

China's stake in the US "war on terrorism"

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Since September 11, the Chinese regime has cautiously extended its political support to the Bush administration's war on Afghanistan. At the same time, Beijing has, like other countries, sought to use the opportunity to its own advantage, both at home and internationally.

In its relations with the US, it has gained a temporary lessening of tensions. During the 2000 election campaign, Bush labelled China as "a strategic competitor" and, after assuming office, assumed a more hostile stance towards Beijing which came to a head in April during the confrontation over the US spy plane. None of the issues, such as China's opposition to Bush's National Missile Defence, have been resolved but they have been deliberately played down by both sides.

China's entry into the World Trade Organisation on November 11 was a relatively smooth affair with no objections raised in the US. The following day, Bush called Chinese leader Jiang Zemin to congratulate China on its WTO accession and to thank Zemin for his collaboration in the "global war on terrorism".

Beijing is, however, nervous about the direct intervention of the US into the strategic and resource-rich Central Asian region. Not only does China have its own ambitions in the area, it also faces an ongoing separatist insurgency among the ethnic Uyghur minority—a Turkic-speaking, predominantly Muslim people—in the western province of Xinjiang that abuts the Central Asian republics.

China has exploited the US "war on terrorism" to step up its crackdown. On November 14, Chinese vice-premier Qian Qichen told the UN Commission for Human Rights—which has complained in the past about alleged human rights abuses in Xinjiang—that over 1,000 Islamic extremists from the province had received terrorist training in Afghani camps operated by Osama bin Laden's Al Qaeda network. In recent

weeks, ethnic Uyghurs have been among the "foreigners" captured fighting alongside the Taliban.

Since September 11, tens of thousands of extra Chinese troops have been moved into Xinjiang, both to bolster border posts and to enforce martial law conditions. According to a November 19 article by the official Xinhua news service, a campaign against "major threats to social security" was ordered in September. The most prominent threats were listed as "infiltration and sabotage by hostile overseas forces", "disturbance by nationalist splittism forces" and "religious extremists and terrorists".

In Xinjiang, Uyghur opposition groups are alleging that hundreds of arrests have been made and that nine people have been sentenced to death for promoting separatism. One arrest involved a man who joked that he hoped the Americans would come to Xinjiang and free them from Chinese rule. In recent weeks, opposition groups have accused China of prohibiting Muslim women from wearing head scarves and alleged that schools and colleges are compelling students, on threat of expulsion, to ignore the fasting obligations of the Islamic holy month of Ramadan.

Xinjiang is critical to the economic ambitions of the Chinese elite. The province makes up more than one-sixth of China's land mass, but more importantly has rich, untapped deposits of oil, natural gas and minerals. China is currently trying to attract investment for a massive natural gas pipeline project, costing over \$US14 billion, that is being built from the province to Shanghai. China also sees Xinjiang as its gateway to the huge oil and gas reserves of Central Asia. Chinese companies are already seeking foreign partners to construct pipelines from fields in Kazakhstan and Russia. [See: China pushes into Central Asia for oil and gas]

In line with these plans, China has sought to develop close political, military and economic relations with the

Central Asian states. In 1996, it formed the “Shanghai Group” with Russia, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. One of the declared aims of the group was to coordinate the exploitation of Central Asian resources and root out the various Islamic fundamentalist movements in the region, many of which operated from or received training in Afghanistan.

Whatever the involvement of the Afghani-based Al Qaeda in training Uyghur fighters, the source of the unrest in Xinjiang is resentment over social inequality and decades of religious and cultural repression by Beijing. Spurred on by the victory of the Afghani *mujaheddin* against the Soviet Union, Islamic separatism gathered support in Xinjiang in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Large-scale unrest against Chinese rule was brutally suppressed. In the mid-1990s, it is estimated that China deployed up to 300,000 troops into the province, backed by paramilitary units among Xinjiang’s eight million ethnic Chinese. In May 1997, according to Amnesty International, hundreds were executed and thousands imprisoned after major demonstrations in the city of Yining. In the last four years, there have been scattered reports of ongoing guerilla operations, bombings and assassinations by Uyghur extremists.

Beijing has welcomed the collapse of the Taliban regime, which has both deprived Uyghur separatists of a safe haven and opened up the possibility of China securing a stake in Afghanistan. Beijing is calling for a role in the UN transitional administration in Kabul, to provide political, technical and financial assistance to rebuild the country.

China has also been concerned that the US and other major powers could seize on Uyghur separatism as a pretext for intervention. The main Uyghur exile organisations are based in Turkey, Germany and other European Union states, where they have, from time to time, received a sympathetic hearing. As recently as October, the “Eastern Turkestan National Congress”—a coalition of 16 Uyghur groups—was permitted to meet in the chambers of the European parliament in Brussels.

Within the US, where Taiwan and to a lesser extent Tibet are generally the focus of anti-China agitation, the Uyghur nationalist cause is occasionally espoused. In 1999, in the aftermath of the NATO war on Yugoslavia, for instance, US congressmen introduced

Anwar Yusuf, president of the “Eastern Turkestan National Freedom Centre”, to President Clinton.

China is now demanding that the Uyghur groups be treated as terrorists internationally. Chinese Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan told the UN General Assembly on November 12: “The Eastern Turkestan terrorist forces are trained, equipped and financed by international terrorist organisations. They should be dealt telling blows”. Just how the US and other major powers respond will be determined by whether or not the “Uyghur question” can be exploited in the complex rivalry for domination of Central Asia.



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