

The Promise and Limitations of a Sino-U.S. Partnership

Terrorism's emergence after September 11, 2001, as the primary threat to international security introduced a new focus to Chinese foreign policy and brought about a great opportunity for improving relations with the United States. The broadened and deepened cooperation with Washington on counterterrorism and nonproliferation raised the prospect of a Sino-U.S. partnership in a new international setting. The effects of U.S. foreign policy adjustments on U.S. relations with China, however, are mixed. Although September 11 lowered China's status on the United States' threat list, the way the Bush administration has pursued the campaign on terrorism, particularly the invasion of Iraq, has aroused strong Chinese concern about the orientation of U.S. foreign policy, thus constraining the two countries' emerging partnership.

A New Focus for Chinese Foreign Policy

Although Chinese leaders and scholars have long been aware of the rise of nontraditional security challenges, a new recognition of terrorism's capacity for destruction in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks has largely reshaped China's security concept as well as its foreign and security policies. As the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs explicitly acknowledged, "the 9/11 incident underscored the imminent threat of terrorism to international peace and security."¹ New concern over the terrorist threat in the global war on terrorism in the three years since the attacks has encouraged the Chinese government to undertake a series of security and foreign policy initiatives in counterterrorism, nonproliferation, and regional security, as well as develop a greater commitment to multilateralism.

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The Washington Quarterly • 27:4 pp. 115–126.

COUNTERTERRORISM

China, a nation that has faced its own terrorist threat posed by the East Turkistan terrorist forces in China's Xinjiang Province, has intensified its counterterrorism efforts in the aftermath of September 11 through a range of legal, military, and diplomatic measures.

The East Turkistan terrorist threat is the product of a movement launched by Islamic fundamentalists in the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region of China in the 1980s, which seeks to found a so-called state of East Turkistan. In the 1990s, influenced by extremism, separatism, and international terrorism, part of the East Turkistan forces inside and outside China turned toward separatist and sabotage activities, with terrorist violence as their main means. According to the Chinese government, from 1990 to 2001 the East Turkistan terrorist forces were responsible for more than 200 terrorist incidents in Xinjiang, which resulted in 162 deaths and more than 440 injuries. Moreover, these forces are believed to have close connections with Al Qaeda. For example, the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM), one important group of the East Turkistan forces, is supported and directed by Osama bin Laden. Since the 1990s, bin Laden has schemed with the heads of Central and West Asian terrorist organizations many times to help the East Turkistan forces launch a holy war in Xinjiang, with the aim of establishing a theocratic Islamic state in the region.² Although China worked hard to cope with this terrorist threat, Beijing took a low profile on this issue before September 11, never internationally publicizing the threat or openly calling for international cooperation in fighting the East Turkistan terrorists.

The events of September 11 and the emergence of an international security environment focused on combating global terrorism has encouraged and enabled China to attract new international attention to this threat. On November 11, 2001, Chinese foreign minister Tang Jiaxuan stated in his address at the United Nations that "China also suffered from the terrorist threat. 'Eastern Turkistan' terrorist forces were trained, armed, and financially aided by international terrorist organizations. Fighting 'Eastern Turkistan' is an important dimension of the international campaign against terrorism."³ In January 2002, China released a White Paper revealing in detail the East Turkistan organization's terrorist activities conducted in Xinjiang from 1990 to 2001.⁴ Beijing's efforts to publicize East Turkistan terrorist activities in the hopes of encouraging the world to treat the organization as part of the greater international terrorist threat proved successful in the summer of 2002 when ETIM was added to the U.S. Department of State's list of terrorist organizations and the UN followed suit.

Beijing's new interest in working with international partners to meet its own terrorist threat, as well as combat global terrorism, further led China to

enter into regular bilateral dialogue with other countries to promote cooperation on counterterrorism. In October 2001, China and Russia agreed to establish the Sino-Russian working group on counterterrorism. In the same month, Presidents Jiang Zemin and George W. Bush met at the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit meeting in Shanghai, where they reached an agreement to set up Sino-U.S. exchanges and to cooperate on counterterrorism. In January 2002, Beijing and New Delhi agreed to establish a bilateral working group on counterterrorism.

