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Strategic Insight

Beijing and the American War on Terrorism

by [H. Lyman Miller](#)

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July 1, 2002

The American war on terrorism since the 11 September attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon has presented Beijing with a dilemma. On one hand, Washington's call for international support in the war on terrorism gave Beijing an opportunity to improve bilateral relations with a new Bush Administration that previously had regarded ties with the PRC with a cool skepticism. On the other hand, Washington's conduct of the war on terrorism has given it new strategic assets and military relationships in Asia that, Beijing fears, may be used in the long term to contain China itself. With diverging key interests at stake, Beijing's view of the war on terrorism has been publicly collaborative but also increasingly ambivalent.

U.S.-China Bilateral Relations

For Beijing, a stable relationship with the United States is critical to China's economic development. Since the early 1980s, the PRC has relied heavily on access to U.S. markets and on American investment to fuel its drive at economic modernization. China's success at economic reform over the past two decades is due in part to the policy of economic engagement pursued by the past six U.S. administrations, from President Nixon to President Clinton. Campaign statements by President George W. Bush and some of his policy advisers, however, promised a harder policy line toward China. In addition, the EP-3 affair--in which a Chinese fighter collided with an American electronic surveillance plane off the China coast in April last year--introduced an early sour note into Beijing's relationship with the new administration.

The attacks on 11 September therefore gave Beijing an opportunity to help Washington on an issue of top priority for the United States. Beijing seized the opportunity immediately. In telephone calls to President Bush by Chinese President Jiang Zemin immediately after the 11 September attacks and in conversations in Washington of the PRC foreign minister with the President, Vice President Cheney, and Secretary Powell soon thereafter, the Beijing leadership condemned the attacks and pledged cooperation in the following war against terrorism. In summits with the President in Shanghai in October and in Beijing in February this year, Jiang urged the creation of long-term mechanisms for combating international terrorism.

Concretely, Beijing cooperated. It lent diplomatic support in persuading Pakistan--long a close Chinese ally and a key country in the American effort in Afghanistan--to cooperate with Washington. Beijing voted in favor of UN Security Council Resolution 1368 authorizing the use of military force against al-Qaida and the Taliban regime in Afghanistan--the first time Beijing has voted for the international use of force since taking its seat in 1971. It has supplied intelligence on financial networks and on fundamentalist Islamic groups operating in western China and having ties to al-Qaida. As the Afghan campaign began, it closed its border with Afghanistan to prevent al-Qaida and Taliban members from escaping into western China. For all these steps and others, President Bush has publicly thanked Beijing more than once. Administration officials also implied that Beijing's collaboration had moderated their earlier skeptical view of China, promising no longer to talk of China as a "strategic competitor."

Strategic Unease

At the same time, the course of the American war on terrorism has increasingly unsettled Chinese security and foreign affairs analysts, who see Washington using the war to enhance what they see as American predominance-"hegemonism"-in the international system. They also are suspicious that Washington is using the war on terrorism not only to root out al-Qaida and its supporters, but also to extend a decade-long effort to encircle China strategically.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Beijing has worried about the implications of the resulting "unipolar" world order-one in which the United States remains as the sole superpower, now able to dominate the international system and pursue unilateral policy courses unconstrained by counterbalancing great powers. Since the early 1990s, therefore, Beijing has sought to dilute overarching American power globally in two ways. First, it has tried to play to a presumed interest of other significant centers of power in the international system-Russia, European states like Germany and France, India, and others-in limiting U.S. power. These efforts are usually couched in the rhetoric of promoting "multipolarity" in the international order and are manifested in the "strategic partnerships" Beijing has established with Moscow in 1997, Paris in the same year, Sao Paolo thereafter, and others.

Second, Beijing has insisted that U.S. military intervention in regional crises proceed under the auspices of the United Nations, where Beijing as a permanent Security Council member may have a voice in shaping how such intervention is pursued. For example, Beijing went along with the U.S.-led effort in 1991 to evict the Iraqis from Kuwait because Washington did proceed under the umbrella of UN Security Council authority. In contrast, Beijing objected vehemently to the U.S. intervention in Kosovo in 1999. In that instance Washington sidestepped the United Nations and proceeded under the umbrella of NATO, a "unilateralist" course that Beijing fears might plausibly be employed by Washington in a crisis over Taiwan, Tibet, or some other area of direct Chinese concern. In the present context, Beijing's support for war on terrorism in Afghanistan was made easier because Washington sought to work through the UN Security Council.

In addition to these broad strategic concerns at the global level, Beijing has seen the war on terrorism as enhancing the American military position in Asia, directly on China's periphery. Specifically, the war on terrorism has:

- Given the United States a new and potentially permanent military presence in Central Asia;
- Extended Washington's tilt toward India in South Asia, resuming military cooperation between them;
- Lent impetus to a restored U.S.-Philippines military relationship;
- Provided the opportunity for resuming long-suspended U.S. military cooperation with Indonesia; and
- Provided the occasion for support roles by the Japanese navy in the Indian Ocean, far beyond its previous scope of operations.

These steps complement other steps by the United States since the early 1990s to enhance the American security posture in the Asia-Pacific region in ways that, in the eyes of many Chinese security analysts, portend a new American effort to "contain" China, as Washington had attempted in the 1950s. These steps include:

- Expansion of the scope of the U.S.-Japan security alliance;
- Expanded U.S. arms sales to Taiwan, together with incremental steps to upgrade Washington's quasi-official relationship with Taipei;
- Normalization of American relations with Hanoi in 1995;
- Efforts to build theater missile defense systems with Japan and possibly Taiwan;
- Plans to build a national missile defense system that effectively negates China's small nuclear deterrent; and

- The Bush Administration's announced plan to shift the focus of American defense forces from Europe to the Asia-Pacific region.

Chinese security and foreign affairs analysts are not unanimous on the significance of these steps for American China policy, which they acknowledge has long been couched in the language of "engagement." For most of the past decade, a persisting and thinly concealed debate has festered in Beijing over exactly what Washington's policy toward China is. Some have argued that Washington's policy course has been essentially one of cooperative engagement, despite its steps in the security realm over the past several years. Others argue that Washington talks the talk of engagement, but it actually has been quietly practicing a policy of containment that ultimately seeks to break China's growing power and overturn the Beijing regime.

The implication of all of these considerations on Beijing's part is that Beijing's approach to the American war on terrorism will be colored significantly by its perceptions of the longer term impact that the conduct of the war will have on American power globally and in the Asia-Pacific region specifically. Beijing will continue to support Washington in the limited ways that do not jeopardize what it sees as its own security interests in the region. At the same time, it will be eager to appear supportive of the war on terrorism because the economic relationship with the United States is so critical to China's present and future prosperity.

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