

# China's Anti-Terrorism Policy

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As with many other countries, China changed its attitude to terror following the attack on the Twin Towers in September 2001. The term "terror" began to be used intensively in its declarations; its diplomatic agenda included international cooperation against terror; and it undertook a variety of related actions on a multilateral, regional, and bilateral level. Since China's principal anti-terror activity targets extremist Islamic organizations, its fight against terror may be a potential area of cooperation with Israel. However, in order to establish fruitful cooperation, Israel must understand that Beijing's concept of terrorism derives from its own set of strategic interests and is not identical to that of other states.

## China's Local Terrorism Challenge

The main terrorism threat that China deals with comes from separatist groups belonging to the Muslim Uighur minority, most of whom live in China's western Xinjiang Province. The Uighur, who number nine million, are ethnically, culturally, and historically distinct from the Chinese people. Their origins lie in the Turkish peoples to the west of China, their language is closely related to Turkish languages, their belief is based on Islam, and they practice exclusive customs.

Uighur terror is founded on the group's claim to a separate state (which they call East Turkistan) or at the least, extensive autonomous authority. Xinjiang Province is officially considered an autonomous region in which the Uighur are able to manage their lives according to their customs, study their language at schools, practice their religion and so forth. However this state of affairs is qualified by the regime's claim that Xinjiang has been an integral part of China for two

thousand years, and that it will remain so in the future.<sup>1</sup>

Aside from the historical link, Xinjiang Province is highly important to China: it serves as a strategic buffer separating China from its northwestern and western neighbors (Mongolia, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India), it has high concentrations of natural resources (mainly oil and gas), and it contains strategic military facilities. Furthermore, the Chinese government is fearful that a more radical Uighur separatism might encourage separatist elements in Taiwan and Tibet. As a result, it has exercised a strong hand against any attempt to weaken its hold on the region by defining four Uighur organizations as terror organizations. Of these organizations, the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) – which the US government has also defined as a terrorist organization – receives the most public attention.<sup>2</sup>

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The terrorist actions attributed to the Uighur began in the 1990s, when the Soviet Union's collapse was followed by the establishment of several new states in the proximity of Xinjiang that had ethnic-religious characteristics similar to that of the Uighur population. This change, plus a certain expectation on the part of the Uighur that the Soviet breakup would weaken Communist rule in China, sparked an eruption of Uighur nationalism. The awakening, which occurred not long after the Tiananmen riots of 1989, aroused fear in the Chinese regime, which has always named China's political and social stability as one of its primary concerns.

What eventually followed was a series of terror attacks, mainly in Xinjiang and other Chinese cities as well, including Beijing. Based on official Chinese data, between 1990 and 2001, when most of the attacks occurred, there were over 200 terror attacks, which claimed 162 lives with more than 440 injured.<sup>3</sup> According to the Chinese, these attacks included planting bombs, assassinations of government officials (mostly Muslims), poisonings, arson, and sabotage of government buildings. Furthermore, the Chinese accuse Uighur organizations of running training camps, fundraising, purchasing and manufacturing arms, subversion, and organizing riots.<sup>4</sup>

Without minimizing the problem, a sense of proportion is in order. First, the dimensions of terror in China are relatively not large. Terrorist acts have accounted for an average yearly toll of fewer than twenty people killed, while the current decade has seen 2,500–3,200 people killed each year in natural disasters.<sup>5</sup> Second, most of the terror on the part of Muslims in China was contained at the beginning of the decade, thanks to Beijing's focused measures. On the

one hand it exercised a strong hand, with arrests and even executions of persons accused of involvement in terror. On the other hand there was extensive infrastructure building in the Xinjiang region (and in western China in general), while new opportunities in employment and education were created for residents along with intermittent easing of restrictions on local cultural and religious life.

The situation changed at the start of the current decade, and despite the curbing of terror within its boundaries, China began increasing its operational preparedness and developing new capabilities. Special units of the military and the Ministry of Public Security now receive larger budgets and undergo extensive and sophisticated training; Chinese defense industries are developing advanced anti-terror equipment; China has initiated operational cooperation with foreign countries whereby Chinese forces are exposed to modern methods of operation and receive advanced training;<sup>6</sup> efforts are invested in improving electronic intelligence; and there is greater protection of facilities and locations feared to be potential targets of terrorist attacks.<sup>7</sup>

### **China's Policy Post-9/11**

The attack on the Twin Towers changed China's attitude towards terror. Although the wave of attacks within the country's borders was contained, the leadership chose to define terror as a new type of threat to national security and assign greater weight to this issue. According to the official Chinese position, post-September 2001 terror is a global phenomenon and one of the new elements threatening the international system. In a white paper of 2002, China argued that even though the world in general and East Asia in

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**Through its fight against terror, China seeks to improve its image in the international community.**

particular has enjoyed relative stability since the end of the Cold War, many challenges remain that undermine stability and development. It maintained that “terrorism, in particular, is posing a real threat to both global and regional security.”<sup>8</sup> To a large measure this revised position stemmed from an altered understanding of contemporary terror and the threats it entails.

