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### China's Caution on Afghanistan-Pakistan

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## China's Caution on Afghanistan–Pakistan

The ongoing crisis in Afghanistan and Pakistan looks like a prime candidate for closer cooperation between the United States and China. There are various broadly shared interests in combating terrorism, containing rising extremism, and supporting the stability of both states. With its extensive influence in Pakistan and substantial economic capacity, Beijing has important assets to bring to the table. In practice, however, efforts to achieve convergence have proved frustrating. Differences run deep over how to address the extremist threat and the broader geopolitics of the region. And as is true of its foreign policy elsewhere, China pursues a relatively narrow conception of its interests in Afghanistan and Pakistan, rather than supporting a more widely shared set of goals.

The problem for Beijing is that this narrow approach is proving increasingly unsuccessful. Security for its workers and major investment projects has deteriorated; the U.S. role in the region has expanded, much to China's discomfort; and Pakistan's capacity to protect Chinese interests has weakened. There is a debate starting in China about whether a strategic reassessment is needed, which has already resulted in a few tactical shifts on Beijing's part. But until China is forced to go through a more fundamental reappraisal of its strategy for dealing with extremism in the region, prospects for the United States and China to pursue complementary policies will remain limited.

### **(Re)engaging China**

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China has good reason to support the stability of its neighbors. It shares an interest with the West in preventing the region from becoming a base for

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terrorists. A stable security environment for Xinjiang, the restive northwestern province that is home to China's largest Muslim minority group, the Uighurs, is of great importance to Beijing. Aside from the direct risk of cross-border flows of arms, militants, and narcotics, the ideological influence of pan-Islamic jihadi groups has played an important role for some Uighur pro-independence groups. China has been the victim of attacks from militants trained in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and it is believed that the bulk of the remaining Uighur fighters are based between the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) in Pakistan and the eastern and southern provinces in Afghanistan.<sup>1</sup> While many of these fighters are affiliated with other transnational groups, such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, small numbers are still thought to be active in groups that target China specifically, such as the Turkestan Islamic Party (TIP) or East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), which seek to establish an Islamic state of East Turkestan in Xinjiang.<sup>2</sup>

China's economic interests in both countries are also substantial. In Afghanistan, the China Metallurgical Construction Group's \$3.2 billion

**The consensus among U.S. officials is that Chinese contributions have been disappointing.**

Aynak copper mine investment, in the eastern province of Logar, is the country's largest, with the mine holding as much as the equivalent of a third of China's total copper reserves. Chinese companies have interests in mineral deposits elsewhere in the country and are also active in the irrigation, infrastructure, telecommunications, and power sectors. China has an even wider-ranging set of investments in Pakistan. In addition to large-scale projects

in telecommunications and hydropower, the Chinese-built port at Gwadar in Baluchistan potentially provides both an energy transshipment route—once connected to the expanded Karakoram Highway (KKH)—and a future naval facility. Not only does rising extremism in the region threaten these projects, it also puts Chinese nationals at risk, and calls into question the very viability of China's most important ally in the region, Pakistan.

The theoretical result, therefore, should be a China willing to find ways to support international efforts to combat militancy and bring stability to both states. But the reality is different, even if Sino-U.S. cooperation on Afghanistan and Pakistan is not itself new. In fact, few regions have played as prominent a role in the Sino-U.S. relationship in recent decades. Islamabad was the conduit for the normalization of relations between the United States and China in the 1970s. It was the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan that provided the final catalyst for establishing joint Sino-U.S. signal intelligence bases in Xinjiang to monitor

Soviet military activities. China, in close conjunction with the Central Intelligence Agency and Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), became the leading weapons supplier to the mujahideen in the first years of the Afghan campaign, while Chinese arms, mules, and military training were an integral part of the mujahideen's war throughout its duration.