In addition to bilateral approaches, China turned to multilateral institutions such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). The organization, with China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan as its members, was founded in 2001 to fight separatism, extremism, and terrorism. In the post-September 11 era, SCO faced both challenges and opportunities. On one hand, the United States, under the flag of fighting terrorism in Central Asia, started to forge closer security ties with some SCO members and stationed troops in the region, potentially undermining the organization's cohesion and function. On the other hand, the new sense of urgency about the terrorist threat among SCO members provided an incentive to deepen the organization substantively. Beijing seized this opportunity to intensify SCO cooperation, leading to the June 2002 agreement among SCO member states to establish its regional antiterrorism institution in Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan, to enhance coordination and the exchange of intelligence in the campaign against terrorism. In the summer of 2003, China and all SCO members except Uzbekistan launched their first, joint, multilateral military exercise, rehearsing a strike on terrorist camps.

In sum, the events of September 11 heightened China's awareness of the terrorist threat. Beijing subsequently not only moved to actively seek international cooperation in meeting its own terrorist challenge, but also extended support to the global war on terrorism through bilateral and multilateral approaches.

Terrorist forces in Xinjiang are believed to have close connections with Al Qaeda.

APPROACH TO NONPROLIFERATION

The September 11 attacks coupled with subsequent international attention to the prospect that terrorists could acquire weapons of mass destruction (WMD) has also alerted China to threats posed by weapons proliferation in unprecedented ways. The terrorists' use of hijacked civilian aircraft to attack military and civilian targets in the United States has made Chinese

policymakers aware that, were terrorists able to obtain them, they would indeed be likely to use nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons to wide effect. As China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs observed, "At present, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and their delivery vehicles has posed an increasing threat to world peace and security. Putting an effective end to such a threat has become a common task for the entire international community."⁵

Post-9/11 concern about WMD drove Beijing to adopt active diplomacy on North Korea.

This escalation of the WMD threat on Beijing's foreign policy agenda has prompted the Chinese government to improve its export control practices and take a more active role in international efforts to prevent WMD proliferation. Although Beijing promised to Washington in November 2000 that it was going to publish regulations to enhance its export controls, it was slow in doing so. China's heightened concern over the spread of WMD in the post-September 11 era, how-

ever, speed up its pace. In 2002, for example, China formulated, promulgated, and enforced a series of control regulations and related lists aimed at safeguarding its sensitive materials, such as missiles, biological and chemical items and technologies, and all military products. Marking a major step forward in China's nonproliferation legislation, these new regulations and lists established detailed and stringent provisions on the scope, clearance procedure, and punishment of the export of sensitive materials and embraced the "catch-all" principle, requiring the comprehensive control of all exports that might entail proliferation risks.

Heightened concern about the spread of WMD also drove Beijing to adopt active diplomacy on the North Korean nuclear issue. Since the revelation of the North Korean nuclear program in the fall of 2002, Beijing has engaged in "its most active multilateral diplomatic efforts ever,"⁶ both to avoid conflict on the Korean peninsula and to prevent the further proliferation of nuclear weapons and technology. In fact, China is more concerned about nuclear proliferation beyond Korea than it is about the prospect of a nuclear North Korea, as a nuclear North Korea is unlikely to use its weapons against China while proliferation runs the risk of weapons landing in the hands of terrorist organizations, a nightmare for every country.

REGIONAL STABILITY

The September 11 attacks highlighted the preeminence of nontraditional security threats; the transnational nature of these challenges has caused China to attach more importance to stability on its periphery. China, bor-

dering 15 countries, has more immediate neighbors than any other country in the world. As it increasingly opens its borders for economic and people-to-people exchanges with the outside world, the state of China's neighbors' stability directly impacts its own. For instance, the disintegration of the Soviet Union led to the rise of Islamic fundamentalist influence in some of its Central Asian republics. Very quickly, these influences penetrated China's Xinjiang province, spurring the East Turkistan forces' activities in China.

To enhance stability on its periphery, Beijing used to focus on improving political ties with adjacent countries through a policy it described as "*mu lin you hao* (good neighbor and friendliness)." In recent years, however, particularly after September 11, China has paid more attention to the economic dimension of its relations with neighboring countries. Reflecting on the broad sociopolitical context of terrorism, the Chinese believe that poverty and economic inequality is the hotbed of terrorism. As former Chinese foreign minister Tang Jiaxuan commented, "The prolonged violence and impoverishment in some developing countries has made them easy prey to the manipulation of terrorists. Only when we succeed in achieving common development ... can we eradicate the root causes of terrorism."⁷ The Chinese political and intellectual elite realize that, although China's economy is growing fast, most of its immediate neighbors still lag behind. Poverty in those countries may generate serious sociopolitical tensions and instability that will strain security on China's periphery, but the economic gap between a prosperous China and some of its poorer neighbors could also cause resentment against China, giving rise to tensions in their relations.

