

China prepares to fall into line with US war on Iraq

John Chan
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The Stalinist regime in China is playing a thoroughly cynical role as the UN Security Council prepares to debate US allegations about Iraq's "weapons of mass destruction" and a resolution to give Washington a green light for its military onslaught. At the same time as calling for UN inspectors to be given more time to investigate the charges and urging a "peaceful" settlement, Beijing is making clear to Washington it will not be an obstacle to its predatory war aims in the Middle East.

Following a meeting with US Secretary of State Colin Powell on February 3, Chinese Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan issued a demand that Iraq "cooperate" with the UN to clarify the "outstanding questions" from the January 27 UN inspector's report. "We have always held the view that Iraq should comply with relevant resolutions of the [UN Security] council in a strict, comprehensive and practical manner, and that the international community should seek by every means a political solution of the issue," he said.

According to the official *Peoples Daily*, "Powell praised the great importance China attached to and its constructive role in the Iraq issue" and "briefed Tang on the US stance on Iraq and expressed the hope that the two sides would maintain close contact on the issue." On January 30, an opinion piece in the *Peoples Daily* declared that the UN inspectors' report had "indeed provided the United States and Britain with some evidence for winning over opinion" that Iraq was in breach.

There is little reason to doubt that if the US insists on a motion in the Security Council authorising force against Iraq, China, which has the power of veto, will either abstain, as it did during the first Gulf War in 1991, or even vote in favour.

Beijing's stance is motivated by the narrow self-

interest of the country's ruling elite. In the course of the 2000 US election campaign, Bush branded China as a "strategic competitor" in the Asia-Pacific region. Economically dependent on exports, particularly to the US, and militarily incapable of challenging the US, Beijing has been preoccupied ever since with preventing any conflict that could bring about an open rupture in relations.

The eruption of US militarism in Central Asia and the Middle East following September 11 has therefore been largely welcomed in Chinese government and military circles as a convenient means for diverting US attention from China and creating opportunities for extracting concessions from the US.

China collaborated with the US in its military assault on Afghanistan and remained silent as Washington deployed military forces into the Central Asian states along China's far-flung western border. In return, the US facilitated China's final entry into the World Trade Organisation in December 2001.

Last year, as the US initiated its military build-up in the Middle East, China once again remained silent. On September 12, in an open pay-off before the first vote in the UN on Iraq, Washington designated as a "terrorist organisation" one of the Muslim ethnic Uighur groups advocating independence from China for the province of Xinjiang. Beijing reciprocated by voting for UN resolution 1441, which threatened Iraq with "serious consequences" if it did not comply with a new weapons inspections regime.

In the Chinese elite's efforts to further their own interests and keep the peace with Washington, the lives of thousands of Iraqis are so much small change. An example of the cynical calculations animating Beijing was featured in the *Peoples Daily* last November 5. The state organ enthused that a war on Iraq would mean

“the United States would have no time to attend to the East, and so its foreign strategy would have to devote energy to this hot spot. Against such a background, China could win a number of years of a relatively relaxed international environment.”

Some sections of the Beijing bureaucracy are, however, clearly concerned about the impact on China of a US war on Iraq—both in the short and long-term. Any disruption of Middle East oil supplies is likely to inflate oil prices and severely impact on the oil import-dependent Chinese economy. In the longer term, US control of the world’s major oil reserves will give it the potential to impose an energy blockade on its rivals in the event of any conflict.

A recent study conducted by Su Jingxiang from the Research Institute on China’s Modern International Relations declared US control over the oil in Middle East would leave Europe and East Asia “pinned down by the United States”. China now imports nearly two million barrels of oil per day. The Chinese government only has strategic oil reserve contingencies of 50 million barrels of oil—just 25 days supply. By official estimates, China’s reliance on oil imports will surge to 9.8 million barrels per day by 2020.

The state of affairs on the Korean peninsula also underscores the shortsightedness of China’s policy. Far from the impending war with Iraq leading to a narrow US focus on the Middle East, the Bush administration has also embarked on a confrontation with North Korea as a means of reasserting US predominance in North East Asia.

Once again, China has sought to accommodate to Washington. Beijing has joined the Bush administration in denouncing North Korea’s withdrawal from the 1968 Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty and is believed to be working behind-the-scenes to encourage both Pyongyang and Washington to enter into talks.

Unlike Iraq, however, the extent of Chinese cooperation with the US over North Korea has limits. Within Chinese political and military circles, it is widely recognised that one of the strategic aims of the American aggression against North Korea is to position the US for any future conflict with China.

North Korea plays an essential strategic role for China. Acutely aware of the historic precedents, Beijing is determined to prevent any outbreak of war which could end with American forces stationed on

China’s Manchurian border. The Japanese seizure of Manchuria in 1931 was launched from Korea. During the Korean War, China sent millions of troops into battle to prevent the US-led forces from completely overrunning North Korea, out of legitimate fear that the US would extend the war into China itself.

A South Korean professor from Seoul-based Yonsei University, Lee Chung-min, summed up China’s stance to the US-based *Newsday* on January 21: “It [China] does not want a North Korea with nuclear weapons; that would not only destabilise the peninsula but would harden Japan’s position. China does not want a militarily strong Japan. At the same time, because North Korea has been a buffer state, China wants to control or preserve North Korea as it is, to constrain South Korea and US initiatives in Asia.”

Despite US requests, China has refused to stop supplying Pyongyang with desperately needed fuel and emergency food supplies, disrupting Washington efforts to bring about North Korea’s economic collapse. The *Washington Post* noted on February 4: “China’s failure to assertively pursue a solution to the crisis over North Korea is irritating the United States and South Korea, threatening to undermine progress in US-China relations since the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks.”

The “irritation” is not simply over China’s failure to agree to US demands. It is one more indication that the real target is not so much North Korea but China itself. Threatening Pyongyang is a convenient means for Washington to keep up the pressure on its “strategic competitor”.



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