



NEWPORT PAPERS

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CHINA AND THE TERROR WAR

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CHINA AND THE TERROR WAR

Purpose: To assess China's responses to the terror war and the opportunities for and limitations of U.S.-Chinese collaboration to combat the terrorist threat.

Background: China was among the first states to condemn the terrorist attacks against the United States. Chinese officials were stunned by the magnitude of the 11 September events, and quickly acknowledged the threat posed by terrorist actions to international stability and to Beijing's security interests. China's border with Afghanistan, its close ties with Pakistan and several of the Central Asian republics, and its own experiences with ethnic separatist activities in western China underscored these concerns. At the same time, the Chinese clearly recognized that the abrupt and intense U.S. focus on the terrorist threat sharply reduced previous American preoccupations with China's strategic challenge to U.S. interests in East Asia. Beijing thus saw and acted on the near-term opportunity to improve bilateral relations with Washington and to align with the burgeoning coalition arrayed against Al Qaeda. However, Beijing's continued unease about Bush administration policies toward China, its wariness about large-scale U.S. military interventions on China's periphery, and worries about the longer-term course of U.S. strategy in the terror war has placed limits on Chinese support. Sustaining longer-term U.S.-Chinese collaboration in the war is far from certain, especially should U.S. military operations extend to states beyond Afghanistan.

Discussion: *What explains China's initial reactions to 11 September?* China's unequivocal condemnation of the terrorist attacks reflected the leadership's clear recognition of the dangers posed by Al Qaeda. Several sources claim that Chinese President Jiang Zemin watched the terrorist attacks on CNN, and immediately convened an emergency Politburo meeting to deliberate Chinese policy responses. In the first days following the attacks, some Chinese chat room participants argued that America's power and international dominance made it a natural target for such terrorist activity, the implication being that the United States "got what it deserved." But the leadership quickly suppressed these sentiments and (in contrast to other recent Chinese reactions to the U.S. use of force) sharply limited any criticisms of U.S. policy in China's official media.

The Chinese also sought to distinguish between support for the elimination of the Al Qaeda network in Afghanistan and unconditional backing of longer term U.S. counter terror strategy. During a visit to Washington the week after the attacks, Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs Tang Jiaxuan set forth Chinese "principles" governing support for U.S. military actions: (1) there had to be conclusive evidence that the targets of military retaliation were responsible for the attacks; (2) the target(s) of any counter attack should

be kept strictly limited; (3) civilian casualties and collateral damage needed to be kept to an absolute minimum; and (4) all military actions should be fully consistent with the U.N. charter and international law. In addition, the Chinese very early called for the establishment of a new Afghan coalition government. Beijing also counseled far stronger U.S. support for Pakistan and for General Musharraf in particular. Having stated its primary concerns, China helped craft the U.N. Security Council resolution that provided ample sanction for the U.S. military campaign against the Taliban and Al Qaeda. Chinese diplomats subsequently offered full backing to the Bonn Accord creating an interim Kabul government.

China has also vigorously pursued renewed intelligence collaboration with the United States. China's proximity to Afghanistan, its long-standing close ties with Pakistan, and the fact that significant numbers of Chinese nationals are known to have been trained in the Al Qaeda organization provide the Chinese with ample information of clear intelligence value to U.S. counter terror operations. In early December 2001, Ambassador-at-Large Francis Taylor led a delegation to Beijing for the purpose of upgrading and formalizing this cooperation. The two sides established a bilateral financial terrorism working group and biannual meetings on intelligence, law enforcement, and financial monitoring. Equally important, in meetings with Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi, senior Chinese leaders concurred with Japan's unprecedented naval deployments to the Indian Ocean. This suggests a degree of flexibility that few would have thought possible prior to 11 September. At the same time, the Chinese quickly approved a five-day port visit to Hong Kong by the USS STENNIS en route to the Arabian Sea, thereby indirectly endorsing U.S. military strikes in Afghanistan. Talks on military maritime safety issues were also resumed. China's readiness to cooperate in the terror war at multiple levels has had a major positive impact on U.S.-Chinese relations.

China's early signals of support for U.S. policy paid immediate dividends for Beijing, including high level contact with senior Bush administration officials, early consultations between U.S. and Chinese counter-terrorism experts, and (most important) President Bush's decision to travel to Shanghai for the APEC economic summit in mid-October—the only overseas trip that the President has undertaken since 11 September. During the summit, Presidents Bush and Jiang pledged common efforts to move toward a constructive and cooperative relationship, with the U.S. also noting that relations had to be "candid." Such statements of common purpose, though necessarily formulaic, were a far cry from earlier U.S. pronouncements that China was a prospective "strategic competitor" of the United States. In addition, the U.S. appears ready to resume senior-level military-to-military contacts, which were suspended during the EP-3 standoff. Some Chinese officials may also have believed that early support for U.S. military actions could enable much more vigorous suppression of ethnic separatist forces in western China. By claiming that as many as 1,000 Uighur separatists may have been trained in Al Qaeda camps in Afghanistan, the Chinese explicitly sought to make common cause with the United States; U.S. officials have rejected this rationale.