To guard against this possibility, Beijing has shown more enthusiasm for promoting economic cooperation with its neighboring countries, including the building of strong economic ties among SCO's members and the deepening of economic cooperation with states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. Indicative of this new focus on shared, improved economic relations, Beijing has more recently declared a policy of "*you lin, an lin, fu lin* (bringing its neighbors harmony, security, and prosperity)." It is expected that such an approach will help create a stable security environment for China and enhance its influence in regional affairs.

A Greater Commitment to Multilateralism

China's new post-9/11 awareness that terrorism in the era of globalization is transnational and requires a multilateral response has made the country a more vocal advocate of multilateralism in the last three years. Meanwhile, the U.S. penchant for unilateralism both before and since the September 11 attacks has reinforced China's commitment to multilateralism. Immediately

after September 11, Beijing was very concerned that the Bush administration, which demonstrated a unilateral tendency well before the attacks, would launch a series of unilateral efforts to fight terrorism, with uncontrollable consequences for the existing international order.

From the beginning of the global response to transnational terrorism, China stressed the desirability of giving the UN the lead role in coordinating an international campaign. On October 3, 2001, in a speech to a UN session on antiterrorism, the Chinese permanent representative to the UN suggested that the UN “is an important venue for the counterterrorism cooperation among countries, and it should play a leading role in the international campaign against terrorism.”⁸ Although China understood and even provided support for the U.S. war in Afghanistan, the subsequent U.S. invasion of Iraq without UN authorization aggravated China’s concern that the United States is determined to use military force and to abandon multilateral institutions to achieve its security goals.

Although the war in Iraq quickly drew to an end, China worries about its implications for international relations in the long run. Beijing deplored how the Iraq war and the international dispute that preceded it undermined mutual trust between countries, eroded harmony among different cultures, and detracted from the authority of an international regime of cooperation. Reflections on the Iraq war have reinforced China’s commitment to multilateralism. As Chinese foreign minister Li Zhaoxing put it, “Multilateralism stands as an effective means to address the common challenges facing humankind, an important approach to solving international disputes, a strong safeguard of globalization’s healthy development, and the best way to promote the democratization and legalization of international relations.”⁹ From China’s point of view, Washington’s appeal to the UN after the war to handle the Iraq issue proves that even a powerful country such as the United States cannot succeed alone, attesting to the high value of multilateralism.

The United States: Testing a New Security Concept and Practices

September 11 obviously resulted in drastic changes for the United States, both externally, including a revolutionary change in U.S. threat perceptions, the birth of the preemption doctrine, and the pursuit of freedom of action at the expense of traditional alliances, and internally, including the elevation of homeland security concerns as well as the rise of neoconservative influence. First, the September 11 attacks brought a paramount change to the United States’ concept of security and national security strategy that has had profound implications for Sino-U.S. relations: the U.S. threat perception shifted from a geopolitical concern to a functional one. Prior to the at-

tacks, the Bush administration's defense planners held that shifts in the balance of power, including the rise of major powers, and traditional major-power competition stood as the primary threat to U.S. national security. Challenges posed by a rising China particularly concerned the Pentagon, as the 2001 *Quadrennial Defense Review Report (QDR)* noted that "[m]aintaining a stable balance in Asia will be a complex task. The possibility exists that a military competitor with a formidable resource base will emerge."¹⁰ Although the *QDR* was released in late September 2001, its draft was completed before that and thus presented the pre-September 11 security thinking in the U.S. national security establishment.