Despite the multiplicity of issues that Chinese experts feel fuel today’s global terror (opposing globalization, preserving the environment, and so on),<sup>9</sup> China’s focus is on Uighur terror and the extremist Islamic groups that assist it. As to advances in operational tactics, technological progress has changed terrorism’s modus operandi. Today’s terror organizations are decentralized and smaller than in the past. They strive to execute high casualty attacks; employ non-conventional tools such as chemical and biological weapons; and include in their targets nerve centers of modern society such as communications centers, central databases, and financial institutions,<sup>10</sup> i.e., those with great media potential. These are not merely theoretical forecasts; there are assessments that terrorists will try to attack key infrastructure projects in China, such as the Three Gorges Dam currently under construction, as well as Olympic sites.<sup>11</sup> It is precisely these that are the source of Chinese apprehensions.

As far as can be assessed, Beijing gauges the terror threat not according to the number of potential casualties but according to the potential comprehensive damage to the country’s continued stability and development. Despite China’s size and prosperity, the regime is extremely anxious as to the country’s internal cohesion. Accelerated economic growth and social changes are creating huge gaps in income, leaving millions of

people severely disadvantaged and sparking resentment and occasionally violence as well. Today internal order is maintained, but the regime fears violent events that could erupt in a particular section of the country, which would testify to the regime’s impotence, and spread to other areas of the country, as occurred in the 1989 Tiananmen riots. Another scenario depicts acts of terror igniting border incidents or breaking out while China is involved in an international military crisis (against Taiwan, for example).<sup>12</sup>

A different potential threat involves paralyzing the momentum of economic growth by hitting strategic infrastructure hubs, executing high profile attacks with international repercussions, and launching attacks in regions of economic potential. These types of attacks would damage the image of the Chinese government’s stability and raise doubts among foreign investors over the advisability of investing in China. This is a fairly significant threat because the high barriers to entering the Chinese market and the business risk it entails make the stability of the Chinese regime one of the primary factors that attract investors. If events occur in China that cast doubt as to the country’s continued political stability, investors’ considerations are liable to change.

And finally, as China increases its investments and presence in foreign countries, especially in developing countries in Asia and Africa, it becomes increasingly exposed to terror beyond its borders. For example, in April of this year Chinese workers in Ethiopia were attacked by a local organization opposing the local government and the presence of Chinese firms. In July, Chinese workers were attacked in Pakistan by Muslim extremists in revenge for the extradition of a Uighur leader who had fled China for Pakistan.<sup>13</sup>

These issues explain why China no longer views terror as a local concern, as it had until 2001, but sees it as a global problem. And thus since 2002 China has begun to emphasize the subject of terror in its official policy papers and within different frameworks of international cooperation. Immediately following the 9/11 attacks, China, along with the other members of the UN Security Council, endorsed UN resolution 1373, which condemned terrorism and defined moves to be taken against it. This step did not hold a great deal of practical significance and China would have been hard pressed to avoid it, but the fact is that Beijing refers to it frequently.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, since 2002 China has begun to address the problem of terror in its official documents on a regular basis,<sup>15</sup> and has even engaged in dialogue and anti-terror military exercises with other countries and various international organizations. China's main dialogue partners on this issue are the US, Turkey, Germany, the ASEAN organization, and associate member countries of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) – Russia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. These countries, with the exception of the US, constitute the base of Uighur populations and/or organizations.

### **International Cooperation against Terrorism**

Due to the potential terrorist threats to China and the perception of terror as a global problem, Beijing's cooperation in this area with other countries is far from unusual. Still, the connection between the steps it is taking and the war on terror is not always clear; and in order to explain Beijing's international cooperation, the measures that are directly aimed at terror must be distinguished from those with broader purposes.