Recent examples of Sino-U.S. coordination during crises in the region have underscored the necessity of bilateral cooperation. Officials from both sides have described close bilateral liaisons over issues ranging from the Kargil conflict of 1999 to the financial turbulence in Pakistan in 2008 as well as the Mumbai attacks of the same year. China played a supportive role in the immediate aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks, backing Pakistan's decision to withdraw its support for the Taliban, and developing a limited program of cooperation on counterterrorism issues with the United States, which included the establishment of a Federal Bureau of Investigation office in Beijing. Formal bilateral consultation mechanisms were expanded under George W. Bush's administration, which launched a South Asia dialogue at the assistant secretary of state level as part of a package of new exchanges on regional issues established under the U.S.-China Senior Dialogue.<sup>3</sup> Without necessarily translating into immediate outcomes, these dialogues set down broad markers for both sides, established a basic tradition of coordination, and brought into regular contact parts of the U.S. and Chinese bureaucracies that would otherwise have had little interaction.

The prospects for upgraded cooperation with China under the Obama administration seemed good. Aside from Beijing's own concerns about the worsening situation in the region, China has traditionally felt under pressure to appear cooperative on the top tier of U.S. security priorities—and Afghanistan and Pakistan were set to occupy a higher status for President Barack Obama than for Bush. Officials in the Obama administration were less ambivalent than those in the previous administration about the virtues of greater Chinese involvement in Afghanistan, particularly on the security side where limited offers from Beijing had been rebuffed in the past. The greater prominence given to Pakistan in U.S. strategy—exemplified by the “AfPak” coinage—also placed China toward the top of any possible list of countries whose cooperation could have a major impact. And the promise of a broader regional engagement strategy meant that a more extensive and systematic U.S. diplomatic effort to solicit that involvement was anticipated. This was reinforced by Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan Richard Holbrooke's early initiatives, which included visiting Beijing in March 2009 and attending the U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue (SED) in Washington in July 2009, which featured discussions on Afghanistan and Pakistan under the strategic track.

The wish lists in Washington for Chinese involvement in Afghanistan and Pakistan vary, but generally tend to include China contributing some combination of aid, civilian capacity, investment, trainers for police, peacekeepers, and allowing its territory to be used as a part of the Northern Distribution Network for the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force. Even more importantly, some think that China could use its leverage over the Pakistani military to press it to rein in the Afghan-focused groups operating out of Pakistan, such as the Haqqani network and the Afghan Taliban itself, as well as refocusing its “India-centric” doctrine toward a more effective set of counterinsurgency capabilities. It is hoped that some of these steps can be coaxed out by a more sustained U.S. effort to engage China on regional policy and to draw Beijing into an active role in the various multilateral groupings that deal with Afghanistan and Pakistan.

### **China Holds Back in Afghanistan (and Pakistan)**

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The consensus, however, among U.S. officials involved in the process is that China’s contributions have been disappointing. After positive signs from Chinese officials in some meetings at the beginning of 2009, and detailed negotiations over issues, such as access routes for nonlethal supplies, subsequent progress has been very limited. A U.S. Department of State action plan suggesting a modest program of cooperation in Afghanistan has been stalled in the Chinese foreign ministry. Chinese officials have refused even to consider proposals for a program in Pakistan.

China’s existing bilateral efforts in both countries are, of course, contributions in their own right. If realized, the commitments involved in the Aynak bid alone, which include a railroad, generating plant, schools and roads, are notable.<sup>4</sup> China has pledged modest tranches of aid to Afghanistan (\$150 million from 2002<sup>5</sup> and another \$75 million from 2009<sup>6</sup>), tariff-free access to a selection of Afghan goods, and limited training in areas such as counternarcotics. Its large-scale investments in Pakistani infrastructure and provision of economic assistance totaling hundreds of millions of dollars are also important. But they are on a scale considerably below Beijing’s capacity to act as a contributor and stabilizing force, and are rarely coordinated with other international actors. Moreover, even the most widely heralded investments, such as Aynak, have proceeded very haltingly.