The primary perceived threat to U.S. national security then changed, as clearly conveyed in its September 2002 *National Security Strategy (NSS)* report, to "the crossroads of radicalism and technology,"¹¹ otherwise defined as the combination of terrorism and WMD. By fundamentally shifting the priorities on the U.S. national security agenda and U.S. threat perceptions, the September 11 terrorist attacks made terrorism a much more urgent task than balancing emerging powers. In the realm of U.S. foreign policy, China was thus transformed from a "strategic competitor" requiring imminent attention to a potential partner in the war on terrorism. As demonstrated by Bush's trips to China in October 2001 and February 2002, Washington now was interested in developing "candid, constructive, and cooperative" relations with China. Meanwhile, Beijing also saw the opportunity to improve ties with Washington and reached out to the United States by providing valuable assistance and cooperation in the war on terrorism, such as supporting all UN counterterrorism resolutions, sharing intelligence, and cracking down on the financing of terrorist activities, among others. As such, the events of September 11 transformed the mood of Sino-U.S. relations from negative to positive.

Although Beijing views the reprioritization of the U.S. security agenda as necessary and appropriate, it saw other adjustments in U.S. national security strategy, particularly the preemption doctrine, as controversial and worrisome. At a tactical level, preemption was not new in U.S. military actions, demonstrated by the U.S. invasions of Grenada and Panama. Incorporating preemption into the U.S. national security strategy, however, and using it as the basis to deal with certain types of threats, such as rogue states, caused concern in Beijing and around the world. The *NSS* promises that, in the pursuit of preemption, the United States "will always proceed deliberately";

Post-9/11, China has paid more attention to economic relations with neighboring countries.

pledges that it will “build better, more integrated intelligence capabilities to provide timely, accurate information on threats”; and will “coordinate closely with allies to form a common assessment of the most dangerous threats.”¹² Such assurances were proven false, however, by the United States’ conduct of the war in Iraq, the first application of a preemptive strike after the September 11 attacks. As it turned out, the U.S. intelligence community did not provide “accurate information” about Iraq’s WMD capability or connections to Al Qaeda, nor did Washington “form a common assessment” with some of its important allies over the threats posed by Baghdad, much less seriously

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listen to China’s opinion on the issue. While eliminating the exaggerated threat posed by Saddam Hussein, the preemptive war against Iraq derailed the counterterrorist campaign, which should focus on terrorism itself rather than the so-called axis of evil; strained transatlantic relations; and undermined U.S. credibility as a responsible power. As a group of 27 retired U.S. diplomats and military commanders complained in June 2004, “Never in

the 2 1/4 centuries of our history has the United States been so isolated among nations, so broadly feared and distrusted.”¹³

Beyond preemption, the Bush administration, and the Pentagon in particular, seemed to believe that the United States should seek support from, but not be constrained by, traditional allies in fighting rogue states and terrorists after September 11. Instead, the United States sought to forge a “coalition of the willing” whenever necessary to advance its objective, with the mandate determining the coalition, not vice versa. Implicit in such an approach is a quest for unlimited freedom of action. That quest and the subsequent quarrel over the war in Iraq between the United States and some of its traditional allies have been so intense that some even wonder whether they are witnessing “the beginning of the end of ‘the West’—a coalition of U.S.-led, like-minded allies, bound by core shared values and strategic threats?”¹⁴ From a Chinese perspective, this means that the United States may become less predictable and potentially more dangerous to the world.

Beyond these foreign policy changes, the fourth change to the U.S. national security strategy since September 11 is the elevation of homeland security to its core, as demonstrated by the creation of the Department of Homeland Security. From the end of World War II until September 11, 2001, U.S. strategic attention was mainly devoted to protecting its overseas interests and allies in Western Europe, the Middle East, and East Asia. Although the Soviet Union could have attacked North America during the Cold War, the U.S. capacity to retaliate deterred it. In more than half a cen-

tury, amid endless conflicts and chaos around the globe, the U.S. homeland was basically safe, affording Washington the freedom of action overseas, including its involvement in Korea and Vietnam. The tragic attacks in New York and Washington, however, revealed the vulnerability of the United States in an era of globalization, particularly when the enemies are nonstate actors employing nontraditional means.

As a result of the new sense of vulnerability in homeland security, the Americans—the elite and the general public alike—have become more sensitive to perceived external threats and are more inclined to endorse the use of force to address them, even single-handedly. This explains why the U.S. invasion of Iraq, although widely and strongly opposed in the rest of the world, received a relatively high percentage of support at home. This phenomenon added to China's concern about the force-prone tendency in U.S. foreign behavior. Now with the transition of authority from U.S. forces to the Iraqi interim government, the Chinese wonder what the United States will target next—North Korea, Iran, or even China?

