



# IDSS COMMENTARIES

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## CHINESE VIEWS ON THE IMPLICATIONS OF SEPTEMBER 11 FOR THE U.S.-CHINA RELATIONSHIP

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### Introduction

While there have been debates on the implications of the September 11 terrorist attacks on America for Chinese foreign policy outside China, there are no detailed analysis of how the Chinese analysts themselves interpret and debate these implications. This paper intends to shed light on the Chinese views of September 11. Specifically, it attempts to address the following questions: What are the China's views on the implications of September 11 for the U.S.-China relationship, and what are the institutional sources of these views?

### Chinese Views

"With regard to counter-terrorism, our position has not changed ... And that is, China is firmly opposed to international terrorism of all forms."

This comment by President Jiang Zemin was made on 21 February 2001 at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing during a press conference jointly held with President George Bush. While implying that China supported the U.S. counter-terrorism effort, it also implicitly warned against U.S. support of "separatist" groups in Xinjiang, Tibet and Taiwan. Underlying this public statement are two major views that have developed in China concerning the implications of September 11 on the U.S.-China relationship: the optimistic view which places emphasis on opportunities, and the pessimistic view which stresses challenges.

#### The optimistic view

For the optimists, three major opportunities have emerged that may enhance Chinese interests in dealing with the U.S. after September 11.

- Distraction of U.S. attention and diversion of its resources from East Asia.
- Opportunities for cooperation between China and the U.S.
- Other benefits.

On the first point, some Chinese analysts argue that the U.S.'s post-September 11 war on terrorism has largely shifted American attention from East Asia to Central, South, and South East Asia. Such a shift may reduce the American military pressure on East Asia, a region that has, since the end of the Cold War, become China's security policy priority (which is concerned mainly with the security of China's prosperous east coast and the issue of Taiwan). While there had been a marked increase in anxiety in Beijing since the April EP-3 incident and President Bush's statements that China is a "strategic

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competitor” and that the U.S. “would defend Taiwan with whatever means necessary,” September 11 had led to a general sigh of relief. This happened largely because some believe that the earlier U.S. shift of policy emphasis to China-related issues may be delayed by the war on terrorism, if not completely abandoned. Moreover, now that the U.S. military has to fight on both the overseas front and the homeland defence front, its strategic resources would be spread even thinner than before September 11. This may work to the advantage of China if it chooses to achieve limited policy objectives within a sufficiently short duration, before the U.S. is capable of effectively reorganizing its resources for intervention. The possible shift of resources from missile defence to conventional warfighting and homeland defence may also reduce the pressure on China to spend on developing the countermeasures. Finally, some argue that September 11 has made it much more difficult for American politicians to mobilize public support for the “China Threat Theory”. This is because politicians who advocate such a view would not gain much public support in the face of the more imminent and real danger of terrorism, where thousands of Americans had been killed and billions of dollars worth of property destroyed. In comparison, China may offer a much more benign image, with its emphasis on economic development and trade, and on a moderate pace of defence modernisation.

Second, on opportunities for cooperation between China and the U.S., some suggest that the U.S. war on terrorism may create a situation where U.S.-China cooperation can be diffused from the top to the more bureaucratic level, ranging from intelligence sharing, diplomatic cooperation among multilateral institutions, interdiction of drug-trafficking and money laundering to block funding for terrorist groups, and to arms control dialogue. The increased interaction and entanglement between the functional bureaucracies of China (Ministry of Public Security, Ministry of State Security, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Finance, and the People’s Liberation Army) and the U.S. (FBI, State Department, Treasury Department, and Defense Department) may provide new impetus and incentive for more extensive cooperation. This may work favourably for China, because it may enhance the Chinese leverage in related issues (through the “tit for tat” game of exchanging favours). It can also gain China the much-needed “breathing space” by diverting attention away from the more contentious issues in U.S.-China relations.