Some of the reasons why China has felt little pressure to step up are contingent on other issues that have occupied the Obama administration. The security side of the Sino-U.S. relationship ended up being dominated by the North Korean nuclear issue in the spring and summer of 2009, and then later by the Iranian nuclear issue. More recently, broader difficulties in the relationship

over U.S. arms sales to Taiwan and other bilateral disputes for a time diminished China's willingness to cooperate on international security issues.<sup>7</sup>

Developments in Afghanistan and Pakistan have, on the other hand, reduced the immediacy of the imperative for China's involvement that characterized the first months of 2009. Until Pakistan launched its operation in Swat in May 2009, the acute

worries about the reach of the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), the FATA-based coalition of militant groups—and the seeming unwillingness of the military to act against it—meant that China's capacity to exert pressure on Rawalpindi was of great potential significance. Since the relative success of the Pakistani military's operation and the continued deterioration of the situation in Afghanistan, the administration's focus has switched to the other side of the border, where China's influence and actions are less consequential.

Given the absence of transport infrastructure between Afghanistan and China, logistics routes through Xinjiang—which means that transportation must pass through Central Asia—are more symbolic than genuinely useful, while Chinese training and aid are not game-changing contributions in the short term. The prospects of Beijing being willing to send troops have been considered too remote even to be worth asking for, given China's consistently negative statements on the subject. U.S. requests have also been held hostage by the fierce debate in Washington over U.S. strategy in Afghanistan. As a result, for many months it was unclear to Chinese officials whether they were being asked to provide support for a major counterinsurgency campaign—the potential success of which they doubted anyway—or to become part of the coalition to pick up the pieces after an early U.S. withdrawal.

Even more important were developments in China itself—July 5, 2009 saw large-scale ethnic clashes in Xinjiang, in which at least 197 were killed.<sup>8</sup> With the notable exceptions of the Turkish government and some prominent Iranian clerics, much of the fallout across the Muslim world was contained.<sup>9</sup> But these reactions outside China and the volatility of the situation in Xinjiang heightened Beijing's concerns about being visibly associated with a controversial war that—it fears—may increase internal unrest, encourage greater support to Uighur independence efforts, or simply make China a frontline target for Islamic militants.

Some of the items on the “China Af-Pak” wishlists are indeed unrealistic, either because they would expose China to heightened risk for little apparent payoff or because they would create tensions in China's closest bilateral relationship with Pakistan, which Beijing is unwilling to accept. But there has

**C**hina's influence and actions are less consequential in Afghanistan than in Pakistan.

been a reasonable expectation that China would engage in a more systematic fashion toward addressing the threat of Islamic militancy in the region. Two major potential steps that Beijing could take stand out.

China is one of the few countries capable of deploying substantial packages of economic assistance and investment, which, if appropriately targeted and coordinated, could have a transformative political, economic, and social impact on conditions in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. China is also the only country to which Pakistan is willing to be so readily responsive when it communicates a forceful message about its concerns, whether the concerns are over economic interests or personnel security. This leverage could be deployed to mutually beneficial effect if Beijing were willing to convey consistently to Pakistan that the network of militant groups that has grown up in Central and Southwest Asia—not simply those groups that target China—poses a vital long-term threat to Chinese interests regionally as well as globally, and that it is willing to provide the necessary support—discreetly and bilaterally—to address it. While there are many other specific areas, such as nuclear security, where China could play an important role, these broad steps would be far more significant than any bilateral cooperation with the United States. The problem is that there is no sign that they are forthcoming.

### **A Wider Sino-U.S. Gap**

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The divergences between China and the United States go well beyond recent developments. The deeper problem is that Beijing weighs Afghanistan and Pakistan—and the supposedly shared issues at stake in both—very differently from Washington.