In fact, the Chinese are closely watching the neoconservatives' future influence on U.S. foreign policy. Before September 11, neoconservatives saw China as the primary threat to the United States and advocated a tough China policy. The events of September 11, however, shifted their attention away from China and toward Al Qaeda and Iraq. In the post-September 11 period, although the neoconservatives have used their influence in the Bush administration, particularly in the office of Vice President Dick Cheney and in the Pentagon, to promote robust military support for Taiwan—unprecedented since normalization of Sino-U.S. ties in 1979—and limit military-to-military relations with China, they do not have much control over other dimensions of Sino-U.S. relations. If Bush is reelected in November and the neoconservatives remain influential into his second term, however, it is very likely that they will try to turn more heat on China. Yet, some U.S. watchers in China argue that there is no need to worry even if Bush is reelected because the Iraqi aftermath should have been enough to teach him to distance himself from the neoconservatives.

Overall, the Chinese have seen both opportunities and challenges from the changes that have occurred in U.S. foreign policy in the post-September 11 era. On one hand, counterterrorism's emergence as the top U.S. priority changed the context of Sino-U.S. relations and broadened the area of cooperation between China and the United States. On the other hand, the United States seems to have become more force-prone, more unilateralist, and more unpredictable. If the level of political and strategic trust between the two countries is any indication, it is fair to say that the current stability in Sino-U.S. relations is tactical, not strategic.

New Trends Shaping International Security

By successfully destroying the World Trade Center in New York City, Al Qaeda demonstrated to the world its immense capacity to inflict heavy casualties on its targets, encouraging other terrorist groups throughout the world to follow its example by building networks and launching their own attacks. The attacks highlighted two trends that had developed in the post-Cold War era. First, nontraditional security challenges such as terrorism, WMD proliferation, drug trafficking, illegal immigration, AIDS, and envi-

The U.S. focus on terrorism at the expense of other issues may strain Sino-U.S. cooperation.

ronmental pollution superseded traditional security threats at the forefront of national security agendas. Most countries today see nonstate actors as a greater threat to their security interests than a shift in the balance of power. The terrorist threat in particular has received unprecedented attention. Where the next major terrorist attack may occur, how to cope with terrorist threats effectively, what the root causes of terrorism are and how to address them, and how

to enhance international cooperation in the campaign against terrorism have risen to the top of the international agenda. The preeminence of counterterrorism has facilitated the birth of new international regimes as well as modified the function of some existing ones. For instance, APEC—a forum created to promote trade and economic and technological cooperation as well as to liberalize investment in the Asia-Pacific region—has devoted more attention to counterterrorism.

As far as Sino-U.S. relations are concerned, the events of September 11 prompted the Bush administration to view China through a more rational lens and provided more ground for cooperation between the two countries. Even so, the United States' narrow focus on terrorism at the expense of other issues such as AIDS, poverty, and environmental degradation may strain Sino-U.S. cooperation. For China as well as for many other countries, although terrorism is a great threat to world peace and security, a more balanced agenda should be set, reflecting a wider range of concerns and serving the interests of more countries and peoples. Otherwise, cooperation on counterterrorism may not be sustainable.

Second, relations among countries are more fluid, fundamentally realigning contemporary major powers in a highly pluralistic and flexible international system of cooperation, competition, alignment, and realignment. During the Cold War, countries divided into two antagonist camps along an

ideological line; today, the line of demarcation has blurred. Traditional allies may fall into serious disputes, while countries without alliance bonds can move close to each other because of common interests and similar views of the world. International relations are becoming much more dynamic.

The United States is a major source of the dynamics for change. The Bush administration's unilateralist tendency and its attitude toward traditional alliances certainly have aroused strong concern among other major powers, including China, and may disrupt the global partnership against terrorism. Many questions remain unanswered: Will the United States continue to deviate from its long-held liberal tradition in its foreign policy? Will the American people succumb to the temptation of empire in a world of only one superpower? If Senator John Kerry (D-Mass.) wins the presidential election in November 2004, will he adopt a foreign policy informed by neoliberalism and multilateralism? If Bush is reelected, will he draw lessons from his first term, distance himself from the neoconservatives and traditional nationalists, and adopt a more moderate and pragmatist foreign policy? Only three years after the September 11 attacks, it is still too early to tell which of these changes in U.S. foreign policy are permanent and which are just temporary.

Notes

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