

Chinese leaders seek allies against US encirclement

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Last month's tour by Chinese President Jiang Zemin to Germany, Nigeria, Tunisia, Libya and Iran, and the visit of Premier Zhu Rongji to Turkey, Egypt and Kenya, highlighted Beijing's concerns over the Bush administration's "war on terrorism". While ostensibly trade missions, the tours indicated that Chinese leaders are seeking to develop alliances with the European Union and others to resist American domination over the resources of Central Asia, the Middle East and the Pacific.

Washington's actions since September 11 have resulted in a virtual military encirclement of China and undermined a protracted effort by Beijing to expand its influence in Central Asia and secure access to rich deposits of oil and gas. The Chinese-inspired "Shanghai Five" group, which was aimed at forging close military, economic and political ties between China, Russia and the former Soviet Central Asian republics, has effectively collapsed. US troops and warplanes are now based or have fly-over rights in its member states of Tajikistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, as well as Afghanistan, Pakistan and Uzbekistan. The Russian government, with which China had signed a "strategic partnership", has adapted to the new circumstances and is collaborating more closely with the US. The US is also developing military ties with India, China's regional rival.

On the Korean peninsula, where China had been encouraging a rapprochement between North and South in the hope of benefiting economically and politically, the inclusion of North Korea in Bush's "axis of evil" has pushed tensions to the brink of war. The Bush administration has increased weapons sales to Taiwan and restated its blanket guarantee to use whatever force necessary—including nuclear weapons—to defeat any attempt by China to force the island to reunify with the mainland. Of even greater concern in Beijing, Washington is actively encouraging the remilitarisation of Japanese imperialism with the aim of using Tokyo to assist in putting pressure on China. Elsewhere in the Pacific, US forces have moved back into the Philippines, with which China has disputed territorial claims in the South China Sea. Washington has also bolstered its military ties with Australia and Thailand, overshadowing China's overtures to these US allies in recent years.

Within this context, the choice of countries visited by Jiang had considerable significance. The visit to Germany followed

in the wake of confused signals from the EU that it would, to some extent, resist US ambitions being pursued under the banner of a "war on terrorism". Some EU leaders have openly opposed a US war on Iraq and, while taking no action, were critical of the tacit US backing for the Israeli invasion of the West Bank. The main European nations have also strengthened their relations with Iran and North Korea this year—the other states in the "axis of evil". In all these countries, Europe has economic and strategic interests that do not coincide with those of the US.

In Berlin from April 8 to 13, Jiang Zemin attempted to align China with the layers of the EU establishment that are calling for the UN to block the US threats of a unilateral war on Iraq. He told *Der Spiegel* on April 8: "Like Germany and most other states, we want to solve the Iraq question under the conditions of a UN resolution." The same day, Jiang told the *Welt am Sonntag*: "We all want to fight terrorism. But the states involved in the fight against terror each have their own specific viewpoint."

On April 9, following meetings with German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder and President Johannes Rau, Jiang called for "Israel to comprehensively withdraw from the Palestinian territories and to implement the relevant UN Security Council resolutions." He declared China's support for a permanent German seat on the UN Security Council and expressed his hope "the EU and Germany will play a more active role in the Middle East issue [the Israel-Palestinian conflict]."

Jiang Zemin left no doubt as to the benefits on offer for European corporate interests from a closer EU relationship with China. He urged German corporations and banks to "actively participate" in the energy project in the country's west. The week before Jiang's visit to Berlin, Brussels sent EU External Relations Commissioner Christopher Patten to Beijing to deliver a 40 million euro grant to assist China's plans to develop a 4,200 kilometre West-East natural gas pipeline from its Central Asian Xinjiang province to Shanghai. Patten, who was labeled a "whore" by Beijing when he was the British governor of Hong Kong, was welcomed with smiles and handshakes by senior Chinese officials. Although the amount of money he brought was small, it indicated the EU's interest in China's Central Asian energy and economic plans.