#### **Counterterrorism with Chinese Characteristics**

While it is true to say that terrorist groups and individuals targeting China have trained in Afghanistan and Pakistan, China has pursued a strategy of decoupling them from other Islamists, rather than treating them as part of a continuum of threat that needs to be addressed collectively. China has consistently used its channels in the Pakistani military and Islamist parties to reach out to the groups over which they have influence and dissuade them from targeting China. It reached agreements with the Taliban in pre-9/11 days to prevent Uighur groups from using Afghan territory for their training facilities. In recent years, it has elicited public statements of support or disavowal of intent to harm Chinese interests from representatives of the Afghan Taliban, Hezb-e-Islami Gulbuddin, and the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA). Far from wanting Pakistan to cut its ties with extremists, Beijing sees such ties as vital to its own security interests.

China is similarly willing to deal with a broad spectrum of actors to secure its assets on the ground. At the micro-level, Chinese companies maintain contacts through their security officers with a range of extremist groups, which they are

willing to pay off when necessary, in the environments in which they operate. At the macro-level, China has consistently hedged on different outcomes in both Afghanistan and Pakistan, maintaining its position that the Taliban should be part of any political solution in Afghanistan and showing initial sympathy for a similar approach to the TTP (albeit one that it has since reversed). While the Aynak facilities, for instance, are secured by the Afghan National Army, with U.S. forces in close proximity, they are located in territory that could plausibly end up being Taliban-controlled, and China sees no *a priori* reason why that should preclude their continued operation. China's discomfort with Islamist groups is evident, but so is its willingness to work with whomever it has to is also clear.

For the transnational terror groups, such as al Qaeda, where scope for reconciliation is limited, China's main concern has been to ensure that it remains a secondary target—a strategy that is, of course, parasitic on Western targets remaining the primary ones. In the aftermath of the July 5, 2009 clashes in Xinjiang, however, what are believed to have been the first statements from al Qaeda and its formal affiliates explicitly targeting China were issued. Al Qaeda

in the Islamic Maghreb, a North African affiliate, vowed to take revenge for the Uighur killings by targeting Chinese engineers in North Africa.<sup>10</sup> In October 2009, Abu Yahya al-Libi, a prominent member of the al Qaeda core group in Pakistan, urged jihad in Xinjiang.<sup>11</sup> Rather than exposing China's hope of avoiding provoking such militant groups as unsustainable, Chinese officials insist that their approach will remain the same: seek to

### Beijing weighs Afghanistan and Pakistan very differently from Washington.

minimize further reaction. This has meant greater reluctance to be seen cooperating with the United States in the region, rather than closer alignment.

Beijing's threat perceptions about the risk of direct terrorist attacks are, for the most part, far lower than the West's. The groups that specifically target China are relatively small and have had their capacities significantly degraded. ETIM and its supposed successor, the TIP, have seen their leaders killed in 2003 and 2010, respectively, and now number as few as a hundred militants. Many Chinese counterterrorist experts no longer treat them as a significant concern,<sup>12</sup> and external experts tend to be even more skeptical.<sup>13</sup> The risk of direct cross-border incursions is also relatively modest. Of the bordering regions, Gilgit-Baltistan is one of Pakistan's most peaceful, Afghanistan's Wakhan corridor has no direct road link to China, and the short borders are themselves well secured. Any extremist infiltration that does take place,

therefore, comes through Central Asia. China focuses more seriously on the “separatist” threat, which means that virtually all Uighur political groupings are treated as hostile, with the World Uighur Congress being the primary focus of Beijing’s post-July 5 campaigns.

### **Geopolitical Gaps**

China’s geopolitical perceptions are also substantially different from those of the United States. The U.S. role in the region is seen by Beijing as a problem both in its own right, because of the strategic threat that China perceives a U.S. presence to represent, and as a source of destabilization in recent years. Many in China believe that the United States is not purely motivated by counterterrorism concerns—if at all—but has instead a geopolitical objective: to exert control over the region’s energy routes and strategic chokepoints and “encircle” China.<sup>14</sup> It is a precise echo of Beijing’s concerns about the Soviet invasion in the 1980s, a period which still deeply permeates Chinese thinking about Afghanistan.

