

China's strategic interests in AfPak Conflicts

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On the United States”*

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Panel II:

**China’s Interests in Afghanistan and Pakistan and Their Impact on the
United States**

Dear Commissioners,

China’s strategic interest in the “AFPAK” region (Afghanistan and Pakistan) is of great importance to US interests, particularly since the fall of the Taliban regime in December 2001 and even more importantly as Taliban forces are escalating their offensive against Pakistan’s government and while the US Administration is preparing a renewed campaign inside Afghanistan and is devising a new plan to provide support to the government of Pakistan. Chinese strategic options in central and southern Asia can complicate and mitigate US, NATO and allied efforts against terrorism, or it can bring additional strength to the international campaign against dangerous radical forces in the region. Chinese strategic behavior regarding the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan and Pakistan can also have an impact on China’s internal national security and territorial integrity on the longer term.

This testimony aims at drawing the attention of the US Government to a key factor: If China's leadership develops an accurate long range perception of the

Jihadi threat in the region, its behavior and strategic response can bring about a significant effort against the Taliban and al Qaeda and therefore tighten cooperation in Asia and beyond against the terror forces

Hence in this testimony I will review quickly the impact of the AFPAK conflict on China's national security and argue that Beijing has a vital interest in joining the US-led efforts in the subcontinent against the threat of Jihadi terrorism and should be engaged by Washington from that perspective. I will also raise questions about China's understanding of the threat, its potential policies regarding the latter and make recommendations regarding US initiatives to influence that understanding and encourage a new Chinese participation in the global confrontation with the common threat, al Qaeda and the Taliban. ¹

China's Global Geopolitical interests

Traditionally China's leadership has perceived its geopolitical and economic interests in several concentric circles from the inside out. In the inner circle, the regime's primordial interest has been to insure the territorial integrity of the country. Several regions of China, some acquired via past military campaigns, have continued to witness separatist movements. Most active has been Tibet followed by Xinjiang (Sinkiang) northwestern province. Other areas have been candidate to potential separatist trends including lower Mongolia and Manchuria. The next wider circle of national security concerns and geopolitical goals has been the return of former territorial possessions. Reuniting with Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan has been on the list of goals to achieve, in one way or another. The reintegration of Hong Kong and Macao at century's end was seen as a tremendous success and as a indicator for future possibilities regarding Taiwan. In addition to the highly publicized claims for reunification, other less visible claims had developed during the Cold War but never pursued: contiguous territories belonging then to the Soviet Union and now to the Russian Federation along the northern frontiers of the People's Republic of China (PRC). Beyond the two territorial circles of national security interest, China's projection of power expressed itself eastbound militarily during the Korean conflict drawing a red line against the West in defense of North Korean's Communist regime and southbound during the Vietnam War. But on its western and south western frontiers, China's regime developed also transnational attitudes. With India, at times, Beijing experienced border tensions generated over border delineation disagreements. However with Pakistan, even as Islamabad and Washington entertained good relations, China built a series of relationships, which can be defined as close to strategic in more than one domain. Chinese Pakistani partnership in more than one area, has been traditionally perceived in Beijing as a balance of power play with a growing India.

But beyond regional consideration, the Chinese “window” into Pakistan has also served as a testing ground of influence into the wider Muslim world. ²

In the past few years, China’s government has increased its level of trade and military transactions deeper in the Greater Middle East, particularly with regimes hostile to the US and Western efforts against terrorism and under UN sanctions, including Iran, Syria and Sudan. Hence, one major trend to be noted is Chinese strategic cooperation with Pakistan against India on the one hand and supplying the axis Iran-Syria-Sudan -- themselves supporters of terrorist organizations -- with advanced weapons on the other. In short, China’s strategic policies regarding two parties in the Muslim world, collides with US and Western interests. With Pakistan, Beijing’s interest is aimed at a strategic balance with India. With the axis Iran-Syria-Sudan, Beijing’s interest is to empower the latter against US-led efforts. ³

China’s strategic benefit to Global Jihadi forces

By engaging in backing Pakistan’s military exclusively against India while ignoring the Taliban threat in Afghanistan and Pakistan, Beijing indirectly -- and perhaps unwillingly -- finds itself injecting strength into the sub Indian regional Jihadi web. Indeed, by supplying Pakistan with missile technology and weapons capable of escalating the military buildup with India, China would be encouraging both nuclear countries to expand their strategic armament and reduce their diplomatic attempts to reach solutions to their bilateral crises. By supplying Pakistan with long range missiles, Beijing would be forcing India to improve its own. And by focusing on equipping Pakistan’s military with weapons aimed at India, China would be lessening Islamabad’s focus on the Taliban and the Jihadi organizations operating on the Pakistani-Indian and the Afghani-Pakistani borders. In short, Chinese support to Pakistan is aiming at the wrong foe: India.