Moreover, China can benefit from the U.S. war on terrorism in several other aspects. Some suggest that the replacement of the radical Islamic Taliban regime with a moderate government in Afghanistan may enhance Chinese security. This is because a suspected major safe haven for the “separatist” groups of the ethnic minorities such as the Uighurs in Xinjiang has been eliminated. Also, the war on terrorism may enhance the legitimacy of the Chinese government in its own effort to crack down on “separatism” in Xinjiang, Tibet, and other ethnic minority-dominated areas on the margins of China. Finally, U.S. constraints may have the subtle psychological effect of deterring Taiwan from pursuing formal independence, thus enhancing the chances of reunification.

The optimists also tend to play down the concern about the increased U.S. presence in Central, South, and South East Asia that may reinforce the containment-driven “encirclement” of China. Some argue that some level of American military presence may generate a measure of stability and security against terrorism, which can translate into improved security in China’s western provinces. It is also pointed out that the U.S. military presence in these regions is still rather limited and temporary, and is confined to advising, training, and logistics, and its purpose is to fight terrorism, not China. But even

if the U.S. decides to expand its military presence by establishing more numerous and more permanent bases in these regions, this may increase but not decrease U.S. vulnerability. This is because 1) such expansion would alienate the Muslim population to the point there may be more terrorist attacks on U.S. facilities and personnel; and 2) bases close to China may be held hostage should a major U.S.-China conflict erupt. Moreover, the overly extensive and assertive U.S. presence in Central Asia may eventually alienate Russia, which considers the region as too vital to its own security to be dominated by U.S. influence. Furthermore, increased U.S. economic aid to Pakistan, a Chinese ally, may reduce the vulnerability of the current Pakistani government to radical militant Islamic terrorism. This may enhance Chinese interests because U.S. aid may reduce the economic burden of China as the primary supplier of aid. At the same time, a stable, secular and moderate government in Islamabad can be preserved and sustained. Such a government clearly serves Chinese interests better than a radical Islam-dominated government.

Finally, in the immediate aftermath of September 11, some believed that the psychological trauma of the horrific human losses might make it more difficult for the U.S. government to build up public support for intervention in overseas crises such as Taiwan, where substantial U.S. casualties may be incurred. Moreover, the tremendous financial and material losses and the heightened popular sense of insecurity in the U.S. might trigger a loss of confidence among investors and consumers in the U.S. economy. A downturn in the U.S. economy may result in China losing some revenue because of declining exports to the U.S. But China may also benefit because foreign capital may shift to China, which among other things offers a seemingly more peaceful and stable alternative.

### The pessimistic view

Unlike the optimists, the pessimists see four major challenges which China may have to face in enhancing its security interests (particularly after the successful U.S. war in Afghanistan and the fact that the U.S. economy seems to be headed for recovery). These are:

- U.S. encirclement of China.
- Increased support for missile defence.
- U.S. unilateralism.
- Other costs.

First, some analysts argue that the extensive, prolonged, and unmitigated U.S. military presence in Central, South, and South East Asia may undermine Chinese influence in these regions, and make it more difficult for China to achieve its security, economic, and energy objectives in the future. Also, some claim that the U.S. government has “double standards” in the war on terrorism by refusing to treat the “separatist” groups in China as terrorists. It is alleged that some U.S. human rights groups even call them freedom fighters. As a result, as the U.S. expands its influence to Central Asia, the U.S. may replace the Talibans as a major source of shelter for “separatist” groups in China, thus undermining the stability of China’s western provinces. This may in turn force China to shift its strategic resources from the eastern seaboard to the western frontiers, thus frustrating China’s strategic priorities.

Another major concern among the pessimists is that September 11 may make it much easier to mobilize U.S. domestic support for defence budget increases and for developing its missile defence. These in the long run would translate into reduced U.S. vulnerability and increased Chinese vulnerability, particularly in the area of China's retaliatory nuclear strike capabilities. Furthermore, as the U.S. improves the security of its homeland and facilities abroad after September 11, the U.S. would become much less vulnerable. This would make it more difficult to wage its so-called "unrestricted warfare" against the U.S. homeland and its overseas facilities if open conflict between the U.S. and China takes place. Both would reduce the vulnerability of the U.S. and hence increase its motivation to intervene in foreign crises. This in turn would severely limit China's choices in reducing its own vulnerability.