The NATO lead role in Afghanistan further exacerbates this perception. Still heavily tainted in Chinese eyes by the bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in 1999, Chinese military officers have no direct contact with the organization. Although relations have improved recently, many Chinese officials continue to view it as the military arm of the democracy promotion agenda that saw “color revolutions” in the Caucasus and Central Asia in the previous decade, which Beijing viewed as a potent threat.

China also treats the U.S. presence in Pakistan with suspicion. It sees a commercial threat, believing that its companies may lose the privileged access they have enjoyed, and a strategic one, suspecting that the United States (along with India) intends to weaken China’s position, whether by destabilizing its Balochi foothold on the Indian Ocean or by seizing the Pakistani nuclear arsenal that it played a vital role in developing. The Chinese ambassador has publicly raised concerns about the expansion of the U.S. embassy,<sup>15</sup> which is indelibly associated with many rumors swirling in the Pakistani press about a growing presence of U.S. marines and private military companies in the country.<sup>16</sup>

The consequence of China’s geopolitical perceptions is deep ambivalence about U.S. success in Afghanistan and Pakistan—unless success means exit. China has no desire to see a precipitate withdrawal, but would certainly prefer a reduced U.S. presence. While it does not wish to see a victory for the militants, and certainly would not provide them with any support, the strategic setback for NATO, the United States, and the West that a withdrawal would represent has its advantages, as does continuing the status quo with U.S. forces bogged down in the country.

On the other flank is India. The Pakistan “hedge” is a longstanding one for China, but recent developments have, if anything, given it renewed importance. Despite significantly expanding economic ties with India, Beijing’s aspirations in recent years to move toward a more balanced policy have faltered as Sino-Indian relations have resumed their familiar pattern of strategic rivalry,<sup>17</sup> most clearly manifested in the flare-up of border disputes that have remained unresolved since the 1962 war.<sup>18</sup>

The U.S.-Indian nuclear deal, the overall strengthening relationship with the United States under the Bush administration, and the booming Indian economy have resulted in a resumed concern to pin India down in South Asia, rather than allow it to develop as a regional rival. As the Indian economy continues to outpace Pakistan’s by a substantial increment, any thought in Beijing of achieving a comprehensive South Asian balance of power is long gone, and there is little prospect of China shepherding a Pakistani nuclear deal through the Nuclear Suppliers Group. But the promise of a tit-for-tat expansion of Pakistan’s nuclear power capabilities through the Chashma III and IV plants looks set to be realized.<sup>19</sup> The willingness to augment Pakistan’s conventional military capabilities also persists—with China’s full-spectrum support to air, land, missile, and naval forces—alongside tacit support for the jihadi strategy that helps to bind half a million Indian troops in Kashmir. China has provided direct protection to these militant groups at the UN Security Council’s 1267 committee, blocking efforts to sanction Jamaat-ud-Dawa (the Lashkar-e-Taiba [LeT] alias) until political pressure on Pakistan escalated after the LeT involvement in the November 2008 Mumbai attacks. This entire strand of China’s thinking, which requires a state of managed tension in the region, cuts directly against the U.S. efforts to dissuade Pakistan from its India-centric military strategy.

The depth of China’s relationship with Pakistan is also a forceful barrier to efforts that include Beijing more seriously in multilateral groupings, such as Friends of Democratic Pakistan (FoDP), a multi-country initiative launched in 2008 to provide donor and broader development support for the new Pakistani government.<sup>20</sup> China is ordinarily reluctant to multilateralize its relationships and aid efforts anyway, but it is particularly reluctant to treat its closest partner as a joint “problem” to be addressed with other countries. “We don’t want to be seen by our Pakistani friends as engaging in G-2 management,” as one Chinese analyst put it.<sup>21</sup> While China still attends the FoDP meetings, Beijing routinely sends relatively junior officials.

