reached out to states in the region suspected of providing havens for terrorist organizations. Indeed, China has normal working relations with Iran, has acknowledged informal contacts with the Taliban government, and maintains a close relationship with Pakistan. While China's domestic approach to separatist and terrorist groups emphasizes repression and the use of force, its approach to Islamic countries tends to be more moderate. China typically seeks cooperation in preventing terrorist organizations in Islamic countries from providing support to separatist groups operating within China.

The September 11 terrorist attacks also provide the opportunity for a fresh start for Sino-U.S. relations. Chinese leaders hope that increased cooperation in the area of anti-terrorism can help rebuild a stable bilateral relationship. Despite major differences between the United States and China over human rights, humanitarian intervention, and regional security issues, the two countries have also pursued common interests in combating narcotics trafficking, international organized crime, and terrorism. Many Chinese analysts hope this attack could mark a turning point for enhanced consultation and expanded cooperation in fighting terrorism and pursuing other areas of mutual interests. This could help restore Sino-U.S. relations following a series of setbacks, including 1998-99 allegations of Chinese nuclear espionage, the accidental U.S. bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in May 1999, and the collision between a U.S. reconnaissance plane and a Chinese fighter in April 2001. The very fact that Beijing's cooperation is being actively sought by the United States gives Chinese leaders an opportunity that should not be missed. Closer cooperation in terms of intelligence sharing, coordination of law enforcement efforts, and extradition of suspected criminals could be particularly helpful if separatist elements in Xinjiang are emboldened by what happened on September 11. Any experience and lessons drawn from current U.S. anti-terrorism operations could potentially provide tremendous benefits to Chinese law enforcement efforts.

Changes in U.S. priorities following the terrorist attacks also provide a windfall of sort for Chinese leaders. The Bush administration's international focus is now on the war against terrorism, not on the possibility of a future challenge from China. The need to build the broadest possible coalition against international terrorism is also forcing the Bush administration to retreat from its tendency to rely on unilateral foreign policy actions. Black Tuesday also reinforced Beijing's claims that ballistic missile defenses are not the right answer to international terrorist attacks, which are now viewed as the most salient threat to U.S. security, property, and public safety. This new security agenda may ease Chinese suspicions about U.S. intentions, though efforts by the Bush administration to use the terrorist attacks to push forward with missile defenses would revive these concerns.

New Concerns

While China's support for increased international cooperation in combating terrorism is clear, its attitude toward the use of force in response to the September 11 terrorist acts remains ambivalent. Indeed, one can detect strong reservations about military actions. Beijing has laid down several conditions to be met before it endorses U.S. military operations: actions should be based on "concrete evidence," should strictly observe international law, should not hurt innocent civilians, and should be carried out with authorization from the UN Security Council. China also wants U.S. "support and understanding in the fight against terrorism and separatists [in China]," although the Foreign Ministry denied any linkage between Chinese cooperation against terrorism and a change of U.S. policy toward Xinjiang, Tibet, and Taiwan. Underlying this hesitance and ambivalence are Chinese perspectives on the post-Cold War international order and views on the sources of international terrorism; strong objections to interference in domestic affairs under the pretext of

humanitarian intervention; and concerns over potential expansion of U.S. military presence close to China's borders.

Chinese perspectives on the post-Cold War world revolve around consistent themes of multipolarity, a greater UN role in world affairs, state sovereignty, and non-interference in domestic affairs. China wants to be consulted on important international issues and believes key security issues should be handled through the UN Security Council, where Beijing wields veto power as a permanent member. Given China's relatively weak but rising international position, China has repeatedly emphasized the importance of the principles of territorial integrity and sovereignty, and non-interference in internal affairs. Chinese officials and scholars suggest that these principles must form the basis of any new international order.

Chinese analyses of international terrorism not only focus on the origin, evolution, and characteristics of terrorist groups and activities, but also seek to uncover the root causes of terrorism and the links to international political, economic, and social justice. While acknowledging the role of globalization and technological diffusion, and the rising religious fundamentalism in fermenting international terrorism, Chinese analyses almost all point to post-Cold War U.S. foreign policy as one of the direct causes of the United States becoming the target of terrorist attacks. The United States is seen as an arrogant superpower protecting an unjust international political and economic order, intervening in other countries' domestic affairs, and acting without regard for the concerns of many ethnic and religious groups. This makes the United States a target for international terrorist organizations. In other words, terrorist activities cannot be eradicated without fundamental change in U.S. foreign policy.

Beijing's reservation's about providing unconditional support for U.S. military actions also reflect its consistent opposition to intervention in other countries' domestic affairs. Indeed, China has been derided as the "vicar" of state sovereignty at a time when the traditional notion of sovereignty is being eroded. China worries about the potential for the United States to use the pretext of humanitarian intervention to challenge its sovereignty over minority regions such as Tibet and Xinjiang. US/NATO intervention in Kosovo sent a chilling warning to policy-makers in Beijing that the United Nations could be bypassed and that sovereignty could be ignored and violated. The Bush administration's rhetoric about treating terrorist groups and the states that harbor them alike only heightens China's anxiety. Hence, China is demanding "concrete evidence" and a UN role.