On the other hand, China’s strategic arms support to the “confrontational axis” (known as *al Muma’naa* in Arabic) including the Iranian, Syrian and Sudanese regimes, is also strengthening the two large trees of the global Jihadi web, directly and indirectly. Iran’s regime is Khomeinist-Jihadist. Tehran and Damascus strategically support Hezbollah, a Khomeinist-Jihadist organization. Iran, Syria and Hezbollah openly support Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), both Salafi Jihadists. Furthermore, Iran and Hezbollah cooperate with Sudan’s regime which is Salafist and has ties to international Jihadi organizations in Africa and beyond, themselves with ties to the Taliban and al Qaeda. In short, eventually, China’s strategic arming of the “confrontational axis” ends up backing international Jihadism, including the Taliban and al Qaeda -- even if Beijing is not directly

supplying the latter with weapons, as far as we know. This raises the question: is supporting Jihadi forces in the interest of China's national security?⁴

China's Jihadi problem domestically

At the core of China's self perceived priorities with respect to its national security are two secessionist movements, one in Tibet and the other in Xinjiang. Both movements are ethnically and historically grounded and have developed international outreach. While Tibet's independence movement inspired and led by the Dalai Lama, is essentially non violent and non armed, some networks in the Xinjiang's separatist movement have adopted terror methods and have conducted operations against Chinese authorities as recently as last summer. The latest security reports, including some by Chinese authorities confirm that a Jihadist terrorist organization is now operational in Xinjiang province and its latest actions have reached areas across China and its capital. What is the nature of that Jihadi threat inside China?

The Xinjiang province inside China is inhabited by 45% Uyghurs, 40.6% Han Chinese, 6.7% Kazakhs and 7.5% from other ethnicities. The Uyghurs have been opposing Chinese domination of the province for decades and in alliance with other non Han ethnicities, form close to 60% majority inside the province. Xinjiang has a Muslim majority. The separatist claim in the province is a classical ethnic conflict but in the last few years a Jihadist movement has made inroads inside the Muslim communities, indoctrinating and recruiting a significant number of Jihadi militants. Many "Chinese Jihadists" have been recruited by al Qaeda and fought in Afghanistan. Some are now fighting in the ranks of the Taliban in Pakistan. These Xinjiang Jihadists have been dispatched by the Jihadi network to countries and areas remote from central Asia, such as Chechnya, the Caucasus, the Horn of Africa and south Asia. Hence, the Chinese-based Jihadist movement not only aims at separating Xinjiang from China but is now embedded in the worldwide terror network threatening several countries around the world.

The East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM, *Doğu Türkistan İslâm Hareketi*) is declared as a terrorist organization by the governments of the PRC, Kazakhstan, Pakistan and the United States, as well as the United Nations.⁵ The Chinese government accused ETIM for car bomb attacks in Xinjiang during the 1990s, as well as the death of a Chinese diplomat in Kyrgyzstan in 2002. ETIM is linked to al Qaeda as well. In its 2005 report on terrorism, the US State Department said that the group was "linked to al Qaida and the international jihadist movement" and that al Qaeda provided the group with "training and financial assistance." In January 2002, the Chinese government released a report in which it revealed that Hassan

Mahsum, the head of ETIM, met with Osama bin Laden in 1999 and received promises of money, and that bin Laden sent "scores of terrorists" into China. During the summer of 2008, Chinese authorities arrested members of ETIM and other Jihadist terror groups such as the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) and stopped others as they were planning or executing terror attacks against the Olympics. To this date, ETIM and TIP as well as other Jihadi factions are still operational inside China, in Central Asia and embedded in international networks.⁶

Jihadi strategies towards China

What are the strategic goals of the “Chinese Jihadists”? By exploring the available literature produced by ETIM, TIP and other transnational central Asian Jihadi groups as well as al Qaeda, Taliban and international Salafists, one can understand the long term goals of the movement as follow:

1. To indoctrinate a vast pool of ethnic Uyghurs and other non-Hans inside Xinjiang province into Jihadism before recruiting them into a local Jihadi urban army.
2. Unleash a Jihadi intifada inside Xinjiang by attacking Chinese military, economic and urban targets.
3. Organizing terror strikes across China, focusing on major cities, financial and economic centers, including foreign establishments with the aim of weakening the political resolve in Beijing.
4. Establish large Taliban-like enclaves inside Xinjiang and implement tightly interpreted Sharia Law.
5. When time is ripe and amidst severe internal crises in China, to declare a Taliban-like Emirate in parts or all of Xinjiang.
6. Launch Jihadi operations from Xinjiang into the other Turkic speaking republics of central Asia and link up with their local Jihadi movements
7. Separate Xinjiang from China and merge it with the other “Emirates” of central Asia to form a regional Taliban like power with ambitions to unite with all other Emirates already formed in Afghanistan and parts of Pakistan and India.