**Beijing sees leveraging, not severing, Pakistan’s ties to extremists as vital to China’s own interests.**

In Afghanistan, China has been more willing to deal in a multilateral context, being a member of the original Six-Plus-Two grouping from 1999–2001. It has taken part in most of the principal initiatives since then, including The Hague and London conferences where, in the latter case, it was represented at the foreign minister level. But these still tend to be treated by Beijing as occasions where China's main role is just to be present and to be seen.

### **China's Faltering Strategy in Afghanistan and Pakistan**

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The approach China has been taking in Afghanistan and Pakistan is not devoid of successes. Indeed, it has served Beijing well for many years. To date, China has avoided becoming a focus of militant efforts on a scale remotely comparable to that of the West, despite an approach to sections of its own Muslim population, which would attract fierce condemnation were it carried out by any Western state. It has maintained its close relationship with Pakistan—military, political parties, and public alike—while developing good relations with the Afghan government. Its access to economic projects in both states is also second-to-none.

Yet, in many other respects, things are not going according to plan.

The direct threat to China is growing. This year has seen the first kidnappings in Afghanistan of Chinese workers by Taliban guerillas in the Fayrab province.<sup>22</sup> Rocket attacks on the Aynak facility have cooled Chinese willingness to move forward with the project itself as well as with future prospects, such as the Hajigak iron ore deposit, where Chinese companies were again prominently placed in the bidding.<sup>23</sup> But Pakistan has been an even greater concern. The situation there certainly posed difficulties in the past. In the 1990s, until Beijing exerted considerable pressure, Pakistan was viewed as a haven for Uighur refugees, a number of whom were given training by an array of jihadi groups. Chinese workers have been targeted directly by insurgents in Baluchistan, where several have been killed in recent years, as well as by local groups in the FATA. China has also been prompted to close the border and move troops to its vicinity on different occasions.<sup>24</sup> But the events since 2007 have taken a more dangerous turn.

The June 2007 Lal Masjid incident, in which Chinese “massage workers” were kidnapped and held in the heart of Pakistan's capital, was a watershed. While they were eventually released, the subsequent Pakistani military assault on the mosque complex was seen to have taken place at Beijing's instigation.<sup>25</sup> As an immediate reprisal in the North-West Frontier Province (now known as Khyber Pukhtoonkhwa), three Chinese engineers were executed in July 2007,<sup>26</sup> along with a suicide attack on a convoy of Chinese workers in the same month in a market town near Karachi,<sup>27</sup> indicating a more systematic targeting of China

throughout Pakistan. Pakistani politicians have expressed concerns that militant groups will look to “drive a wedge” between Beijing and Islamabad.<sup>28</sup> An extensive set of security measures have since been put in place, with a joint task force established in August 2007 at the national and provincial levels to address the threat to the 10,000 Chinese in Pakistan,<sup>29</sup> including providing direct military protection.

**The Pakistani military is growing less capable of securing China's interests.**

But subsequent attacks and kidnappings have led to continued tension in the relationship. At the time of President Asif Ali Zardari's maiden visit to China in 2008, the failure to gain the release of Chinese telecommunications workers in Swat resulted in threats to withdraw all Chinese personnel from the country.<sup>30</sup> While these have been made before, and are seen by some on the Pakistani side as a bluff to extract concessions,<sup>31</sup> the personal involvement of President Hu Jintao and other senior Chinese leaders in statements about the kidnapping incidents have added a level of seriousness to the Chinese threats.

