

LUKEWARM PARTNER: CHINESE SUPPORT FOR U.S. COUNTER-TERRORISM IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

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Overview

- Although Beijing in principle supports U.S. efforts to thwart international terrorist activities, Chinese leaders and analysts believe the Bush Administration has defined the war on terrorism (WOT) too broadly and simplistically.
- Chinese observers commonly object to some aspects of American prosecution of the WOT, arguing that it sometimes serves as a cloak for the pursuit of narrow U.S. interests and that Washington has shown insufficient consideration for the views and concerns of other countries.
- Beijing nevertheless sees cooperation with the USA against terror groups as a means of gaining international support for China's own counter-terrorism (CT) effort as well as a way of enhancing trust and cooperation with the United States.
- The Chinese have mixed feelings about U.S. CT efforts in Southeast Asia. On one hand, they welcome the suppression of terrorist activities and havens in this region, which is economically important to China and straddles searoutes on which China is increasingly dependent. On the other hand, China worries that the USA will take advantage of CT engagement with Southeast Asia to attempt to weaken that region's relationships with the Chinese.
- Informed Chinese observers are doubtful that U.S. CT activities in Southeast Asia will succeed. They point out that Islam has deep roots in the sub-region and that CT activities may have the reverse effect of increasing resentment toward the United States.
- China is willing to carry out a wide range of measures inside China to deny support to terrorist groups. The Chinese government welcomes many forms of cooperation with U.S. authorities. China participates in the Container Security Initiative and has allowed the FBI to open an office in China.
- The Chinese remain suspicious, however, that U.S. CT operatives inside China would conduct anti-China espionage. Furthermore, China's support for U.S.-led sanctions or military operations against terrorist havens within the region is uncertain.

The War on Terrorism, as Seen From Beijing

Officially, China opposes terrorism and is willing to cooperate fully with the rest of the world, including the United States, in a wide range of counter-terrorism measures. China, however, has its own view of the war on terrorism (WOT). The terrorism that most directly threatens Beijing occurs within the context of ethnic separatist activity among non-Han minorities in the PRC, particularly the Muslim Uighurs in Xinjiang Province. Hence Chinese officialdom frequently uses the phrase “terrorism, separatism and extremism,” because in the case of Xinjiang the Chinese see linkage between these three phenomena. Opposition to these “three evils” was the founding principle of the Shanghai Security Organization that binds China with Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Since 9-11, the Chinese government has released copious amounts of information about Uighur groups that Beijing says are terrorists, including the claim that up to 1,000 Chinese Muslims received training in training camps in Afghanistan run by Osama bin Laden.

Statements by Chinese officials about terrorism also commonly emphasize the need to combat not only the “symptoms” but also the “root causes” of terror by working toward alleviating poverty and promoting prosperity in developing countries. This sentiment is consistent with China’s long-standing effort to style itself as a “principled” country that promotes just treatment of the Third World. It also indirectly supports the Chinese view that the Bush Administration has relied too heavily on military approaches to fight terrorism.

Chinese observers understand clearly, therefore, that their counter-terror interests differ from those of the United States. There is a large asymmetry between the two countries in the perceived threat posed by international terrorism. America faces immediate danger from a large, well-financed collection of enemies with a broad, long-term agenda of hostility. China, on the other hand, faces a vastly lower level of terror threat that is primarily focused on a single issue. The Chinese also believe they have far better relations with the Muslim world than do the Americans. China, self-proclaimed champion of the developing world, has long cultivated favorable relations with several Middle East countries. Beijing even had a constructive relationship with Afghanistan’s former Taliban regime, largely motivated by the Chinese desire to shut off the flow of external support for separatists in Xinjiang.

There remains considerable common ground for Sino-U.S. counter-terror efforts. Many Chinese analysts accept that al Qaeda and other terrorist organizations threatening U.S. interests are a challenge to international peace and order, and are thus a threat (albeit a less compelling one) to Chinese interests as well.