In a sum, the ETIM-TIP terror campaign in China may overlap (or claim to overlap) with the ethnic Uyghur struggle for liberation or separation, but in fact exceeds that goal in order to create a totalitarian fundamentalist regime, similar and parallel to the Taliban and al Qaeda model. Note that the “Chinese Jihadist” movement is part of the international Jihadist movement at the center of which is al Qaeda and the Taliban. ETIM-TIP terrorists have been spotted, arrested or killed in

“battlefields” as far as Afghanistan, Pakistan, central Asia, the Caucuses and Africa, in addition to China. Therefore, Beijing is facing off with a Jihadi international threat as are the United States, Europe, Russia, India and the moderates in the Arab and Muslim world. But is the Chinese government acting accordingly and what are its real stakes in Afghanistan and Pakistan?

China’s stakes in “AFPAK”

Had the Taliban not been removed from power in Kabul, it would have pressed forward north to defeat the Northern Alliance and eventually reached the international borders including with China. The 76 km long frontier between a Taliban/AQ state and the Chinese state would have been a corridor for Jihadist crossing into and from China. A well established Jihadi regime in Afghanistan would be compelled ideologically and strategically to lend its support to Jihadi activities in Xinjiang. The presence of ETIM Uyghur fighters with al Qaeda in Afghanistan prior to September 11, 2001 is clear evidence that the projection was for Kabul under Mullah Umar and Usama Bin Laden to serve as a base for an insurrection in China’s northwestern provinces. Beyond the “Islamist” ideological agenda, a Taliban “Jihad” for power across Xinjiang has other strategic incentives. This vast province has an annual runoff of about 88 billion cubic meters of surface water together with 25 billion cubic meters of exploitable groundwater. Glaciers covering 24,000 square kilometers lock away about 2,580 billion cubic meters of water. Xingjian’s coal reserves are about 38% of China’s national total. Petroleum and natural gas reserves estimated at 30 billion tons and that is more than 25% of the national total. Add to it the strategically important nuclear installations in the province as well as some of China’s space program components in the near future.

In short, a Jihadist takeover of Xinjiang, outside any norm of peaceful resolution to the ethnic minorities question, will be catastrophic to Chinese economic and political stability. It would also add severe threats to world security. Thus, the return of the Taliban to power in Kabul must be perceived by China’s strategists as a direct threat to the country’s national security and economic development.

The Chinese stakes in Pakistan aren’t that different. In some regards they may be higher. A Taliban victory over the secular government in Islamabad will have cataclysmic consequences on China’s national security and economy as well. Pakistan has 523 km of borders with the Popular Republic of China. A Jihadi takeover of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan will lead to a campaign of Jihadi activities via the common borders and through the two zones of Kashmir (India and Pakistan) into Chinese territories to link up with and support an intifada in

Xinjiang. The Jihadi strategic agenda in the sub Indian continent consists of seizing Afghanistan, Pakistan and Indian Kashmir and wage a massive “Jihad” along the entire western borders of China including with central Asia. The minor Chinese experience with few terror attacks or attempted plots inside the country are only a minute sampler of what will hit the Asian giant if US efforts collapse in Afghanistan and Pakistan’s government crumbles under the Taliban. Beijing, a super nuclear power, understands perhaps better than other countries the cataclysmic meaning of a nuclear armed Taliban federation of Emirates across its southern borders. Simply put, China will be the next nuclear threatened target along with India. But is the Chinese leadership aware of the menace? And if so, is it applying the right strategic choices to preempt this mounting danger? ⁷

China’s current policy on “AFPAK”

In 2006 Chinese and Afghan authorities signed an agreement of cooperation on their joint border. One of stipulations stated

Both sides agreed that terrorism constitutes an international menace, as it poses a grave threat to world peace and security. China and Afghanistan are both victims of terrorism and they both firmly oppose terrorism of any form. The Chinese side supported Afghanistan’s efforts in combating terrorism and safeguarding national stability and is ready to work with the Afghan side to fight terrorism, separatism, extremism, organized crime as well as illegal immigration, drug trafficking and illegal arms trade. The Afghan side reaffirmed its strong support to the Chinese side in combating the three forces.

Without naming the threat, both countries committed to fight terrorism on both sides of the border. This is a good step in the right direction.