Moreover, some argue that the swift and successful execution of the U.S. war in Afghanistan, with relatively few military casualties and little collateral damage, may embolden the U.S. to embark on a policy of unilateralism, which would eventually undermine Chinese interests. The possible expansion of the U.S. war on terrorism following the American President's rhetoric of the "axis of evil," for instance, may place China in an awkward position: China's good relations with North Korea and Iran and the associated benefits may be jeopardized if it chooses to side with the U.S.; or it could choose to side with these countries and criticize U.S. policy, and pay a public relations price. But the more important concern is that once the U.S. has accomplished its objective of defeating terrorism, it may gain a freer hand in focusing on the "China question," thus reducing the "breathing space" for China to pursue its interests and to expand its influence.

The pessimists have also identified other costs China may have to pay or challenges it may have to face. In spite of China's cooperation with the U.S. on the terrorism front, some complain that there is little reciprocity from the U.S. side. China shares intelligence with the U.S. on the terrorist groups, but the U.S. allegedly continues to gather intelligence on China, such as through its surveillance flights along China's coast. On issues such as arms sales to Taiwan and missile defence, the U.S. has not made any concession, but rather taken steps that alienate China further. These steps include the sale of more sophisticated arms to Taiwan and the U.S. decision to withdraw from the ABM Treaty. The U.S. even invited Taiwan's defence minister to visit the U.S., and put China on its list of possible targets for future U.S. nuclear strikes.

Finally, some analysts worry that the U.S. war on terrorism may produce other unintended consequences that may hurt China's interests. Overly close cooperation between the U.S. on the one hand, and Russia and the Central Asia countries of the former Soviet Union on the other, may undermine years of Chinese effort to build up influence in the region, particularly in the framework of the "Shanghai Five" security cooperation. This in the long run may undermine the pursuit of Chinese interests in the region. The war has also produced an excuse for Japan to expand its military deployment abroad. This may in turn lead to Japan's rearmament, making it more difficult for China to pursue its security objectives in East Asia. As far as the India-Pakistan relationship is concerned, the scenario that serves China's interests best was the pre-September 11 status quo: not too close so that a moderate level of tension between India and Pakistan can distract Indian resources from the India-China border; not too apart so that no war breaks out between the two that may require more substantial Chinese material or manpower aid to Pakistan. The U.S. war on terrorism, however, may upset the delicate balance of the status quo: it may bring the two much closer in a U.S.-sponsored united front against terrorism. But the

more likely and more worrisome scenario is that the radical Islamic groups in Pakistan may instigate terrorist attacks in Kashmir and India by exploiting the weakness of the Pakistani government, triggering a war between Pakistan and India. This may either draw China into a military conflict it has neither the desire nor the interest to participate in, or the war may spill over into China, thereby destabilizing China's west.

### **Institutional Sources of the Chinese Views**

To the extent the current Chinese policy agenda is dominated by the two major issues of 1) economic development, and 2) national defence and security, the institutional origins of the two views are likely to be the bureaucracies responsible for them. The State Council (and its subordinate economic, trade, and diplomatic commissions and ministries) – the major bureaucracy responsible for China's economic development – is likely to be the originator of the more optimistic view. Such a view represents a more benign interpretation of China's external environment and argues for a more moderate policy (mainly through the more integrative economic and diplomatic means) to promote Chinese interests abroad. This view should also be shared by many policy analysts affiliated with China's civilian think-tanks such as the Academy of Social Sciences, and the emerging but still embryonic community of international relations and foreign policy scholars working in China's major universities. It should even find expression among a small minority of the more opportunistic strategic analysts affiliated with the PLA.

The institutional source of the pessimistic view is likely to be the bureaucratic cluster responsible for China's national defence and security: the Central Military Commission (CMC), its four subordinate PLA general departments (command, political, logistics, and armament), and the PLA think-tanks such as the Academy of Military Science and the National Defense University. Such a view should also be shared by some quarters on the State Council side that are affiliated with the Ministry of State Security, and by the nationalist intellectuals working in civilian think tanks and universities. But more importantly, such a view may have popular appeal, particularly at a time when populist nationalism has been on the rise in China.