While only the West-East pipeline is currently under construction, a number of oil companies have investigated the possibilities of constructing a land “energy bridge”, linking China and the Korean peninsula with the largely-untapped resources of Russia’s Far East and the Central Asian republics and, ultimately, to Iran and the Persian Gulf. China, which is rapidly becoming one of the largest importers of energy, is seeking to become less dependent on oil shipped through the Middle Eastern and South East Asian sea-lanes that are vulnerable to blockade by the US Navy. The potential profits flowing from the project have attracted the involvement of major oil companies such as BP Amoco.

Also attracting the interest of transnational corporations is the possibility that a byproduct of the energy projects could be viable land trade links—a modern day “Silk Road”—between Europe and East Asia. On April 19, the *Financial Times* reported the findings of a European think tank operated by the international railway union (Union Internationale des Chemins de Fer—UIC) that rail links between Europe to Asia would provide “a cheaper and more reliable service” than sea-freight within 10 years. Linking from different parts of Europe, rail freight could traverse Russia and Mongolia to Beijing and, through North Korea, to Seoul. Other lines could run south connecting with Shanghai. UIC director Paul Veron commented: “Land bridges instead of sea bridges are something very realistic.” The development of advanced road networks through Central Asia and China’s underdeveloped west would facilitate road freight as well.

The offer of trade and energy links with China, as part of closer political relations, was the focus of Jiang’s visit to Iran from April 16 to 18. Jiang signed six new agreements with the Iranian regime over oil, gas, petrochemicals, trade, transportation and information technology, evoking the historical links between China and Iran along the “Silk Road more than 2,000 years ago”.

Jiang Zemin openly repudiated the US stance against the Iranian regime, telling the country’s parliamentary spokesman Mahdi Karroubi: “Our opinion [on terrorism] is not the same as the United States”. Alongside Iranian President Mohammed Khatami, who called on China to play “the leading role” in opposing the US war plans in the Persian Gulf, Jiang stated that “Iraq’s sovereignty and territorial integrity should be respected” and that the UN should act to reach agreements with Iraq and lift sanctions. The Iranian regime, with justification, fears a US assault on Iraq will be the prelude to increased US military threats and pressure upon its borders.

Iran is becoming an important economic partner of China. It is already a major supplier of oil, with China-Iran trade doubling between 1999 and 2001 to \$US3.3 billion due to increased Chinese oil imports. In the longer term, China’s major oil companies have ambitions to invest in Iranian oil and gas fields and feasibility studies have been conducted into gas pipelines extending from Iran and Turkmenistan to western

China.

Zhu Rongji’s coinciding visit to Turkey stressed China’s strategic preoccupation with these plans. Following discussion with Turkish Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit on April 16, Zhu called for China and Turkey to “jointly combat” the separatist movement among the Turkic-speaking Uyigur ethnic minority in Xinjiang province—the geographical lynchpin of China’s Eurasian ambitions. Beijing has intensified its military and police operations in Xinjiang, which borders Afghanistan, on the pretext of crushing “terrorism”. Beijing’s major fear is a scenario similar to the war on Yugoslavia in 1999, with the major powers backing ethnic separatists in Xinjiang, as NATO backed the Albanian Kosovo Liberation Army, in order to split the resource-rich province from Chinese control.

Some of the main Uyigur exile organisations operate from Turkey. The motives for Turkey revoking support for the Uyigur groups are both its own potential economic gains from strengthened EU relations with China, and its fears of the US exploiting ethnic-based movements in pursuit of its agenda. Ankara has publicly questioned a US war on Iraq, fearing Washington may arm and support Kurdish forces in northern Iraq opposed to Saddam Hussein, thereby encouraging Kurdish separatism within Turkey’s borders.

China’s efforts to break out of US encirclement will no doubt become further grist to the mill for the anti-China lobby in Washington—more evidence of Beijing’s “hostility” and “global ambitions”. While at present Sino-US relations have the appearance of calm, the naming of China’s ally North Korea as part of the “axis of evil” indicates that a wing in the Bush administration is pushing for a confrontation with Beijing. Another possible pretext was supplied in recent months by the CIA, which has accused China of supplying missile technology to Libya and Iran and assisting them to develop “weapons of mass destruction”.



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