On the other hand, Beijing and Islamabad have a web of relationships related to the military, economic and technological realms. This web of connections can become a starter for a new Chinese involvement in counterterrorism on a regional scale. On August 8, 2008 a joint statement said “*Pakistan and China have agreed to coordinate and help closely with each other in fight against terrorism.*” More recently on May 5, a high encounter between the Punjab Governor with the Chinese Ambassador reaffirmed the common concern:

All of us have realized that the terrorists were the country’s “number 1 enemy” and we need to unite to overcome the threat posed by them. By joining hands with the international forces, Pakistan would eradicate terrorism from the region, the

governor said. Reciprocating Taseer's friendly gestures, Zhaohui expressed his satisfaction over the pace and depth of cooperation between the two countries and hoped that mutual cooperation at the strategic level will go a long way.

However, Beijing must come to realize that a set of classical bilateral measures with Kabul and Islamabad aren't enough to stop the Taliban threat, which rapidly would generate into a Xinjiang "Jihad" if Afghanistan and Pakistan fail to contain the flow of terror on short, medium and long terms. China's strategic planning must preempt the scenarios where terror forces would establish launching pads for future attacks across the borders from the Vakhani corridor and the Karkoram range. Hence, Beijing needs to develop a new policy of strategic cooperation with the international campaigns in AFPAK, particularly with the US-led NATO efforts along with the Afghan and Pakistani Government.⁸

China's needed new approach

Beijing must redesign its platform for AFPAK along the following tracks:

1. Reconvert its support to Pakistan, not to escalate the balance of power with India but to enable Islamabad to contain and roll back the Taliban.
2. Open a dialogue with India based on joint efforts against the Jihadi threat in the subcontinent covering the three nuclear powers, China, Pakistan and India.
3. Increase its cooperation with Afghanistan against the joint menace of the Taliban and the Xinjiang Jihadists.
4. Establish a strategic dialogue with the United States and NATO on common concerns regarding international Jihadist terror and lay the groundwork for economic, political, security and military joint measures against Al Qaeda, the Taliban and their global web.
5. Join a consortium on terror threat in central and south Asia along with the US, NATO, Russia, India, Pakistan and all concerned governments so to isolate the Jihadists and deny them the control of any country in the area, particularly if nuclear.

US suggested initiatives

The United States relations with the People's Republic of China depends of a wide array of components ranging from strategic nuclear security, military balance, economic issues, diplomatic questions to human rights and the question of Taiwan and North Korea. The web of areas of concerns and of areas of cooperation is large and complex. Washington's decision makers must indeed take into consideration all other factors when dealing with one issue at the table. Based on this overarching reality, I suggest the development of a new initiative towards China focusing on an elevated cooperation against terrorism in general and on the Taliban-Al Qaeda threat in central and south Asia in particular.

China has a vested interest in stopping the Talibanization of AFPAK and thus preempting a projected terror campaign in Xinjiang; and the United States has a vested interest in defeating the Jihadi threat in Afghanistan and rolling it back in Pakistan. Hence I do propose the following measures:

- a. That the United States of America engages the People's Republic of China in a joint program to counter Jihadi terrorism in AFPAK, in particular, and in south and central Asia, in general.
- b. To form a consortium including the US, China, Russia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, the European Union, India and other willing governments to fight the scourge of Jihadi terrorism and work on de-radicalization programs across the region.
- c. The US must not abandon its policies of defense of human rights and democracy towards China as a price for such a new initiative.
- d. The US must not turn a blind eye on any legitimate ethnic and cultural claim of any minority in China in return for cooperation with Beijing on countering Jihadi terrorism. American Foreign Policy must be able to perform, both missions with equal success.

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¹ From Washington to Kabul to Beijing *Assessing Prospects for U.S.-China-Afghanistan Cooperation* by Nirav Patel and David Capezza, *Small Wars Journal*

² "Regional autonomy for China's ethnic minorities," April 30, 2008 (Xinhua). See also Colin Mackerras, *China's Ethnic Minorities and Globalisation* London, New York, Routledge Curzon, 2003.

³ See "Iran's New Alliance With China Could Cost U.S. Leverage." Robin Wright, *Washington Post* Wednesday, November 17, 2004; Page A21

⁴ See "Iran's China Option," Roger Cohen, *The New York Times*, February 8, 2009.

⁵ Council on Foreign Relations, *Backgrounder*, Holly Fletcher and Jayshree Bajoria, ETIM: "East Turkestan Islamic Movement," July 31, 2008

⁶ See "China hands death penalty to 2 'bent on jihad.'" *MSNBC*; December 17, 2008; also "Jihad in China's Far West," *Times*, Austin Ramzy / Kashgar, August 6, 2008

⁷ See Peter Lee, "Taliban force a China switch" *Asia Times*. March 6, 2009

⁸ Read "China Versus the Taliban" *Strategy Page*; August 14, 2007

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