



Making Sense of China's Iraq policy
by Jing-dong Yuan

China has reacted positively to Iraq's latest offer to permit the return of United Nations weapons inspections without preconditions. Together with France and Russia, China is among the UN member states inclined toward a political settlement of the issue rather than a military solution, as has been pushed by the George W. Bush administration. Chinese officials emphasize that the Iraqi issue must be resolved within the political framework of the UN system, that Baghdad should comply with all UN resolutions on weapons inspections, and that Iraq's sovereignty must be respected.

However, Beijing's moment of truth will come when and if the United States demands a vote in the UN Security Council authorizing the use of force against Iraq should the latter fail to satisfy the demands of the Bush administration - disarmament and dismantling of all of its weapons of mass destruction, not just inspections. How China is going to vote in the UN Security Council will again be under the international microscope. It is highly likely that it will abstain, again.

China's apparent ambivalence toward the Iraqi issue is not new. In late 1990, in the aftermath of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, Beijing condemned Iraq and called for its withdrawal from Kuwait but abstained from voting on UN Security Council Resolution 678 authorizing the use of force against the country. While supporting the UN's general goals of dismantling Iraq's weapons of mass destruction, Beijing has also been critical of the sanctions and U.S.-UK aerial strikes.

Within a broader context, Beijing's Iraq policy must be seen as being driven by three considerations. First is the principle of sovereignty and nonintervention, which Beijing holds dear. Second is the critical U.S.-China relationship in the post-Sept. 11 context. Third is Beijing's growing concern over the implications for its security of an expanding campaign against terrorism - in particular the Bush administration's call for preemptive action.

Beijing's emphasis on respecting Iraq's sovereignty even as it admonishes Baghdad to comply with UN resolutions reflects a deeply held principle. Beijing's reservations about providing UN authorization allowing U.S. military actions against Iraq is consistent with its opposition to military interventions in other countries' domestic affairs. Indeed, China has been derided as the vicar of state sovereignty at a time when the traditional notion of sovereignty is being challenged and eroded as a result of the growing international concern over human rights abuses and inevitable demands for rights beyond borders.

China worries about the potential for the U.S. to use the pretext of humanitarian intervention to challenge its sovereignty over minority regions such as Tibet and Xinjiang. The U.S.-led NATO

intervention in Kosovo sent a chilling warning to policymakers in Beijing that the UN could be bypassed and that sovereignty could be ignored and violated. The Bush administration's rhetoric about treating terrorist groups and the states that harbor them alike only heightens China's anxiety. A military action by the U.S. to remove Iraqi President Saddam Hussein - something clearly beyond the existing UN mandates on inspections - will only heighten China's concerns.

U.S.-China relations since Sept. 11 are another consideration weighing on Beijing's Iraq policy and, for that matter, antiterrorism in general. The past year has seen renewed efforts in both Washington and Beijing to rebuild a tattered bilateral relationship in the wake of the April 2001 EP-3 incident and the largest U.S. arms sales to Taiwan in years. Indeed, the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks provided the opportunity for a fresh start for China-U.S. relations. Chinese leaders hope that increased cooperation in the area of antiterrorism can help rebuild a stable bilateral relationship. Despite major differences between the U.S. and China over human rights, humanitarian intervention, and regional security issues, the two countries have also pursued common interests in combating narcotics trafficking, international organized crime, and terrorism.

China has strong reasons to get on the bandwagon of an international coalition against terrorism due to concerns about its own vulnerability to terrorism in its vast northwestern territories of Xinjiang. Since the late 1980s, Muslim separatists in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region have posed an increasing threat to China's territorial integrity. Xinjiang makes up one-sixth of China's total land area. This vast but thinly populated - 16.6 million - region holds potentially large oil deposits - though these are unconfirmed - and China's nuclear weapons testing site. In recent years, Muslim separatist movements have increasingly resorted to violence, including explosions, assassinations, and street fighting. The central government has responded to the unrest with unrelenting resolve. Islamic fundamentalist elements in Central Asia, Afghanistan, and the Middle East have reportedly trained some of the individuals responsible for these attacks. More worrisome, such attacks have begun to spread to major cities like Beijing, Wuhan, and Guangzhou.

From Beijing's perspective, China-U.S. cooperation on antiterrorism has arrested a rapidly deteriorating bilateral relationship, toned down the rhetoric within the Bush administration - at least for the time being - of calling China as a strategic competitor and a threat to U.S. interests, and necessitated greater and more regular consultation between the two countries. Closer cooperation in terms of intelligence sharing, coordination of law enforcement efforts, and extradition of suspected criminals could be particularly helpful if separatist elements in Xinjiang are emboldened by what happened on Sept. 11. Any experience and lessons drawn from U.S. antiterrorism operations could potentially provide tremendous benefits to Chinese law enforcement efforts.

However, U.S. military campaigns against terrorism and its shifting military doctrine of preemption deeply worry China. Beijing is concerned about the likely expansion of a U.S. military presence closer to China's doorstep. One legacy of the 1990-1991 Gulf War is an enlarged permanent U.S. military presence in the Persian Gulf and Saudi Arabia. Military operations against Usama bin Laden in Afghanistan could bring U.S. armed forces to South and Central Asia, with which China shares over 5,000 km of borders.

The U.S. military presence in and its growing ties with Pakistan create particular problems for China. On the one hand, as some Chinese analysts point out, the need to effectively eradicate the sources of terrorism has forced the U.S. to return to a more balanced South Asia policy, which Beijing has long advocated. In addition, U.S. involvement would release pressure on China as the sole prominent supporter of Pakistan at a time of intensified Indo-Pakistani confrontation on the verge of a military crisis.

A strong U.S. presence could also address China's concerns about its own vulnerability to terrorism in its vast northwestern territories of Tibet and Xinjiang. Over the years, the Chinese government has approached Islamabad regarding the training and infiltration of Islamic separatists in Pakistan but has only partially succeeded. Finally, the U.S. military presence in Pakistan to some extent deters an all-out war between India and Pakistan. On the other hand, the U.S. presence in Pakistan is seen as eroding Chinese influence in that country.

Beijing is not in a position, nor does it consider it wise, to compete with the U.S. for Islamabad's allegiance. But it does worry about the weakening of Sino-Pakistani ties. For this reason Beijing has been more active in recent months in cultivating the all-weather bilateral relationship. Major loans have been signed between China and Pakistan recently to provide urgently needed financial assistance to the latter. Chinese fighter aircraft and spare parts have been transferred to Pakistan. There is also increased traffic in high-level official visits, including Gen. Pervez Musharraf's three trips to China in less than a year and People's Liberation Army Deputy Chief of Staff Xiong Guangkai's visit to Pakistan.

Over the long run, however, the real impact of the U.S. military presence must be assessed against the general state of China-U.S. relations. Should bilateral ties worsen - not an impossible scenario - concerns in Beijing will likely intensify over the apparent if not real encirclement of China by the U.S. through its military alliances in East Asia and now its military presence in Central Asia and Pakistan.

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