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## China breaks its silence on Afghanistan

By M K Bhadrakumar

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In the violent, lethal environment in which he lived and survived to eventually lead Beijing's march towards socialism with Chinese characteristics, Deng Xiaoping had great reasons to be cautious. In regards to [China's](#) international approach, Deng had this to say: "Observe calmly; secure our position; cope with affairs calmly; hide our capacities and bide our time; be good at maintaining a low profile; and never claim leadership."

Thus, China never spoke its mind on the Afghan problem. The organ of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), The People's Daily, has now broken that rule of thumb in a highly nuanced commentary.

Of course, there is a criticality today as the atmosphere in the region surrounding Afghanistan threatens to become sulfurous with blinding speed. But that alone doesn't explain the timing of the Chinese commentary titled "Will adjustments in US anti-terror strategy be successful?"

The context is highly relevant. United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has just concluded a landmark visit to China. Beijing is manifestly heaving a sigh of relief about the "sense of certainty" in Sino-American relations under US President Barack Obama's watch. Even more, Beijing is enthralled that Clinton quoted the ancient Chinese aphorism *tongzhou gongji* - "when on one boat, help each other" - as the spirit of our troubled times. Now, that goes way past George W Bush's tough love aimed at making China a "stakeholder" in the international system.

Afghanistan would have certainly figured in Clinton's talks with the Chinese leaders, especially as her visit coincided with Obama's announcement regarding a troop buildup in Afghanistan.

### **Fishing in troubled waters**

However, there are two other subtexts. The US is palpably shifting gear on its [South Asia](#)

policy, as is evident from Obama's decision to appoint Richard Holbrooke as special representative on Afghanistan and Pakistan. Holbrooke is no stranger to Beijing.

Clearly, in the immediate aftermath of Holbrooke's visit to the region recently, Beijing has sized up that the US's relationship with India is entering a qualitatively new phase, which has shown some signs of friction. It pays well for Beijing to fish in troubled waters and pile up more pressure on its southern neighbor.

Second, the Russian Foreign Ministry announced last week that invitations had been issued for the long-awaited Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) conference on Afghanistan in Moscow on March 27. The time is approaching for Beijing to take a position on the Afghan problem. Prevarication couched in pious homilies may no longer suffice.

Does China have a sense of solidarity with [Russia](#) - or with SCO observers like India and Iran? But Beijing cannot afford to dissipate the budding momentum of partnership with the Obama administration, either. And the US (plus its allies) is boycotting the SCO conference.

Thus, we may get to see some amazing trapeze acts by Beijing in the coming period. The People's Daily commentary has virtually called for an expansion of Holbrooke's mandate to include the "Indian-Pakistani problem". True, it stops short of mentioning Kashmir as such but leaves little to the imagination that Kashmir is precisely what it was referring to - that the US should mediate a solution to what Pakistan calls the "core issue" in its tense relationship with India.

The Chinese commentary says the mere dispatch of more US troops to Afghanistan cannot help achieve Obama's "strategic goals" unless Washington stabilizes South Asia, especially Pakistan and the India-Pakistan relationship. The editorial continues:

It is clear that without Pakistan's cooperation, the US cannot win the war on terror. Therefore, to safeguard its own interests in the fight against terrorism in South Asia, the US must ensure a stable domestic and international environment for Pakistan and ease the tension between Pakistan and India. This makes it easy to understand why Obama appointed Richard Holbrooke as special envoy for Afghanistan and Pakistan issues, and why India is included in Holbrooke's first foreign visit. *In fact, the "Afghan problem", the "Pakistani problem" and the "Indian-Pakistani problem" are all related.* (Emphasis added).

These are not words that are in the nature of off-the-cuff remarks. And these unfriendly remarks are highly unlikely to go unnoticed in [New Delhi](#). Indian diplomats pulled out all the stops to see that Holbrooke's mandate did not include India, though there is a large body of opinion among American think-tanks and within the US establishment, which insists that so long as the Kashmir problem remains unresolved, underlying tensions in India-Pakistan relations will continue. Beijing now has waded into the debate. It openly expresses support for Pakistan's stance.

Interestingly, Beijing completely overlooks the root cause of the "anti-Americanism" prevalent in Pakistan, which has much to do with the US's interference in that country's internal affairs, especially the American backing for successive military dictatorships or with the wounded Muslim psyche or with the brutal US-led war in Afghanistan. Indeed, the Chinese commentary remained silent on the central issue of the foreign occupation of

Afghanistan.

Beijing cannot be naive that India's distaste for third-party intervention in Kashmir is in any way less than China's acute allergy with regard to world opinion on Tibet or Xinjiang. One possible explanation could be that Beijing is nervous that India may again play the "Tibet card" as the 50th anniversary of the Tibet uprising approaches next month.

Beijing is cracking down on Tibetan nationalists in the run-up to the anniversary. Arguably, Beijing would like to put India on notice that it could also flaunt a "Kashmir card". All in all, therefore, Indian strategists will have to analyze carefully the range of Chinese motivations in calling for US mediation in India-Pakistan disputes at this juncture, close on the heels of Clinton's talks with the leadership in Beijing.