But while accepting that an American campaign against terrorism is justifiable in principle, Beijing has taken issue with some aspects of the U.S. response to 9-11. Chinese generally believe the Bush Administration’s approach to counter-terrorism is overly aggressive, diplomatically impatient, and pays too little attention to the political and economic discontent in the Third World that gives rise to terror activities. Beijing offered conditional support for the U.S.-led campaign to overthrow the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, but did not support the invasion of Iraq, siding with countries such as France and Germany that argued for continued reliance on negotiations and inspections to deal with the problem of Saddam Hussein’s alleged weapons of mass destruction program. Chinese observers believe the United States is losing the battle for the “hearts and minds” of communities that are potential breeding grounds for terrorists.

China has consistently warned the United States against “double standards” in opposing terrorism. The Chinese have insisted since 9-11 that if Washington wants international support, the Americans should not define the enemy to include only those

groups that threaten the United States (e.g. al Qaeda are “terrorists” but Uighur separatists are “political activists”).

The Chinese are suspicious that the United States might attempt to use counter-terrorism as a cover for activities that support narrow U.S. economic and political goals without benefiting the international community. At worst, from the Chinese standpoint, this might include activities intended to weaken or constrain China and preserve American strength and influence in Asia.

What China Wants

A constructive working relationship with the United States is crucial to the PRC meeting its economic development objectives. An adversarial relationship would threaten the immense benefits China receives from U.S. trade and investment and could lead to deleterious military tensions. Prior to 9-11, U.S. strategists commonly identified China as America’s main potential adversary. Sino-U.S. relations had deteriorated in the first months of the Bush II presidency with the new administration’s tough approach to China and the EP-3 collision incident of April 2001. The dramatic emergence of a compelling new enemy, al Qaeda, gave China a welcome opportunity to recast itself as a partner of the United States and speed the recovery of the bilateral relationship. China therefore seeks to emphasize cooperation in counter-terrorism as an area that unites China and the USA in a common cause, underscoring China’s hope that Washington views China as a friend rather than a latent enemy. Hence the Chinese consistently stress that their contribution to the war on terrorism is important. The implication here is that Beijing is providing a valuable service to the international community, and in particular the Chinese are accommodating a vital U.S. interest. A Chinese wish, usually stated, is that the United States will reciprocate this support on issues vital to the PRC. Statements by Chinese officials immediately after the 9-11 attacks, for example, gracelessly linked Chinese support for the WOT with American willingness to oppose “separatism” (i.e., support for Taiwan).

Beijing also wants international, and especially U.S., recognition and legitimation of China’s own fight against terrorism. This has been controversial. Human rights monitoring groups have warned that Beijing was using counter-terrorism as a cover for a politically-motivated crackdown on Uighurs who hold views that displease Beijing but who do not necessarily using violent means to pursue their agenda. The PRC was thus pleased by Washington’s designation of the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) as a terrorist organization in 2002. The Chinese have blamed ETIM for a campaign of bombings and sabotage inside China designed to win independence for Xinjiang province. Beijing says these attacks have killed 162 people in China and wounded 440, and that ETIM is affiliated with al Qaeda. Beijing protested, however, when the Americans proved unwilling to hand over to the PRC 22 Chinese Uighurs detained in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. U.S. officials said they feared the Uighurs might be mistreated if returned to China. This development, clearly embarrassing to the Chinese, sparked Chinese criticism that America was inconsistently showing leniency toward terrorists that were a direct threat to PRC but not U.S. interests.

Cooperation with the USA

China has made significant efforts to accommodate both international public opinion and U.S. objectives in the WOT. China is a signatory to most of the international conventions on opposing terrorism, including the International Convention for the Suppression of the Financing of Terrorism. China has proven supportive of efforts to freeze assets linked to terrorist groups, and Chinese officials regularly consult with U.S. officials on this issue. The People’s Bank of China is organizing a Terrorist Finance Investigative Department within its anti-money-laundering bureau. Chinese officials have reportedly provided information such as the locations of suspected

terrorist training camps in Afghanistan, leads about funds linked to terrorist groups, and hotel records that aided the U.S. investigation of the “Portland Six” in 2002. China takes the same actions against groups designated terrorists by the United States (under Executive Order 13224) as those listed under United Nations Security Council Resolution 1267.