This focus on personnel security has been coupled with Chinese political pressure, as one former Pakistani military officer put it “of a kind that there has not been before,”<sup>32</sup> on Islamabad to crack down on Uighurs based in the country. At points, this has leaked into the press when Chinese behind-the-scenes lobbying has not delivered results, such as 2009 pressure ahead of supposed threats to the 60th anniversary celebrations for the People's Republic.<sup>33</sup> Despite a number of high-profile extraditions, Chinese analysts have described counterterrorism cooperation as falling short of expectations, criticizing ISI warnings to Uighur groups to disperse ahead of some of their operations and questioning their motivation to eliminate the threat.<sup>34</sup>

The strength of the TTP has also been a concern to China. While initially sanguine about the Pakistani government's deals in Swat and Buner, they became increasingly worried that the writ of the Pakistani state was running out in a territory that runs dangerously close to the principal Sino-Pakistani trade route, the KKH. While never as worried about the “Talibanization” of Pakistan as some of the more alarmist accounts suggested they should be, the Chinese ultimately took a clear position encouraging the Pakistani government not just to mount the operation, but to bring it to a decisive conclusion. Since the campaign started, China has provided aid to assist with massive numbers of internally displaced persons as well as counterterrorism equipment, ranging from scanners to night-vision goggles, to the Pakistani army. The army, in turn, has provided additional security for the KKH, placing troops along its length to

protect it from being used as an escape route for militants fleeing the Pakistani army's campaign.

The deterioration in the general security situation and the fracturing of the Pakistani military's relationship with various militant groups has posed broader problems for Beijing. China is particularly exposed when it comes to groups seen to operate under the authority of elements of the Pakistani state itself, such as the LeT and the Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), which have the capacity to precipitate conflict in the event of another major attack on Indian territory. China will inevitably be pulled into any potential Indian-Pakistani crisis diplomatically, and has even attempted to send signals—which convince few—that it could be engaged militarily in the event of any Indian retaliation. Since China bears significant historic responsibility for Pakistan's nuclear program, it is also notably culpable in the event of any diversion of

**The challenges to China's regional position represent an opening for China-U.S. cooperation.**

nuclear materials, a scenario most likely to occur in just such a conflict situation.<sup>35</sup> Managed tension has been in China's interests, but Pakistan's capacity to maintain control is essential. While China continues to express faith in Islamabad, doubts have inevitably been creeping in as militant groups have become stronger and the lines between them have become less cleanly delineated. The capacity of the

jihadi groups to hijack policy is a major risk to Chinese strategy in the region, not least because the ramifications are so unpredictable.

Many of these problems escalated under General Pervez Musharraf, but China is far more skeptical about the political direction in which Pakistan has been headed since his fall in September 2008. As a general principle, Beijing is more comfortable with Pakistani military than civilian rule. Although it can work with Pakistan People's Party governments, it sees them as the most pro-Western of the possible political constellations. Zardari's relationship with Beijing has been particularly poor from the very start, when he bypassed the traditional practice of paying the first presidential visit to China, and instead took trips (albeit classified as private) to the United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Zardari's quarterly visits to China since then have not notably remedied this, and Chinese officials have been privately disparaging about the weakness of the civilian government. While any problems on the civilian side are traditionally trumped by the Sino-Pak military relationship, China has also been uncomfortable with what it sees as closer U.S.-Pakistani military-to-military ties. Chinese officials have sought assurances that their interests will remain a protected class.

The common thread across all of these issues is that the principal guarantor of China's interests, the Pakistani military, is growing less capable of securing them. But Beijing at present lacks a Plan B. The People's Liberation Army is resistant to rethinking the level of Chinese reliance on Rawalpindi, and as a group they are unusually influential over this bilateral relationship. Even among the Chinese military though, while the basic tenets of the Sino-Pakistani relationship are not in doubt, there is reportedly a broader debate about the competing imperatives of geopolitics and the more pragmatic desire to improve the stability of China's Western periphery.<sup>36</sup> The first school of thought sees the overriding regional objectives as keeping India down and the United States down or out. The latter position sees greater strategic advantage in being able to minimize the risk of major contingencies in Pakistan, weaken the external support base for Uighur militants, and embed Xinjiang in a secure and economically thriving environment. This stance still does not inherently result in any greater cooperation with the West per se, but it does imply a more active and nuanced set of Chinese policies, especially in a context where Beijing increasingly expects Washington to draw down its presence in the coming years and is starting to feel the need to prepare for the aftermath.

