

China, Russia fall in behind Bush's "war against terrorism" at APEC summit

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23 October 2001

In his first overseas trip since the September 11 attacks on New York and Washington, US President Bush used the proceedings at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) leaders forum in Shanghai last weekend to consolidate support for his administration's "war on terrorism". Despite the fact that the gathering took place in the midst of the continuing US bombardment of Afghanistan, none of the leaders present made even the most muted criticism of Washington.

At Washington's insistence, the APEC forum's final communiqué, agreed to by all, focused not on economics but politics. It condemned the September 11 terrorist attacks on the US and pledged "to strengthen international cooperation at all levels in combatting terrorism in a comprehensive manner". The only concession to the governments of predominantly Muslim countries within the region—Indonesia, Malaysia and Brunei—was that it did not specifically mention or endorse the US attacks on Afghanistan.

In Indonesia, a number of protests have already taken place and the government is clearly concerned about the political impact of a protracted US war against Afghanistan. Foreign Affairs Minister Hassan Wirayudha warned in Shanghai of an "explosive" reaction in the Islamic world if the US attacks continue into the traditional Muslim fasting month of Ramadhan beginning in mid-November.

Neither President Megawati Sukarnoputri nor Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad, however, expressed any opposition to the US bombing. Nor for that matter did Chinese President Jiang Zemin and Russian President Vladimir Putin. Their principal aim at the forum was to extract what they could from the US in return for their acquiescence to Washington's military intervention in the strategic, resource-rich

Central Asian region.

The British *Independent* newspaper underscored the extent of the shift, commenting: "Day after day, US airmen use 21st-century firepower to pound an almost medieval nation on Communist China's north-west frontier. US troops are massing in the region, using central Asian bases built by Moscow. And it is unlikely to be a short-term stay in the underbelly of the former Soviet empire, and Beijing's backyard. Yet both the Russian and Chinese presidents still assure President Bush of their support. In the past, the slightest American foray into such a sensitive sphere of influence as Afghanistan would have won swift condemnation from Moscow and Beijing."

The only hint of concern over the US involvement in Afghanistan was a reference in the final communiqué to the necessity of the UN playing a major role in the fight against terrorism. Moscow and Beijing have previously called for the involvement of the UN Security Council as a means of securing a say and preventing Washington from unilaterally dictating events in Central Asia. In their separate meetings with Bush, however, both Putin and Jiang were at pains to emphasise their support for the US military campaign.

Jiang met with Bush for three hours on Friday and, in what was their first encounter, the two pledged to build a "mature" relationship based on common interests. Both leaders downplayed the sharp tensions that emerged earlier in the year over Washington's provocative use of spy planes close to China's borders and US arms sales to Taiwan. Bush spoke of developing "candid, constructive and cooperative" relations and Jiang echoed his words, saying Chinese leaders "stand ready to work together with the US side". According to a senior US official, China has already been "very helpful" in providing intelligence to

the US on Afghanistan.

Despite the cordiality of the meeting, the frictions were not far below the surface. During last year's US election campaign, Bush repeatedly emphasised that he regarded China as a "strategic competitor" not a strategic partner. While Bush's tone in Shanghai was more conciliatory, he nevertheless publicly restated his support for Taiwan, which Beijing considers a renegade province of China, and warned the Chinese leaders against persecuting religious or other minorities.

Moreover, none of the outstanding strategic and economic issues between the two countries appear to have been addressed, let alone resolved. According to US officials, Bush attempted to reassure Jiang that his administration's plans to build a National Missile Defence (NMD) shield was directed at so-called rogue states such as Iraq and North Korea not against China. He also repeated calls for China to halt the overseas sale of missile technology. But there was no discussion on either topic.

Following his meeting with Bush, Jiang and his Russian counterpart Putin issued a joint call for the military operations in Afghanistan to give way rapidly to a political solution on the basis of UN decisions and norms. They also reiterated their opposition to US national missile defence plans. A Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhu Bangzao said Jiang and Putin shared "identical views".

When Putin met Bush last Sunday after the conclusion of the APEC gathering, however, he indicated Russia's willingness to break ranks with China and do a deal with the US over its NMD program. Russia has previously opposed any change to the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, which prohibits the construction of defensive missile systems such as the NMD. Putin indicated that Russia would be prepared to consider modifications to the ABM treaty as long as the US did not unilaterally withdraw from the accord. While no details were given, Putin emphasised that he and Bush "have an understanding that we can reach agreements". The two leaders are due to meet again next month at Bush's ranch in Texas.

No doubt Putin is seeking to use the ABM treaty and Russia's support for the US war in Afghanistan as a means of gaining leverage with the Bush administration on other issues. But as in the case of China, none of the underlying issues are resolved. For all the appearance

of unity at the APEC summit, the aggressive US intervention in Central Asia is likely to heighten tensions with Russia and China, both of which have vital strategic and economic interests in the region.

Significantly, on his return from Beijing, Putin stopped off in the Dushanbe, the capital of Tajikistan, to meet with senior leaders of Afghanistan's opposition Northern Alliance, including its president Burhanuddin Rabbani. A report in the *LA Times* cited a Northern Alliance general Abdul Basir as saying that the meeting was preoccupied with Russian concerns over American control of Afghanistan. "Basir said there is increasing concern in Russia, Iran and other front-line states that the US has a hidden agenda: to be the dominant power in Afghanistan, a strategic crossroads and a gateway to vast Central Asian oil fields."

In all, 20 member countries were represented at the APEC forum, which includes the countries of East Asia along with the US, Canada and several South American nations. Like China and Russia, all of them gave their support to the US "war against terrorism," while at the same time seeking to advance their own interests.

The Japanese government has exploited the political situation to introduce a law allowing it to dispatch troops overseas, bypassing the so-called pacifist clause in the constitution. Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi met with Bush in the course of the APEC forum and indicated that Japan wanted to play a role in rebuilding Afghanistan. Australian Prime Minister John Howard had his mind on a much shorter-term goal—parading on the world stage to boost his current election campaign. While he was unable to gain a sought-after private meeting with Bush, he eagerly took the opportunity to be photographed by the media shaking hands with the US president.



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