In some instances, China has endured setbacks to other goals to preserve its image as a supporter of the WOT. China chose not to seriously oppose Japan’s support for U.S.-led military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. Beijing has a well-established record of complaining vociferously about increases in either the capabilities or the activities of Japan’s Self-Defense Forces. Tokyo’s dispatch of naval vessels to the Indian Ocean to support U.S. forces fighting in Afghanistan was a precedent-setting event, as was sending Japanese soldiers to Iraq during the post-Saddam insurgency. Beijing’s criticism was noticeably mild in both cases, demonstrating a Chinese desire not to be perceived as obstructionist.

Chinese officials have been agreeable to cooperation that provides for advice from and consultation with U.S. officials based in China, but are not willing to cede jurisdiction within Chinese territory to U.S. operatives. China allowed the FBI to open an office in Beijing in 2002. In July 2003, China joined the Container Security Initiative (CSI), allowing U.S. customs officials stationed in Shanghai and Shenzhen to help screen containers bound for shipment to the USA.

China has contributed to reconstruction in Afghanistan by providing tents and lighting for polling stations. Beijing has also donated nearly \$200 million in assistance to Iraq despite opposing the American-led invasion to overthrow the Saddam Hussein regime. Beijing fights terrorism indirectly as well through efforts to stop piracy, drug smuggling and human trafficking. For example, China contributes millions of dollars annually to anti-narcotics efforts in Burma.

The Chinese desire to be seen as a partner rather than a target country. An announcement in the Chinese press about China joining the CSI pointed out that as conditions of China’s cooperation, “The U.S. customs officials should respect China's sovereignty and abide by Chinese laws, while similarly, Chinese customs officials can be sent to U.S. ports.” Similarly, the Chinese assented to the FBI office in Beijing under the condition that China can open an equivalent office in the USA.

Counter-Terrorism in Southeast Asia

The potential danger Southeast Asia-based terrorist groups pose to Chinese interests is not trivial. With its voracious appetite for energy and other supplies and the huge profits it gains from its exports, China’s reliance on shipping that passes through Southeast Asian waters is growing. Linkage with terrorist groups could worsen the piracy that already plagues these waters. As China grows wealthier, Chinese investment in Southeast Asian countries is increasing. PRC nationals frequently do business with ethnic Chinese in the sub-region. Given the resentment aroused by these overseas Chinese among other local ethnic communities, it is not difficult to imagine that terrorist attacks might target enterprises in which Chinese citizens have investments.

Therefore, in the Chinese view, U.S. attempts to combat terrorism in Southeast Asia are not necessarily contrary to Chinese interests, even though these efforts involve an increased U.S. military presence. Chinese analysts are inclined to think U.S. involvement in the sub-region that is strictly aimed at counter-terrorism is helpful to China, but using counter-terrorism operations as an opening for activities designed to support other, narrowly self-interest U.S. strategic goals would meet Chinese disapproval. Whether the U.S. was employing one approach or the other would always

be subject to Chinese interpretation. Thus one can easily foresee this becoming a source of Sino-U.S. friction despite American assurances.

China already pursues its own counter-terrorism agenda in Southeast Asia. Counter-terrorism cooperation is on the agenda for bilateral talks Chinese officials regularly hold with their counterparts in several Southeast Asian countries. China participated along with Japan, India, South Korea, Sri Lanka and ASEAN in the formation of the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Anti-Piracy in Asia, designed to facilitate the sharing of information among regional navies to help combat terrorism as well as piracy in and around the Strait of Malacca.

The Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI), announced by President George W. Bush in May 2003, aims to commit a coalition of countries to agree to intercept and search ships and aircraft within their jurisdictions that are suspected of illegally transporting weapons of mass destruction technology or materials. Beijing was initially cool toward the PSI, disturbed by the prospect of the U.S. Navy stopping and searching ships around the globe based on American allegations. The Chinese have not forgotten the 1993 *Yinhe* incident, in which U.S. officials searched a Chinese freighter in a Saudi Arabian port on suspicion the vessel was carrying precursors for making chemical weapons to Iran. No such chemicals were found, and the Chinese complained they suffered financial losses of \$13 million and international embarrassment. More recently, however, China has cautiously indicated it might support PSI. PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson Zhang Qiyue recently said Chinese officials “agree with the aims of the PSI,” but added that PSI action “should be carried out within the scope of international law and in line with the relevant principles of the UN Charter.” Zhang said “we are ready to exchange views with the countries concerned on this,” but “We have reservations concerning forcible interception” that might violate international law.

In March 2004 Admiral Thomas Fargo, commander of U.S. military forces in the Asia-Pacific region, proposed a Regional Maritime Security Initiative (RMSI). Regional media interpretations of Fargo’s comments elicited negative reactions to RMSI in Malaysia and Indonesia. Many Chinese analysts see this as an American attempt to control the Strait because of its strategic significance as the waterway for maritime traffic between Asia and the Middle East. The more pessimistic of these analysts fear the USA would use this control to block energy and other vital supplies from reaching China in order to slow China’s economic growth. China officially said little about RMSI after Fargo’s announcement, apparently content to stand aside while Malaysia and Indonesia raised strong objections.

Chinese observers knowledgeable about international affairs raise doubts about the prospects of success of U.S.-sponsored counter-terrorism efforts in Southeast Asia. They note that Islam is deeply integrated into many Southeast Asian societies, and that counter-terrorism activities constantly risk offending Muslim communities. One Chinese foreign affairs analyst opined, “The more the USA tries to oppose terrorism, the stronger anti-Americanism will become.” Some Southeast Asian governments may be willing to cooperate with Washington to get material benefits, but effective counter-terrorism will be a delicate, long-term endeavor. From what the Chinese have seen of the Bush Administration’s global counter-terrorism efforts thus far, they say they are not confident that Washington has the skill to succeed.

At some level, China and the USA are competing for influence in Southeast Asia. China has consciously and assiduously worked to convince the sub-region that the PRC poses no “threat” either strategically or economically. Beijing welcomes opportunities to juxtapose itself favorably against the United States before a Southeast Asian audience. Beijing’s New Security Concept, for example, formally promulgated at a 1997 ASEAN meeting, calls for replacing the “Cold War mentality” (including U.S. bilateral alliances in

the Asia-Pacific region) with a new international order based on cooperative security, multilateral dialogue, and peaceful resolution of international disputes (Taiwan, as an “internal Chinese matter,” does not count here). Many countries in the sub-region are uncomfortable with the idea of U.S. forces attacking suspected terrorist bases in their neighborhoods and are unwilling to offer their territory as staging areas for American troops. Beijing would be unlikely to join or even endorse a U.S.-sponsored anti-terrorist activity or operation in the sub-region that large numbers of Southeast Asians viewed as heavy-handed, both because China perceives the threat as less compelling and because the Chinese would see another opportunity to score public relations points against the Americans.

A Limited, Conditional Partnership

China can be expected to insist that counter-terrorism cooperation with the United States must not require China to compromise its sovereignty or principles. Beijing will require that all agreements are reciprocal and imply full equality. There is potential tension between, on one hand, China’s desire to cooperate with the United States against terrorists, and on the other hand, Chinese suspicion about American intentions toward China and Chinese umbrage toward the notion that they need American help to combat terrorist activities within their own territory.

China has made sacrifices to gain recognition as a supporter of U.S. global counter-terrorism efforts. Chinese support, however, is not limitless. Beijing is not likely to take a leading role in either promoting or opposing counter-terrorism activities in Southeast Asia, but will rather fall in line with the prevailing sentiment in the sub-region. Washington should not count on China to help pressure Southeast Asian countries to take measures that are advocated by the USA but are domestically unpopular. It has been difficult for China to oppose the presence of U.S. forces in Central Asia without appearing unsupportive of the WOT. In the case of Southeast Asia, however, China can maintain a low profile while relying on other countries to insist on limits to American involvement.