Apart from India, Beijing singles out Russia as another regional power that negatively impacts on the US strategy to stabilize Afghanistan. (Incidentally, the commentary ignores Iran altogether, as if it is not a factor of consequence on the Afghan chessboard.) The commentary says, "... the US must make sure that Russia is appeased. The [Central Asia](#) region, where Afghanistan lies, used to be Russia's backyard ... While relations between US and Russia show signs of recovery after Obama's assumption of power, Russia's reactions to the US decision of increasing troops in Afghanistan are rather subtle."

So, what does Obama do? Beijing has the following assessment: "Russia's determination to not allow the US enjoying dominant control in the Afghan affair is rather noticeable. The way the US deals with its 'cooperative and competitive' relationship with Russia in the Afghan affair will test the US's capability to realize its strategic goals in Afghanistan."

But then, China is also an interested party *apropos* the two contentious issues today in US-Russia relations: the expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) into Central Asia and the deployment of the US missile defense system. China abhors NATO expansion into its Central Asian backyard and opposes the US missile defense system that will rubbish China's relatively sub-standard nuclear strike capability.

But, as Deng would say, why claim the leadership of opposition to these US moves when Moscow is already doing a splendid job?

The People's Daily commentary differentiates Russia's interests in Afghanistan. By implication, it urges Washington not to take the forthcoming SCO conference as any sort of ganging up by [China](#) and Russia. Again, by affirming that the closure of the Manas airbase by the Kyrgyz authorities is part of "a strategy game between the US and Russia", The People's Daily has in effect debunked the forthcoming SCO conference. After all, the conference's *raison d'etre* is that the Afghan situation poses a threat to Central Asia's security. But the Chinese commentary never once brings up this aspect.

In sum, what emerges is that no matter Moscow's determination to challenge the US's "monopoly over conflict resolution" in Afghanistan, China will not be drawn into such a calculus. As Deng would say, China will observe calmly and maintain a low profile. After all, Russia is forcing its way onto the Afghan turf and if it succeeds, not only the SCO but also China will be a net beneficiary. On the other hand, if the US snubs Russia, that will only dent Moscow's prestige, not Beijing's.

Is Beijing peeved that there are new stirrings in US-Russia relations? There is reason for Moscow to ponder why The People's Daily should have harped on Russia's animus toward the US influence in Central Asia at such a delicate juncture when the Obama administration has decided not to make the Manas airbase closure a factor in US-Russia relations. Moscow would find it embarrassing that it has been portrayed as a "spoiler" in Obama's strategy towards Afghanistan.

### **Reaching out to Islamists**

What is truly extraordinary about the Chinese commentary is its oblique references to the central issue of the Taliban. There are indications that Beijing has no problems as such if the Taliban are accommodated in the power structure in Afghanistan as part of a political settlement. Interestingly, the commentary advises the US to be "pragmatic towards the actual conditions of Afghanistan". It also voices support for the argument that Afghanistan lacks "almost any of the prerequisites of modernity". Besides, it suggests that Afghanistan cannot be a unitary state.

These comments are to be seen in the light of the new thinking in influential circles in the US and Britain that a "bottoms-up" approach involving diffusion of state power in favor of local leaderships might be the answer to the problems in Afghanistan and will be the best way of involving the Taliban in the power structure in the Pashtun regions.

Breaking fresh ground, the CCP invited a delegation of Pakistan's influential Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) to [visit China](#) last week. During the week-long visit, the two sides signed a memorandum of understanding enunciating four principles of China-Pakistan relations, including independence, equality, mutual respect and non-interference in the internal affairs of each country.

Meanwhile, the JI assured full support to China's national and geographical unity and fully backed China's stance on [Taiwan](#), Tibet and Xinjiang issues. Beijing then reciprocated with its "principled stance" on the Kashmir issue and "reiterated that this stance and vital cooperation of China will continue".

Socialism - even with Chinese characteristics - does not easily mix with Islamism. There is no other way of explaining the CCP's cooperation with Pakistan's leading Islamic party except as a Faustian deal against the backdrop of the ascendancy of the forces of militant Islam in the region.

The People's Daily admits that the outcome of the US's surge strategy in Afghanistan remains uncertain. It takes note that the US is also moving toward "a compromise with moderates within the Taliban", as President Hamid Karzai would not otherwise have ventured onto that track. The commentary lauds such thinking as a manifestation of the use of "smart power", an idea "frequently mentioned" by Clinton. That is to say, while the US troop build-up is a "hard measure", "policies like helping the Afghan government to consolidate its regime for gradually stabilizing the country will be the 'soft measure'."

All the same, Beijing is aware that the real US agenda could be strategic insofar as Afghanistan is located "at the crossroads of Eurasia". While smashing up al-Qaeda indeed constitutes a goal, Washington's strategy will also "enhance NATO cooperation and alliance to guarantee that NATO's first military action out of Europe will not fail". In turn, that will enable the US to "raise its leadership status among its allies and reinforce its presence in the

heart of Eurasia by using these means".

It seems China has no problem with such an agenda. China will "hide its capacities" - to quote Deng - even as the US and Russia collide and negate each other and eventually drop down in exhaustion. As The People's Daily concludes, Afghanistan is known as the "tomb of empires". Therefore, China must focus on securing its position and simply bide its time - a strategy Deng could surely appreciate.