There have certainly been some modest tweaks to China's approach. The weakening of the military channel in dealing with militants has led China to seek more direct methods. The most potent recent successes against Chinese targets have come not from the Pakistani military—which was responsible for the 2003 operation against ETIM's leader—but from U.S. drone strikes, which have killed numerous TIP militants in the province of Baghdis in Western Afghanistan, along with its leader, Abdul Haq al-Turkistani, in North Waziristan.<sup>37</sup> China has also courted parties with their own routes to extremist groups, the MMA as well as the Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) in particular, being wooed in the past two years. Various members of the MMA have been invited on public relations visits to China, with one of the most recent culminating in a memorandum of understanding between the JI and the Communist Party of China's international department, in which JI “fully backed China's stance on Taiwan, Tibet and Xinjiang issues,” and pledged cooperation on “justice, development, security and solidarity,” as well as stating that the agreement “makes us accept finally and formally that China's internal affairs are not our business.”<sup>38</sup>

Crisis-management scenarios for Pakistan, along the lines of those for North Korea, have even been drawn up by groups affiliated with Chinese military intelligence, even though these are not part of any formal contingency planning process. Looking at case studies—such as nuclear weapons falling into the hands of terrorists, another potential conflict between India and Pakistan, and the failure of efforts to contain militancy in the region—they suggest that in various

worst-case scenarios, Chinese interests can only effectively be secured through closer coordination with other major powers, principally the United States.<sup>39</sup>

### **Beijing in Denial?**

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The challenges to China's position in the region do represent an opening for the United States to start drawing Beijing into taking a more constructive approach. A greater U.S. focus on Pakistan, which remains China's primary concern, would help. Although the broader dialogue on the region has value, not least in reducing Chinese suspicions about U.S. strategic intent, Afghanistan still takes up a disproportionate space in the bilateral conversation. China's reticence in discussing Pakistan, and unwillingness to be seen to cooperate with the United States there, should not obviate the fact that greater Chinese alignment with U.S. objectives in Pakistan is by far the more significant goal. Dialogue at all levels of the U.S. government, including with the Chinese military, will be necessary if there is to be any prospect of traction outside the context of a major crisis. The U.S.-China discussion on Pakistan through official and even second track channels is still highly underdeveloped.

While these measures can have some impact in helping to change China's mindset, planning for a more extensive level of cooperation is presently unrealistic. At the May 2010 SED in Beijing, China again made positive but non-specific noises about its willingness to coordinate with the United States in the region but that would depend on Chinese officials giving different answers. For instance, as its economic and political presence grows across the world, and its Xinjiang problem stays unresolved, is it realistic to believe that China can avoid becoming a primary target of transnational terror groups and extremists in the region? Or should China look to address the threat in a more concerted fashion and develop a more complementary approach with the other countries that share it? Furthermore, is China's situation in Pakistan likely to improve—or even stabilize—short of a more systematic attempt to address the major challenges there? Is it likely to be achieved simply by using China's leverage to exert pressure on the Pakistani government to look out more attentively for Chinese interests?

For now, China's approach of defending a relatively narrowly conceived set of bilateral interests, rather than addressing these broader issues seriously or in a coordinated fashion, is likely to persist. While many in Beijing are giving these questions attention, and a wide range of different views exist, a cautious Chinese political leadership and a suspicious military continue to keep the traditional policies in place. But the longer the balance of opinion in Beijing holds that the strategic threat from instability and extremism in Pakistan as well as Afghanistan is someone else's problem, the harder it will be for China to address it effectively.

The United States is not the *demandeur* here. It is Chinese long-term interests, not favors to Washington, which are at stake.

## Notes

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