What do the Chinese see as the potential downsides to supporting U.S. policy? Despite its support for coalition military operations in Afghanistan, China also sees potential longer-term risks to its political and security interests in U.S. leadership of the terror war and Washington's burgeoning military presence in Central Asia. The major breakthroughs in U.S.-Russian relations prompted by 11 September have sharply reduced the possibilities of a Chinese-Russian coalition to constrain U.S. strategic dominance. Increased U.S. political and economic support for Pakistan (though strongly urged by Beijing) suggests that the United States will increasingly serve as Islamabad's primary international benefactor. Though China has long seen Pakistan's viability as pivotal to South and Central Asian security, a disproportionate U.S. role could diminish China's standing and stature in Islamabad. In addition, the prospect of a substantial, open-ended U.S. military presence in areas contiguous to China's western borders, including new U.S. security commitments to the ex-Soviet states of Central Asia, clearly increases U.S. political-military advantage at China's expense, and among states that China had assiduously cultivated over the past half decade. A major Chinese diplomatic initiative toward Central Asia, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, has been all but eclipsed by U.S. actions in the present crisis.

The U.S. campaign in Afghanistan also seems very likely to affect future Chinese strategy toward Taiwan. The campaign's major successes to date have no doubt reminded China's leadership of the potency of U.S. military power, and America's readiness to use it. U.S. military prowess will thus prove helpful in cautioning Beijing about any use of force against Taiwan. Indeed, a setback to Beijing's interests in Taiwan's parliamentary elections of early December 2001 (when pro-independence forces won a major electoral victory at the expense of those committed to increasing political links to the mainland) did not precipitate anything approximating a full-blown cross-straits crisis, as occurred in 1996. Though the Chinese are seeking to avoid any major escalation of tensions with the United States during the current crisis, some Chinese leaders may believe that the U.S. preoccupation with the terror war will distract Washington from ongoing attention to developments in the Taiwan Strait. U.S. officials may need to disabuse their Chinese counterparts of any such miscalculation.

It is, however, the prospect of future U.S. actions against other states accused of harboring, financing, or supporting international terrorism that pose the largest concerns for the Chinese. So long as the United States remains focused on countries where there is unambiguous evidence of support for terrorist activities, the Chinese will neither impede nor second guess U.S. actions. Though China clearly entertains serious reservations about a counter-terrorist strategy that could entail successive military operations against other sovereign states, they have thus far kept their reservations in check. However, heightened military pressure against major U.S. adversaries such as Iraq is viewed very warily by the Chinese—unless Iraq can be tied unambiguously to the Al Qaeda network. The Chinese would also be profoundly concerned about a military campaign that might spread beyond Afghanistan, and could potentially create risks of far greater regional instability, especially in Pakistan. Thus, Beijing's near-term concurrence with U.S. military operations in Afghanistan does not constitute a blank check for subsequent U.S.

actions. This underscores the need for continued close consultations with China on future steps in the terror war.

What have been the net gains for both countries of Chinese support for the terror war? China's support for the terror war reflects Beijing's keen appreciation of the potential dangers to international security and stability posed by global terrorism. This has clearly facilitated U.S. efforts to assemble as broad a coalition as possible to counter terrorist threats. Compared to the roles of Russia, Pakistan, and the frontline states of Central Asia, however, China's role is less direct. The Chinese are not a core member of the international coalition, except insofar as future actions in the terror war require additional Security Council support. But the Chinese recognize the opportunity to strengthen and regularize diplomatic, security, and intelligence consultations with the United States. This political breakthrough cuts both ways, since it obligates both countries to heightened consultation, especially as the United States contemplates future steps in the terror war. This could apply in particular should efforts to root out terrorist networks shift toward the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia and/or other Southeast Asian states, where an enhanced U.S. military presence and future U.S. military operations could represent a major security concern to China.

Chinese interests do not afford Beijing a realistic option to distance itself from the terrorist threat. Indeed, the Chinese have sought to exploit the intense international focus on terrorism to justify actions against domestic groups opposed to Communist rule. The U.S. clearly cannot condone Chinese actions against groups with legitimate grievances, as opposed to against ethnic separatists prepared to use internal violence for larger political ends. But more positive Chinese involvement in the terror war warrants careful consideration, including possible Chinese contributions to the rebuilding of Afghanistan and enhanced coordination of U.S. and Chinese political and economic support for Pakistan. The looming questions for U.S.-Chinese relations concern the clarification of the larger ends and means in the terror war, and whether this might potentially entail a more direct Chinese participation in these actions. This bears in particular on the possible extension of U.S. military operations beyond Afghanistan. Given China's abiding suspicions about major power intervention in the internal affairs of sovereign states, this is an especially sensitive issue for Chinese leaders. The U.S. cannot allow Chinese concerns to dictate future U.S. steps in the terror war, but neither can Chinese concerns be ignored or dismissed. The Chinese are seeking to define an appropriate, sustainable contribution to the anti-terror campaign. The U.S. retains ample incentives to encourage China's fuller involvement in this struggle, in as much as it will facilitate broader restraint in Chinese regional policies and contribute to much more productive U.S.-China relations.

Recommendations/Actions: The terror war has reestablished a basis for heightened security consultations between the United States and China, including new opportunities for political and intelligence collaboration. Increased U.S. engagement with China does not guarantee future Chinese support for U.S. actions, but such support would be impossible in the absence of such efforts. The United States therefore needs to continue

to explore the potential opportunities for heightened collaboration with Beijing presented by the terror war.