China's assumption that terror groups within its territory are assisted by external agents<sup>16</sup> defines several of the objectives it strives to achieve via international cooperation. The first is blocking external assistance to potential local terror elements, particularly Uighur groups. To this end

China is engaged in military and intelligence cooperation with countries that house groups able to assist Uighur organizations, particularly SCO countries and Pakistan.<sup>17</sup> In addition, China maintains contacts with Western countries in which Uighur organizations operate. As far as China is concerned, even if these organizations are not directly involved in terror, they are an important link in the Uighur struggle for separation. They could assist militant organizations in China and more seriously, intensify international awareness and legitimization for the issue. China, already the object of international criticism over its treatment of minorities (particularly the Tibetan minority), is fearful of this. To preempt any aggravation of the problem, China is making an effort to promote its position on Uighur nationalism to the world by emphasizing the connection between Uighur organizations and known Islamic terror organizations. According to Chinese sources, Uighur organizations received financial assistance and arms shipments from the Taliban regime and from al-Qaeda; they trained at their bases; and, with their assistance, set up training bases and arms factories in Chi-



nese territory.<sup>18</sup> From this standpoint, the inclusion of the ETIM on the US list of terror organizations – though at the cost of China’s consent to the US army presence in Central Asia following 9/11 – was a notable success.

Another objective for China’s international activity against terrorism is the drive to acquire knowledge and technology for the war against terror. In this context China has initiated cooperation not necessarily with countries where the Uighur operate, but with countries experienced in confronting terror. Cooperation of this type might be relevant to Israel, but the prospects here are at best limited, because the cooperation per se is not centrally important as far as China is concerned. Rather, China is striving to develop independent capability in the area of operational self-defense against terror.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, cooperation between the two in itself incurs complex political implications.

Of the broader objectives that China seeks to advance through its fight against terror, the preeminent one is improving China’s image in the international community. The active role China has taken upon itself in the international effort against terror casts it as a responsible country working to advance worldwide stability and peace. Thus China’s anti-terror activity joins the other steps it has taken (financial aid to countries, participation in the international peace force, multiple diplomatic visits) aimed at mitigating the “China threat” perceived in the international arena and advancing China’s integration into the international system.

An additional objective served by China’s fight against terror is strengthening its regional influence and its struggle for change in the US-led international order. The war against terror allows China to intensify its military cooperation with countries in the

region in a way perceived to be legitimate. Hence the joint maneuvers China conducts with Central Asian countries and with Russia, and the security dialogue it is engaged in with countries and organizations in East and Southeast Asia. Thus without arousing fears China is amplifying its military activity in the region and simultaneously increasing the transparency of its forces; this helps China ward off US criticism over the strengthening of its military.

Terrorism is also one of the issues that underscore the common link between China’s outlook and the rest of the countries of the region, in contrast to the US stance. The US has a comprehensive and global outlook on terror while the countries of Southeast Asia, China included, adopt a more narrow approach that focuses on regional problems.<sup>20</sup> In addition, the war against terror serves China as a channel for casting criticism on the existing international order while proposing an alternative order. China highlights the political, economic, and social factors it claims are at the base of terror – even when not directly connected to potential Uighur terror – and points an accusing finger at the current international order that breeds those factors. Thus, for example, a discussion presented in China’s official daily argued that “although terrorism often excuses its existence based on the broadening gap between the rich and the poor, the reality is that the international political and economic arrangements that are in place are its fundamental reason.”<sup>21</sup> A similar idea appeared in a security policy document from 2002: “In the war against terror we must (also) deal...with its roots, and take comprehensive measures, especially for problems related to development, reducing north-south gaps, and ending regional conflicts.”<sup>22</sup>

As for China's suggestions for confronting the problem of terror, here too there is latent criticism of the US: "The war against terror demands complete evidence...and agreement with the goals and principles of the UN Charter...and norms of international law. One must not make a connection between terror and a particular country or religion, or employ a double standard in the war against terror."<sup>23</sup> Thus China expresses its opposition to the unilateral US leadership of the international war against terror, while on the other hand expressing adherence to the UN. This does not necessarily advance the war against terror, but it does question the existing international order. Moreover, China's warning against adopting a double standard is evidence of its concern that its fight against separatist movements – similar to the struggles of other countries – might exact criticism over the violation of human rights, in contrast with the US war against terror, in which all means are justified.<sup>24</sup>

This set of arguments is addressed particularly to developing countries, those that feel injured by the existing international order and are courted by China in order to counterbalance the US. Nevertheless, China is walking a tightrope, because at the same time it is cooperating with the US in the war against terror. This cooperation is *inter alia* aimed at winning Washington's support for China's war against Uighur separatism, and relaxing US criticism over the strengthening of the Chinese armed forces. Furthermore, Beijing stresses repeatedly that terror is not identifiable with any particular country or religion; this in order to avoid positioning itself in the American camp and harming its relations with various developing countries. Still, most of China's actions against terror are directed against Islamic terror.