China also worries about the likely expansion of a U.S. military presence closer to China's doorstep. One legacy of the 1990-91 Gulf War is an enlarged permanent U.S. military presence in the Gulf and Saudi Arabia. Military operations against Usama bin Laden in Afghanistan could bring U.S. armed forces to South and Central Asia, with which China shares over 5,000 kilometers of borders. China also faces immediate worries about backlash and possibly refugees as a result of U.S. military retaliation. As one prominent Chinese security analyst has pointed out, China is worried that U.S.-led military strikes against Afghanistan "may squeeze the evil activities out of Afghanistan and into our territory." High-ranking Chinese officials also warn that military retaliation could lead to an escalation of revenge begetting revenge, further aggravating terrorism and violence.

Weighing the Options

China faces a serious dilemma in crafting its response to the U.S. war on terrorism. On the one hand, it wants to be seen as resolute and unfailing in its political support for action against terrorism. On the other, it does not want to be closely associated with U.S. military actions that violate state sovereignty and invite retaliation. Beijing wants to join international efforts in the fight against terrorism because international support may help it confront growing terrorist activities in support of separatist movements in Xinjiang. At the same time, China is concerned that U.S. military

operations may set precedents for future interference in domestic affairs and the further erosion of the UN's authority. China wants to seize the opportunity to improve Sino-U.S. relations, but also wants to exploit the opportunity to extract U.S. concessions on Taiwan, missile defense, and its policy toward Xinjiang and Tibetan separatists. These long-term normative and practical concerns are pitted against the more immediate challenges of crafting the right policy in a volatile situation.

Clearly, the current situation requires that China strike the right balance between its fundamental principles and immediate policy responses. Specifically, China will have to make decisions about several immediate policy issues. These include:

- * whether and how hard China should insist on a UN resolution authorizing military action;
- * what role (if any) should China play in supporting U.S. military actions;
- * how China should respond if the United States proceeds without UN authorization;
- * what impact the war on terrorism will have on Pakistan and how Beijing should help; and
- * how heightened concern over international terrorism should affect Chinese arms sales and relations with states that harbor terrorists.

China supports greater international cooperation against terrorism. Beijing desires (but is unlikely to insist) that the UN Security Council authorize any military action. This would not only address China's concerns about unregulated U.S. unilateralism, but would also give China a voice in shaping the scope and objectives of UN-sanctioned military operations. However China is unlikely to object too vocally to U.S. military actions without UN authorization or to push too hard for a UN resolution setting limits on U.S.-led military operations.

While Beijing and Washington agree on the need to deal with international terrorism resolutely (including greater security measures at home, isolating and demonizing terrorist groups, and seeking greater international cooperation), they have fundamental differences over the use of force outside one's own borders. However, the magnitude of the September 11 tragedy and the global consensus on forceful responses make arguing against any military responses difficult. Beijing must decide whether to become part of a global struggle against terrorism and what specific role it might play. Following a September 21st meeting with U.S. Secretary of State Powell, Chinese Foreign Minister Tang stated that Sino-U.S. cooperation against terrorism had already started and would continue in the future. This cooperation will include sharing of intelligence information about terrorist groups and activities. If the United Nations authorizes military action, it is possible that China would provide support for operations against terrorist targets.

Pakistan presents a difficult challenge. China will continue to strongly support General Musharraf's government, but will be more concerned about the risks of destabilizing Pakistan than about Pakistan's value as a strategic counterweight to India. Chinese Foreign Minister Tang likely used his meeting with Secretary Powell to urge Washington to adopt a more balanced South Asia policy and not to push Islamabad for actions that might bring down the Musharraf government. China wants a moderate Pakistani government that can help stem Islamic fundamentalist support of separatist movements in Xinjiang.

Finally, Beijing must also reconsider its relations with key countries in the Middle East. Chinese ties to countries like Iran, Iraq, and Libya have been driven by a host of geo-strategic, commercial, and foreign policy considerations, often straining relations with Washington in the process. China's alleged transfers of nuclear- and chemical- related items and technology to Iran and Pakistan and the role of Chinese companies in rebuilding the Iraqi air defense system have triggered U.S. complaints and sanctions. One motive for Chinese efforts to develop diplomatic and economic relations with countries such as Iran and Iraq was to prevent them from supporting separatist groups in Xinjiang. The September 11 attacks could again bring the issue of China's ties to these countries under the U.S. microscope and increase pressure on China to curtail relations and end

arms sales to countries harboring or sponsoring terrorist groups. In the context of an international war against terrorism, Beijing may have to make some difficult choices.

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Nautilus Institute

608 San Miguel Ave., Berkeley, CA 94707-1535 | Phone: (510) 423-0372 | Email:

nautilus@nautilus.org