### **Implications for Israel**

China's outlook on terror is fashioned by the country's particular circumstances coupled with the regime's objectives; these allow only a partial overlap with the outlook of other countries. Worthy of special emphasis is Beijing's internal conflict over the idea of cooperating with Washington and, to a certain extent, also with Israel. In other words, China's anti-terror policy attempts to balance closer ties to developing countries as it challenges the international order spearheaded by Washington with defense of its security, in part via cooperation with the US.

From this aspect, Israel is not an ideal partner for any sort of cooperation on terrorism with China, because its policy towards Palestinian terror is identified with the US and arouses sharp criticism in the Muslim world and elsewhere. Sensitive to this, China has adopted a stance on Israel's fight against terror similar to that of Islamic countries. An article published by one of China's police academies states that Israel is a country that permanently suffers from terror but "in fact is also a terrorist power." The difference is that as far as Israel is concerned, "terror is employed as military strategy...and therefore has greater impact...and causes more casualties."<sup>25</sup>

China is aware that Islamic countries would highly disapprove of close cooperation in the area of terror between China and official Israeli bodies. Islamic countries have no complaints over Beijing's ties with Jerusalem concerning any other area; however, close cooperation between the establishments of those two countries against Islamic organizations would likely be perceived by Islamic countries as going too far and arouse strong anti-China criticism on their part. Therefore, as long as the terror threat to Chi-

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na is tolerable, the potential damage of China-Israel cooperation outweighs its benefit. At the same time, it is possible that such cooperation would also be counterproductive to Israel's objectives, since it would likely find itself involved in a complicated internal Chinese issue. In addition, this could stimulate criticism from various Western bodies if the issue of Uighur separatism comes up on the agenda of human rights movements.

Nevertheless, if the threat of terror against China escalates in a real sense, either within its borders or beyond, China's security considerations may overcome its reservations. In that case, expanded cooperation between China and Israel may become possible, since professional organizations in China hold Israel's capability in this area in high regard. For example, an article published by a different police academy contains an analysis of the Israeli security forces' organizational structure, their protection of the prime minister, their methods of recruitment and training, their intelligence gathering, and so on. The article's general attitude is that Israel possesses high professional capabilities in this area and that China should learn from them.<sup>26</sup> As for Israel, it too would find it more comfortable assisting China if the terror threat to China intensifies, particularly if other world Islamic terror organizations are connected, since it would ease the problem of international legitimacy.

A different type of cooperation the two sides could pursue is the transfer of technology. This would certainly help China, since it would not necessarily require contact with Israeli government bodies, especially if technology suppliers are not directly identifiable with Israel. Still, even this sort of cooperation has its limits, as witnessed by Israel's failed attempt to play a part in securing the Beijing

2008 Olympics. The main reason stems from the relatively small dimensions at this stage of the terror threat, along with the permanent principle that guides China in equipping its military and security system: to supply its own needs. Still, just as in inter-governmental cooperation, here too an increased terror threat would be expected to lower the barriers Beijing constructs.

Another impediment to cooperation of this type is the set of US restrictions on Israeli security exports to China. Following the crisis that erupted between Washington and Jerusalem in 2005 over Israel's agreement to repair the Harpy UAVs it had sold China several years earlier, the US obliged Israel to establish a strict supervisory regimen for preventing defense exports to China. At the same time, Israel's unilateral cancellation of defense-related deals increased China's misgivings over signing further transactions with Israel. Nonetheless, it is possible that in the area of terror this is a relatively small problem since China's anti-terror activity is supposed to be serving a global interest, and the US and China are already cooperating and engaged in a strategic dialogue in this area.

Finally, as far as cooperation between Israel and China in the area of terror is concerned, it is preferable for all parties involved that it be done secretly. The attempt at defense trade between the two attests that China properly distinguishes between the official and pragmatic facets of policy, and is prepared to deviate from its declarations when doing so serves its best interests. Furthermore, preserving secrecy would not only serve Beijing and Jerusalem, but also China's Arab friends and primarily the US, which sometimes finds it easier to turn a blind eye to such things and whose reaction when they are disclosed is not always foreseeable.

## Notes

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